



Optimizing Early Childhood Learning Interest through a Differentiated Learning Approach

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Abstract

Every student definitely has various characteristics and learning interests that are different from each other. This is a challenge for teachers in carrying out teaching and learning activities. Teachers should be able to accommodate the diversity, needs and learning interests of students because this is the key to success in achieving learning goals. However, in reality, many children have low interest in learning because learning is not focused on children and learning needs are not in accordance with their characteristics. This research aims to optimize children's interest in learning through the application of differentiated learning. This research uses a classroom action research (PTK) approach which is carried out in 2 cycles. Each cycle consists of planning, implementation and observation and reflection stages. The location of the research was at the Kebayoran Lama State Kindergarten 01, South Jakarta, with research subjects of group B students totaling 16 students. The data collection techniques used in this research are interviews and observation. The research results showed that there was an increase from pre-cycle, to cycle I and then cycle II. The percentage of interest in learning in the pre-cycle was 49.91%. In cycle I it was 81.40%, and in cycle II it reached 96.79%. Thus it can be said that children's interest in learning can be optimized through a differentiated learning approach because differentiated learning is a learning approach that is designed to meet their needs, interests and child's talent.

Keywords: *Early Childhood, Learning Interest, Differentiated Learning Approach*



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INTRODUCTION

When young children enter the educational environment, they inevitably possess varying abilities, personalities, learning strategies, attitudes, and motivations (Kahmann et al., 2022). This uniqueness requires them to be guided, trained, and nurtured to ensure their growth and development are achieved optimally. According to Amat, a 3rd-grade teacher at Montong Betok Elementary School (Guru et al., 2021), in his journal on individual growth, development, and maturity, it is stated that each individual has growth and developmental tasks that must be navigated. As individuals mature, they generally strive to reach a level of

maturity characterized by certain traits. Therefore, during early childhood, education should be delivered by prioritizing their interests, talents, and developmental stages.

One of the educational approaches that teachers must understand is differentiation. Although teachers have already implemented it, they have not done so consistently. Additionally, Khosiyono (Khosiyono et al., n.d.2022) states that differentiated instructional strategies significantly impact students' learning interests. Interest implies a feeling of attraction, liking, and a heightened desire towards learning aspects, leading to changes in children's knowledge, skills, and behavior. According to Nasihin & Bari (2023), interest greatly influences learning, as someone will only do something they are interested in. Conversely, without interest, a person is unlikely to do anything. Therefore, the ways teachers can foster children's interest in learning are: 1) The material must capture attention and be presented gradually, starting from easy to difficult and from concrete to abstract. 2) A conducive learning environment that supports learning activities. 3) Learning through habituation, and 4) Utilizing various methods in delivering activities, including voice intonation, facial expressions, and more. There are many activities that can be carried out to spark children's interest.

Currently, at TK Negeri Kebayoran Lama 01, in the educational quality report (2023), element 1 concerning the quality of differentiated learning is rated low in point 2.5 because teachers still implement group learning not based on interests and characteristics, resulting in children becoming easily bored with low learning interest due to the learning activities applied by teachers. Based on the conditions described above, the researcher aims to examine to what extent children's learning interest can be optimized or, in other words, revitalized and motivated in their learning activities. From the background above, the researcher can identify the following problem statements: 1) How can differentiated learning be implemented to optimize children's learning interest? 2) What is the impact of applying differentiated approaches on children's learning interest?

The objectives of the research are to determine the approaches and strategies used to optimize the learning interest of young children and to convey the importance of differentiation in early childhood education. Differentiated learning is an approach that accommodates the needs of each individual to gain learning experiences and mastery of the concepts being studied. Differentiated learning can improve children's learning outcomes if conducted independently, as it is an adjustment to their interests and academic performance (Kamal, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The research approach employed in this study is action research. Mills (2003), in his book, states that: "Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher research, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching, learning environment to gather information about how their particular school operates, how they teach, and how well their students learn." The meaning of action research is a systematic investigation carried out by researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching and learning environment to gather information about how their schools operate. Mills, as cited in Creswell (2008), mentions that: "Action research designs are systematic procedures done by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather information about and subsequently improve the ways their particular educational setting operates, their teaching, and their student learning." This can be interpreted to mean that action research designs are systematic procedures conducted by teachers (or others in an educational setting) to gather information about how they teach and how their students learn.

Surawasih Madya (2019), in her book on action research theory and practice, reveals that action research is situational research, or adjusted to circumstances, and is closely related to learning issues and specific conditions that cannot be broadly described. Therefore, it is highly appropriate for the researcher to use the action research method. The purpose of this action research method is to collect data related to optimizing the learning interest of Group B children at TK Negeri Kebayoran Lama 01, consisting of 16 children—9 boys and 7 girls. The researcher chose to use the Kemmis and Taggart model of action research because its stages focus on specific activities, making it easier for the researcher to carry out this action research. The cycle begins with planning, followed by action and observation, and then reflecting on the findings. The data are analyzed in percentages using the following formula:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Explanation:

P = Percentage of activity

F = Frequency of activity performed by the children

N = Number of children in the class.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research results were obtained from the implementation of actions during the pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II, showing an increase in children's learning interest. In the initial observation, the researcher divided learning interest into three indicators: attention during learning activities, which was 43.75%; participation in learning activities, which was 56.25%; and the average indicator of enjoyment in learning activities, which was 68.75%. These three indicators were categorized as very low. Therefore, the researcher conducted two cycles of action.

The average increase in these three indicators in Cycle I is described as follows: the average indicator of attention during learning activities was 68.75%, categorized as sufficient; the average indicator of participation in learning activities was 81.25%, categorized as good; and the average indicator of enjoyment in learning activities was 87.5%, categorized as good.

Based on the research conducted in Cycle I on learning activities in the block area, reading, writing, and natural materials with Group B children at TK Negeri Kebayoran Lama 01, there were several aspects that needed improvement to address the low interest in learning. In Cycle II, the research procedure was the same as in Cycle I, which included planning, acting and observing, and reflecting. The planning and implementation stages in Cycle II were almost the same as in Cycle I, with some improvements made based on reflections. These improvements included: a) adding the use of media that could accommodate activities in the block area, reading, writing, and natural materials.



Figure 1. Children Playing in the Block Area

Children had more choices in using media they liked, and in the block area, they not only played with blocks but also drew the buildings they created. In the reading and writing area, additional learning media were provided, such as shells, bottle caps, etc. The observations showed that the learning activities conducted by the children were going well, and there was an increase in children's learning interest compared to Cycle I.



Figure 2. Children in the Reading and Writing Area with Differentiated Instruction

The children's learning interest could be seen from the achievement of the three main assessed indicators. The average increase in these three indicators was as follows: the average indicator of attention during learning activities was 93.75%, categorized as very good; the average indicator of participation in learning activities was 93.75%, categorized as very good; and the average indicator of enjoyment in learning activities was 100%, categorized as very good.

During the reflection stage, after making improvements in Cycle II, most of the children were actively asking and answering questions from the teacher and their peers. The children became more focused on learning activities and were very happy to engage in learning activities. This was because the learning approach provided met their diverse needs, and the strategy of differentiating the learning process was

tailored to their learning interests. The average result of each learning interest indicator reached the target, which was above 75%. Therefore, the research in Cycle II was considered successful. The overall increase in student learning interest from Cycle I to Cycle II after the implementation of differentiated

Based on the data on student learning interest collected during Cycle I and Cycle II, there was an increase: in the pre-cycle, the average learning interest was 56.25%; in Cycle I, the average learning interest was 79.17%; and in Cycle II, the average learning interest reached 95.85%. This indicates that differentiated instruction can be recommended for school learning activities to meet students' needs and optimize their learning interest. The goal is to stimulate students to focus on learning, be active in their learning activities, and enjoy the learning process at school. Learning should accommodate the interests of all students so that each student can perform at their best. For this reason, teachers must differentiate instruction in the classroom to meet the needs of all students, either to recover or accelerate instruction and to provide learning opportunities for all students.

Arviana (Arviana et al., 2014) noted that the creativity of Indonesian children is lower compared to other countries. The low creative thinking skills are indicated to have implications for students' low achievements. As Ade Sintia Wulandari (2022) stated, teachers also have an obligation to ensure that every student has an equal opportunity to learn in a way that best suits their interests. This is because the role of the teacher should be child-centered, meaning the teacher always acts in the best interest of the child's development as the primary and most important factor.

The achievement of learning goals is influenced by the interest or desire to learn a particular activity presented by the teacher. As Imawati (2021) pointed out, learning that is tailored to students' interests and learning styles will affect the learning objectives. The process of accommodating students' learning needs through differentiated instruction is meant to facilitate students according to their needs, as each student has different characteristics and cannot be treated the same. In implementing differentiated instruction, teachers need to consider reasonable actions to be taken, as differentiated instruction does not mean providing different treatment or actions for each student, nor does it mean differentiating between smart and less smart students. The Differentiated Instruction approach (Tomlinson, 2001) is a way to tailor instruction to students' needs to maximize their potential within the given scope. This process involves learning style, readiness, and interest. Innovation in education is necessary to address these issues, particularly through the differentiated approach.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the Classroom Action Research (CAR) conducted, it can be concluded that differentiated instruction can optimize the learning interest of children in Group B at TK Negeri Kebayoran Lama 01. Teachers, as the forefront of educational success, should provide learning materials to students by considering their characteristics, interests, and learning styles. This is evidenced by the change in the percentage of students' learning interest, which increased from the pre-cycle to cycle I and cycle II. In the pre-cycle, the average percentage of students' learning interest was 56.25%, categorized as very low. In cycle I, the average percentage of students' learning interest increased to 79.17%, categorized as good, and in cycle II, the average percentage of students' learning interest reached 95.85%, categorized as very

good. Therefore, the researcher concludes that the study on differentiated instruction in optimizing children's learning interest was successful.

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