

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the challenges and opportunities within the Indonesian education system, particularly the diverse characteristics of students that affect learning outcomes. To address these differences, differentiated learning was implemented in the Merdeka Curriculum. This chapter outlines the background, research questions, objectives, scope, and significance of the study, serving as a foundation for exploring students' perceptions of differentiated learning implementation at SMKN 26 Jakarta.

1.1 Background of the Study

The learning process is shaped by the diverse characteristics of its students. This diversity consists of the differences in student readiness, needs, interests, learning styles, and the students' social background (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Since students have diverse characteristics and learning needs, applying the same teaching approach to all students may fail to address these differences, potentially leading to unequal learning outcomes (Fahira et al., 2022). Students' social background can also impact the learning process. A low educational background among parents often correlates with lower socioeconomic conditions. The low income of students' parents makes it difficult for the students themselves to access adequate learning opportunities, participate in extracurricular activities that support their development, and receive sufficient communication and attention from their parents during their developmental process (Devitasari et al., 2025). Based on these characteristics, teachers need to have the knowledge

and skills to adapt the learning process to student diversity. Teachers should be able to provide learning that suits the needs of different students to ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to achieve optimal learning outcomes (Istiqomah et al, 2024). Teachers also need to provide appropriate and equitable instruction to accommodate students' diverse learning needs and interests, as failure to do so may result in gaps in student engagement and achievement. For this purpose, differentiated learning is implemented to address these challenges.

Differentiated learning is an effort for teachers to adapt their instruction according to students' abilities, talents, and interests. Teachers can provide different activities that are personalized to individual abilities (Situmeang, 2025). Although learning is adapted to individual abilities, teachers do not need to do it individually. Teachers can create differentiated learning in small groups that have been adjusted. There are three aspects of differentiated learning that teachers need to know: content, process, and product (Kristiani et al., 2021). The content aspect discusses how teachers should adapt the subject matter to students' profiles and interests. The process aspect relates to how teachers use effective learning strategies in dealing with different classroom situations and students. Then the assessment or product aspect relates to how teachers provide tasks, assessments or projects that are customised by the content and process aspects. This allows students to show their maximum learning outcomes (Dinita & Nurpratiwiningsih, 2024). In order to fulfil the aspects above, teachers are strongly encouraged to conduct student mapping before the lesson begins. Teachers must be careful in preparing a teaching plan. Teachers should make a teaching plan that meets all aspects involved in differentiated learning. With these adjustments, teachers are

now required to improve their knowledge and skills so that differentiated learning can be implemented (Istiqomah et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, differentiated learning is incorporated into a curriculum called Kurikulum Merdeka. Kurikulum Merdeka was created in response to Indonesia's educational needs in order to keep pace with global developments. Curriculum implementation must be relevant to the socio-cultural conditions and development of a country. Developments that occur sometimes also require curriculum changes so that learning can be carried out with appropriate targets and processes. Curriculum changes are still happening today. That is because the curriculum has an adaptive characteristic according to the conditions of this country starting from 1947 as the opening curriculum and the changes that occurred in 2020 as the forerunner of the Merdeka curriculum (Putri & Maula, 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum offers something different than before. The previous curriculum, namely K13, offered a learning style with a scientific approach that focused on students' affective, cognitive and psychomotor development (Insani, 2019). The scientific approach is designed so that students can understand that whatever they get and what they do must be done through a scientific process (Rahayu, 2016). The latest curriculum, Kurikulum Merdeka, emphasises project-based learning, focuses on meaningful learning, and also provides differentiated learning (Nugroho & Narawaty, 2022). In the mechanism of the implementation, learning in the Merdeka curriculum must be integrated in each subject. In addition, a focus on student development through differentiated learning must be established (Kemendikbudristekdikti, 2022). Learning in the Merdeka curriculum has a higher flexibility level than the previous curriculum.

Learning activities and subjects can be customised to accommodate the needs of each school (Paramita et al., 2025).

Differentiated learning is beginning to be implemented in many schools. Teachers began to learn and apply the concept of differentiated learning offered by the Merdeka curriculum. This was done because differentiated learning was felt to have significantly improved students' cognitive aspects (Shafina & Mukhlis, 2025). Differentiated learning does have many positive impacts on student learning outcomes. This is because differentiated learning requires the material to be learnt according to students' interests and needs. In addition, there is also an increase in student learning motivation caused by the suitability of the material (Bilantua et al., 2024). Differentiated learning concept also provides space for students and teachers to develop independently, creatively and innovatively. The creativity of the teacher is required in providing activities or projects that facilitate students to develop. As for students, their process in working on projects that are given freedom up to a certain scope, makes them have space to develop their creativity and innovation (Ningrum et al., 2023).

During the process of implementation, differentiated learning also faces several challenges. Some of these challenges are related to the lack of adequate infrastructure, low costs, and time adjustments that are very different from before (Hermansyah, 2023). In addition, teachers' lack of understanding of this learning method is also one of the challenges. Moreover, the lack of training provided by the government and related institutions makes it difficult to disseminate complete information about differentiated learning. And the biggest obstacle to implementing differentiated learning is related to fairness. Both fairness in

learning implementation and student assessment. This is because with the diverse characteristics of learners, differentiation cannot facilitate all differences in students' learning needs and interests (Lailiyah & Mas'ud, 2024).

A number of previous studies have investigated the implementation of differentiated learning and its influence on various aspects of students' learning. Previous research discussed more about the effectiveness of differentiated learning by Sutrisno, et al (2023) with the title 'The Effectiveness of Differentiated Learning as an Approach to Independence'. According to the results of the study, differentiated learning can increase student motivation and interest in learning. Furthermore, research conducted by Lisnawati, et al (2023) with the title 'The Role of Teachers in the Implementation of Differentiated Learning to Foster Learning Interest'. The study stated that the teacher has a role as a facilitator who is required to be able to adjust learning strategies to student learning interests. In order to complete the scope of research that has not been touched, this research is focused to analyze students' perceptions and the challenges they encounter in differentiated learning in order to provide insights that can enhance students' motivation and learning achievement. In some previous studies, learning effectiveness is only seen from student learning outcomes. Meanwhile, in order to make sure that differentiated learning can be implemented appropriately, research is needed on students' perspectives towards this matter. It is therefore essential to explore whether differentiated learning effectively aligns with students' individual needs and preferences. After analysing students' perspectives on differentiated learning, it is expected that learning can be carried out effectively and has a direction that suits students' needs.

Differentiated learning is designed to respond to students' diverse learning characteristics (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). Since students directly experience how differentiated learning is implemented in the classroom, their perceptions provide valuable insights into whether the instructional practices have addressed their learning needs. While previous studies have mainly focused on teachers' perspectives, students' perceptions can complement these findings by providing a better understanding of how differentiated learning is experienced from the learners' perspective. Therefore, this study examines students' perceptions and the challenges they encounter during the implementation of differentiated learning.

Based on the description of the problems above, the researcher decided to conduct research on student perceptions of differentiated learning. This is done so that learning and assessment carried out by teachers can be more fair to each student. This research is titled "Students' Perceptions on the Implementation of Differentiated Learning as a Significance to Fulfil the Merdeka Curriculum Approach: A Survey at SMK Negeri 26 Jakarta." Several students from SMKN 26 Jakarta were selected as the subjects of this study to minimize variations in teaching styles, which may influence students' perceptions of differentiated learning. By focusing on a consistent instructional context, the researcher aims to obtain more accurate and reliable data. Sugiyono (2018) states that when conducting a research, it is advisable to use people who are known to the researcher as subjects or participants. This is done so that participants can be more open and honest with the researcher, allowing the researcher to explore more deeply what the participants feel.

1.2 Research Question

1. How do students perceive the implementation of differentiated learning?
2. What challenges do students encounter in engaging with differentiated learning activities ?

1.3 Purpose

This study aims to explore 11th-grade students' perceptions and challenges of differentiated learning. The findings are expected to help teachers implement differentiated learning more effectively by aligning instructions with the needs and challenges of students.

1.4 Scope

In order to make this research more focused, the scope of this study is limited to exploring students' perceptions of the implementation of differentiated learning in English classrooms under the Merdeka Curriculum. The study focuses on Grade 11 students of SIJA 1 at SMKN 26 Jakarta and examines differentiated learning based on five dimensions: students' readiness, learning needs, interests, learning styles, and social backgrounds.

1.5 Significance

This research can contribute to the development of differentiated learning practices by presenting field-based insights about differentiated learning on students' perceptions and challenges they faced. This research can be used as an

additional theoretical foundation for further research to improve student-centered learning approaches.

The findings of this study can help teachers design engaging differentiated instruction materials. In addition, this study is expected to open new perspectives for other researchers in conducting further research on differentiated learning in the context of vocational education. For the author, this study will enhance the researcher's understanding of the practical application and effectiveness of differentiated learning in the classroom.

