

Implementation Of Talent-Based Projects As A Differential Learning Strategy In Optimizing The Potential Of Grade Viii Students At Smp Alam Azzahra Way Jepara, East Lampung

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the application of talent-based projects as a differentiated learning strategy to optimize the potential of eighth-grade students at SMP Alam Azzahra Way Jepara Lampung Timur. The research background is based on the need to meet the diverse learning needs of students, which are often not accommodated in a uniform classical learning model. In the research that will be carried out, the researcher has the aim of explaining and analyzing the implementation of talent-based projects as a differentiated learning strategy to optimize student potential. In this research, the researcher employs a qualitative approach using a field-based case study method. The participants composed of teachers and students involved in the implementation of talent-based projects. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, then analyzed using an interactive model consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that talent-based projects provide opportunities for students to develop their abilities according to their interests and strengths. This strategy enhances student engagement, fosters creativity, strengthens independent learning, and increases self-confidence in presenting learning outcomes. Furthermore, teachers act as facilitators who guide students in designing and completing projects based on their individual characteristics. Supporting factors include school support, learning flexibility, and effective collaboration between teachers and students. Meanwhile, challenges involve time constraints, variations in student abilities, and teachers' readiness to design differentiated instruction. The study concludes that talent-based projects have significant potential as an effective differentiated learning strategy for optimizing students' holistic development

Keywords

Talent-Based Project, Differentiated Learning, Student Potential, SMP Alam Azzahra



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INTRODUCTION

Every child certainly has uniqueness in their characteristics; they are born with different potentials, strengths, and interests and talents. Every child born into the world certainly possesses potentials that develop along with their growth (Lestarinigrum et al., 2021). The development of each child's potential depends on the environment they receive, such as parents, siblings, and the people around them (Rijkiyani et al., 2022). Potentials that are developed from an early age can shape children's life skills in the future, including critical thinking, creativity, leadership, communication, and perseverance. All of these become important assets for facing challenges in a continuously changing world. At this stage, everything that children hear and see will certainly have a very strong impact during their growth, including their behavior, attitudes, and intellectual development (Azizah & Adawiyah, 2020).

Based on the description above, an educator or parent must be able to recognize every potential possessed by children. Regarding the period of developing children's potential, Hadi (2021) argues that these matters constitute the initial steps that must be taken by a teacher in determining how to facilitate the development of children's potential so that such potential can develop maximally and optimally. This opinion is in line with Masitoh and Cahyani (2020), who state that in the process of developing children's potential, interests, talents, and abilities, an educator has a very important role, in which an educator must be ready to guide and direct children in order to achieve success and happiness.

Regarding efforts to develop children's potential, Fathoni (2023) states that in the process of educating children, parents must realize the importance of and be able to collaborate with educators at school. This aims to create a positive educational environment so that gradually children can develop into individuals who behave well and are able to apply religious teachings in their lives in the future. This opinion is consistent with Amaliyah et al. (2021), who emphasize that several efforts can be made by educators in the process of developing children's potential, such as providing guidance to children who lack motivation, demonstrating good examples, and providing activities that can foster the potential within children. Thus, children will find it easier to participate in activities together.

The learning environment is one of the places that plays a very important role in nurturing the seeds of a quality generation. From generation to generation, the learning environment is a place capable of producing future generations and shaping their growth according to the characteristics inherent in each individual. As stated by Ki Hajar Dewantara, in developing children's innate potential, education has an important role in the process of discovering children's interests and talents, including how they can develop in accordance with the era of digitalization without abandoning the existing culture (Al Hafiz et al., 2025).

One of the efforts to develop the concept of independent learning currently being implemented in the National Education System, and which is consistent with the thoughts of Ki Hajar Dewantara, is differentiated learning. Differentiated learning is learning that accommodates the needs of each individual to obtain learning experiences and mastery of the

concepts being studied (Adisjam et al., 2023). The differentiated learning approach is not a difficult learning process in which an educator must make several learning plans simultaneously. Teachers do not have to focus here and there to assist one student and another student at the same time because teachers cannot be required to be in one position and another position simultaneously to solve all problems.

After the emergence of the 2013 Curriculum (K13), the government issued the latest curriculum, namely the Merdeka Curriculum, which has been implemented since 2021. The Merdeka Curriculum was initiated by the Indonesian Minister of Education, Nadiem Makarim, who adopted the concept of independent learning promoted by the Father of Indonesian Education, Ki Hajar Dewantara. In the learning process of the Merdeka Curriculum, students are given opportunities to develop their potential, interests and talents, as well as their knowledge. Therefore, teachers are not merely transmitters of knowledge, but also play a very important role in the process of developing and fostering students' potential, interests, talents, and knowledge (Mutmainnah, 2020). There are several steps that can be implemented by educators to continuously foster students' interest in developing their interests and talents, namely: educators can provide an engaging learning atmosphere and introduce new surprises to attract students' attention, such as quizzes, puzzles, and animated videos containing learning materials; provide motivation to develop students' self-confidence related to their interests and talents; convey the benefits of each material provided; and generate brilliant ideas in learning, including how to solve a problem (Adisjam & Andi Saparia, 2023). Based on this idea, Sutaga (2022) also states that in implementing the differentiated learning approach, educators can create conditions or a classroom atmosphere that supports the learning process and can convince students that, with the guidance of teachers, whatever challenges they face, students will be ready to solve them (Amin et al., 2023).

The fulfillment of the learning needs of each student is carried out through four ways, namely content, process, product, and learning environment (Fauzi et al., 2023). Content differentiation is the process of delivering material using various sources. Process differentiation is a learning process that applies various active learning methods such as PBL and PjBL to provide facilities for students through activities adjusted to their respective interests, talents, and abilities. Product differentiation is a learning process that provides facilities for students to develop skills based on their interests and talents, such as completing projects. Environmental differentiation is a learning process that involves the physical and mental aspects of students by creating learning atmospheres that are more conducive, safe, and not boring (Arhinza et al., 2023; Kriswanto & Fauzi, 2023; Suwandi et al., 2023). To ensure that the learning needs of each student are fulfilled, meaningful learning must be based on the skills, interests, talents, and abilities of each individual student. In line with the thoughts of Abidin et al. (2021), talent is a skill that, in general terms, is inherent in every human being.

As has been implemented by SMP Alam Azzahra, talent-based projects are conducted as an effort to develop students who are independent, creative, and capable of innovative thinking in facing future challenges. This program is designed to provide students with real learning

experiences through practice-based activities and self-potential development. Therefore, in its implementation, students first participate in an internship activity to gain direct experience regarding the business world and work environment. The internship activity aims to help students understand work processes, learn to interact with the community, and gain insight into simple business management. This experience then becomes the basis for students in preparing business plans that correspond to the students' interests and talents. After the internship activity has been completed, students are directed to create business plans individually or in groups. Business planning includes determining the type of product, marketing strategies, estimating production costs, and setting sales targets. At this stage, students' creativity begins to emerge through their ability to create interesting and innovative business ideas. Students are also trained to become confident in presenting their ideas through presentations of their business plans in front of teachers and classmates. These presentation activities provide opportunities for students to practice communication skills, mental strength, and the process of developing courageous character, as well as the ability to take responsibility for the ideas they have created. The next stage is the process of producing products according to the business plan that was previously prepared. In this process, students are actively involved, starting from preparing materials, production, packaging, to determining the selling price of products. Direct involvement in the production process provides meaningful learning experiences because students not only understand theory but are also able to practice entrepreneurial skills in a real context. In addition to increasing creativity, these activities also foster students' attitudes of responsibility, cooperation, and independence in completing the project tasks assigned to them. The products that have been created are then marketed directly by students to the school environment and the surrounding community. The marketing process is carried out so that students understand how to communicate with consumers, promote products, and manage sales proceeds. The profits from product sales are not immediately used personally but are saved as part of the students' backpacker program. The *backpacker* program serves as a form of appreciation as well as an out-of-class learning experience aimed at training students' independence, responsibility, and ability to adapt to new environments. Through this entire process, the talent-based project at SMP Alam Azzahra focuses not only on academic outcomes but also on student character development, creativity, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Based on the description above, the researcher aims to describe and examine the process of implementing talent-based projects as a learning strategy that uses a differentiated approach to optimize students' potential. This research focuses on the implementation process, the experiences of teachers and students, as well as the factors that support and hinder its implementation.

Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich scientific knowledge regarding differentiated learning and talent development from a constructivist perspective. From a practical perspective, the findings of this research are expected to serve as a reference for teachers, schools, and policymakers in designing learning that is more inclusive and meaningful

and that is capable of providing space for the development of the unique potential of every student..

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. This study seeks to analyze the implementation of differentiated learning in meeting students' learning needs.

Research using a qualitative method is a research approach that seeks to understand social conditions in depth through the process of exploring meanings, experiences, and realities of the research subjects. Researchers do not merely collect data but also become part of the research instrument actively in understanding the context existing in the field. Therefore, selecting appropriate techniques is the key to the success of qualitative research (Fitri Nurpita et al., 2026). The following describes various commonly used qualitative research techniques, starting from data sources, observation, interviews, and the use of documentation.

Data sources using qualitative research methods have two main categories, namely primary data and secondary data. As primary data, the researcher directly observed differentiated learning at SMP Alam Azzahra and conducted interviews with the teaching staff to collect the required data. In addition to conducting observations and interviews with the teaching staff, the researcher was given the opportunity to examine several records of agendas and activities that had been carried out at SMP Alam Azzahra as additional material in completing the research task.

To produce valid data, the researcher conducted observations at SMP Alam Azzahra Way Jepara, East Lampung. The researcher observed in depth the learning activities that used an approach based on students' interests and talents. The purpose of the observation was to obtain direct data regarding the behavior, interactions, and interests and talents of the students.

In-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher with several parties at SMP Alam Azzahra, including the principal, homeroom teachers, and students, to collect important data in qualitative research. Through these interviews, the researcher attempted to collect data by exploring more deeply the learning activities that used differentiated learning from each school party.

From several data collection methods described above, the researcher was given permission to take several forms of documentation that would be used to strengthen the research findings. In addition, the researcher was also given permission to examine several documents such as lesson plans, teaching modules, and activity agenda books, which showed the flagship programs at SMP Alam Azzahra. From these documents, the researcher obtained additional information intended to broaden the scope of the research.

In addition to the research guidelines described above, this study was conducted by considering research ethics principles, namely obtaining consent from the school and informants, maintaining the personal privacy of participants, and using research data solely for academic purposes. The researcher provided every informant with the opportunity to

voluntarily provide information without any coercion from any party so that the data obtained could accurately describe the actual conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Implementation of Talent-Based Projects in Differentiated Learning at SMP Alam Azzahra

The research findings show that the implementation of talent-based projects begins with the identification of students' potential, interests, and talent tendencies. Teachers conduct mapping through observations of learning activities, discussions with students, analysis of assignment results, and communication with parents. The data obtained are then used as the basis for designing project activities to develop abilities that are appropriate to the characteristics of each student.

At the planning stage, teachers do not provide the same form of project to all students. Instead, students are given the opportunity to choose a type of project that corresponds to their interests and strengths. Within the same learning theme, for example, some students choose to create educational videos, digital infographics, simple written works, craft products, or interactive presentations. The differences in project forms do not change the learning outcomes that must be achieved, but provide space for students to demonstrate their competencies through methods that are more appropriate to their individual potential.

These findings show that talent-based projects are one form of concrete implementation of differentiated learning. Teachers not only adjust the learning process but also provide differentiation in the products produced by students. This research is also supported by the findings of Fitriyani, Mardapi, and Suryadi (2022), who state that the implementation of differentiated strategies can increase student motivation and classroom engagement. They emphasize that students feel more valued when they are given choices and opportunities to learn according to their respective potentials. This increase in motivation directly affects learning interest, which is one of the important indicators in achieving optimal learning outcomes.

From these findings, the researcher can conclude that learning strategies using a differentiated approach can make a positive contribution to increasing students' learning interests. This differentiated learning method is not only effective academically but also supports the creation of a more humanistic and inclusive learning atmosphere. This method is highly significant in the context of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. In addition, students demonstrate a higher level of participation when they are given freedom in determining the form of the project. They appear more active in seeking information, discussing with peers, and attempting to complete projects independently. This situation indicates that learning that provides space for students' talents and interests can produce learning experiences that are more meaningful compared with uniform learning.

B. Increased Student Engagement and Learning at SMP Alam Azzahra

One of the findings of this research is the increased involvement of students during the learning process. Students are not only actively involved in identifying their current academic performance, but more broadly, students can predict future learning achievements and performance, which has a significant impact on the development and growth process of students (Jia et al., 2020). From interviews at SMP Alam Azzahra, the researcher obtained important notes from one of the teachers regarding student development, namely;

In developing students' self-confidence.

a. Self-confidence increases, and the results of their work become better and more creative.

b. Active in learning.

c. Able to complete assignments/projects independently.

d. There is an improvement in certain skills.

e. Have clearer goals or interests.

f. Academic/non-academic grades or performance improve.

Talent-based projects help students.

a. Develop abilities according to their interests.

b. Become more motivated because they learn according to their preferences.

c. Practice 21st-century skills (creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking).

d. Provide space for exploration and innovation.

e. Increase students' self-confidence.

The results show that students feel they have the freedom and confidence to determine the best way to complete learning tasks. This encourages the emergence of a sense of responsibility for the learning process and outcomes. In addition, students who are involved are highly likely to become academically successful students, attend classes regularly, and continue their education at school. Providing encouragement to students to be enthusiastic about learning also improves the quality of student learning. During the learning process, motivation plays a very important role in influencing students' learning success (Dewi Ratna Swari et al., 2026).

Therefore, educators must provide encouragement to students so that they become more diligent in learning and learning objectives can be achieved. In learning activities, there are three main functions of motivation. First, motivation functions as a stimulus for a person to act, thus becoming a driving force in every activity undertaken. Second, motivation plays a role in determining the direction of action so that the actions carried out are consistent with the objectives to be achieved. Third, motivation helps individuals choose appropriate actions to achieve goals effectively (Miftahussaadah & Subiyantoro, 2021).

The documentation above shows that a teacher provides freedom and space to every student, allowing students to actively participate in learning activities based on their interests and talents.

C. Development of Creativity and Learning Independence at SMP Alam Azzahra

The research findings show that the implementation of talent-based projects contributes to the development of student creativity. This can be seen from the variety of products produced by students. Within one learning theme, students are able to create works that differ from one another. This diversity shows that the learning process is no longer oriented toward one answer or one form of product considered correct. Student creativity develops because they are given opportunities to explore ideas, seek solutions, and develop products based on their imagination and abilities. An educator has a role as a facilitator who provides general guidance, while the project development processes are largely carried out independently by students.

In addition to students' learning creativity, this research also found an increase in learning independence. In line with previous research, it has been revealed that the ability to learn independently is influenced by several main factors, such as motivational encouragement to achieve goals, self-confidence, and support from the surrounding learning environment (Tresnowati & Sunarto, 2022). In addition, the role of teachers as facilitators in the learning process has high significance in supporting students in developing independent learning skills (Ani, 2025).

D. The Role of Teachers as Facilitators in Developing Student Potential at SMP Alam Azzahra

The implementation of talent-based projects requires a change in the role of teachers from the center of information to learning facilitators. The research findings show that teachers no longer dominate the learning process through lengthy lectures, but instead provide guidance, direction, and feedback while students develop their projects.

Teachers play a role in helping students recognize their potential, determine appropriate types of projects, and solve various obstacles that arise during the completion process. In addition, teachers conduct regular monitoring to ensure that the projects being carried out remain directed toward the learning objectives that have been established.

This change in role shows that differentiated learning requires more complex pedagogical competencies compared with conventional learning. An educator is required to understand the characteristics of students more deeply while also designing learning experiences that are flexible in nature. Therefore, the success of implementing talent-based projects highly depends on the ability of educators to manage the diversity present in the learning environment.

E. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in the Implementation of Talent-Based Projects at SMP Alam Azzahra

This research found several factors that support the successful implementation of talent-based projects.

The first factor is school support for learning innovation. The availability of policies that provide flexibility for teachers in designing learning is an important asset in program implementation.

The second factor is collaboration among teachers and students during learning activities through a more open and participatory approach.

The third factor is the availability of various learning resources that enable students to develop projects according to their respective needs.

These findings are consistent with previous research conducted by Yeyen Sormin et al. (2025), which identified supporting factors for learning methods using a Project Based approach, including student enthusiasm, teacher support, parental involvement, and learning facilities. Thus, contextual learning activities such as these are highly appropriate for students' daily lives. In addition, research by Suci et al. (2023) found that factors supporting the success of learning methods using Project Based Learning (PBL) include support from school principals, teachers, parents, students, and the surrounding daily environment.

On the other hand, there are factors that create obstacles during the practical implementation process. Limited learning time is the most frequently encountered obstacle because projects require a relatively long process. In addition, differences in students' abilities require teachers to provide different forms of assistance to each student. Another challenge is teachers' readiness to understand the concept of differentiated learning and integrate it systematically into learning planning.

F. Implications of Talent-Based Projects for Optimizing Student Potential at SMP Alam Azzahra

Based on the overall research findings, talent-based projects have been proven to make a positive contribution to optimizing student potential. This strategy greatly assists students in achieving learning objectives while encouraging the development of creativity, self-confidence, independence, communication skills, and collaboration skills.

Furthermore, talent-based projects create a space that allows every student to be appreciated based on their uniqueness. Learning is no longer oriented toward uniformity of outcomes but toward the maximum development of individual potential. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, this approach is consistent with the educational objective of positioning students as the main subjects of learning and providing them with opportunities to develop according to their nature, potential, and respective characteristics.

Thus, the implementation of talent-based projects can be viewed as one of the effective differentiated learning strategies in supporting the creation of education that is more inclusive, meaningful, and directed toward the comprehensive development of students' potential.

CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that instruction utilizing a talent-based project approach serves as a highly effective differentiated learning strategy for optimizing student potential at SMP Alam Azzahra. Implementation begins with identifying students' interests, talents, and characteristics, which then serve as the foundation for designing learning projects. Through this approach, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and competence by creating various products that align with their individual personal strengths.

The study reveals that talent-based projects at SMP Alam Azzahra enhance student engagement in the learning process, boost learning motivation, foster creativity, and encourage independence in task completion. Beyond academic outcomes, this strategy also contributes to the development of students' self-confidence, communication abilities, and collaborative skills. Throughout the process, teachers act as facilitators, guiding students as they design, execute, and reflect on their projects.

The successful implementation of talent-based projects is supported by SMP Alam Azzahra's policy of fostering instructional innovation, strong teacher-student collaboration, and the availability of adequate learning resources. However, the research also identified several challenges, including time constraints, the diversity of student abilities, and the readiness of teachers to consistently implement differentiated instruction.

Overall, talent-based projects offer a relevant alternative instructional strategy to support the implementation of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum). This approach focuses not only on achieving learning outcomes at SMP Alam Azzahra but also significantly supports students in developing their unique potentials, thereby making the educational process more inclusive, meaningful, and student-centered..

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