

# Differentiated Learning for Students with Special Needs in Inclusive Schools

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**Abstract:** The research aims to examine how teachers understand and perceive the influence of differentiation on instructional practices. This qualitative research aims to explore the perceptions of a teacher in implementing differentiated learning in students with special need in inclusive schools. The study interviewed 32 teachers (included senior, junior, and primary school) using observation and interview questions to promote conversational dialogue. The interview questions afforded teachers opportunities to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences pertaining of differentiated instruction about students learning profiles. Data analysis revealed the following aspects: (1) the learning that provides opportunities for students to learn naturally and efficiently, (2) the learning that provides opportunities for students to work independently and in groups, and (3) providing a conducive learning climate with various learning preferences. The study found that the teacher has not yet understood and taught students based on student learning profiles. Consequently, the research results form the basis for developing a differentiated learning model for a student with special needs in inclusive classes. This study supports training for regular teachers and special educators specifically about the application of differentiated learning.

**Keywords:** differentiated instruction, student with special needs, inclusive schools

## I. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of education in Indonesia has tended to be mass classical. That is, education programs are implemented to serve as many students as possible. Such learning models follow a one-size-fits-all pattern. The disadvantage of the learning model is that student with special needs is not noticed. In fact, their special potential and characteristics should be served and developed through educational programs that are in accordance by their potential and characteristics.

Students with special needs have more challenges when they are in inclusive schools. Ideally, the implementation of inclusive education can provide the widest opportunity for all students to study, provide services needed in regular schools, provide support for teachers and regular school administrators, encourage friendship between student with special needs and student without special needs, place student with special needs in the same school as students without special needs (regular students), and provide a differentiated education program [1].

So far, education service programs of the student with special needs in inclusive schools are generally the same as learning programs for the student without special needs. Even though the setting of learning settings and peer involvement is very helpful in improving the student with special needs social skills in inclusive schools [2]. Student with special needs academic and non-academic abilities will develop rapidly if the school organizes differentiated learning [3].

Based on the research results of [2] in inclusive elementary schools, data was obtained that regular school teachers tended to equate the learning process of regular students with peers. As a result, many peers are difficult to learn, including indicators of learning that are too high, the material is too difficult, learning media that are not in accordance by the type of disability they carry, and evaluation of learning outcomes that are not in accordance by their abilities [4]. Another study stated that these conditions became more difficult with the teacher's negative attitude towards the learning needs of the student with special needs, ranging from learning preparation to learning evaluation [5].

This research is very important to do because one of the causes of the failure of the student with special needs in inclusive schools is their difficulty adjusting the demands of learning, the lack of social skills, and the lack of acceptance of the student with special needs by teachers and peers. The negative attitude of the teacher is because the teacher does not have the understanding and skills about the learning needs of the student with special needs [6].

This research is a follow-up of others research on the student with special needs social skills in inclusive elementary schools [4], [7]. The findings of the study indicate that: (1) curriculum modification is appropriate to the conditions disability of the student with special needs, (2) needed modification of the learning plan adapted to the student with special needs' abilities, and (3) differentiated learning programs for the student with

special needs are needed that are in accordance with the potential and characteristics of specific needs.

The concept of differentiated learning is based on the needs of teachers in differentiating learning so that the needs of different students are met in inclusive schools. Differentiated learning is built as the teacher's response to the different learning needs of students [8]. The teacher must understand all students in the class, how students learn, and how students make their learning choices. Therefore, teachers must make modification to their learning, at least in terms of: (1) the content (what is learned), (2) the process (how the material is taught), and (3) the product (how to evaluate learning). This learning model will accommodate the learning needs of the student with special needs in inclusive schools (as instructional effects) and improvement of social skills (as nurturant effects).

To explain the phenomenon above, this study examines the understanding and perspective of teacher educators specifically about differentiated learning in children with special needs in inclusive schools. The research questions are: (1) how the perceptions of regular teachers and teacher educators specifically about differentiated learning in children with special needs in inclusive schools; (2) how is the teacher's perception of the implementation of learning based on the student learning profile; (3) the form of constraints and challenges faced by regular teachers and teacher educators specifically in implementing differentiated learning in student with special needs in inclusive schools.

## II. METHOD

This study uses a phenomenological approach with qualitative methods. The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions of regular teachers about student learning profile and challenges in applying it. Interviews were conducted with regular teachers in four (4) inclusive schools in West Sumatera, which represented elementary and secondary education. Criteria for determining regular teachers and special teachers are based on the following provisions: (1) at least have been teaching in inclusive schools for five years, (2) willing to be involved in the research as evidenced by proof of willingness.

Administrative recruitment of participants is based on teacher list data in inclusive schools from the Office of Education, Provincial West Sumatera. Then the teachers were contacted by telephone and message to verify the willingness to be a participant. The recruitment process is carried out for one month. This study involved 32 inclusive school teachers from the elementary, junior, and senior high schools' levels. Researchers also conducted interviews with students with special needs as many as 7 people consisting of student with visual impairment, student with visual impairment, student with autism, learning disabilities, slow learner, and gifted and talented student.

In the current study interviewees were provided opportunity to verify the accuracy of interview transcriptions through member checking [9], [10]. The interview questions for this study are most appropriate for the goals of the current research study as they have been shown to adequately gather data regarding participants' experiences with student learning profile. Researcher bias

was avoided during the interviews as the researcher listened openly and used non-directive prompts [11].

Reliability of the current study is ensured in several ways. First, an interview protocol was used to ensure participants were asked the same questions. Second, the wording of the interview questions was clear and explicit so participants could understand what was being asked [9]. Third, participants chose the time and place where they wished to be interviewed, so they were less likely to be anxious, unfocused, or have any other issues that could interfere with their participation. Fourth, participant credibility was considered at the beginning of each interview. Participants were asked about student years teaching in inclusive schools. Additionally, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using transcription software in order that no data would be misconstrued or lost.

## III. RESULT

Based on the results of a field study of 32 inclusive school teachers in the city of Padang, results were obtained regarding teacher perceptions about the application of differentiated learning, which focused on aspects of the student learning profile, namely the way in which learners prefers to learn or demonstrate mastery of learning, i.e. a preference for learning rather than ability to learn.

To explore the phenomenon of teacher perceptions of learning based on the student learning profile using a modification of [12] from the phenomenological analysis method of [13]. The steps for analyzing the phenomenological data are Epoche, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation and Synthesis.

The procedure for data collection is carried out simultaneously in all four schools, each school uses a research assistant for two people who have been trained (1 lecturer and 1 student). The classes and teachers studied are taken based on certain criteria that have been set in advance (see table 1). All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Following each interview the data was transferred from the voice recorder to a interview transcript. The transcripts were then printed out in hard copy in order to allow the researcher to read them easily. All of the transcripts were read through three times before any manipulation occurred.

### 1. *Perceptions of regular teachers and teacher educators specifically about differentiated learning in children with special needs in inclusive schools.*

The first interview questions sought to gather information regarding how the perceptions of regular teachers and teacher educators specifically about differentiated learning in children with special needs in inclusive schools. The data analysis pertaining to these questions are reported on the following statement.

Most participants have not yet understood how the form of differentiating learning implementation in heterogeneous classes. However, some participants acknowledged that several aspects of differentiated learning had been carried out even though they did not yet know that this was differentiated learning. Besides, the education and learning system implemented in schools still refers to the achievement of curriculum demands, so

that almost all participants state that they teach must achieve a predetermined "curriculum demand". Even if they want to teach according to the learning needs of students with special needs, they will miss the curriculum.

As a result, learning for students with special needs is equated with students without special needs. In fact, Darmawi said: "How can we meet the learning needs of each student, while we are required to teach as is in the curriculum". The school feels that students with special need must adapt to the education system rather than vice versa. This philosophy is attached to every teacher, as Jaszrizal stated: "If students with special needs can continue their education in regular schools, then they can adjust to the learning system with their peers who do not have special needs".

On the other hand, participants have a pretty good understanding of differentiated learning for children with special needs. However, they do not know how to implement it, what must be prepared, and how the government demands on student learning outcomes. As Herlinda stated: "We do not understand where we started to carry out differentiated learning. We were afraid that later the principal and supervisor would ask us about the curriculum demands. What should we prepare if we are to implement differentiated learning?"

## 2. *The teacher's perception of the implementation of learning based on the student learning profile*

The second interview questions sought to gather information regarding how the teacher's perception of the implementation of learning based on the student learning profile. The data analysis pertaining to these questions are reported on the following statement.

Most participants do not understand the concepts and characteristics of learning based on student learning profiles. Participants assume that all students have the same learning method. Even if there are differences, participants tend to assume that students with special needs must be able to follow the learning methods of most students in the class. Elfiwati stated: Our school does accept students with special needs, in the learning process we equate the treatment with students not with special needs.

Participants also assumed that they were not responsible for learning based on student learning profiles because these responsibilities had been handled by the teacher of guidance and counseling and special teachers. On the other hand, the teacher carries out learning by facilitating students to learn and work alone, distinguish safe and comfortable classrooms, sitting position of students with special needs placed according to their characteristics, as follows: (a) students with emotional disturbance get a place in front of the teacher, because they must be monitored so that not be bullied by a friend, and will be angry when he loses his belongings; and (b) student with physically handicapped are given a place not close to the wall, so that they are more flexible when drawing interior design.

Besides, learning is carried out by accommodating students' cognitive abilities. However, the teacher has not adapted learning to the learning styles of each student, the teacher has not involved many peers in learning, the learning strategies used are also not varied. This is

indicated by teachers who do not understand the characteristics of students, so that learning strategies are equated and not adapted to the best way's students learn.

## 3. *The form of constraints and challenges faced by regular teachers and teacher educators specifically in implementing differentiated learning in student with special needs in inclusive schools.*

The biggest challenge facing teachers in inclusive schools is the gap between the philosophy of education that is friendly to students and an education system that is not student-centered. Students are seen as entities that must obey and comply with all rules and regulations that apply in regular schools. The teacher as the person responsible in the class, must run the class and the learning is following the demands of the curriculum. As stated by special teacher educator Agus Rindo: "It is difficult for us to run student-friendly, inclusive and student-centered learning, if all school people still have the view that all students must adapt to the existing education system. It takes a big struggle to run a truly inclusive educations for all students without exception".

Participants also stated that they wanted to implement differentiated learning in their classrooms, but were constrained by lack of understanding. As Yesteti stated: "Teachers want to teach flexibly, according to the needs and characteristics of students, but the teacher does not know how to do it. We need training first about the application of differentiated learning".

## IV. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of data collection, it found that teachers cannot conduct differentiated instructional, have not got to know the learning profiles of the students, and have several challenges in teaching children with special needs. Teachers in inclusive schools, need to know differentiated instructional so that it can be implemented in inclusive classrooms. Differentiated instructional is how to introduce and teach material that is adapted to the characteristics of students and learning styles of students [14]. This is related to the results of the data collection, that the teacher cannot conduct the differentiated instructional because teachers have not able to recognize the learning styles of students well. Those two things cannot be separated from the fact that teachers do not understand children with special needs, the characteristics, the challenge, and strength. So, it is difficult to determine the learning style that fits for students.

These barriers that faced by teachers caused by teachers do not have a background in special education, so the need to learn from the beginning about children with special needs. Without understanding the child with special needs, teachers will have difficulty in differentiated instructional. Differentiated instructional is a learning design to find the needs of students' characteristics and emphasize on responsibility, learning with peers, flexible learning groups, and the choice of learning style by the students. More importantly, this approach is also included in modifying learning so that all students can be successful in learning [15], [16]

Differentiated instructional focus on students and using a student-centered approach. The approach aims to

help students succeed in learning and resolve their differences. In order to reach the purpose of differentiated instructional, teachers need to have the mindset that every student is different, design the activities that will be implemented in the classroom until the evaluation. Another study states that students will be fully engaged in learning and will learn more excited when teachers conduct the planning that accommodates the differences between students [17]. Therefore, the "one for all" approach is not applicable in a classroom consisting of diverse students. Besides, the differentiated instructional is important and crucial because it is directly related to the student learning process. Therefore, teachers with differentiated instructional can support students' diverse' by adapting the teaching materials to the level of thinking and understanding of students.

### V. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that teachers cannot conduct differentiated instructional, have not got to know the learning profiles of the students, and have several challenges in teaching children with special needs. Needed help for teachers to develop themselves in creating differentiated instructional. It is because of differentiated instructional focus on students and using a student-centered approach. So, the students' needs of learning can be met and learning outcomes can be achieved.

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