

Differentiated Instruction in a Modular Boarding School Curriculum: A Case Study of Educational Support for Students from Low-Income Families in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT: This study examines differentiated instruction within a modular boarding school curriculum as an educational support strategy for students from low-income families in Indonesia. The study is based on the case of Sekolah Rakyat Medan, an early-stage boarding school program serving students from Desil 1 and Desil 2 households through Sekolah Rakyat Dasar and Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas. Using a qualitative case study design with an evaluative orientation, the study analyzed an observation report and a supporting presentation document to identify how learner diversity, Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME), teacher resources, boarding-based support, and student welfare conditions shape the need for differentiated instruction. The findings reveal that differentiated instruction is not merely a classroom technique in this context, but a systemic support model required to address wide differences in students' age, academic readiness, previous schooling experience, learning pace, and psychosocial adjustment. Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) provides a strong structural basis for differentiation because it allows flexible entry, flexible completion, module-based learning, and individualized learning pathways. However, the effectiveness of this curriculum depends on systematic implementation through diagnostic assessment, individual learning plans, flexible module progression, remedial and enrichment activities, peer tutoring, co-teaching, psychosocial assistance, learning portfolios, and progress tracking. The study also shows that teacher availability and the boarding system create important opportunities for personalized support, but these opportunities require clear role distribution, weekly coordination, stronger learning management systems, and integrated welfare services. The study concludes that differentiated instruction can function as a bridge between educational access and educational quality for vulnerable learners. Its contribution lies in framing differentiated instruction as an integrated support ecology that connects curriculum, pedagogy, teacher collaboration, boarding routines, and student welfare in an equity-oriented educational setting. This model may inform future school improvement efforts in similar socially vulnerable and resource-supported educational contexts more effectively.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction; Modular curriculum; Boarding school; Low-income students; Educational support; Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit; Educational equity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational equity remains one of the most persistent challenges in contemporary education systems, particularly when access to schooling does not automatically translate into meaningful learning opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Global education discourse has increasingly emphasized that inclusive education should not only bring marginalized learners into school, but also ensure that their diverse

academic, social, emotional, and developmental needs are recognized within daily pedagogical practice. UNESCO's inclusion framework stresses that education systems often reproduce disadvantage when they fail to respond to social, economic, linguistic, cultural, and individual differences among learners, while the OECD highlights that supporting disadvantaged students requires more than financial access; it requires targeted resources, responsive teaching, student support systems, and institutional capacity to address learner diversity [1]. In this context, the issue is not merely whether low-income students are enrolled in school, but whether schools can design learning environments that are sufficiently flexible, diagnostic, and supportive to help them progress from different starting points.

Differentiated instruction has therefore become an important pedagogical response to learner diversity because it assumes that students do not enter the classroom with the same readiness, prior knowledge, interests, learning pace, or support needs. The concept is commonly associated with adapting content, process, product, and learning environment in response to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, rather than delivering uniform instruction to all learners in the same way. Tomlinson's work on mixed-ability classrooms argues that differentiation is not a separate method or occasional remedial activity, but a systematic way of planning instruction so that teachers can respond flexibly to the diversity already present in the classroom [2]. Recent evidence also supports the relevance of differentiated instruction for improving student learning outcomes, although its effectiveness depends strongly on teachers' capacity to diagnose student needs, organize flexible grouping, provide formative feedback, and manage classroom complexity [3]. A systematic review and meta-analysis found that differentiated instruction can positively affect learning outcomes, while research on formative assessment shows that teachers need sufficient assessment literacy and classroom routines to use ongoing evidence of learning effectively.

The need for differentiated instruction becomes more urgent in educational settings where student diversity is not limited to learning style or academic preference, but is rooted in structural inequality [4]. Students from low-income families may enter school with uneven literacy and numeracy foundations, interrupted schooling histories, limited access to learning resources, nutritional and health risks, psychosocial vulnerability, and lower exposure to stable academic routines. These factors can produce wide differences in learning readiness even among students placed in the same formal grade level. In such contexts, conventional whole-class instruction risks widening the gap between students who can follow the expected curriculum pace and those who need more time, scaffolding, remedial support, or socio-emotional adjustment. Differentiated instruction is thus not simply a pedagogical innovation; it becomes a matter of educational justice because it allows schools to recognize that equal treatment is not always equitable treatment [5]. Students who begin from different academic and social positions require different forms of support to reach meaningful learning outcomes.

The Indonesian context provides a relevant setting for examining this issue through the emergence of Sekolah Rakyat Medan, a free boarding school program designed for students from economically vulnerable families. The initial observation report indicates that Sekolah Rakyat Medan operates in Medan Tuntungan, North Sumatra, during the 2025/2026 academic year as an early-stage implementation site serving both Sekolah Rakyat Dasar and Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas. The school has four initial classes consisting of one lower elementary class, one upper elementary class, and two Grade X senior secondary classes, supported by 19 teachers. Its students come from families categorized in Desil 1 and Desil 2 based on the national socioeconomic database, meaning that the school specifically serves children from the lowest socioeconomic groups. The program uses a full boarding system in which essential needs are covered, and it applies Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME), a modular curriculum with an individual approach.

Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) is particularly important for the present study because its design directly intersects with the principles of differentiated instruction. The observation report explains that MEME allows students to enter without being fully bound by the conventional academic calendar, complete learning according to individual achievement, follow different learning pathways based on ability and pace, and study through modules that can be completed flexibly. The curriculum consists of three layers: preparatory curriculum involving physical, mental, psychosocial, literacy, numeracy, and talent mapping; formal school

curriculum involving national compulsory subjects, co-curricular and extracurricular programs, literacy, numeracy, STEM, and contextual content; and boarding curriculum involving spirituality, leadership, character, communication, life skills, and vocational development. This curricular structure suggests that MEME is not merely an administrative model of flexible entry and exit, but a potentially rich framework for designing individualized, modular, and holistic learning support for students whose academic readiness and life experiences are highly varied.

The observation findings, however, also show that the implementation of such a curriculum is pedagogically demanding. Sekolah Rakyat Medan serves students with very diverse educational histories, including lower elementary students aged 6–9 years, many of whom had not previously attended school, upper elementary students aged 10–12 years, some of whom had experienced school dropout, and senior secondary students aged 15–17 years with varied academic backgrounds. This configuration creates a strong need for intensive differentiated instruction, especially because the students are not only academically heterogeneous but also socially and emotionally vulnerable due to poverty-related experiences. The report identifies high academic heterogeneity, the complexity of implementing MEME, the need for learning management and student progress tracking, psychosocial support, boarding adaptation, and post-graduation sustainability as major areas requiring attention. These findings indicate that educational support in this setting cannot be reduced to providing free schooling, facilities, meals, or boarding; it must also include instructional systems that can identify each learner's starting point and provide appropriate learning pathways [6].

The case of Sekolah Rakyat Medan therefore offers an opportunity to examine differentiated instruction in a setting where modular curriculum, boarding school structure, poverty alleviation policy, and learner diversity converge. While differentiated instruction has been widely discussed in relation to mixed-ability classrooms, inclusive education, and student-centered learning, fewer studies have explored how it may function in a modular boarding school designed for students from low-income families. This gap is important because boarding schools serving vulnerable students require a more integrated model of differentiation: academic differentiation must be connected with diagnostic assessment, psychosocial assistance, character formation, health and nutrition support, peer relations, teacher collaboration, and continuous monitoring of individual progress. In other words, differentiated instruction in this context is not only about modifying classroom tasks; it is about building an educational support ecology that connects curriculum, teachers, boarding routines, student welfare, and long-term learning pathways.

Based on this background, the present study aims to analyze how differentiated instruction can be positioned as a form of educational support within a modular boarding school curriculum for students from low-income families in Indonesia. Using Sekolah Rakyat Medan as a qualitative case, this study focuses on the relationship between learner diversity, Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME), teacher capacity, diagnostic assessment, individualized learning planning, remedial support, peer tutoring, and psychosocial assistance. The study contributes to the literature by extending the discussion of differentiated instruction beyond conventional classroom differentiation and situating it within a broader equity-oriented boarding school model. Its novelty lies in framing differentiated instruction as a systemic support mechanism for vulnerable learners in a modular curriculum, rather than as a narrow teaching technique. In doing so, the article argues that differentiated instruction can become a strategic bridge between educational access and educational quality, particularly when schools are expected not only to admit marginalized students, but also to help them learn, adapt, and develop through pathways that acknowledge their unequal starting points.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design with an evaluative orientation. The design was selected because the study did not aim to test the statistical effect of differentiated instruction on students' learning outcomes, but to analyze how differentiated instruction can be conceptualized and implemented as an educational support strategy within a modular boarding school curriculum for students from low-income families. A case study approach was considered appropriate because Sekolah Rakyat Medan represents a

specific educational setting where poverty alleviation policy, boarding school practice, modular curriculum, learner diversity, and individualized learning support intersect in one institutional context. The case was examined not as a general representation of all Indonesian schools, but as an illustrative and analytically meaningful site for understanding how differentiated instruction may operate in an equity-oriented educational program.

The evaluative dimension of the study was used to interpret the strengths, needs, and implementation challenges found in the initial observation documents. Therefore, the analysis focused on identifying the extent to which the school context, curriculum structure, teacher resources, student characteristics, and support systems provide conditions for differentiated instruction. The study was framed around the assumption that differentiated instruction is not merely a classroom technique, but a broader instructional response to learner diversity involving diagnostic assessment, flexible learning pathways, remedial support, peer tutoring, teacher collaboration, psychosocial assistance, and continuous monitoring of student progress.

2.2 Research Site and Case Context

The case examined in this study was Sekolah Rakyat Medan, located on Jalan Flamboyan Raya III, Tanjung Selamat, Medan Tuntungan, Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The school was observed during the early operational stage of the 2025/2026 academic year. Based on the observation report, Sekolah Rakyat Medan serves students at the elementary and senior secondary levels through Sekolah Rakyat Dasar and Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas. At the time of observation, the school consisted of four initial classes: one lower elementary class, one upper elementary class, and two Grade X senior secondary classes. The school was supported by 19 teachers and operated as a full boarding school in which students' essential needs were covered free of charge.

The students served by the school came from families categorized in Desil 1 and Desil 2 based on the national socioeconomic database, indicating that the program specifically targets children from the lowest socioeconomic groups. The observation document also shows that the students' educational backgrounds were highly diverse: some lower elementary students had not previously attended school, some upper elementary students had experienced interrupted schooling, and senior secondary students had varied academic backgrounds. This condition made Sekolah Rakyat Medan a relevant case for examining differentiated instruction because the school serves learners with different levels of readiness, learning pace, academic foundation, psychosocial condition, and school adaptation needs.

2.3 Data Sources

The data for this study were derived from two main documents provided as the initial empirical basis of the article. The first document was the observation report entitled Laporan Observasi dan Rekomendasi Konstruktif Sekolah Rakyat Medan, dated June 2026. This report contained institutional profile, legal and program background, curriculum description, student and teacher profile, facilities, implementation findings, challenges, and constructive recommendations. The second document was a presentation file summarizing the same observation results into a structured visual format. The presentation was used as a supporting document to verify and synthesize the main points found in the observation report, particularly regarding school profile, curriculum structure, learner characteristics, implementation challenges, and priority recommendations.

Because the study was developed from observation-based documents rather than direct classroom intervention data, the analysis did not include student test scores, interview transcripts, classroom recordings, or experimental measurements. Consequently, the study is positioned as an exploratory and evaluative case study. Its purpose is to generate a grounded interpretation of how differentiated instruction can be planned and strengthened in the Sekolah Rakyat Medan context, not to claim causal effects on academic achievement.

2.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through document-based qualitative inquiry. The observation report was first examined to identify factual information about the school, including its location, student population, teacher

composition, curriculum model, boarding system, facilities, and implementation challenges. The report was then reviewed more specifically to extract information related to differentiated instruction, such as learner heterogeneity, diagnostic assessment needs, individual learning plans, modular learning, remedial instruction, peer tutoring, teacher role distribution, and learning progress tracking. The PowerPoint document was used as a complementary source to confirm the consistency of the observation findings and to identify the main themes emphasized in the summary presentation.

The data collection process followed three stages. First, all information related to the institutional and curricular context was mapped to understand the structure of Sekolah Rakyat Medan as a boarding school using Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME). Second, all information related to student diversity was extracted, especially age range, schooling history, academic readiness, socioeconomic background, and psychosocial vulnerability. Third, the recommendations in the observation report were reviewed to identify practical implications for differentiated instruction, including diagnostic assessment, individual learning planning, flexible module progression, remedial sessions, peer tutoring, co-teaching, psychosocial support, and learning management systems.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis combined deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding was guided by the conceptual dimensions of differentiated instruction, including learner readiness, learning profile, content differentiation, process differentiation, product differentiation, learning environment, formative assessment, and teacher support. These categories were used to examine whether the school context and curriculum structure provided opportunities for differentiated learning. Inductive coding was then applied to identify themes emerging from the observation documents, especially those related to the specific context of Sekolah Rakyat Medan.

The analysis produced several central themes. The first theme was learner heterogeneity, which refers to the wide differences in students' age, previous schooling experience, academic readiness, and psychosocial background. The second theme was modular curriculum as a differentiation mechanism, referring to the role of Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) in allowing students to learn through flexible modules and individual pathways. The third theme was teacher capacity and instructional organization, which included the potential use of 19 teachers for co-teaching, remedial instruction, mentoring, and individualized support. The fourth theme was psychosocial and boarding-based support, which reflected the need to connect academic differentiation with emotional adjustment, counseling, social adaptation, and student protection. The fifth theme was monitoring and learning management, which highlighted the need for diagnostic assessment, student portfolios, formative assessment, and progress tracking systems to ensure that differentiated instruction is implemented systematically.

III. RESULT

The analysis showed that differentiated instruction emerged as a central instructional need in Sekolah Rakyat Medan because the school served learners with highly diverse academic, socioeconomic, and psychosocial backgrounds. The school operated during the early stage of the 2025/2026 academic year and served students through four initial classes: one lower elementary class, one upper elementary class, and two Grade X senior secondary classes. The students came from Desil 1 and Desil 2 families, while the school was supported by 19 teachers and implemented Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME), a modular curriculum based on individual learning pathways. These conditions indicate that the school had a strong foundation for differentiated instruction, but also faced substantial implementation demands because the learners entered school with unequal educational histories, different readiness levels, and varied support needs.

Aspect	Observed Condition	Implication for Differentiated Instruction
School model	Full boarding school with free provision of basic student needs	Differentiation needs to integrate classroom learning, dormitory routines, welfare support, and character education
Curriculum	Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME), modular and individually oriented	Learning can be organized through flexible module progression and individualized learning pathways
School level	Sekolah Rakyat Dasar and Sekolah Rakyat Menengah Atas	Differentiation must address both elementary and senior secondary learning needs
Class structure	Four initial classes: one lower elementary class, one upper elementary class, and two Grade X classes	Instructional planning must respond to wide differences across age, grade level, and academic readiness
Student background	Students from Desil 1 and Desil 2 families	Learning support must consider socioeconomic vulnerability, possible interrupted schooling, and limited prior access to learning resources
Teacher resources	19 teachers for four classes	Teacher availability creates opportunities for co-teaching, remedial support, mentoring, and flexible grouping
Main instructional challenge	High academic heterogeneity	Uniform whole-class instruction is insufficient; diagnostic assessment and individualized targets are required
Main support challenge	Psychosocial vulnerability and boarding adaptation	Differentiation must be connected with counseling, emotional support, student protection, and structured dormitory orientation

Table 1: Institutional and learner profile relevant to differentiated instruction

Table 1 shows that the need for differentiated instruction was not caused only by academic diversity, but by the combination of poverty-related vulnerability, modular curriculum design, boarding-based schooling, and varied student readiness. The observation documents reported that lower elementary students were aged 6–9 years and many had not previously attended school, upper elementary students were aged 10–12 years and some had experienced interrupted schooling, while senior secondary students were aged 15–17 years with varied academic backgrounds. This composition demonstrates that formal class placement could not be assumed to represent actual readiness. Therefore, differentiated instruction became necessary to ensure that students were supported from their real starting points rather than from a uniform grade-level expectation.

The second result concerns the role of Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) as a structural foundation for differentiation. The curriculum was described as allowing flexible student entry, individual completion based on achievement, different learning pathways according to student ability and pace, and module-based learning. These principles are closely aligned with differentiated instruction because they make it possible for students to progress through learning materials at different speeds. The curriculum also consists of three layers: preparatory curriculum, formal school curriculum, and boarding curriculum. The preparatory layer includes physical, mental, psychosocial, literacy, numeracy, and talent mapping; the formal layer includes national subjects, literacy, numeracy, STEM, co-curricular, extracurricular, and contextual learning; while the boarding layer includes spirituality, leadership, character, communication, life skills, and vocational development.

Theme	Evidence from the Case	Current Condition	Differentiated Instruction Implication
Learner heterogeneity	Students differed in age, schooling history, academic readiness, and psychosocial condition	Very high diversity	Teachers need diagnostic assessment before determining content level, learning pace, and support strategy
Modular curriculum	MEME uses flexible modules and individual pathways	Strong curricular potential	Modules can be used for differentiated pacing, enrichment, and remedial learning
Teacher capacity	19 teachers supported four classes	Potentially strong	Teacher roles need to be organized for co-teaching, mentoring, remedial instruction, and progress monitoring
Diagnostic assessment	Talent mapping, literacy-numeracy mapping, and initial readiness assessment were emphasized	Needed as a priority	Student learning plans should begin with academic and psychosocial diagnosis
Individual learning plan	The report recommended individual learning plans and module targets	Not yet fully systematized	Each student requires documented learning goals, module progress, and support records
Remedial and enrichment	Remedial sessions and faster module progression were recommended	Needed immediately	Students who need more time should receive intensive support, while faster students should move to the next module
Peer tutoring	Peer tutoring was recommended, especially for elementary differentiation	Potential strategy	More advanced students can support peers under teacher supervision
Psychosocial support	Counseling, emotional check-ins, and social work support were emphasized	Very high priority	Academic differentiation must be accompanied by emotional and social adjustment support
Learning management system	LMS, student portfolios, and module tracking were recommended	Needs strengthening	Differentiation requires reliable records of student progress and formative assessment
Boarding adaptation	Structured dormitory orientation and family communication were recommended	Important transition issue	Learning readiness should be supported through stable routines, emotional safety, and adaptation programs

Table 2: Thematic findings on differentiated instruction readiness

Table 2 indicates that differentiated instruction in Sekolah Rakyat Medan cannot be reduced to adapting classroom tasks. It requires a coordinated support system involving diagnostic assessment, modular pacing, individual learning plans, remedial and enrichment activities, teacher collaboration, psychosocial assistance, and learning progress tracking. The observation documents explicitly placed differentiated learning for elementary students as a very high priority, recommending diagnostic assessment, individual learning plans, remedial support, peer tutoring, and flexible module progression. The PowerPoint summary also emphasized LMS use, student portfolios, and module tracking as important mechanisms for supporting MEME implementation.

The third result shows that teacher availability was one of the strongest institutional assets for differentiated instruction. The presence of 19 teachers for four classes provided a favorable ratio for individualized support. This condition creates practical possibilities for co-teaching, small-group instruction, remedial learning,

academic mentoring, and differentiated supervision. However, the data also show that teacher availability alone does not automatically produce differentiation. The observation report emphasized the need for clearer teacher role distribution, weekly coordination, counseling support, social work assistance, and vocational strengthening. Therefore, the effectiveness of differentiated instruction depends not only on the number of teachers, but also on how teacher roles are organized within a collaborative instructional system.

The fourth result highlights the importance of monitoring and documentation. Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) can only function effectively if each student's progress is recorded systematically. The documents reported that MEME implementation requires initial assessment, module-based learning, student progress tracking, portfolios, and consistent formative evaluation. Without these systems, flexible learning may become difficult to manage because teachers would not have sufficient evidence to determine whether students should receive remediation, repeat a module, move to a new module, or receive enrichment. Thus, the findings suggest that differentiated instruction in this school requires not only pedagogical flexibility, but also a simple and reliable learning management system.

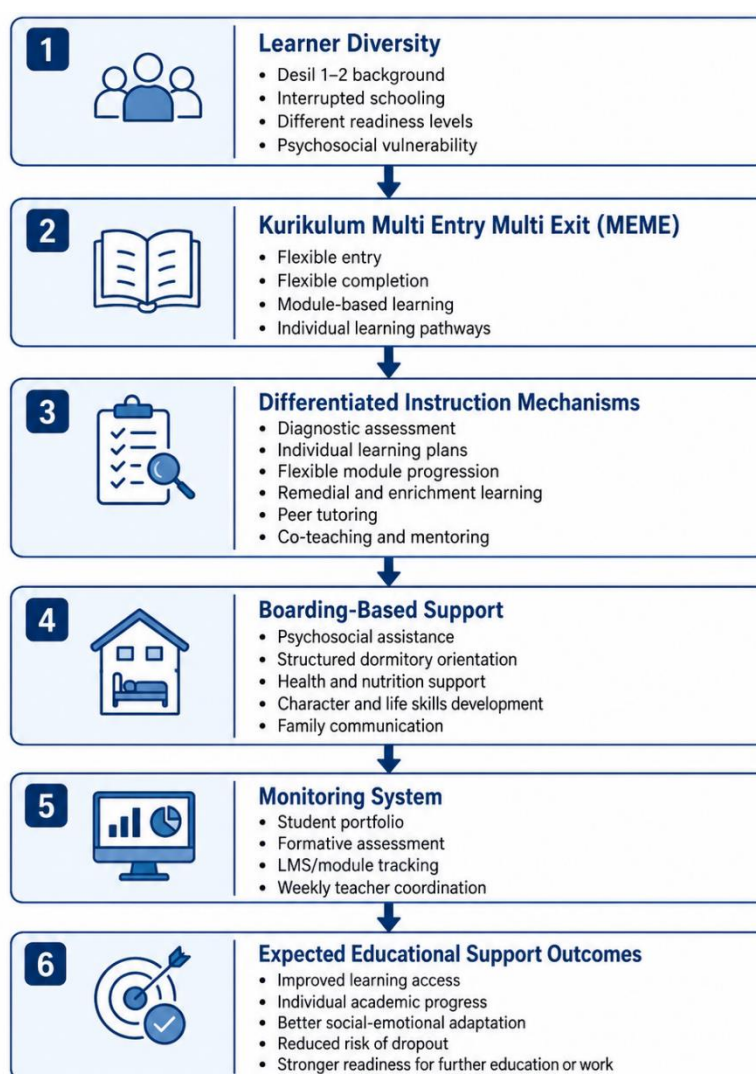


Figure 1. Differentiated instruction support model in sekolah rakyat medan

Figure 1 summarizes the central result of the analysis: differentiated instruction in Sekolah Rakyat Medan should be understood as a systemic educational support model. Learner diversity creates the need for differentiation, while MEME provides the curricular space for flexible learning pathways. However, the success of differentiation depends on instructional mechanisms, boarding-based support, and continuous monitoring.

This model also reflects the observation documents' IPO logic, in which inputs such as policy support, teacher resources, student background, MEME, and boarding structures must be translated into processes such as diagnostic assessment, modular learning, student protection, and monitoring before producing expected outcomes such as improved learning access, individual academic progress, social adaptation, and dropout prevention.

Overall, the results demonstrate that Sekolah Rakyat Medan provides a promising but still developing environment for differentiated instruction. Its strongest foundations are the equity-oriented mission, modular curriculum, boarding system, teacher availability, and commitment to supporting students from low-income families. At the same time, the main challenges are high learner heterogeneity, the complexity of MEME implementation, the need for stronger diagnostic and formative assessment, limited learning management infrastructure, psychosocial vulnerability, and student adaptation to boarding life. These findings suggest that differentiated instruction should be positioned as a bridge between educational access and educational quality. In this case, access to free schooling is only the first step; meaningful educational support requires a structured system that enables each student to learn through pathways that match their readiness, pace, needs, and life circumstances.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that differentiated instruction in Sekolah Rakyat Medan should be understood not merely as a classroom strategy, but as a systemic educational support model for learners whose starting points are shaped by socioeconomic vulnerability, interrupted schooling, academic heterogeneity, and psychosocial adjustment needs. This interpretation is important because the school does not serve a relatively homogeneous student population. Instead, it serves students from Desil 1 and Desil 2 families through a full boarding school system, with four initial classes across elementary and senior secondary levels and 19 teachers supporting the early implementation of Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME). In such a context, equal access to school is only the first layer of equity. The more complex challenge is ensuring that students who enter the school with different literacy levels, numeracy foundations, schooling histories, emotional readiness, and life experiences can participate meaningfully in learning [5], [7].

This finding is consistent with the broader international discourse on equity and inclusion in education. UNESCO emphasizes that inclusive education must address students who are excluded or disadvantaged because of background or ability, and it frames quality education as a moral imperative for every child [8]. Similarly, the OECD argues that equitable and inclusive education systems require a holistic approach that connects governance, resourcing, capacity building, school-level interventions, and monitoring and evaluation [1], [9]. The case of Sekolah Rakyat Medan reflects this holistic requirement. The school already has several important equity-oriented inputs, such as free boarding provision, government support, teacher availability, modular curriculum design, and student welfare services. However, the results show that these inputs must be translated into differentiated instructional processes if the school is to move from access provision toward learning quality.

The most important implication of the findings is that differentiated instruction becomes a pedagogical necessity when formal class placement does not accurately represent students' actual readiness. The observation documents show that lower elementary students include children aged 6–9 years, many of whom had not previously attended school; upper elementary students include children aged 10–12 years, some of whom had experienced school interruption; and senior secondary students include learners aged 15–17 years with varied academic backgrounds. This composition makes whole-class instruction problematic because students in the same broad school level may not share the same prerequisite knowledge, learning habits, or emotional readiness. Therefore, differentiated instruction in this setting should begin with diagnostic assessment rather than syllabus delivery [10], [11]. Teachers need to know where each learner starts before deciding what content to teach, how fast modules should be completed, what form of scaffolding is required, and which students need remedial or enrichment support [12].

The findings also confirm that Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) provides a strong curricular

foundation for differentiated instruction. MEME allows students to enter learning without being rigidly tied to the conventional academic calendar, complete learning according to individual achievement, follow different learning pathways, and study through modules that can be completed flexibly. These characteristics align closely with the core idea of differentiated instruction, which involves tailoring content, process, product, and learning environment to students' needs, supported by ongoing assessment and flexible grouping. In this sense, MEME can be interpreted as a structural enabler of differentiation because it provides curricular space for students to progress at different rates. However, the curriculum alone cannot guarantee differentiated learning. Without diagnostic tools, teacher coordination, module tracking, formative assessment, and individualized learning plans, MEME may remain a flexible policy design without consistent classroom implementation.

This study therefore extends the discussion of differentiated instruction beyond its common classroom-based framing. Much of the literature conceptualizes differentiated instruction as teachers' adaptation of tasks, materials, learning processes, and assessment products in mixed-ability classrooms [13]. While this remains relevant, the Sekolah Rakyat Medan case shows that differentiation for socioeconomically vulnerable learners must be wider than instructional adaptation. It must include academic diagnosis, psychosocial support, dormitory adaptation, student protection, health and nutrition monitoring, teacher collaboration, and continuous documentation of learning progress. The observation documents explicitly identify the need for psychosocial support, emotional check-ins, counseling or social work assistance, structured dormitory orientation, and family communication, especially for younger students adapting to boarding life. This means that readiness to learn is not only cognitive; it is also emotional, social, physical, and environmental [14].

The teacher factor is another critical point in the discussion. The presence of 19 teachers for four classes is a major institutional strength because it provides a realistic opportunity for co-teaching, small-group instruction, remedial sessions, mentoring, and individualized academic support. However, the findings also show that the availability of teachers must be supported by clear role distribution and regular coordination. This is consistent with research on differentiated instruction teacher preparation, which shows that successful programs tend to include active learning, collaboration, reflection, and long-term development, while contextual school factors can either support or hinder implementation [15], [16]. In Sekolah Rakyat Medan, the number of teachers is promising, but the school still needs an organized instructional system: teachers should not simply be assigned to classes, but distributed according to academic, remedial, mentoring, vocational, psychosocial, and boarding-support functions.

Another important implication concerns learning monitoring. Differentiated instruction requires evidence. Teachers cannot differentiate effectively if they do not have reliable information about student readiness, progress, module completion, learning difficulties, and socio-emotional conditions [15], [17]. The observation documents recommend diagnostic assessment, individual learning plans, flexible module progression, remedial learning, peer tutoring, student portfolios, LMS use, and module tracking. This is not only an administrative recommendation; it is central to the logic of differentiated instruction. If MEME allows different students to move through different modules at different speeds, then the school must have a mechanism to record who has mastered what, who needs repetition, who is ready for enrichment, and who requires additional support. Without such documentation, flexibility may become fragmented and difficult to evaluate.

The case also suggests that differentiated instruction can serve as a bridge between educational access and educational quality. Sekolah Rakyat Medan already addresses access by providing free schooling, boarding, meals, equipment, and basic services. Yet the findings indicate that access alone is insufficient for students who may have experienced delayed schooling, poverty-related learning gaps, nutritional problems, trauma, or unstable prior educational environments. Differentiated instruction becomes the pedagogical mechanism through which access is converted into meaningful learning opportunity [18]. Therefore, the relevance of differentiated instruction in Sekolah Rakyat Medan should not be assumed only because the approach is internationally recognized; it must be adapted to the specific realities of Indonesian low-income learners in a boarding school environment.

The integration of boarding-based support with differentiated instruction is one of the most distinctive contributions of this case. In ordinary classroom settings, differentiation often focuses on academic readiness and learning profile. In Sekolah Rakyat Medan, however, the boarding system creates a 24-hour educational environment in which learning, character formation, emotional adaptation, health routines, social relationships, and life skills development are interconnected. The PowerPoint summary identifies the school's boarding system as a strength for character formation, while also noting that dormitory adaptation may create homesickness and that psychosocial support must be strengthened. This suggests that differentiated instruction in boarding schools should not be restricted to lesson planning. It should also consider how dormitory routines, peer mentoring, structured orientation, communication with families, and student welfare affect readiness to learn.

The findings also have implications for school leadership and policy implementation. Since Sekolah Rakyat Medan is still in its early operational stage, the success of MEME and differentiated instruction will depend heavily on whether school leaders can transform recommendations into routines. Weekly teacher coordination, individual learning plan review, student portfolio monitoring, module tracking meetings, psychosocial check-ins, and remedial scheduling should become part of the school's operational culture. The OECD's emphasis on capacity building, school-level interventions, and monitoring is relevant here because equity-oriented policy requires implementation structures at the school level, not only strong policy design at the national level [9]. For Sekolah Rakyat Medan, this means that differentiated instruction should be institutionalized through teacher workload design, assessment systems, professional development, and cross-sector collaboration with health, social work, and child protection services.

Overall, this study shows that Sekolah Rakyat Medan has strong potential to become a model of differentiated educational support for students from low-income families, but this potential depends on the school's ability to operationalize differentiation systematically. The strongest foundation lies in the combination of an equity-oriented mission, Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME), full boarding support, teacher availability, and commitment to student welfare. The main challenge lies in ensuring that these strengths are connected through diagnostic assessment, individualized learning planning, flexible module progression, teacher collaboration, psychosocial assistance, and continuous monitoring. The novelty of this study is therefore its argument that differentiated instruction in a modular boarding school curriculum should be framed as an integrated support ecology, not merely as a teaching technique. In this ecology, students' unequal starting points are not treated as barriers to standard instruction, but as the basis for designing more responsive, humane, and equitable learning pathways.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that differentiated instruction is a crucial educational support strategy in a modular boarding school curriculum serving students from low-income families in Indonesia. The case of Sekolah Rakyat Medan shows that students' diverse academic readiness, interrupted schooling experiences, socioeconomic vulnerability, and psychosocial adjustment needs require more than equal access to free education; they require responsive instructional pathways that recognize different starting points and learning speeds. Kurikulum Multi Entry Multi Exit (MEME) provides a promising curricular foundation for differentiation because its modular and individualized structure allows flexible learning progression, but its effectiveness depends on systematic implementation through diagnostic assessment, individual learning plans, remedial and enrichment activities, peer tutoring, co-teaching, psychosocial assistance, student portfolios, and continuous progress tracking. The findings suggest that differentiated instruction in this context should not be treated merely as a classroom technique, but as an integrated support ecology connecting curriculum, teacher collaboration, boarding routines, welfare services, and monitoring systems. Therefore, Sekolah Rakyat Medan has strong potential to become an equity-oriented model of educational support for vulnerable learners, provided that its modular curriculum is consistently translated into structured, humane, and evidence-based differentiated learning practices.

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