

Differentiated Learning Strategies to Develop Critical Thinking Skills in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore and describe the implementation of differentiated learning strategies in early childhood education and their impact on the development of critical thinking skills at TK ABA Bebekan. **Method:** Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected over five weeks through classroom observations, teacher interviews, and documentation analysis. The study focused on class B, where differentiated strategies were implemented based on children's learning styles and interests. **Results:** The findings indicate that the teacher employed three forms of differentiation – process, content, and product. Children were more engaged, demonstrated increased curiosity, and exhibited critical thinking behaviors such as asking questions, reasoning, making decisions, and solving problems. Specifically, 12 out of 15 children actively questioned phenomena, and 13 made independent choices during learning. **Novelty:** This study contributes to the limited literature on early childhood differentiated instruction in Indonesia by highlighting its practical application in enhancing critical thinking, particularly through individualized learning activities that respect children's developmental uniqueness.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is in a developmental phase known as the golden age [1] [2] [3]. This period greatly determines the direction and quality of a child's future growth and development. All the stimulation given at this stage will have a long-term impact on the child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. One important aspect of this development is the ability to think critically. This ability needs to be introduced early so that children become accustomed to thinking logically and rationally [4] [5] [6]. By thinking critically, children are able to differentiate information, connect concepts, and organize ideas coherently. The learning process at this time must be designed to actively stimulate children's cognitive functions. Therefore, early childhood education must be the main foundation in shaping a generation that thinks intelligently and independently [7] [8].

Critical thinking is a skill that enables children to understand the world around them more deeply [9], [10]. Children who are able to think critically can observe, analyze, and conclude the relationship between one event and another. They are also able to make decisions based on logical considerations [11]. In the context of the 21st century, critical thinking has become one of the key competencies that every individual must possess [12], [13], [14]. Therefore, strengthening critical thinking skills should start at the early childhood education level. Children who are trained in critical thinking are more prepared to face changes and challenges of the times. This ability also encourages children to become lifelong learners. Therefore, early childhood education institutions must place

the development of critical thinking as an important part of their curriculum [15][16] [17], [18].

Although important, in reality, there are still many early childhood education institutions that apply uniform learning for all students. This type of learning model does not take into account the diversity of children's characteristics in terms of interests, abilities, and learning styles. However, each child has unique potential and learning needs. When the learning approach does not align with the child's needs, the child's potential cannot develop optimally. As a result, some children become passive, less engaged, and even feel bored during learning activities [19]. The learning environment also becomes less supportive of the development of critical thinking skills. Teachers often focus on delivering the material without considering the best ways to actively engage the children. This condition indicates the need to design more adaptive and responsive learning strategies to the diversity of children [20].

Differentiated learning is an educational approach that pays attention to individual differences in learning [21] [22] [23]. Through this strategy, teachers can adjust the content, process, and products of learning according to the needs, interests, and learning profiles of the children. This approach positions the teacher as a facilitator who actively creates a flexible learning environment. In practice, teachers provide various activity options that allow children to learn according to their styles and developmental levels. This creates opportunities for children to explore their abilities more optimally [24]. Differentiated learning also fosters children's self-confidence because they feel valued as individuals. With a fun and inclusive learning environment, children find it easier to develop both academically and socially. Therefore, differentiated learning becomes an important strategy in early childhood education [25].

One of the advantages of differentiated learning is its ability to encourage children's critical thinking [26], [27]. Children who are given choices of activities tend to be more challenged to make decisions and express opinions [28]. Flexible grouping also allows children to learn from friends with different characters, broadening their perspectives. Teachers who use varied learning media help children access information more effectively. The learning process becomes more meaningful because it aligns with the child's world and encourages them to ask questions and explore further. This active involvement strengthens the child's thinking process in constructing arguments and solving simple problems [29]. In a supportive environment, children feel safe to explore and try new things. Thus, differentiation strategies have a significant impact on strengthening children's critical thinking skills from an early age [30].

TK ABA Bebekan is one example of an early childhood education institution that has adopted the principles of differentiated learning in its daily activities. At this school, teachers consistently design activities based on initial assessments of children's interests and learning styles. A variety of optional activities are available, allowing children to engage according to their individual preferences. Teachers also regularly rotate playgroups so that children can interact socially with a variety of friends. In addition, space is provided for independent exploration, allowing children to learn through direct

experience. As a result, the children appear more focused and enthusiastic in their learning. They actively ask questions, make decisions, and show a high level of curiosity. This condition reflects the success of implementing differentiated learning in creating meaningful and effective education.

Several previous research findings support the importance of differentiated learning in the development of critical thinking in early childhood. According to Prasetyani, 2021, differentiated learning that takes into account children's different learning styles and interests can enhance active participation and the quality of understanding [31]. Research by Calik (2019) & Komilova (2024) shows that differentiation strategies are effective in creating an inclusive and enjoyable learning environment for early childhood children [32], [33]. Furthermore, a study by Bhujakkanarin (2024) states that the implementation of differentiated learning can enhance children's analytical and decision-making skills [34]. Findings from Jampel (2017) also emphasize that children who learn through a tailored approach tend to be more critical in observing and responding to situations [35]. Thus, these results provide a strong foundation that differentiation strategies are the right approach in fostering critical thinking skills from an early age.

Based on that background, this research aims to describe the differentiated learning strategies implemented at TK ABA Bebekan. The main focus is on how the strategy is developed and implemented by teachers in learning activities. In addition, this research also aims to identify its impact on the critical thinking skills of early childhood children. This research is qualitative with a descriptive approach to explore the real experiences of teachers and children. Data were obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation in the context of daily learning. The findings from this research are expected to contribute to the development of learning practices in early childhood education (PAUD). This research can also serve as a reference for other teachers who wish to implement similar strategies. In the end, this research emphasizes the importance of an approach that values diversity and children's potential from an early age.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive qualitative type to gain a deep understanding of differentiated learning strategies in the context of early childhood education. This approach was chosen because it aligns with the research objectives of exploring in detail the naturally occurring learning practices. The researcher focuses on the process and meaning behind learning activities, rather than on numerical measurement or generalization. Data were collected through direct observation techniques in the classroom, in-depth interviews with teachers, and documentation of the learning activities conducted. All data collection activities were conducted at TK ABA Bebekan, an early childhood education institution that has implemented the principles of differentiated learning. The research was conducted over five weeks from January to February 2025.

The researcher conducted participatory observations to examine the behavior of teachers and children in various learning activities. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with the classroom teacher to obtain broader information regarding the background and strategies implemented. Documentation such as lesson plans, activity photos, and children's work were also collected as supporting data. Data analysis is conducted by reducing the data, organizing thematic categories, and drawing relevant conclusions. Data validity is maintained through source and method triangulation, as well as checking findings with key informants (member check). With this method, it is hoped that the research results can provide a comprehensive and contextual picture of the effectiveness of differentiated learning in developing critical thinking skills in early childhood.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This research was conducted in class B of TK ABA Bebekan over five weeks in January-February 2025. Through direct observation, interviews with the classroom teacher, and documentation of teaching devices and learning activities, data was obtained regarding differentiated learning strategies and their impact on the critical thinking abilities of early childhood children.

1. Differentiated Learning Strategies Implemented by Teachers

Based on the results of observations and interviews, the teacher implements three main forms of differentiation, which include process, content, and learning products. This strategy is designed to accommodate the individual characteristics of children in a single class. With this approach, children can learn according to their individual styles and abilities, without being uniformed.

a) Differentiation of the Learning Process

The teacher provides several different activity options within one theme, such as: stringing beads (for children who enjoy fine motor activities), free drawing (for children who tend to be visually expressive), and role-playing professions (for children who are socially active). Each activity has an adjusted level of challenge, and the teacher provides guidance according to the child's needs. Children can choose activities that best match their preferences, making them feel more comfortable and motivated to learn. In addition, varied activities help prevent boredom and stimulate various aspects of a child's development. Teachers also record the development of each child based on the activities they choose to participate in as part of formative evaluation.

b) Content Differentiation

The teacher delivers the material using various media such as illustrated stories, short educational videos, and live demonstrations with real props. This helps children understand concepts through various learning styles (auditory, visual,

kinesthetic). Children who tend to learn through auditory means will find it easier to understand through stories, while visual and kinesthetic learners will benefit from pictures and props. This variation in content makes the learning process more engaging and accessible to all children. The teacher actively observes the children's responses to each media used to adjust the subsequent learning. Thus, the process of knowledge transfer becomes more effective and enjoyable.

c) Product differentiation

Children are given the freedom to demonstrate their learning outcomes in different forms, such as drawing, arranging pattern blocks, or retelling orally. With this choice, children can express their understanding creatively and according to their individual strengths. The teacher gives children the space to be creative according to their interests and potential. This makes the child feel valued for their unique way of learning. Assessment of the product is also flexible, not only focused on the final result but also on the child's process and effort. This strategy fosters self-confidence and strengthens the child's motivation to learn continuously.

2. Indicators of Observed Children's Critical Thinking Skills

From the observation results of 15 children in group B, it was found that the children displayed the following critical thinking behaviors:

Table 1. Observation Results.

Indicator of critical thinking	Number of children (out of 15 children)	Example of Behavior
Asking a question	12 children	"Why can the color change, ma'am?"
Giving reasons or explanations	10 children	"I chose this color because it's the sea."
Solving simple problems	11 children	Fixing the tower of blocks that fell over by itself
Making decisions on your own	13 children	Choosing the most preferred activity
Expressing opinions to friends	9 children	"I prefer using the big blocks."

Based on observations of 15 children, it was found that most of them exhibited quite strong critical thinking behaviors. The children are able to ask questions, provide reasons, solve problems, make decisions independently, and express their opinions. For example, 12 children were seen actively asking questions like, "Why does the color change, Ma'am?" while 13 children were able to choose activities independently. This ability reflects a deep thinking process within those children. This result shows that differentiated learning plays an important role in stimulating critical thinking from an early age.

Children who were given choices of activities showed more confidence and actively engaged in learning activities. They appear focused and are willing to take initiative during play and learning. The comparison between children who were given choices and those who were directed singularly shows a significant difference in terms of curiosity and enthusiasm for learning. This condition affirms that a personal and responsive learning approach can trigger higher cognitive activity. An inclusive and flexible learning environment provides a safe space for children to explore and ask questions.

3. Teacher Reflection on Learning

The teacher acknowledged that the implementation of differentiation strategies had a positive impact on the classroom atmosphere. The children became more orderly, enthusiastic, and felt valued because they were given the freedom to choose activities. Moreover, the children appear more active in group discussions and are able to express their ideas with confidence. The teacher finds it easier to guide the children because they understand each child's preferences and needs. This approach also builds a more positive relationship between the teacher and the students. The teacher also mentioned that the variety of activities offered makes the children more motivated and less easily bored. Children who were previously passive are starting to show participation in activities and becoming more confident. Overall, the teachers feel that the learning has become more meaningful and has an impact on the children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. Overall, teachers feel that learning has become more meaningful and impactful on the cognitive and socio-emotional development of children.

Discussion

The research results show that differentiated learning strategies have a positive impact on the development of critical thinking skills in early childhood. Children who were given the freedom to choose activities appeared more focused, confident, and active in the learning process. This finding is consistent with the research results [36] which emphasizes that differentiated learning can create an inclusive learning environment and stimulate higher-order thinking. The application of variation in the learning process gives children space to adapt to their individual learning styles. In the context of early childhood, the selection of activities that align with children's interests can enhance their engagement and exploration. This supports the view [37] which emphasizes the importance of autonomy and choice in early childhood education. Therefore, teachers need to design adaptive activities so that the potential for critical thinking can develop naturally.

Content differentiation has proven effective in reaching different learning styles, such as auditory, visual, and kinesthetic. Children find it easier to understand concepts because teachers use various media such as picture stories, educational videos, and real-life props. Research by [38] shows that content differentiation allows for broader and fairer access to learning for all students. In the context of early childhood education, visualization and concrete experiences are very important for building the foundation of a child's logical thinking. The results of this study reinforce the idea that varying the

delivery of material can enhance the quality of children's understanding and engagement. Children who are usually passive can become more active when the media used aligns with their learning style. Therefore, it is important for teachers to conduct an initial assessment to thoroughly understand the child's learning profile.

In the aspect of product differentiation, children are given the freedom to demonstrate their understanding through various forms of creative work. These results indicate that learning environments that provide space for creativity can strengthen children's self-confidence and initiative. Research by [39] support this finding, where product differentiation strategies can accommodate the diversity of ways children express themselves. Children who tend to be verbal will prefer to recount the material, while visual children are more comfortable drawing or creating shapes. Thus, learning is no longer solely about assessing the final result, but also the process and the child's personal expression. Teachers who apply this approach can be more objective in understanding the development of each child. This creates a more inclusive and humane evaluation system in the early childhood education environment.

The results of the observation also showed an increase in critical thinking behaviors such as asking questions, providing reasons, making decisions, and solving simple problems. These findings reinforce the study conducted by [40] which states that a learning environment that supports individual differences will stimulate children's critical thinking abilities. Children who are accustomed to being given choices tend to be brave in taking initiative and making independent decisions. This is different from conventional learning, which tends to be one-sided and does not provide space for exploration. Children also become more reflective about the actions and decisions they make during the learning process. Thus, differentiation is not just a learning strategy, but also a pedagogical approach that fosters critical thinking skills. This process becomes an important asset for children in facing future challenges.

Teacher reflections show that differentiated learning strategies have a positive impact on the overall classroom atmosphere. The teacher finds it easier to guide the children because they have understood their individual learning styles and needs. This condition aligns with the findings [41] which states that teachers who implement differentiation are more capable of building personal relationships with students. The classroom atmosphere becomes more conducive, active, and harmonious because each child feels valued for their uniqueness. Learning also becomes more flexible and adaptive to the dynamics of children's development. Teachers who are able to reflect on their teaching strategies will be more open to continuously developing innovative approaches. Therefore, differentiated learning not only impacts the students but also contributes to the professional growth of the teachers themselves.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : The study found that differentiated learning strategies – through varied processes, content, and products – effectively enhance critical thinking skills in early childhood. Children engaged more actively, asked questions, gave logical

reasons, solved problems independently, and made decisions with confidence.

Implication : These findings imply that differentiated instruction is a powerful pedagogical approach for early childhood education. It fosters inclusive, engaging, and meaningful learning experiences tailored to each child's learning style, ultimately supporting the development of higher-order thinking skills from an early age.

Limitation : The study was conducted in a single institution (TK ABA Bebekan) over a five-week period, limiting its generalizability. The small sample size and qualitative design also restrict the extent to which conclusions can be applied to broader populations.

Future Research : Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples across different early childhood institutions. Longitudinal research is also recommended to assess the long-term impact of differentiated learning on cognitive and socio-emotional development in young learners.

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