

TEACHER AGENCY IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY

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Abstract: This research objective was to investigate teacher agency in the context of implementing differentiated learning which is one of the instructions from the latest national curriculum. The study employed an interpretive approach by exploring teacher agency using the ecological model of teacher agency with three dimensions: iterational, projective, and practical-evaluative. To capture an in-depth understanding of teacher agency, there are three main domains related: teaching planning, differentiated learning, and technology in pedagogy. The differentiated learning domain was selected to be investigated in this study. Data was gathered by interviewing a nineteen experienced teacher who implemented differentiated learning in her teaching by the latest curriculum instruction. The collected data is analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights regarding the perception of the teacher. The study uncovered that teacher agency was shaped by past experiences and knowledge. Teacher's innovation in teaching and support for the success of national education goals indicated the dedication of teacher agency. This research showed that teachers committed to improving student learning and willing to face challenges are through teacher agency. Further research opportunities include exploring teachers' planning strategies and technology integration in teaching.

Keywords: teacher agency, differentiated learning, the ecological model of teacher agency

INTRODUCTION

In today's educational scene, a compulsion to adapt to the unique and distinct needs of learners has prepared the way for the adoption of innovative teaching approaches, with differentiated learning taking the lead. According to (Tomlinson, 2005), differentiated learning has been shown to be effective in meeting the numerous demands of pupils. The utilization of differentiated learning principles in Indonesia is exemplified by the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile development initiative in the Merdeka Curriculum. This program is administered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in Indonesia, with the primary objective of addressing the educational setbacks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Hasanah et al., 2022). As a means of enriching the Pancasila student profile, an adaptable educational structure has been implemented within schools. This framework enables the optimization of time allocation, facilitating dynamic and engaging learning opportunities. The core aim of this initiative is to enhance diverse proficiencies encompassed within the Pancasila student profile through purposeful exercises and activities (Usman et al., 2023).

However, implementing differentiated learning can be a challenging effort that may require teacher agency. There are also still many issues and challenges with differentiated learning as implied in

the Merdeka curriculum. The difficulties of limited time, money, and poor training frequently prevent instructors from properly adopting differentiated learning (Gibbs, 2023). Moreover, two challenges encountered in Indonesia regarding differentiated instruction implementation (Siam & Al-Natour, 2016; Komang Arie Suwastini, 2021). Make a start to the application of differentiated instruction at the school management level, aiming to aid both schools and parents. Moreover, the customization of teaching approaches to suit each student's distinct traits is a tough. Those challenges are highlighted that teacher agency is considered to influence the effective implementation of differentiated learning.

The concept of agency can be simply described as the ability or inclination to take action. It's important to consider agency as something individuals do or attain, rather than just something they possess (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Agency encompasses the intention to act, the ability to consider various potential actions, the active evaluation of those possibilities, and the ultimate decision-making process (Priestley et al., 2015a). The idea of teacher agency has attracted more attention in recent years, sparking academic investigations that highlight its crucial role in boosting student learning (Day & King, 2008; Husu & Tirri, 2007). Teacher agency often described as a dynamic construct in which teachers are active agents in response to available resources, institutional norms, and policies (Weng & Ataei, 2022); a teacher's ability to make choices, influence, resist, or take stances not limited towards policy or curriculum change but in different contexts (Kayi-Aydar, 2019); the ability of teachers to act responsively within a particular classrooms conditions (Foley et al., 2022); and last but not least, the ability of teachers to act as agents of change in their personal and professional lives (Vitanova, 2018).

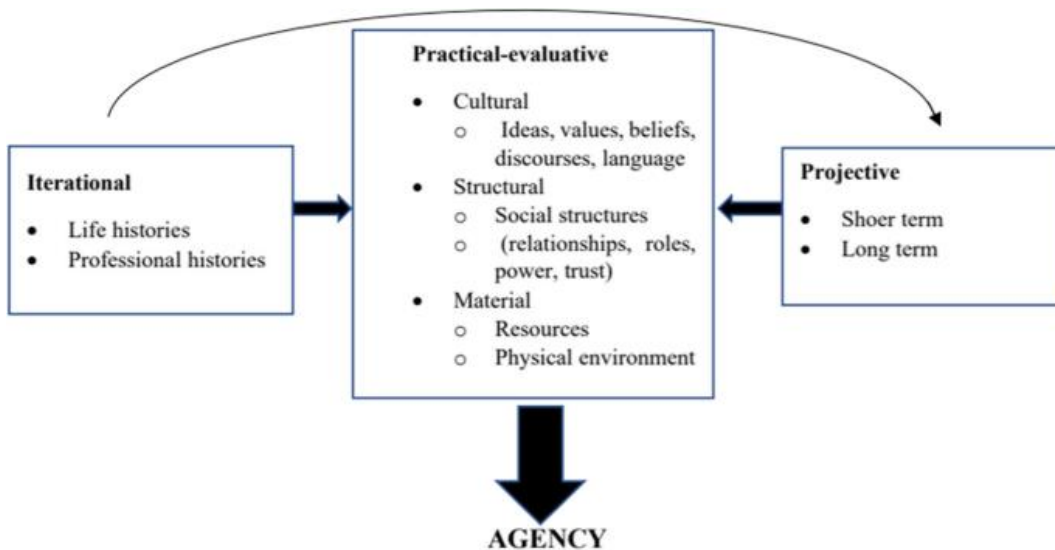


Figure 1. The Ecological Model of Teacher Agency (Prestley et al., 2015)

Teacher agency has been the subject of substantial discussions and deliberation over an extended period of time, owing to its diverse interpretations, which have given rise to various theories and conceptual frameworks (Farmasari, 2021). Due to the agency, it is argued that the emergence of this phenomenon is a consequence of the interplay between individual capabilities and environmental factors (Priestley et al., 2015). In this case, the sense of agency is shaped by individual initiatives, available resources, and socio-cultural and structural influences (Leijen et al., 2020). In order to obtain the teacher’s perception of teaching differentiated learning, this study applied the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015). This model is divided into three: experience-driven (iterational dimension), goal-guided (projective dimension), and contextual interaction (practical-evaluative dimension) (see Figure 1), which help to understand the insight of agency. The description of each dimension is provided in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Description of dimensions in ecological model of teacher agency

No	Dimension	Description
1	Iterational	Teachers draw on their past experiences and knowledge.
2	Projective	Teachers consider future goals to guide their actions.
3	Practical-evaluative	Teachers interact with their cultural and structural context.

Leijen et al. (2020) established the ecological model of teacher agency, with the aim of in-depth capturing agency across three domains: teaching planning, differentiated learning, and technology in pedagogy. In the teaching planning domain, it is commonly recognized as a crucial task that educators are required to undertake. Meanwhile, differentiated learning and technology in pedagogy have emerged as prominent aspects of teacher's jobs in numerous countries in recent times. The selection of these specific domains was based on the recognition that agency is dependent on context, and these domains represent several key areas of current teachers' duties. To enhance the comprehensiveness of this study, the researchers will only focus on one specific topic within this study, which is the differentiated learning domain. Thus, this study explored teacher agency in the context of the differentiated learning domain which is elaborated in three dimensions in the ecological model of teacher agency. Overall, this study highlighted in what way a teacher accomplishes agency through iterational dimension, projective dimension, and practical-evaluative dimension in the context of differentiated learning, as well as what may assist or hinder this domain. Consequently, this study examined a research question: *How does teacher's perspective in the context of differentiated learning determine teacher agency?*

METHOD

The study used the interpretive approach in a qualitative study. The basic purpose of the interpretive approach is to obtain insight into individuals' views of their own and others' behaviors. Interpretive approach, like other types of qualitative research, seeks to understand the meanings, motives, and interpretations that individuals give to their own actions and interactions with others (Given, 2008). This approach helps to uncover how teachers draw from their past encounters to shape their current agency, adapting their methods based on what has proven effective. We can explore teachers' iterative learning and adaptation processes through interpretive research in the experience-driven dimension. By adjusting their strategies depending on what has worked in the past, teachers shape their current agency by drawing from their experiences in the past.

In the goal-directed dimension, the interpretive approach allows us to investigate how teachers set and achieve professional goals. We get insights into how these factors influence their agency, directing their activities towards certain goals, by evaluating their aspirations, strategies, and the considerations that shape their decisions. Understanding how teachers negotiate the intricate web of interactions in their learning settings is aided by interpretive inquiry in the context of contextual interaction.

To collect data, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to find the way of implementing differentiated learning in the classroom. The researcher asks a sequence of pre-planned but open-ended questions to informants as part of a qualitative data-collecting strategy (Given, 2008). When conducting semi-structured interviews, researchers adapted a written interview guide in preparation. The Leijen et al.'s (2020) questionnaire served as the basis for the interview questions used in this study. This adaptation aims to explore differentiated learning context in greater depth within the ecological model of teacher agency. With the use of this method, this study seeks to explore and comprehend the subtleties of how teacher agency interacts with the use of diversified learning methodologies. By using this approach, we can get a deeper understanding of the dynamic interaction between teacher agency and differentiated learning within the educational ecosystem.

The study's participant is a teacher who actively uses differentiated learning approaches in her classroom. The teacher has 19 years of teaching experience. She gained a thorough understanding of differentiated learning principles after participating in the Guru Penggerak program in 2022-2023, Indonesia's teacher empowerment initiative program, and has used diversified learning approaches as part of her involvement in the program. In 2022, she was named one of the inspirational teachers in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology's Inspirational Teacher program. The award not only recognizes her teaching excellence but also her agency in influencing her educational

environment and encouraging her peers. This study intends to dive into the delicate interplay between her teaching agency and her implementation of differentiated learning by including her as a participant. Her journey and achievements demonstrate her proactive participation in improving her teaching method, especially in implementing differentiated learning.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researchers present the key findings derived from an in-depth understanding of the role of teacher agency in the successful implementation of differentiated learning strategies. The following subsections detail the themes that emerged and explain the dimensions in the ecological model of teacher agency that relate to the implementation of differentiated learning, which ultimately impacts teacher agency.

Iterational: Teachers draw on their past experiences and knowledge

Drawing on prior experiences and knowledge in the past education is unquestionably important for teachers to shape their agency in classroom. This dimension serves to activate teachers' background knowledge and beliefs in order to develop robust ideas about education. The participants illuminated their thoughts in the interview data as follows:

"My valuable experience over the past year of implementing differentiated learning is learning content in English learning. So, maybe all this time I only taught students from textbooks, but maybe now I have to prepare everything from videos, books, games. I tried to implement the Jigsaw game."

This statement is an example of how the teacher is drawing on her own personal experiences and competence in the classroom. It represented her knowledge of teaching has changed in the way of applying new methods which is the Jigsaw game.

"These experiences are valuable to me. At least I have implemented differentiated learning, although it is not ideal because I have only just graduated from teacher training and my school has only implemented the latest national curriculum this year."

Referring to teachers' experiences and implementation of differentiated learning showed the recognition of the learning process which must be done repeatedly until it becomes an appropriate method for language learning.

Projective: Teachers consider future goals to guide their actions

In the second dimension, unlike the previous one where past experience plays active roles in shaping teacher agency, teachers' future objectives direct their ways in reaching their professional purposes. The dimension is implicitly shown in the following interview data:

"My short-term goal is to succeed in the government program, because differentiated learning is part of the latest national curriculum program. Moreover, I have graduated in teacher training, my school has implemented the latest national curriculum even though it is not yet."

The emphasis on short-term objectives related to government programs goals, one of them are the implementation of differentiated learning.

"In the long-term goal, my hope is that students will continue to be enthusiastic about learning according to their interests or abilities. In their lives, they do things that focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. Teachers should do something for their future depending on their strengths."

Teacher emphasizes the long-term goal in differentiated learning is for students to succeed in any future jobs based on their strengths.

Practical-evaluative: Teachers interact with their cultural and structural context

The last dimension mostly shows the teachers' challenges in dealing with cultural and structural context of learning. However, their limited information concerning differentiated learning and lack of support system at school do not keep them from implementing the approach in the classroom practices. This is shown from the following interview findings:

"Not all teachers at the school were so supportive. With the expression from the teacher that students become addicted to the library because when I teach, they are often taken to the library. So there has not been full support because there has also been no reinforcement from the principal, for example, reflecting on how to learn, has never been done."

This quotation addresses the practical-evaluative dimension by emphasizing the interaction between the teacher and the school's context and structure. The lack of support from some teachers and the absence of reinforcement from the principal highlight the teacher's engagement with the school's cultural and structural factors.

According to the findings, the teacher demonstrated an integrated approach to implementing differentiated learning. This study revealed that the teacher drew on her knowledge to experiment the innovative technique (Keiler, 2018) such as the Jigsaw game, and leave the old style of teaching (the material is in the textbook only). The innovation signalled the evolution of her teaching, which became a commitment to continuous development and improvement in classroom learning (Lodge et al., 2018). In addition, she encouraged teachers to develop their teaching to align with the new curriculum expectations for implementing differentiated learning. Her support for the success of national education goals by implementing differentiated learning proactively identified agency of the teacher. In this case, teacher agency is more than a personal aspiration, it also included a practical-evaluative dimension that interacts with the cultural and structural context of the educational ecosystem (Oosterhoff et al., 2020). In another finding, the challenge of less support from fellow teachers and principals did not isolate

teachers' actions in implementing differentiated learning. This indicated that teachers' efforts to continue practicing differentiated learning as it should while recognizing the obstacles and chances presented by this context (Lavania & Mohamad Nor, 2021).

CONCLUSION

According to the ecological model of teacher agency, this research drawn the agency of teacher by implementing differentiated learning. From the teacher perspective, it is interpreted that teacher agency is holding an important role in the progress of implementing differentiated learning. The teachers who are devoted to constantly evolving and are willing to try new strategies are more likely to apply differentiated learning progressively. Supporting agency in teachers' selves may enable teachers to create differentiated learning that is responsive to the needs of the students. It can be said that teacher agency become an inner power to be consistent and overcome the challenges from the environment during the implementation of differentiated learning. Further researchers can conduct several researches to investigate the in-depth understanding of other domains of teacher agency which are: teaching planning and technology in pedagogy.

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