



Teacher Emotional Intelligence and Classroom Leadership Dynamics in Differentiated Learning

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study aims to examine the relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom leadership dynamics in supporting the effectiveness of differentiated learning for students at Senior high school Muhammadiyah Luwuk.

Methodology: The research method used is a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation involving teachers, students, and school principals. Data were analyzed using reduction, display, and verification techniques to gain an in-depth understanding of classroom leadership practices and teachers' emotional intelligence.

Main Findings: The results show that teachers with high levels of emotional intelligence tend to be more adaptive in dealing with classroom dynamics and are able to create an inclusive and participatory learning environment. Dimensions such as empathy, self-awareness and the ability to manage emotions play an important role in facilitating learning differentiation. In addition, transformational leadership style is proven to be effective in building positive relationships between teachers and students, which has a direct impact on improving student motivation and learning outcomes. In conclusion, teachers' emotional intelligence and dynamic classroom leadership are key factors in the successful implementation of differentiated learning.

Novelty/Originality of this study: These findings provide important implications for teacher professional development and more targeted training design. Previous studies have mostly focused on the individual effects of emotional intelligence or teacher leadership on learning outcomes, while the dynamic interaction between the two in shaping differentiated learning practices is still an open area for further exploration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

21st century education demands a fundamental transformation in teaching and learning approaches to respond to the diverse characteristics of students. Amidst the diversity of learning styles, cognitive abilities, cultural backgrounds and socio-economic conditions of learners, there is a need for more inclusive and adaptive learning strategies. One approach that is considered capable of answering these challenges is differentiated learning. Which emphasizes the importance of customizing learning processes, content, and products to suit the individual needs of students [1].

The implementation of differentiated learning demands not only high pedagogical skills, but also emotional sensitivity and effective classroom leadership on the part of teachers. In this context, teachers' emotional intelligence plays a vital role. Emotional intelligence not only refers to the ability to recognize and manage one's own emotions, but also includes the ability to understand and respond constructively to the emotions of others [2]. Teachers with high emotional intelligence tend to be more successful in building healthy interpersonal relationships, creating a positive classroom environment, and responding adaptively to students' emotional dynamics.

On the other hand, the dynamics of classroom leadership is also a key factor in creating a conducive learning atmosphere and high support for the implementation of differentiated learning. Teacher leadership in the classroom is not simply a matter of authority or control, but includes the ability to motivate, guide and inspire students in the learning process [3]. In this context, transformational leadership style is often associated with increasing students' learning motivation, active participation in the learning process, and maximum development of individual potential.

However, in practice, the relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom leadership dynamics has rarely been comprehensively studied, especially in the context of differentiated instruction at the high school level, and even more so in religious schools such as Senior high school Muhammadiyah Luwuk. Previous studies have tended to focus on the individual effects of emotional intelligence [4], [5] or teacher leadership on student learning outcomes, without delving deeply into the dynamic interaction between the two in shaping a differentiated learning approach. Therefore, there remains a significant gap in the literature to examine more holistically how the combination of emotional intelligence and teacher leadership style influences the implementation of differentiated learning, particularly within the context of specific cultural and religious values [6], [7].

In addition, the results of the study show that many teachers in Indonesia still face challenges in implementing differentiated learning optimally [8]. A multi-case study in Balinese madrasahs found that limited understanding of concepts, lack of training, and classroom management constraints were the main obstacles. More than 60% of teachers also did not feel confident in implementing differentiation strategies in learning [9]. Some of the barriers identified include time constraints, lack of understanding of the concept of differentiation, and low emotional support from the work environment. [10]. In this context, a deep understanding of the role of emotional intelligence and classroom leadership can make an important contribution to improving the effectiveness of differentiation strategies.

This research is relevant and important because it addresses the contextual need to develop an inclusive and humane learning model by integrating affective aspects and teacher leadership in learning strategies. In the midst of increasing academic pressure and the complexity of teachers' tasks, a holistic approach that considers the emotional and leadership dimensions becomes increasingly urgent to be studied. Specifically, the main objective of this study is to describe and analyze the relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom leadership dynamics in the implementation of differentiated learning at Senior high school Muhammadiyah Luwuk. The research also seeks to identify effective classroom leadership practices and how teachers' emotions influence their approach to differentiated learning.

The main findings of this study are expected to make conceptual and practical contributions to the development of teacher training, particularly in the aspects of strengthening emotional capacity and classroom leadership. This study also has the potential to open a new discourse in education policy regarding the importance of emotional intelligence training as an integral part of teacher professionalism. In addition, the results are expected to provide a deeper understanding of the interaction between affective aspects and pedagogical strategies in realizing education that is more equitable and oriented to the individual needs of students.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study design [11]. This approach was chosen to enable in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and practices in their natural environment, as well as to accommodate the complexity of social and emotional interactions involved in the learning process [12]. The research subjects consisted of three core subject teachers who had consistently implemented differentiated learning for at least two semesters. The three teachers were selected based on their track record of involvement in the Merdeka Curriculum training and documented reflective activities.

Meanwhile, the student participants were selected through purposive sampling. Selection was based on the diversity of student characteristics as indicated by teachers' initial diagnostic assessment data, such as differences in learning styles, academic abilities, and social-emotional needs. The students' role in this study was as additional informants through classroom interaction observations and limited interviews to strengthen data triangulation from the students' perspective.

Data was collected through in-depth interviews, direct classroom observations, and document analysis such as lesson plans (RPP), formative assessments, and teacher reflection journals [13]. Interviews were conducted semi-structured with guidelines that allowed exploration of teachers' perspectives on the role of emotions, classroom leadership, and differentiation strategies they implemented. Observations were used to confirm teachers' actual practices, while documents were analyzed to explore teachers' planning and reflective processes related to learning adaptation.

The researcher was the primary instrument in this study and was assisted by data collection tools such as interview guides, observation sheets, and document analysis rubrics. These instruments were validated through expert judgment by two education experts from a state university and one education practitioner from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Validation involved assessing the format and content of the instruments, as well as a limited pilot test with one teacher and one student outside the main subjects to adjust the questions and observation scales to fit the context.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation (teachers, students, and documents), technique triangulation (interviews, observations, and documentation), and member checking by returning the interview summaries and initial interpretations to the teachers for review. An audit trail was conducted by systematically documenting the research process, including interview logs, field notes, and instrument revisions. All processes are reviewed by the research supervisor and verified by peers in the form of limited group discussions (peer debriefing) to maintain data transparency and consistency [14].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Quo Vadis Utilization of Technology in Islamic Religious Education Teacher Competency Improvement Programs

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Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach in line with the intrinsic qualitative case study approach [12]; [14]. The analysis process was carried out in stages through three main phases: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification [15].

In the data reduction phase, raw data from interviews, observations, and documentation were filtered to identify information relevant to the research focus, namely the relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom leadership in the context of differentiated learning. Next, the data is presented in the form of thematic narratives and initial coding matrices to connect main categories such as empathy, emotion regulation, leadership style, and differentiation strategies. This process is carried out iteratively and flexibly to capture the complexity of the classroom dynamics observed.

There is a strong relationship between teachers' emotional intelligence and classroom leadership dynamics in the effectiveness of differentiated learning implementation at SMA Muhammadiyah Luwuk. Based on the results of in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, it was found that all teacher subjects who have a high level of emotional intelligence show adaptive, reflective, and humanist classroom managerial skills. This has a direct impact on the successful implementation of differentiation strategies in various dimensions of learning: content, process, and product.

1. Teacher Emotional Intelligence as the Foundation of Classroom Interaction

The subject teachers demonstrated dimensions of emotional intelligence such as empathy, self-awareness and emotion regulation in managing classroom dynamics. An Indonesian language teacher, for example, demonstrated the ability to recognize changes in students' emotions during the learning process and adjust her communication style to maintain a positive learning climate.

In the interview, the teacher stated:

"I can tell when my students are getting tired or uninterested. I usually change my approach, either with humor, personal stories, or relating the material to their experiences."

The observation supports this statement. In a literature learning session, the teacher integrated a poetry reading activity with a free discussion about students' personal experiences. This triggers the participation of almost all students, even those who are usually passive. Emotion becomes the bridge between teacher and students in forming learning attachment.

2. Transformational Leadership in Classroom Practice

The most prominent leadership model among the subject teachers is the transformational style, which inspires, motivates and gives students learning autonomy. This style is manifested in the way teachers design project-based learning activities, provide space for independent exploration, and openness to critical questions from students.

During an observation in Biology, the teacher gave students the option to make a simple experiment at home or present the results of micro-research through a short video. This is a real application of the principle of product differentiation. In this context, the teacher does not only act as a conveyor of material, but as a facilitator who empowers students' potential.

The interview results support this observation. The teacher conveyed:

“I can't equate all children. Some are fast, some are slow. I give them choices, but still according to the learning objectives.”

This transformational leadership strengthens teacher-student relationships and creates an environment that supports diverse learning needs.

3. Relationship between Emotion Regulation and Differentiation Strategy

Teachers who are able to manage their emotions well appear to be more patient in dealing with students who experience learning barriers. In the reflection journal documentation, a Mathematics teacher noted:

“Students with special needs tend to require a more personalized approach. I must avoid negative emotions because they can have a significant impact on them.”

From observation notes, the teacher used visual aids, such as concrete manipulatives and logic flowcharts, to help students with numerical difficulties. This shows how stable emotional regulation contributes to creativity in developing differentiated learning strategies.

4. Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Leadership Styles

Interviews with students revealed that students responded more positively to teachers who showed empathy and were able to create a flexible learning environment. One student said:

“My teacher is very caring. If I am slow to understand, he does not get angry, but instead gives me other ways to understand.”

This response was consistent across all classes observed. Students felt a sense of psychological safety and positive emotional engagement while learning, which are important elements of inclusive differentiated instruction.

5. Barriers and Challenges

Although teachers generally demonstrate good emotional competence, there are several challenges they face. For example, administrative pressure, large class sizes, and time constraints often trigger emotional tension. In one reflection note, a teacher stated:

“Sometimes I feel exhausted. Dealing with 30 children with different needs in such a short time is exhausting, especially when I also have to assess individual tasks qualitatively.”

This condition highlights the importance of institutional support and policies that enable teachers to practice differentiated learning in a sustainable manner.

Table 1: Emotional Intelligence and Differentiation Strategies

Teacher's Name	T	Dominant KE Dimension	Differentiation Strategies Applied	Leadership Style	Effects on Students
1	G	Empathy, Self-Awareness	Process & product differentiation (free presentation)	Transformational	Student participation increased
2	G	Emotional Regulation	Content differentiation (visualization of material)	Democratic	Students feel heard
3	G	Self-Motivation	Interest-based task selection	Delegative	Students are more independent

EQ refers to Emotional Intelligence, which in the context of this study is identified through five main dimensions: empathy, self-awareness, emotional regulation, self-motivation, and social skills [16]; [17].

6. Consistency Between Learning Plans and Field Practice

Teachers' emotional intelligence and leadership are consistently reflected in their planning and practice of differentiated instruction. [18]. From the analysis of documents in the form of Lesson Plans (RPP) prepared by the subject teachers, it was found that most of them included elements of learning flexibility, although still in a general form. For example, in the Indonesian language teacher's RPP, there was a description of assignment options: students could choose to write a reflective essay or compose a narrative poem as a form of understanding the learning theme.

However, classroom observations revealed that in practice, teachers further enriched differentiation based on students' emotional responses. When some students showed confusion or anxiety, teachers quickly adjusted their strategies for example, by forming learning groups based on the pace of understanding, rather than simply on interests. This shows that the presence of emotional intelligence enables teachers to spontaneously modify their initial plans in order to respond to students' actual needs. [19].

The difference between written planning and actual implementation reflects the reflective dimension that exists within teachers. In a post-lesson reflection journal, a teacher wrote:

"I feel that the initial plan is not sufficient to accommodate students who are slow learners. I have to improvise by giving breaks or rearranging the groups."

This confirms that teachers' understanding of students' emotions is the main basis for adaptive teaching decisions. So, even though the RPP documents show the formal form of differentiated learning, the actual practice in the classroom is more dynamic and shows empathy-based classroom leadership and situational awareness.

7. Professional Transformation of Teachers Through Emotional and Reflective Experiences

One very important but often overlooked dimension in educational practice is how teachers experience professional transformation through reflection on their own emotional dynamics. This study found that teachers' emotional experiences, both positive and challenging, contribute greatly to strengthening their ability to lead classes in a responsive and differentiated manner, in line with research emphasizing teachers' emotional competence. [20].

In in-depth interviews, several teachers revealed that their experiences with students with traumatic backgrounds or learning disabilities had been a turning point in how they viewed the teaching profession. One teacher stated:

"I used to think that my job was just to teach, but now I feel that my job is to understand. When I started learning about students' emotions, the way I teach changed completely."

This transformation is also evident in teachers' attitudes toward student mistakes. In one observation, teachers did not punish students who failed to complete their assignments but instead invited them to talk privately to find out the cause of their difficulties. This approach stems from deep emotional awareness and empathy.

In addition, teachers showed improvement in self-regulation skills. For example, in a reflective journal, one teacher wrote:

"I usually get frustrated quickly when students are noisy, but now I try to take a deep breath and see things from their perspective. Maybe they are bored, not deliberately trying to disturb me."

This shift in perspective shows that emotional intelligence is not a static attribute, but rather a competency that can be developed through experience, awareness, and continuous reflective practice. This is particularly important in the context of differentiated learning, which demands patience, flexibility, and high ethical standards.

Discussion

1. The Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence and Classroom Leadership

Teachers with high emotional intelligence will demonstrate more adaptive, supportive, and reflective classroom leadership skills. Teachers who are able to recognize and manage their emotions and show empathy toward students tend to create a psychologically safe classroom climate. This allows for more effective implementation of differentiated instruction because students feel that they are being given individual attention.

This finding is in line with the theory proposed by [17], which states that emotional intelligence encompasses five key domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Teachers in this study explicitly demonstrated competence in all five domains. For example, in challenging classroom situations, they not only avoided impulsive reactions but also demonstrated calmness and the ability to read classroom dynamics holistically.

Furthermore, these findings are supported by previous research by [7] which shows that teachers with high emotional intelligence are better able to maintain positive relationships with students, manage classrooms effectively, and increase student academic engagement.

2. Implementation of Differentiated Instruction and Classroom Leadership

In the context of differentiated instruction, teachers with transformational leadership styles are more successful in implementing diverse teaching strategies. These teachers tend to give students autonomy, offer task choices, and support exploration based on interests and learning styles.

This consistency is evident in the various differentiation strategies implemented in the classroom: modifying content based on student abilities, varying learning processes based on learning styles, and differentiating products based on student interests and creativity. These strategies are consistently implemented by teachers who demonstrate leadership styles that support collaboration, participation, and student empowerment. [21].

Study by [22] emphasizes that differentiated instruction can only be successful if teachers have high classroom management skills and emotional awareness of students' needs. The results of this study reinforce this claim, while also highlighting the importance of teacher training not only in pedagogical aspects, but also in affective and social aspects.

The current educational context is increasingly complex. Students come to class with very diverse backgrounds: different learning abilities, varying family circumstances, and broad cultural backgrounds. In this situation, teachers can no longer be one-way conveyors of information. They are required to be emotional leaders, learning facilitators, and guardians of social stability in the classroom. [23].

The ability to manage emotions helps them navigate various dynamics, including conflicts between students, resistance to tasks, and institutional pressure. With good emotional regulation, teachers are able to maintain focus on learning objectives. [24] without losing control of the classroom atmosphere.

Furthermore, teachers who are empathy-oriented also tend to design humanistic learning. They consider students' life experiences as part of the learning content, making learning more meaningful and relevant. This approach not only fosters enthusiasm for learning, but also strengthens affective relationships, which are an important foundation for academic success.

Research by [25] emphasizes that teachers who possess a combination of high self-efficacy and emotional intelligence tend to be more motivated in meeting the needs of multilingual students from diverse backgrounds. This study also emphasizes that collaborative leadership in the classroom is greatly influenced by teachers' emotional sensitivity to the psychosocial dynamics of students. [26].

However, there are also interesting differences. In several Western studies, teachers emphasize the role of systems and institutional support in differentiated learning. Meanwhile, in the context of this study, internal factors, particularly teachers' emotional capacity and moral values, are more dominant determinants of success. This may be due to differences in school work culture, decision-making autonomy, and religious values that influence teachers' perceptions of professionalism in the Muhammadiyah environment.

Perbedaan ini memberikan kontribusi penting dalam memperkaya diskursus global tentang praktik pedagogi diferensiasi dengan konteks lokal Indonesia, khususnya sekolah berbasis keagamaan.

These findings have a number of implications. Theoretically, this study confirms the importance of integrating a social-emotional approach into the theoretical framework of educational leadership. Classroom leadership is not merely about regulating structures and behaviors, but also includes a deep understanding of the emotional states of students and teachers themselves. Thus, transformational leadership theory needs to be expanded to include emotional intelligence as a key determinant. [27].

The teacher training program to be developed will emphasize affective skills. Training programs such as strengthening self-awareness, interpersonal empathy, and stress management should be an integral part of teacher professional development. The training curriculum should also include simulations of emotional scenarios in the classroom. [28], not just teaching techniques.

In addition, schools also need to create a work culture that supports teachers' emotional well-being. High administrative burdens, minimal space for reflection, and lack of emotional supervision can be factors that hinder the implementation of differentiated learning. [29].

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, quantitative studies are needed to test the causal relationship between emotional intelligence, leadership style, and student learning outcomes. Longitudinal studies could also help to examine how teachers' emotional capacity develops over time.

Second, comparative studies between public schools and religious schools can provide a broader understanding of the influence of institutional values on differentiated learning practices. Third, a mixed-methods approach that combines real-time observation with psychometric analysis can strengthen the validity of findings and interpretations [30].

Finally, it is also important to involve students' voices more explicitly in future research. Students' perceptions and emotional experiences as the main subjects of education will enrich our understanding of how teachers' emotional intelligence and leadership styles are actually perceived [31].

The findings of this study are influenced by the social, cultural, and religious background, as well as the characteristics of the school where the research was conducted, namely SMA Muhammadiyah Luwuk. As a religious-based school with strong moral and spiritual values, the emotional interactions and leadership styles of teachers may reflect certain norms that cannot be directly generalized to schools with different institutional backgrounds. The values of collectivism, teacher-student closeness, and reflective autonomy found in this context may not be present in secular public schools or educational institutions in areas with more bureaucratic or rigid organizational cultures.

Therefore, it is important to understand that generalizing these findings to other educational environments should be done with caution. The researchers acknowledge that these results are not intended to describe the general conditions of teachers throughout Indonesia, but rather to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena occurring within the specific context studied. This limitation also presents an opportunity for further research in different school environments, whether in terms of geography, religion, or organizational structure, to provide a broader and more comprehensive picture of the relationship between emotional intelligence, classroom leadership, and differentiated learning.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teachers' emotional intelligence plays a central role in shaping effective classroom leadership dynamics that support the implementation of differentiated instruction at Muhammadiyah Luwuk Senior High School. Through their ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions, teachers are able to create an inclusive, responsive, and meaningful learning environment. This study concludes that teachers' emotional intelligence plays a central role in shaping effective classroom leadership dynamics that support the implementation of differentiated instruction at Muhammadiyah Luwuk Senior High School. The findings demonstrate that teachers who exhibit strong empathy, emotional regulation, and self-awareness are more capable of managing classroom diversity and fostering inclusive, participatory learning environments. Likewise, transformational leadership styles consistently correlate with increased student engagement and autonomy across differentiated content, processes, and learning products.

More than just a technical strategy, differentiated learning becomes a space for the actualization of teachers' professionalism based on emotional awareness and reflective leadership. This process shows that teachers are not only curriculum managers but also facilitators of students' psychosocial growth. The emotional experiences encountered by teachers, both challenging and inspiring, contribute to a meaningful professional transformation that enhances their responsiveness in the classroom. However, it is important to emphasize that this study is contextually bound. The findings emerged from a specific setting, a religious-based senior high school operating within a distinct cultural and organizational framework. The values, leadership patterns, and emotional norms present in Senior high school Muhammadiyah Luwuk may differ significantly from those found in secular public schools or institutions with other cultural backdrops. Therefore, readers should interpret the findings with caution and avoid overgeneralization beyond similar socio-cultural contexts.

Future research is needed to explore the transferability of these findings across different educational settings, including comparative analyses between public and private schools, or schools in urban and rural areas, to further validate the interaction between emotional intelligence, leadership, and differentiation practices. The environment for students with diverse needs and learning styles. The dimensions of empathy, self-awareness, and emotional control have been proven to play an important role in building healthy interpersonal interactions, while strengthening the position of teachers as visionary and humane classroom leaders. More than just a technical strategy, differentiated learning becomes a space for the actualization of teachers' professionalism based on emotional awareness and reflective leadership. This process shows that teachers are not only curriculum managers, but also facilitators of students' psychosocial growth. This study also shows that teachers undergo self-transformation through a continuous process of emotional reflection, thereby strengthening their pedagogical identity as lifelong learners. Moving forward, it is important to develop more integrative teacher training approaches that not only focus on academic competencies and learning strategies but also strengthen emotional intelligence as the foundation of classroom leadership. Further research could explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and student learning outcomes in the long term, as well as examine how educational institutions can build a work ecosystem that supports teachers' emotional well-being. Thus, these findings not only contribute to theoretical understanding but also serve as an important foundation for more humane and equitable educational reform.

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