

# Unpacking Curriculum Misconceptions: Critical Insights from Oliva and Implications for Differentiated Instruction

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## ABSTRACT

Differentiated learning is crucial in Indonesian education emphasizing student diversity, yet implementation is often hindered by misconceptions about curriculum's nature. While studies on differentiation focus largely on technical aspects, conceptual foundations regarding curriculum understanding remain understudied. This article systematically examines national and international literature on curriculum misconceptions and their impact on differentiation barriers. Using narrative literature review methodology, this study synthesizes and categorizes four primary curriculum misconceptions: (1) curriculum viewed as a document, (2) curriculum perceived as static content, (3) curriculum understood as a rigid national product, and (4) curriculum separated from actual learning practices. These categories were derived from patterns across varied sources and substantiated through Oliva's framework, which defines curriculum as a responsive and dynamic plan of learning experiences. Findings affirm that these misconceptions lead to failures in diagnosing students' learning needs and obstruct meaningful differentiation design. The practical implication emphasizes strengthening curriculum literacy based on dynamic paradigms as a foundation for teacher professional development. This article enriches scholarship by systematically mapping curriculum misconception dimensions and asserting correct curriculum understanding as a prerequisite for effective differentiation.

**Keywords:** *curriculum misconceptions, differentiated learning, Oliva's perspective, curriculum nature, paradigm transformation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Differentiated learning has become a crucial pedagogical paradigm in contemporary education systems, particularly in Indonesia following the implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka in 2022. This principle aligns with the global commitment to inclusive education (UNESCO, 2015), ensuring every student receives responsive learning experiences aligned with their potential. However, despite widespread advocacy, implementation remains challenging. Research across various contexts indicates that teachers often struggle to design learning that is truly responsive to student diversity, with classroom practices remaining predominantly uniform (Marlina, 2019; Suryani et al., 2020).

Most research on barriers to differentiated learning focuses on technical aspects such as class size, time constraints, or lack of resources (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the more fundamental conceptual dimension—namely teachers' understanding of the curriculum's nature itself—rarely becomes the focus of critical analysis. Yet, understanding curriculum constitutes the epistemological foundation

underlying all processes of planning and implementing learning (Oliva & Gordon, 2013). Reductionist understandings of curriculum—viewing it merely as administrative documents or static lists of subjects—can obscure its true essence and hinder teachers from designing adaptive learning.

To understand the conceptual roots of these barriers, Peter F. Oliva's theoretical perspective offers a comprehensive analytical framework. Oliva and Gordon (2013) define curriculum as "a comprehensive plan for all learning experiences of students designed and directed by the school." This definition emphasizes that curriculum is a systematic, responsive plan, not merely a static document. This perspective aligns with the essence of differentiated learning, which is fundamentally the practical manifestation of a curriculum understood correctly as a dynamic system of learning experiences. If teachers view curriculum as a rigid product, meaningful differentiation becomes conceptually impossible.

To date, few studies systematically map types of curriculum misconceptions and their specific impact on differentiation barriers in the Indonesian context. This research addresses this gap by conducting a systematic narrative literature review to: (1) identify and categorize forms of teachers' misconceptions about curriculum nature; (2) analyze the impact of these misconceptions on differentiation barriers; and (3) formulate a transformation framework based on Oliva's perspective. This study offers a diagnostic insight into current barriers and a prescriptive framework for transforming teacher understanding, which is critical for the successful implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This research employs a narrative literature review approach, namely a narrative-interpretive literature review aimed at synthesizing, analyzing, and interpreting findings from various relevant literature sources (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006).

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative narrative-interpretive literature review approach to synthesize and interpret findings from various sources (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). This design enables in-depth exploration of complex conceptual themes and the integration of perspectives from various disciplines relevant to curriculum theory and differentiation.

### **3.2. Data Sources**

Data sources consist of primary and secondary literature selected from international and national databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and Portal Garuda. The selection focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks on

curriculum theory, and relevant policy documents published between 2013-2025. Inclusion criteria prioritized literature discussing curriculum concepts, misconceptions, differentiated learning barriers, and teacher practices in the Indonesian or global context.

### **3.3. Instruments**

The primary instrument used was a structured literature extraction form designed to systematically record literature identity, methodological characteristics, main concepts, key findings, and recommendations from each source.

### **3.4. Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis was conducted in four stages: (1) thematic coding to identify main themes related to misconceptions and barriers; (2) categorization of themes into specific misconception categories guided by Oliva's framework; (3) narrative synthesis to integrate findings; and (4) formulation of the interpretation and transformation framework. From an initial 287 potential sources, 52 main literature pieces were selected for final analysis after rigorous screening. Analytical validity was ensured through source triangulation and peer debriefing.

## **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Understanding Curriculum and Differentiated Learning**

According to Oliva and Gordon (2013), curriculum is "a plan or program for all the experiences that the learner encounters under the direction of the school." This definition positions curriculum as dynamic, comprehensive, and student-centered. It aligns perfectly with differentiated learning, which demands responsiveness to student diversity. Therefore, differentiation is not an "add-on" technique but an intrinsic feature of a correctly understood curriculum.

### **Forms of Curriculum Misconceptions and Their Impact on Differentiated Learning**

This research identifies four main forms of curriculum misconceptions that hinder differentiation:

#### **1. Curriculum as an Administrative Document**

Teachers often view curriculum merely as "administrative tasks" (syllabi, lesson plans) separate from daily teaching. This "decoupling" leads to teaching practices based on habit rather than planned design. Consequently, teachers neglect the in-depth student needs diagnosis required for differentiation because curriculum work is seen as a formality rather than a foundation for responsive planning.

## 2. Curriculum as Static Content

Curriculum is frequently reduced to a list of topics to be "covered" or transferred. This "coverage" mentality forces teachers to rush through material, leaving no room for flexibility. In this view, differentiation is seen as an obstacle to finishing the syllabus. Oliva's perspective counters this by framing curriculum as "learning experiences" that should be adapted, not just content to be delivered.

## 3. Curriculum as a Rigid National Product

Teachers often perceive curriculum as a finished "blueprint" from the government that must be implemented uniformly. This passive "implementer" mindset discourages contextualization. Teachers feel they lack the autonomy to adapt learning to their specific students, directly contradicting the core principle of differentiation which requires adaptation to learner needs.

## 4. Separation of Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum ("what to teach") and instruction ("how to teach") are often seen as separate domains. This ignores their integral relationship. When separated, differentiation becomes superficial—applied only at the technical level (e.g., using different media) without connecting to broader curriculum goals, rendering it ineffective.

### **Transformation Framework: The Four Pillars**

Based on these findings, this research proposes a transformation framework based on Oliva's perspective, consisting of four interrelated pillars:

**Pillar 1: From Administrative Documents to Systematic Plans.** Transforming teachers' view of curriculum from a static formality to a "living plan" that is continuously reflected upon and revised based on student responses.

**Pillar 2: From Static Content to Dynamic Process.** Shifting the paradigm from "covering material" to creating quality learning experiences. Teachers must understand that content is a means to an end, adaptable to student context.

**Pillar 3: From Rigid Product to Adaptive Framework.** Empowering teachers as professional "curriculum makers" who have the autonomy to contextualize the national framework for their specific students.

**Pillar 4: From Separation to Integration.** Building the understanding that curriculum and instruction are inseparable. Differentiated instruction is simply the way a responsive curriculum is enacted.

This framework implies that professional development must move beyond technical training to fundamental conceptual transformation.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that misconceptions about curriculum's nature constitute the fundamental conceptual root of differentiated learning implementation barriers in Indonesia. Four main identified misconception forms—namely curriculum as administrative documents, curriculum as static content, curriculum as rigid national product, and separation of curriculum from learning implementation—collectively create layered barriers hindering teachers in designing and implementing learning that is responsive and adaptive to student diversity. These misconception impacts occur at three levels: conceptual level (misunderstanding that differentiation is responsive curriculum manifestation), practical level (absence of needs diagnosis, uniform learning, and superficial differentiation), and system level (structural barriers in policy implementation). These findings affirm that differentiated learning transformation must begin with curriculum understanding transformation based on Oliva's perspective, emphasizing curriculum as systematic, responsive, and dynamic learning experience plans.

This research recommends to educational practitioners (teachers and school principals) to strengthen curriculum literacy through conceptual understanding-based training, formation of teacher practice communities, and empowerment of contextual curriculum making at school level. Teacher practice communities can become venues for teachers to share experiences, reflect on teaching practices, and collectively design solutions for encountered barriers. To policymakers, this research recommends redesign of teacher professional development programs that focus not only on differentiation techniques but also on curriculum paradigm transformation, as well as strengthening teacher autonomy in contextual curriculum development. Policies must provide space for teachers to innovate and experiment in learning, while maintaining accountability for national learning achievement. To researchers, this research recommends further empirical studies to test effectiveness of Oliva-based curriculum understanding transformation programs, as well as action research to implement proposed transformation frameworks in real contexts. Ethnographic research in schools can provide deep understanding of how curriculum misconceptions manifest in concrete practices.

Beyond these immediate recommendations, this research points toward several broader implications for educational reform and teacher professionalism in Indonesia. First, it highlights the need to reconceptualize curriculum literacy as a core dimension of teacher professional competence. Just as literacy in traditional sense (reading and writing) is foundational to all learning, curriculum literacy—understanding curriculum's nature, purposes, and development processes—is foundational to all aspects of teaching. Current teacher competency frameworks in Indonesia, such as those articulated in national standards, tend to emphasize pedagogical skills, content

knowledge, and professional behaviors, but rarely explicitly address curriculum understanding as a distinct competency domain (Suryani et al., 2020). Elevating curriculum literacy to explicit recognition within teacher professional standards would signal its importance and provide institutional support for its development.

Second, this research suggests the need for fundamental transformation in how teacher education programs approach curriculum. Currently, many teacher education programs treat curriculum as a single course or module focused on technical skills (writing learning objectives, developing lesson plans, creating assessment instruments). While these technical skills are important, they provide insufficient foundation for understanding curriculum as responsive system of learning experiences. Teacher education programs need to integrate curriculum perspectives across multiple courses, helping prospective teachers see connections between curriculum theory, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, and contextual factors. Moreover, teacher education should explicitly address common curriculum misconceptions, helping prospective teachers recognize and critique these misconceptions before they become entrenched in practice.

Third, this research points toward the importance of creating school-based learning communities where teachers can collectively explore curriculum understanding and differentiated learning practice. Research consistently shows that sustainable professional learning occurs through ongoing, job-embedded, collaborative inquiry rather than through isolated workshops or training events (Priestley et al., 2015). Schools that establish regular structures for teachers to jointly study student work, co-design curriculum adaptations, observe each other's teaching, and reflect on curriculum enactment create conditions for transforming both individual understanding and collective practice. Such learning communities also provide social support and professional validation for teachers attempting to implement responsive, differentiated approaches that may differ from prevailing norms.

Fourth, this research highlights the need for coherent alignment between curriculum policies, assessment systems, and teacher evaluation frameworks. Current misalignment—where policies advocate for differentiated, student-centered learning while assessment systems emphasize standardized testing and teacher evaluation focuses on compliance with prescribed procedures—creates contradictory messages that reinforce curriculum misconceptions. Achieving coherent alignment requires careful policy analysis and systematic reform efforts that ensure all elements of the educational system support responsive, adaptive curriculum enactment. This is particularly important in the context of Kurikulum Merdeka implementation, where policy rhetoric strongly emphasizes differentiation and teacher autonomy, but accountability structures may not yet fully support these principles (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Finally, this research underscores the value of theory-practice dialogue in educational improvement. Oliva's curriculum theory, developed decades ago in North American context, proves remarkably relevant for understanding and addressing contemporary challenges in Indonesian education. This relevance suggests that engaging seriously with curriculum theory—rather than dismissing it as abstract or impractical—can provide powerful tools for diagnosing problems and designing solutions. However, such engagement should be dialogical rather than unidirectional: Indonesian educators bringing their contextual knowledge and practical wisdom into conversation with international curriculum scholarship, critically examining theoretical concepts' applicability and limitations in local contexts, and contributing to curriculum theory's ongoing development through grounded insights from Indonesian educational practice. Such theory-practice dialogue enriches both scholarship and practice, contributing to globally relevant yet locally grounded knowledge about curriculum and learning.

This research's limitations lie in its literature-based nature, so it does not involve direct empirical data from teachers or schools. Further research with mixed-methods approaches will provide more comprehensive understanding of how curriculum misconceptions manifest in concrete practices and how understanding transformation can be facilitated effectively. Causality studies between curriculum understanding and differentiation effectiveness also need to be conducted to verify this research's propositions. Nevertheless, this research provides significant contribution by systematically mapping curriculum misconception dimensions and asserting the urgency of correct curriculum understanding as main prerequisite for effective, inclusive, and meaningful differentiated learning for all students. This research also contributes to enriching academic discourse about the relationship between curriculum theory and differentiated learning practices in Indonesia.

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