

## **Differentiated Learning Strategies for Students with Learning Difficulties in Regular Elementary Schools**

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**Abstract**

The diversity of learning styles among students in regular elementary school classrooms encourages teachers to use flexible teaching methods, especially for students with learning difficulties. This study aims to understand teachers' perspectives, the problems they face, and how they implement different learning approaches for students with learning difficulties in public elementary schools. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a multiple case study design. The research was conducted in three public elementary schools and involved four classroom teachers selected based on their experience in teaching students with learning difficulties. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and then analyzed using cross-case and intra-case thematic analysis. The findings show that teachers view students with learning difficulties as individuals who require more guidance and repetition of material, especially in basic reading and writing skills. Learning difficulties are not only considered an intellectual limitation but are also influenced by the environment and support from the family. Some of the main challenges in implementing differentiated learning include limited learning time, large class sizes, and low parental participation. To overcome this, teachers' differentiate in terms of content, methods, and learning outcomes by simplifying material, using varied media and methods, providing individual or small group support, and adjusting tasks and expectations. This study emphasizes that differentiated learning is implemented in a flexible and context-appropriate manner and plays an important role in supporting inclusive learning in public elementary.

**Keywords:** differentiated learning, elementary school, Inclusive education, teacher strategies

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of learning abilities possessed by students in regular elementary schools is a fact that cannot be ignored in the field of education. Each class shows significant differences in academic ability, so students cannot follow the learning process in the same way and at the same pace. This situation is especially apparent in the lower grades, where many students still face difficulties in reading, writing, and arithmetic, which are basic skills and very important for their future education (Karma et al., 2022; Diari & Insani, 2025). Therefore, it is important for teachers to handle students who are experiencing learning difficulties, as part of their responsibility to ensure the continuity of the learning process (Karma et al., 2022).

In practice, recognizing learning difficulties in elementary schools is usually carried out through observation and the experience that teachers have in the classroom. Teachers utilize daily interactions, observations during the learning process, and direct communication with students to detect the challenges they face. Gathering information through interviews and observations provides teachers with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the learning difficulties experienced by students in a specific context (Rasyid, 2021). Thus, the teacher's role becomes very vital in the initial stage of introducing and addressing learning problems.

Students who face learning difficulties require adjustments in learning strategies so that their potential can develop to the fullest. One appropriate approach is the implementation of differentiated learning, which allows each student to learn based on their needs, interests, and abilities (Salamah, 2025). Choosing appropriate learning strategies can help students better understand the material and encourage greater engagement in the learning process. In addition, creating a supportive learning environment is an important part so that all students, including those who have learning difficulties, can participate fully (Diari & Insani, 2025; Maghribi & Ismaya, 2024).

A number of recent studies show that differentiated learning allows teachers to tailor materials, methods, and assessments to the individual needs of students, thereby increasing learning engagement and providing fairer opportunities for students with learning difficulties to develop optimally Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2022; (Estaiteyeh & DeCoito, 2023). In this context, differentiated learning is seen not only as a teaching strategy, but also as a form of professional response by teachers to the diversity that exists in the classroom. Along with the strengthening of the principles of inclusive education and the dynamics of post-pandemic learning, the demand to implement differentiated learning in regular classrooms is increasing, especially to meet the needs of students with diverse backgrounds and abilities, including those with learning difficulties without a formal diagnosis.

Although various studies have discussed the effectiveness of differentiated learning, most still focus on theoretical studies, policies, or the context of clinically identified students with special needs, while empirical evidence regarding the actual practices of teachers in regular classrooms is still limited (Mofield et al., 2023; Yuen et al., 2023). Therefore, research examining teachers' experiences and strategies in implementing differentiated learning in regular elementary schools is important to provide

a more concrete and practice-based understanding of the implementation of inclusive education for students with learning difficulties.

Furthermore, many previous studies were limited to narrow contexts, such as involving only one school, one grade level, or specific groups of students. Research often prioritizes students with special needs who have a clinical diagnosis, so teachers' experiences in handling students who face learning difficulties without a formal diagnosis are less highlighted (Yuen et al., 2023; Mrema, 2024). Differentiated learning has become an important tactic in elementary education to address differences in student abilities, interests, and learning styles and to improve participation and educational outcomes. However, much research has not fully explored the various models, tactics, challenges, and opportunities across different school settings, indicating the need for a more in-depth, systematic analysis of differentiated learning practices already implemented in schools (Anwar et al., 2025).

Based on the explanation above, there is a clear gap in research due to the lack of empirical studies that provide an in-depth understanding of teachers' differentiated instruction practices in regular elementary schools with diverse school backgrounds. Research that can reveal the specific strategies employed by teachers, the challenges they face, as well as the factors that support the implementation of differentiation for students with learning difficulties is still greatly needed. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by providing an empirical picture based on the experiences of teachers from various schools, with the expectation that it can contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of more inclusive and responsive learning that accommodates the diversity of student abilities.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Learning difficulties experienced by elementary school students should be understood as special educational needs of a pedagogical nature, not as a medical diagnosis. This view is crucial so that teachers can see learning difficulties as part of the learning process that can be addressed with the right educational approach. In addition to being an instructor, teachers also have a role as mentors who provide special support for students experiencing learning difficulties (Devioni et al., 2023). A pedagogical approach to addressing learning difficulties aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasizes the importance of meeting the learning needs of all students without stigmatization (Mufliah et al., 2023).

As teachers' understanding of the diversity of student abilities grows, the need for more flexible and adaptable learning methods becomes increasingly apparent. Research by Putri & Elizar (2025) shows that differentiated learning can meet the diverse needs and learning styles of students, resulting in a more responsive and efficient learning environment than a "one-size-fits-all" approach. This shift underscores the importance of DI as a teaching strategy that can improve student learning outcomes. This approach not only changes the learning content but also the learning process and outcomes according to the characteristics of the students Nuriyani et al, (2023), at the same time emphasizing the principle of student-centered learning (Tadam, 2021).

According to the research analyzed, elementary school students who struggle with learning need educational strategies that can be adapted and are all-encompassing. Modifying teaching methods to meet different learning requirements by changing what is taught, how it is taught, and what is expected as a result is known as differentiated instruction, and this method stands out as particularly pertinent. The way differentiated learning is used in standard elementary school classrooms, especially for students who have a hard time learning, can be better understood because of these theoretical ideas. Based on these theoretical perspectives, this study positions differentiated instruction as a practical pedagogical approach that can be examined through teachers' experiences in regular elementary classrooms.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a multi-case study design, aiming to provide an in-depth description of the differentiated learning strategies implemented by teachers in teaching students with learning difficulties in regular elementary schools. The study was conducted at three public elementary schools, namely SDN 1 Kedawung, SDN Sunyaragi 1, and SDN Merapi, allowing the researcher to obtain an overview of learning practices from different school contexts.

These three schools were selected because they have diverse student characteristics and include students identified as having learning difficulties in regular classes. The data sources come from elementary school teachers who teach students with learning difficulties. This data focuses on teachers' experiences in identifying students' learning difficulties, designing and implementing differentiated learning strategies, as well as teachers' reflections on the learning practices they have carried out.

The research subjects consisted of four classroom teachers, with the details as follows:

**Tabel 1. Research Subject**

School Name	Research Subject	Number of Teacher
SD Negeri 1 Kedawung	classroom teachers	1
SD Negeri Sunyaragi 1	classroom teachers	2
SD Negeri Merapi	classroom teachers	1
Total		4 Teacher

Teachers were selected purposively based on the following criteria: (1) teaching in regular classes, (2) having experience teaching students with learning difficulties, and (3) being willing to be research informants. School differences were positioned as the learning context, not as a variable for comparing learning outcomes.

The research instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide developed based on literature review and research focus. The interview guide covered aspects of teachers' understanding of learning difficulties, challenges faced by teachers in teaching students with learning difficulties, differentiated teaching strategies applied, teachers' considerations in choosing strategies, supporting and inhibiting factors, as well as teachers' reflections and expectations regarding learning for students with learning difficulties.

The validity of the data was maintained through source triangulation, involving teachers from different schools, as well as member checking to ensure the alignment of interview data with the informants' experiences. This approach was used to enhance the credibility of data in qualitative research.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews on December 15, 2025, at different times for each informant. All interviews were recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis through the process of coding, grouping data into themes, and conducting both within-case and cross-case analysis.

#### 4. RESULTS

This study aims to explore teachers' strategies in implementing differentiated instruction for students with learning difficulties in regular elementary school classes. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four elementary school teachers from different grade levels. The thematic analysis resulted in four main themes that describe teachers' understanding, the challenges they face, the differentiated teaching practices they implement, as well as the supporting and hindering factors.

Table 2 presents the main findings, key codes, and representative interview quotes that illustrate the research results.

**Tabel 2. Findings, Key Codes, and Interview Quotes**

Theme	Key Code	Finding Description	Interview Quotes
Teachers' Understanding of Learning Difficulties	Slow at reading, hard to focus, needs repetition	Teachers view learning difficulties as a need for more support, not because the student is incapable.	"That child is actually capable, but takes a long time to understand and needs things to be repeated constantly." (T1)
	Environmental and family factors	Learning difficulties are influenced by a lack of support at home	"At school we help, but at home it's not repeated by the parents." (T3)
Learning Challenges in Regular Classes	Limited time	Teachers struggle to divide their attention in large classes	"One class has many students, while those who need special attention are also not few." (T2)
	Lack of Parental Involvement	The lack of school-home collaboration	"If the parents are less attentive, the child will continue to fall behind" (T4)
Content Differentiation Strategy	The material is simplified	The teacher adjusts the difficulty level of the material	"I first simplify the material; the important thing is that the student

can read and understand."  
(T1)

Process Differentiation Strategy	Visual media, games, audio	Teachers use various media to help students stay more focused	"If I use videos or games, they are more willing to participate in learning." (T2)
Product Differentiation Strategy	Reduced assignments, oral answers	Adjustment of the form and number of tasks	"I'll reduce the assignments, or the answers can be given orally." (T3)
Strategic Planning	Initial observation	Teachers map students' abilities from the beginning	"At first, I observe the child closely, then I determine the learning method." (T4)
Supporting Factors	School support, facilities	The existence of school programs and media helps differentiation	"There is a reading clinic at the school, it really helps the children." (T3)
Inhibiting Factors	Teacher Competence IT	Senior teachers are experiencing technological difficulties	"I'm still learning to use technology, so it's not optimal yet." (T1)

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that elementary school teachers generally have a fairly deep understanding of students who experience learning difficulties, especially in basic literacy skills and focus in learning. These findings reinforce the view that learning difficulties are not only seen as deficiencies in cognitive abilities but also as situations influenced by various environmental factors, including family background and past educational experiences.

The findings of this study indicate that teachers do not view learning difficulties as permanent, but rather as situations that require intensive support, repetition of material, and adjustments in teaching strategies. The innovation of this study lies in the way teachers combine pedagogical understanding with real classroom experience in heterogeneous regular classes, allowing differentiated learning to be understood as an adaptive practice that develops contextually.

Teachers' views regarding students with learning difficulties in this study reflect an inclusive and potential-oriented attitude. Teachers emphasized that most students are capable of keeping up with learning if given the right time and approach. These findings are consistent with research showing that enhancing teachers' insights positively impacts students who experience learning difficulties (Löper & Hellmich 2024). On the other hand, teaching experience and support from educational institutions in preparing teachers to implement differentiated instruction are important (Papanthymou & Darra, 2022). This

study provides new knowledge by showing that teachers' knowledge increases through continuous observation and reflection on everyday teaching methods.

The results of this study also reveal that students' learning difficulties are influenced by non-cognitive factors, particularly family support and the learning environment at home. Teachers expressed that low parental involvement causes the learning process conducted at school not to develop well at home. These findings support previous research indicating that parental support and the social environment significantly affect students' readiness to learn (Pozas et al., 2020).

In the implementation of differentiated learning, this study found that limited learning time and a large number of students are the main challenges for teachers. They have difficulty providing maximum individual guidance while still managing overall classroom learning. This finding is in line with the statement that learning tailored to individual student needs requires more time to plan and manage (Almujab, 2024). In addition, there is other research that reveals that large class sizes are a significant barrier to the implementation of differentiated learning (Kenney et al., 2024). Nevertheless, this study reveals a new aspect: the efforts of teachers to adapt differentiation in a realistic way through simple strategies that are responsive to students' needs.

The variation in challenges found according to grade level in this study enriches the understanding of the complexity of differentiated learning at the elementary school level. Teachers in lower grades place more emphasis on issues of concentration and fine motor skills, while teachers in higher grades focus more on psychological aspects such as low self-confidence and students' learning motivation. These findings complement previous research, which tended to discuss learning difficulties in general without considering the developmental differences of students at each grade level.

The differentiated learning practices carried out in this study were implemented through adjustments in content, process, and learning products. Teachers simplified the material and focused instruction on basic skills, particularly reading and writing. These findings are in line with the results of research by Achmad et al. (2024), which showed that content differentiation helps students with low learning readiness remain engaged in the learning process. In addition, the use of visual, audio, and educational game media supports the findings of Halil et al. (2024) which emphasize the importance of varied teaching methods in enhancing student focus and participation.

Rajak & Dey (2025) stated that a varied assessment approach involves the application of various forms of tasks and assessments, including tasks of varying difficulty, variations in methods, flexible schedules, and helpful feedback, which allow students to demonstrate their learning according to individual strengths, interests, and needs, and support more inclusive and meaningful assessment practices. In this study, flexibility in assessment serves not only as an educational strategy but also as a psychological approach that supports the improvement of self-confidence in students who face learning difficulties.

Saigar & Jamaludin (2025) stated that the implementation of differentiated learning in village school environments involves the application of strategies, techniques, and teaching methods that are adapted to the varying needs of students, which emphasizes the importance of responding to the teaching needs of each student. This

study confirms that teacher flexibility is a key factor for success in differentiated learning in heterogeneous regular classrooms.

Overall, this study confirms and extends previous research findings by showing that differentiated learning in regular elementary schools is an adaptive practice influenced by teachers' understanding, classroom conditions, and support from the learning environment. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of pedagogical, non-cognitive, and post-pandemic contextual factors in differentiated learning practices. These results emphasize that success in differentiated learning not only depends on teachers' abilities but also requires systemic support from schools and families to ensure that inclusive learning can be sustained.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teachers in regular elementary schools have implemented differentiated instruction as a flexible approach to help students who face learning difficulties. The teachers have a good understanding of student characteristics, especially in terms of basic literacy and the ability to maintain focus, and they view learning difficulties as a condition that can develop with appropriate support and adjustments to teaching methods. The implementation of differentiated instruction is carried out through flexible and contextual adjustments to content, process, and learning products, even though teachers face various challenges such as limited time, large class sizes, and low parental involvement. These results indicate that differentiated instruction in regular classrooms is dynamic, evolving through reflective practice and teachers' responses to classroom dynamics.

Based on these findings, this study recommends the need to increase systemic support for the implementation of differentiated instruction in regular elementary schools. It is suggested that schools provide supportive policies and facilities, including literacy programs and ongoing professional development for teachers, especially in the use of technology in learning. In addition, enhancing collaboration between schools and parents is important so that the teaching methods applied in the classroom can continue at home. Future research is recommended to involve a more diverse group of subjects and to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of differentiated instruction for students with learning difficulties in regular elementary schools.

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