



The Effectiveness of Differentiated Learning in Strengthening Mutual Cooperation and Independent Learning in the Merdeka Curriculum

Fitri Adelia Puspita ^{1*}

Istihana ²

¹Raden Intan State Islamic University of Lampung, Indonesia

²Raden Intan State Islamic University of Lampung, Indonesia

*** Corresponding author:**

Puspita, FA. fitriadeliapuspa12@gmail.com

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Abstract

Background of study: The Independent Curriculum demands learning that is responsive to the diversity of student abilities while strengthening the character of the Pancasila Student Profile. Differentiated learning is a relevant strategy to encourage collaboration and independence in learning, but its effectiveness in fostering the values of mutual cooperation and independent learning still requires in-depth study.

Aims and scope of paper: This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of differentiated learning in strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and learning independence in grade IX students of SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji in the context of the Independent Curriculum, with a focus on mathematics learning.

Methods: The research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through observation, unstructured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and documentation. Analysis was conducted using General Inductive Analysis (GIA) and supported by NVivo software to systematically map the categories of findings.

Result: The results show that differentiated learning effectively strengthens both dimensions of student character. NVivo analysis of the mutual cooperation dimension reached 117.2%, dominated by aspects of cooperation, discussion, and mutual assistance. In the independent learning dimension, the percentage reached 117.4%, marked by increased discipline, perseverance, initiative, and the ability to organize learning strategies. Differentiation of content, process, and product has been shown to facilitate student diversity while creating positive social interactions.

Conclusion: Differentiated learning can simultaneously integrate the development of mutual cooperation and independent learning in mathematics. This strategy effectively creates an inclusive, collaborative, and student-centered learning environment, making it relevant as an implementation approach for the Independent Curriculum. This research was limited to a single school, so the findings need to be tested in a broader context.

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INTRODUCTION

The Independent Learning Curriculum is a new paradigm in the world of education that provides greater freedom and convenience to teachers and students in the teaching and learning process (Setyowati and Putri Yanuarita Sutikno 2024). The implementation of the Independent Curriculum provides a space that allows freedom in learning and requires teachers to be more adaptive and reflective of student characteristics (Agung 2025)(Fauziah 2025). Teachers have a positive perception of the Merdeka curriculum because it allows teachers to apply a contextual approach and focus more on character building (Maulana et al. 2024).

One important aspect of the Independent Learning Curriculum is the importance of differentiated learning (Pandiangan, Surbakti, and Syahriani 2025)(Liskawati, Faisal, and Irfan 2025). The differentiation approach is a learning approach that is carried out to meet the needs of each student according to the student's interests and talents (Fauziah 2025). This learning includes three things, namely content (the material taught), process (the media used) and product (the product produced) (Choirunnisa, Wahyuda, and Diningrat 2025)(Stavrou and Koutselini 2016). These three things cannot be separated to achieve learning objectives.

Differentiated learning also has a positive impact on teachers, including enabling teachers to better understand the individual needs of students and improving the quality of teacher teaching (Taupik and Fitriani 2021)(Rachmadyanti and Widyawati 2023). This can also help teachers overcome obstacles in teaching in classes with different needs.(AP Sari and Wahyudin 2024)Overall, differentiated learning is an approach that helps students achieve learning goals and develop learning skills during school (Fahmy et al. 2021)(Almujab 2023). This approach also allows teachers to better understand students' needs, thus helping teachers become more effective educators (Abdullah Syukur, Abdul Zahir, and Supriadi 2025).

The profile of a Pancasila student is an Indonesian student who upholds the values of Pancasila. The goal of the independent curriculum is to realize the Pancasila Student Profile, which encompasses six dimensions (Afifin 2025). These include faith and devotion to God Almighty, noble character, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independent learning, critical and creative reasoning. The Pancasila Student Profile in the Teacher Leader program instills in students a level of knowledge, behavior, and character based on Pancasila values, which makes Pancasila stand up and become an ideology that is understood and applied by students. The Minister of Education stated that through character education, it is hoped that students will be able to sort and select good and correct information (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology 2022) (Oktavianto, Asrial, and Alirmansyah 2023). Of these six dimensions, the values of mutual cooperation and independence are important pillars in building strong and adaptive student character.

The dimension of mutual cooperation reflects one of the characteristics of Indonesian culture (Sendi, Hernawati, and Aradea 2025)(Rifaldi, Hidayatissalam, and Turnip 2025). Mutual cooperation character education should be taught to students from an early age (Sendi, Hernawati, and Aradea 2025)(Malau, Ndonga, and Daulat Saragi 2025), especially at the elementary level, so that good values can be firmly ingrained from the beginning of their lives. Mutual cooperation, as a characteristic of Pancasila students, guides students to become individuals with social values, with an attitude of sociability and mutual assistance (Wati and Alhudawi 2023)(Tanamal and Prasetyo 2023). The dimension of mutual cooperation includes elements of personality values that emphasize acts of kindness and mutual assistance. Students must be sensitive to their surroundings. The cooperative attitude reflects a reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving to achieve common goals (WP Sari, Ananda, and Montesori 2024)(Agatha, Winarni, and Supianto 2024). Through cooperative and collaborative behavior, students can build friendships and develop positive emotional responses. These attitudes, demonstrated at school, can lead to interactions at home. The value of mutual cooperation also aligns with the goal of civics education, which is to develop good and responsible citizens (Wahyuni and) (Dewi Resika Wati 2024). Meanwhile, learning independence shows the student's capacity to organize their learning process independently, have responsibility for their tasks and take initiative in self-development (Febria, Wiantina, and Muttaqin 2024)(Panggabean and Misykah 2025). Both of these values align closely with differentiated learning, which facilitates students to work in diverse groups while optimizing their individual potential.

The differentiated learning strategy has been implemented at SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji since the 2024/2025 academic year through the adjustment of learning modules based on student capacity in

terms of content, process, and product. Students are categorized based on their learning speed into three groups: fast, medium, and slow learners (requiring support). Learning style identification is carried out through observations, questionnaires, and interviews to adapt the learning approach to students' learning characteristics (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic). Although various differentiated learning practices have been implemented, there is still uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of differentiated learning in strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and student learning independence. Several obstacles still occur in its implementation, such as teacher inconsistency in allocating adequate time for completing assignments and low student participation in designing learning activities.

This research is urgently needed to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of differentiated learning in shaping the character of Pancasila students, particularly in the dimensions of mutual cooperation and independence. The results are expected to serve as a reference for teachers and educational institutions in optimizing differentiated learning strategies to not only improve academic achievement but also shape student character aligned with Pancasila values. Based on the above explanation, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of differentiated learning in strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and learning independence in grade IX students of SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji in the context of the Independent Curriculum, with a focus on implementation in mathematics subjects.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative method with a case study design. This design was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of differentiated learning in the context of mathematics learning within the Independent Curriculum. The case study approach allowed researchers to comprehensively explore teacher and student experiences, particularly those related to strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and independent learning.

Participant

The study participants consisted of mathematics teachers and ninth-grade students at SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji in the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. Teachers were involved because they play a direct role in planning and implementing differentiated learning. Students were selected because they fully participated in differentiated learning activities within the Merdeka Curriculum.

Population and sampling

The study population was all ninth-grade students at SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, which selects subjects based on their active involvement in differentiated learning practices. Primary data sources were obtained from teachers, six students selected for FGDs, and classroom situations during the learning process. Secondary data sources included teaching modules, school documents, and learning archives.

Instrument

The research instruments used are non-test instruments, including: Observation Used to observe the differentiation learning process, student behavior, collaboration dynamics, and teacher practices in the classroom, unstructured interviews with teachers to explore differentiation strategies, perceptions, their impact on the value of mutual cooperation and learning independence, Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Conducted with six students to obtain student perspectives regarding differentiation-based learning experiences and Documentation in the form of teaching modules, photos of activities and school archives. Observation instruments, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and Interviews using Indicators (Heny Kristiani et al., 2021).

Table 1. Observation Indicators, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and Interviews

No	Aspects observed	Indicator
1	Differentiated Learning Planning	Learning planning
		Learning facilitator
		Learning motivator
2	Implementation of Differentiated Learning	Diagnostic assessment
		Curriculum Analysis
		Content differentiation

		Process differentiation
		Product differentiation
3	Differentiated Learning Evaluation	Formative assessment
		Summative Assessment

Procedures and time frame

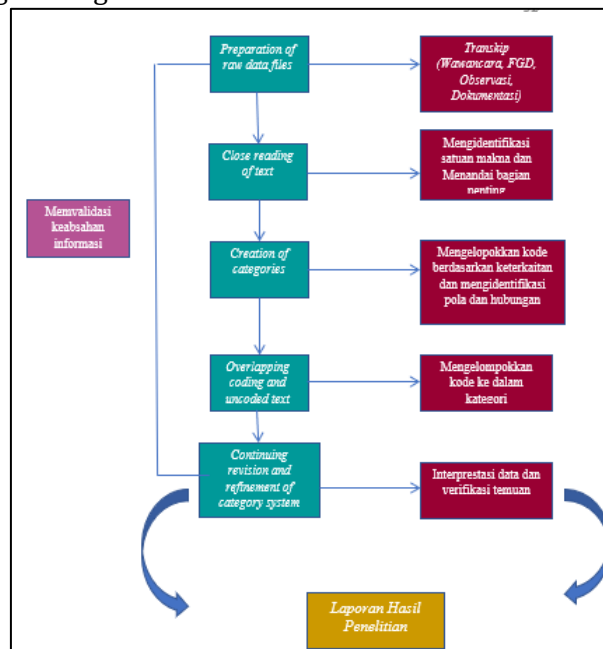
The research procedure was carried out through four main stages which were interconnected and designed to obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of differentiated learning as follows:

1. Initial Observation: To map the learning context and identify the form of implementation of ongoing differentiation.
2. Teacher Interviews: Exploring data regarding the planning, implementation, and evaluation of differentiated learning in the Independent Curriculum.
3. FGD with Students: To obtain students' perspectives regarding learning experiences, mutual cooperation, and learning independence.
4. Documentation Collection: Completing primary information from observations and interviews.

The entire research process was carried out in the period September–December 2024 when the implementation of differentiated learning was actively taking place.

Analysis plan

The data analysis in this study follows Bogdan and Biklen's concept that analysis is a systematic process for organizing data, identifying patterns, and determining relevant findings. The technique used is General Inductive Analysis (GIA) according to Thomas, which allows for inductive theme extraction without relying on a rigid theoretical framework.



Picture1. Data Analysis Stages

The data analysis process includes: (1) data preparation, namely cleaning and standardizing the transcript format; (2) intensive reading, to mark units of meaning that emerge from the text; (3) coding and forming categories, based on similarities in content; (4) refining categories, by combining overlapping codes and reviewing uncoded text; and (5) compiling themes, as a basis for drawing conclusions regarding the impact of differentiated learning on the Pancasila Student Profile.

Scope and limitations

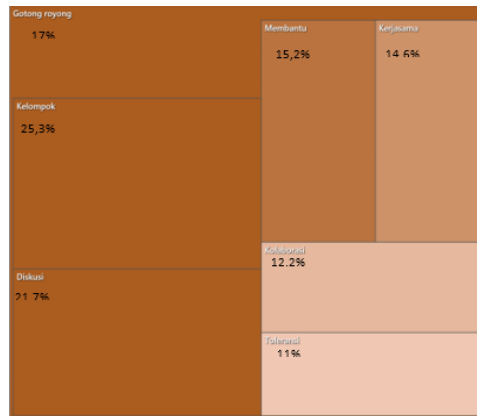
This study focused on the implementation of differentiated learning in ninth-grade mathematics at SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji, focusing on strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and independent learning. The limited scope of the study, confined to one school and one subject, makes the findings difficult to generalize widely. Furthermore, the qualitative approach emphasized

depth of context, making the results highly dependent on data interpretation. Future research is recommended to involve more schools or combine quantitative data for more comprehensive findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Differentiated learning plays a crucial role in strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and student independence in schools, particularly within the context of the Independent Curriculum, which emphasizes an inclusive and character-based approach. Mutual cooperation teaches students to engage in activities together for shared success, fostering a sense of unity, empathy, and social responsibility. Nvivo's analysis of the dimensions of mutual cooperation can be seen in the figure.



Picture2. Mutual Cooperation Hierarchy Chart

The results of the Nvivo analysis above, differentiated learning at SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji showed a significant contribution to strengthening the value of mutual cooperation with a total percentage of 117.2%. These findings indicate that the differentiation approach not only accommodates the diversity of student abilities but also effectively facilitates social interaction between students. The group aspect as the most dominant component (25.3%) indicates that students have become accustomed to working together in completing assignments. The discussion aspect (21.7%) describes the active exchange of ideas between students. The helping aspect (15.2%) and cooperation (14.6%) confirm the existence of concern among students in solving problems. The collaboration aspect (12.2%) and tolerance (11%) demonstrate the ability to work across roles and share tasks fairly among students. Observations show that students are starting to take the initiative in selecting additional learning resources and designing their own ways to understand complex mathematical concepts. The teacher said:

"Since implementing differentiated learning, students have become more willing to try different ways to solve problems. They no longer simply wait for the teacher to explain, but actively seek out their own resources."

From the FGD results, students revealed that the freedom to choose their learning methods makes them more responsible. One student said:

"Now I can learn at my own pace. If there's something I don't understand, I look for references or ask friends who already understand."

The implementation of differentiated learning is evident in the strategies used to facilitate students' learning according to their individual learning style preferences. Students with a visual learning style are facilitated with learning media such as slide presentations or illustrations. For students with an auditory learning style, learning materials should be provided in the form of audio recordings of stories or narratives related to the topic. Meanwhile, students with a kinesthetic learning style are facilitated through role-playing activities.

The results of the study indicate that the value of mutual cooperation has begun to be actively integrated into the learning process at SMP Negeri 1 Anak Ratu Aji through the implementation of differentiated learning in the independent curriculum. Teachers play a crucial role in designing group-based activities. Teachers also stated that the implementation of the value of mutual

cooperation is not only through project activities but also through routine school activities such as class duty and community service. Furthermore, the principal's role is also crucial in providing support for activities based on the value of mutual cooperation, as seen through the policy of collaboration between teachers and parental involvement in school activities. The dimension of learning independence is also an important dimension in the Pancasila student profile. Learning independence in the Pancasila student profile focuses on students' ability to take responsibility for their learning process and outcomes. The results of the Nvivo analysis of the dimension of learning independence can be seen in Figure 3.



Picture3. Learning Independence Hierarchy Chart

The dimension of learning independence showed positive results with a total percentage reaching 117.4%. This finding indicates that differentiated learning successfully facilitates the development of students' independent character. The independence aspect (32.6%) describes students' ability to organize learning strategies and make their own decisions. The discipline aspect (23.6%) and courage (23%) indicate students' compliance with rules and consistency in completing assignments. The perseverance aspect (20.8%) shows students' efforts in facing difficulties, although not yet fully consistent. Independence (17.4%) indicates students' ability to complete assignments without relying on others.

Learning independence is a learning system that is based on self-discipline possessed by students and is adapted to the student's circumstances. The development of students' learning independence is reflected in changes in students' attitudes and behavior in managing study time, taking initiatives and evaluating learning outcomes independently.

Discussion

Strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and independent learning through differentiated learning emphasizes that character building in students occurs in an integrated manner within the learning process, rather than as an additional outcome outside of academic activities. In the practice of differentiated learning, students are not only guided to achieve individual academic understanding, but are also placed in a learning community context that demands interaction, shared responsibility, and positive interdependence. The learning independence that developed in this study did not emerge in the form of individualism, but rather as the ability to make independent learning decisions that remained based on cooperation and social support among students.

The findings of this study are in line with research (Bharoto 2025) which shows that the application of Pancasila-based differentiated learning is able to shape positive character in students when applied in a conducive learning environment and supported by participatory learning methods. Thus, this study not only reinforces previous empirical findings but also provides a conceptual model for the implementation of differentiated learning that integrates the strengthening of social character and independent learning in mathematics learning at the junior high school level. This shows that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is not only oriented towards curriculum flexibility but also towards the formation of a learning ecosystem that supports the simultaneous social and personal development of students.

From a practical perspective, differentiated learning encourages active student participation in group work, which indirectly fosters empathy, social responsibility, and communication skills. The

role of the teacher as a facilitator is key in creating these conditions, where the teacher is no longer the center of information, but rather guides and accompanies the student learning process. This change is in line with research (Amalia Anis Kusumawati 2024), which shows that the role of teachers as facilitators is effective in developing students' independence in learning. This support is gradually reduced as students' self-regulation skills improve, so that independence in learning can develop sustainably.

The implementation of differentiated learning also contributes to the creation of a more inclusive and conducive classroom atmosphere. By recognizing and responding to differences in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles, learning becomes more relevant and meaningful for each individual. This condition encourages a sense of belonging and acceptance in the classroom, as well as fostering tolerance and mutual respect among students. As stated by (Tajik et al 2024), differentiated learning allows students to see differences as part of the diversity that enriches the learning process, rather than as obstacles to learning.

Pedagogically, content differentiation provides space for students to choose learning resources and levels of complexity according to their readiness and interests. This process encourages students to assess their abilities and make conscious learning decisions, which is an important foundation for developing independent learning. At the same time, the value of mutual cooperation develops when learners with different levels of understanding share knowledge and strategies in group discussions, creating a collaborative learning process.

Process differentiation allows for a variety of learning activities tailored to the learning styles of students, whether visual, auditory, or kinesthetic, without neglecting common learning objectives. This variety helps students process information in the most effective way for them, while also opening up space for interaction between students with diverse learning approaches. Meanwhile, product differentiation provides flexibility for students to express their understanding through various forms of learning outcome representation. This choice not only accommodates diversity in abilities but also encourages creativity and a sense of responsibility for the learning outcomes produced.

The novelty of this study lies in the simultaneous integration of strengthening independent learning and mutual cooperation values within a single framework of differentiated learning at the junior high school level. In addition, the use of NVivo-assisted analysis provides a strong empirical basis for demonstrating how differentiated learning contributes to strengthening the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. These findings confirm that differentiated learning can be used as an implementable strategy for the Merdeka Curriculum to comprehensively build students' academic competencies and character through differentiation of content, process, and products centered on students' learning needs.

Implications

The research results have several important implications:

1. For Teachers: Differentiated learning can be an effective strategy for building collaborative learning and independence without sacrificing academic achievement. Teachers need to design activities that balance group work and individual choice.
2. For Schools: The principal's support for collaboration between teachers and parental involvement has been proven to strengthen the implementation of the value of mutual cooperation as a school culture.
3. For the Independent Curriculum: The findings confirm that differentiated learning can be used as a primary strategy in realizing the Pancasila Student Profile in an integrative manner through regular learning, not just projects.

Research contribution

The important contribution of this research lies in the finding that differentiation of content, process, and product is not only effective in accommodating academic diversity, but also becomes a pedagogical approach that is able to integrate the development of social character and individual independence simultaneously.

Limitations

This study is limited by its scope, involving only one school and one subject, so the results cannot be broadly generalized. Furthermore, the qualitative approach makes the findings heavily dependent on the interpretation of data collected through interviews, observations, and focus group

discussions (FGDs). NVivo analysis helps strengthen validity, but it does not replace the need for more quantitative data to generate more generalizable conclusions.

Suggestions

Further research is recommended to expand the school context, grade level, or other subjects, and integrate broader quantitative data to enrich understanding of the effectiveness of differentiated learning in building the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile.

CONCLUSION

Differentiated learning in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum at SMPN 1 Anak Ratu Aji plays a significant role in strengthening the values of mutual cooperation and independent learning among students. The principle of student-centered learning, as emphasized in the Merdeka Curriculum, allows teachers to tailor the learning process to the needs, interests, and learning readiness of students. This creates a learning environment that encourages collaboration, discussion, and mutual assistance among students, allowing the value of mutual cooperation to develop naturally. In addition, the application of differentiated learning provides space for students to manage their learning strategies, organize their time, and take responsibility for their own learning process. This demonstrates the strengthening of independent learning in line with the objectives of the Pancasila Student Profile in the Merdeka Curriculum.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

FAP as P1 is fully responsible for the conceptualization of the research, development of the methodological design, implementation of observations, interviews, and FGDs, preparation of the initial draft of the article, and is the main person responsible for data analysis, including processing using NVivo and interpretation of the results outlined in the discussion and conclusions. He as P2 plays a role in assisting by validating the data, providing academic supervision, completing and reviewing the analysis that has been carried out by P1, and providing critical input including support in substantive revisions to improve the manuscript.

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