



# Beyond the Action and Break the Standards: My Living Educational Theory of Differentiated Instruction

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### ABSTRACT

Like a chrysalis, I am currently waiting for the end of the metamorphosis process and transforming into a beautiful butterfly. That is a picture of me in the process of transforming from a teacher who uses a single standard in teaching to a teacher who uses a differentiated instruction (DI). However, through living educational theory research I realised that the transformation process will never end. The purpose of writing this article is to describe the transformation of the teaching system that I use which is influenced by the environment through reflection activities using living educational theory research. I concluded that DI talks about the teacher's love and the courage of teachers to free themselves to break down the established standards into parts that suit the needs of students, or in other words I say "Beyond the Action and Break the Standard". This research using LET, that allows me as a teacher to theorise my professional practice reflects on my educational values and on the practice solutions which were developed therefrom. Through LET, I have a living educational theory about differentiated instruction and realised that the learning practices that I had carried out were greatly influenced by my beliefs as a teacher. And I also realised that my belief in the importance of DI was greatly influenced by the environment in which I worked.

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I am an Indonesian, living in a country known for its rich diversity of cultures, languages, and ethnic. Pancasila, as the philosophy of the Indonesian, reflects Indonesia's commitment to diversity and unity. This diversity is a strength but on the other hand it is also a challenge for the unity of Indonesia. Various issues faced today related to religious intolerance, ethnic conflict, socio-economic disparities, and politics show the importance of promoting inclusivity and respect for diversity. The independent curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka) currently being implemented in Indonesia provides support to promote inclusivity through an emphasis on the formation of Pancasila student profiles and Differentiated Instruction approach to promote the values of recognizing diversity, accepting differences, and free expression to students.

An inclusive environment needs to be built starting from the classroom as a miniature of the community's environment. The class that I have never been free from diversity, both in terms of gender, cognitive abilities, strengths, culture, economic background, and also the choice of a more comfortable learning environment (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). Moreover, the place where I work is an inclusive school that combines students with needs in regular classes. This causes the classroom to be more diverse (Brissett, 2019; Mngo & Mngo, 2018; Paseka & Schwab, 2020; Saloviita, 2018, 2020). Therefore the implementation of DI becomes very important to facilitate diversity, because a learning approach cannot be suitable for all individuals or is often referred to in the phrase "One size doesn't fit all" (Tomlinson, 2001, 2014, 2015, 2017).

As a great philosopher Said "Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself." (Rumi). My greatest contribution to the country can be done by continuously improving teaching practices especially instilling values in DI. In this research, I use living theory as a form of self-study that is focused by the researcher researching questions of the form, 'How can I improve what I am doing?' (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2013). I use my experience as a research subject and theorise about my own professional practice (Branch, 2022). I explain my educational influences in my own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formations that influence practice and understanding (Whitehead, 1989). Through living educational theory, me as an educational-practitioner develops my living educational-theory research methodology as my research into my practice to understand and improve it and to generate valid accounts of my living-educational-theory (Whitehead & Huxtable, n.d.).

### My DI journey is Begin: The Environment Shaped My Beliefs in DI

Like the phrase 'When in Rome, Do as the Romans Do' refers to the importance of adapting yourself to the customs of the people who are in a certain place or situation and behave like they do. My pedagogy has not only developed but changed since I joined an inclusive school in late 2000, where the inclusive education policy in Indonesia became popular around 2009 with the existence of the Minister of National Education Regulation Number 70 of 2009. At that time the definition of inclusive that I understood was limited to integrating students with special needs in regular classes.

In the adaptation process I learned to be a teacher who can see that all students have good potential and we as teachers are only tasked with facilitating them so that their development is optimal. Like a plant, students are superior seeds. I, as a teacher, need to prepare the planting media and other supporting factors well so that the plants can grow well. Besides, I learned from this school to understand the characteristics of special needs students (SSN) and also how to facilitate their needs through Individual Education Plan design (IEP).

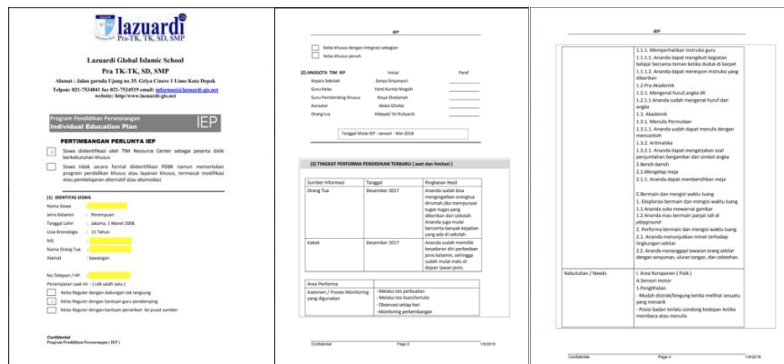


Figure 1. Individual Education Plan (IEP)

One example of an IEP program for a 6th grade SSN with cognitive and behavioural abilities that are very different from the classmate. We allow children to learn something different from their classmates according to their abilities and needs. For example, in the following picture, the left side is the national maths target for 6th grade, the right side is the maths target for students with special needs. One example of a standard that applies to grade 6 of elementary school no. 3.3 is explaining and performing mixed arithmetic operations involving whole numbers, fractions and/or decimals in various forms according to the order of operations. Meanwhile, the target for learning mathematics for this SSN is to recognize numbers and order numbers correctly. You can see how big the gap is in the maths being studied, because we feel that placing SSN according to their age is more important than based on their cognitive ability level. SSNs need to be with their peers so they can see the behaviour and attitudes that should be done at their age.

I. KI-3 dan KD Matematika Kelas 6	IEP
<p><b>A. Kompetensi Inti 3 (KI-3): Pengetahuan</b>                      3. Memahami pengetahuan faktual dan konseptual dengan cara mengamati, menanya, dan mencoba berdasarkan rasa ingin tahunya tentang dirinya, makhluk ciptaan Tuhan dan kegiatannya, dan benda-benda yang dijumpainya di rumah, di sekolah, dan tempat bermain</p>	<p>pernyataan belajar secara klasikal                      1.1.1. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p><b>B. Kompetensi Dasar KI-3 Matematika Kelas 6</b>                      3.1. Menjelaskan bilangan bulat negatif (termasuk menggunakan garis bilangan)</p>	<p>1.2.1. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.2. Menjelaskan dan melakukan operasi penjumlahan, pengurangan, perkalian, dan pembagian yang melibatkan bilangan bulat negatif</p>	<p>1.2.2. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.3. Menjelaskan dan melakukan operasi hitung campuran yang melibatkan bilangan cacah, pecahan dan/atau desimal dalam berbagai bentuk sesuai urutan operasi</p>	<p>1.2.3. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.4. Menjelaskan titik pusat, jari-jari, diameter, busur, tali busur, tembereng, dan juring</p>	<p>1.2.4. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.5. Menjelaskan taksiran keliling dan luas lingkaran</p>	<p>1.2.5. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.6. Membandingkan prisma, tabung, limas, kerucut, dan bola.</p>	<p>1.2.6. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.7. Menjelaskan bangun ruang yang merupakan gabungan dari beberapa bangun ruang, serta luas permukaan dan volumenya</p>	<p>1.2.7. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>
<p>3.8. Menjelaskan dan membandingkan modus, median, dan mean dari data tunggal untuk menentukan nilai mana yang paling tepat mewakili data</p>	<p>1.2.8. Menjawab pertanyaan di kelas</p>

Figure 2. Comparing Maths Standard in Regular Class and IEP

My awareness of inclusive education increased after getting the opportunity to participate in the Asia-Pacific School Leader Academy (APSLA) organised by the Asia-Pacific Center of Education for International Understanding (APCEIU) located in South Korea in 2015. This activity gave me insight into international education issues, one of which is inclusive education. This activity also broadened my view of inclusive education not only related to students with SSN but how to facilitate the various needs of diverse students in the classroom. Through this program enables me to have a deeper understanding of EIU/GCED in fostering a Culture of Peace and identifying effective strategies to develop and implement EIU/GCED initiatives in my local contexts.

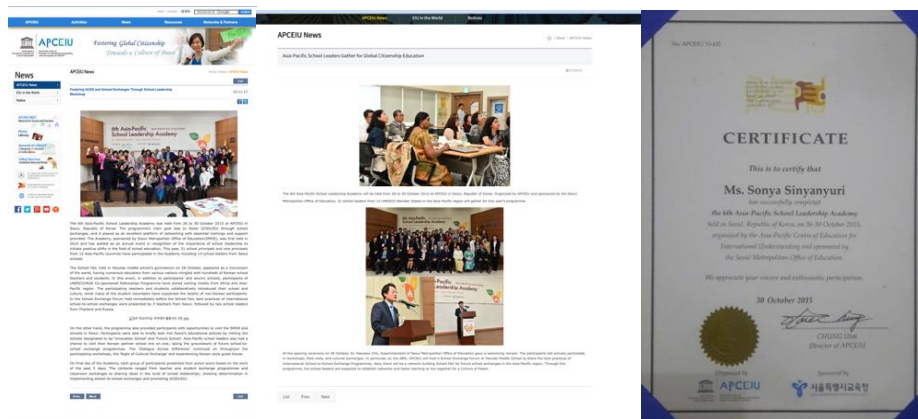


Figure 3. APSLA Documentation

A different situation and deepened my belief to prioritise students' needs over learning targets when I became a volunteer for learning recovery in areas affected by the tsunami and liquefaction disaster in the city of Palu, Sulawesi in 2018. I left all learning targets to reduce trauma and rekindle the children's desire to learn. In this condition, children's feelings become more important than the content of the lesson that must be delivered.



**Figure 4.** Teaching Activities in Disaster-Affected Schools

For me, who grew up in a traditional school environment that set a single standard for all types of learning targets, products, and content, this was a big challenge. I had to facilitate learning with diverse students, especially students with special needs that I had not known before. The environment also pushed me to change from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset the importance for sustaining and facilitating students' growth mindset (Brandisauskiene et al., 2022). Environmental support and experience brought me to the awareness that teaching in the classroom is not only about meeting the learning targets that have been set, but how I can facilitate the needs of various student characteristics is more important. The good example and strong commitment from the leader is also competent in all of the details of changes and this is viewed as a substantially important factor that plays a vital role in project success and crucial for creating environments that lead to higher levels of performance (Khan Marri et al., n.d.). This is what strengthens me to always implement DI in class.

I struggled to implement DI well and I saw other practitioners facing the same difficulties (Gaitas & Martins, 2017; Pho et al., 2021; Suprayogi et al., 2017; Wan, 2017) Therefore, the teacher's beliefs in implementing DI is very important. Teacher beliefs include characteristics, values, attitudes, theories, perceptions (Pajares, 1992). Values can direct teachers to see and determine what is important or not and influence decision making such as teacher assessments of certain subjects play an important role in student learning (Fang, 1996). Beliefs influence how individuals react to a situation, what choices they make, and what strategies they adopt (Maaranen et al., 2019), and organisational support is one of the factors that can encourage teachers to make decisions about implementing a program, one of which is implementing DI (Whitley et al., 2019). I feel that the support system from the environment, leaders, and school policies play a big role in shaping my beliefs and confidence in implementing DI.

### **Doing DI is More than the Action, but Love**

In my teaching journey using the DI approach through various stages and some are done consciously and some are done spontaneously. Some DI techniques that I have tried are done

through organising remedial classes after school hours, grouping, product, process, content, and assessment techniques differentiation.

One of the incidents that made me feel like I failed in DI was when I did the grouping. what I do when I do grouping, after every lesson, I force reflective writing to record students' achievements towards the set learning targets. The results of the reflection became the basis for me for grouping students in the next activity. Every time I will divide the group into three according to level of understanding. Level 1 are children who can exceed the target, group 2 are children who achieve the target, and group 3 are children who are still below the target. Even though I often use other terms to indicate these groupings, such as using terms in metamorphosis, namely the caterpillar group (for the group below the standard), the cocoon (the group according to the standard), and the butterfly (the group above the standard), certain students can feel the difference, and one of the students felt inferior. One of the conversations at that time that I remember and of course this is not exactly the same but more or less like this made me quite touched and sad:

- Student : Ms., did I study well today?  
 Teacher : yes sure, you were orderly, great  
 Student : Being orderly is cool, isn't it, Ms?  
 Teacher : that's really cool  
 Student : So, which group will I be in tomorrow, Ms? Not in the caterpillar group anymore, right?  
 Teacher : What do you mean? So, what if you are included in the caterpillar group?  
 Student : The caterpillar group is the group that can't do it the most, right?  
 Teacher : It's not that you can't, but it takes time to do it and you need additional explanation from Me. So, it's grouped; it's easy to teach in one group. It's nice to have Me accompany you all the time, right?  
 Student : Yes, Miss, but when will I join the cocoon group? I don't want to be in the caterpillar group all the time.

The question that made me stunned was trying to empathise with the students' feelings, and forced me to think again to find another way of grouping. The grouping that I did also did not work well for some of the other children. Some students avoided being in the highest group because they felt they would get more and more difficult assignments. Grouping does make it easier for teachers to manage students, but it is not the best way to increase student motivation (Hove & Phasha, 2022). Labelling is a new problem, if left unchecked will make students less confident and even inferior. This encourages students to become unmotivated and will greatly influence student learning outcomes.

Thinking about the ideal DI implementation reminds me of my childhood stories when my mother prepared food for me and my five siblings. All children have different tastes in consuming eggs. Some like boiled eggs, some fried eggs, and some omelettes. Even though it seems troublesome, my mother is happy to prepare a variety of egg menus for her children to consume. My mother's goal is for her children to eat eggs as healthy food, and various efforts are made to achieve her goal. Thus the goal is achieved and everyone is happy. What my mother did was to give different treatment to her children according to their needs and this is called LOVE regarding the triangular love theory developed by Robert J. Sternberg, My mother not only takes an "action" meaning doing something, but shows closeness and a comfortable personal atmosphere (intimacy), strong emotions (passion), and the quality of devotion to a goal or activity (commitment).

In organising remedial and grouping activities, I have to sacrifice my time to do my other tasks. I invest time and energy to help students grow intellectually through various differentiation efforts that are tailored to their needs, which are built on the basis of empathy and care, so that students feel safe, their self-esteem is maintained, and they are motivated to participate in learning activities. It is more the act of "Teach", which means to show or explain to (someone) how to do something and an activity to deliver material in class with a certain target and time. And also in my spiritual belief, doing DI is a form of tawakal. In tawakal we are not only asked to be serious about teaching, but more than that. Tawakal means starting with good intentions, done as well as possible, keep praying, and leave the results to God. In terms of DI, we will often face big challenges, failures, and frustrations. But when we continue to force ourselves to do it and then tawakal, it is proof that we love our job, our students, and of course love God. Therefore I see DI as more than just an action.

### **Doing DI is Free Myself to Break Standard and Free Students to Choose**

The standard I mean is a norm, model, or something used as a measure. Indonesia sets a curriculum standard containing content or competencies that must be achieved within a certain time. The limitations of content and time of achievement are in the form of a national curriculum which is meant by "Standard" here. This refers to one of the definitions of Standard as "used or accepted as normal or average". So the eligibility of students at a level will be measured by the curriculum standard.

I try to break down standards and design learning to accommodate various needs in the following ways. I tried to combine the learning standards set nationally for one semester into one big project theme to study. This is different from the learning approach used by teachers in general,

where content is usually taught one by one in sequence and in its entirety. I organise materials in a learning management system (LMS) that allows students to study randomly according to their interests.

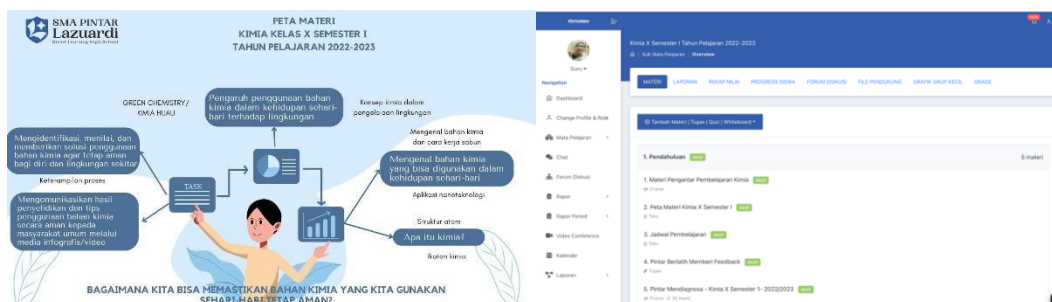


Figure 5. Content and Material Setting

After students understand the concepts they are learning, students will decide on the type of project they will work on. During the implementation of the project, students will discuss in groups on the same subject matter under teacher supervision, then students will present the results of the project in front of an expert who is directly related to the topic being discussed. This design is an effort to differentiate content, products, processes and environments at once. The surprising thing is that children learn more than just chemistry this way.

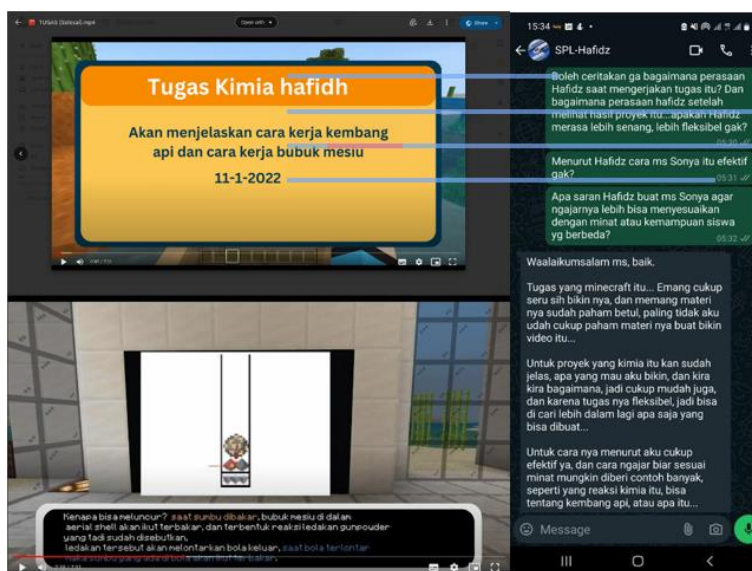


Figure 6. Students' Explanation of The Chemical Reactions That Occur in Fireworks using The Minecraft Application and Feedback

When students use Minecraft, they feel happy and their hobby of playing games is accommodated. He did not expect that so far many people have complained because he often plays games, but it became a way to complete assignments.



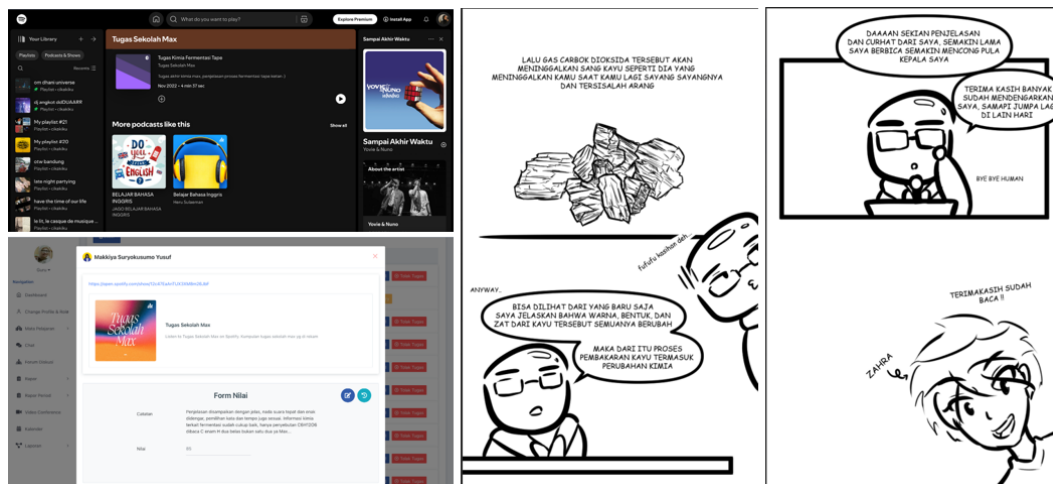


Figure 7. Students' Explanation of The Chemical Reactions Through Podcast and Comics

The development of discussions outside of chemistry occurred when students discussed chemical reactions in burning waste (I don't have a recording of the discussion). Not only the reactions were discussed, but also the laws that prohibit the activity. This refers to the regulation prohibiting burning rubbish carelessly as stated in Law No. 18 of 2008. While another person who made a podcast added a discussion about the halal and haram of alcohol in the chemical reactions that occur when making "Peuyeum" (fermented sticky rice) as one of the regional specialties that will be served at big events. This would never have happened in previous chemistry classes because my focus was discussing chemical concepts. By giving students choices, students can develop their interests in discussions according to their interests.

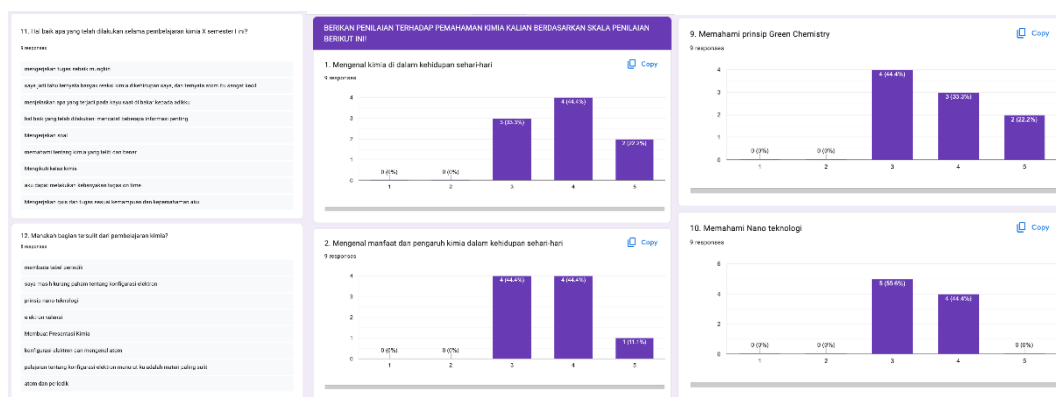


Figure 8. Students' Feedback

Through this approach, students' understanding develops evenly, as seen from the survey results which show an average understanding of each content from quite understanding to very understanding. Likewise, the difficulty in understanding the material is spread evenly, possibly due to student interest.

## My Living Contradiction in Doing DI: Believe Diversity, but Act Uniformity

My other role is as a principal. I always encourage teachers to facilitate students according to their needs including students with special needs. Many teachers have new experiences in handling children with special needs in this school.

I believe that when implementing DI, we should free ourselves to find the most appropriate way for our class. However, without realizing it, I actually did the opposite to the teacher. I often give directions to teachers contrary to that belief. Many times I ask teachers to follow the way I do, and this can be seen from one of the discussion results regarding the design of economics subject learning which has almost the same pattern as what I do when teaching chemistry.

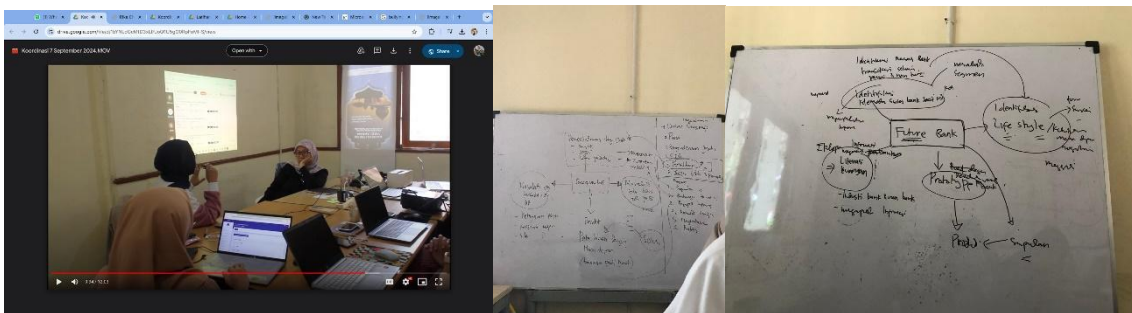


Figure 9. Regular Meeting

Therefore, I need to find a more appropriate way to improve my role as a principal, especially in influencing teachers to organise more flexible and liberating DI. I also still need to explore more DI techniques to disseminate inclusive values most effectively to students through further research.

## CONCLUSION

LET taught me to continuously improve myself in my role as a teacher and principal. Seeing my teaching journey through reflection made me realise that teaching is more than just delivering content, but bringing good values, seeing how they influence, and how they live in our daily lives. More in-depth research needs to be done in order to see the development of my practice so that the wider influence of the values in DI is conveyed to students. This is for the greater purpose of preparing a safer, more peaceful, and more harmonious future through the implementation of more effective DI values.

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