



## The Pedagogical Competence of Teachers in Developing Differentiated Learning at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan: A Study from a Biblical Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates teachers' pedagogical competence in implementing differentiated instruction at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan through a descriptive qualitative approach supported by a systematic literature review. Twenty-first century education demands that teachers address diverse learning needs by adapting instructional content, process, and product based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. However, many teachers continue to apply uniform teaching methods that fail to accommodate such diversity. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews with five teachers and two school leaders, and document analysis of lesson plans and reflective journals. Findings reveal that most teachers possess only a surface understanding of differentiated instruction, often interpreting it merely as varied teaching activities rather than as intentional, theory-based adaptation. Only a few teachers demonstrated deeper pedagogical competence aligned with the Zone of Proximal Development framework, designing tasks that match learners' developmental readiness. The literature review confirms that successful differentiation requires systematic planning, reflective practice, and ongoing assessment. From a Biblical perspective, differentiated instruction resonates with theological principles of love, justice, and stewardship. Psalm 139:13-14 affirms the uniqueness of every learner as God's creation, while Matthew 25:14-30 highlights equity through individualized responsibility. Thus, differentiated teaching represents both a professional and spiritual vocation—an act of Christian ministry that honors each child's sacred individuality. The study concludes that strengthening teachers' pedagogical competence through continuous training and faith-integrated reflection is essential to promote equitable, inclusive, and Christ-centered education.*

**Keywords:** Pedagogical Competence, Differentiated Learning, Biblical Perspective

## INTRODUCTION

Education in the twenty-first century requires teachers to possess the capacity to address the diverse learning needs of students. The differentiation approach in education has emerged as a pedagogical strategy grounded in equity rather than uniformity. According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiated instruction is an instructional approach that adapts the content, process, and product of learning based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This approach positions students as the central focus of learning, honoring their individual uniqueness and ensuring that each learner receives an appropriate learning experience according to their abilities and potentials. In contrast to traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching, differentiated instruction affirms the value of learner diversity as an asset in the educational process rather than an obstacle to be managed (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). In practical settings, many teachers still struggle to implement effective differentiation due to limited pedagogical competence. Numerous educators continue to employ uniform teaching methods that disregard the diversity of learners' needs, interests, and capabilities. This challenge is evident at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan, where students demonstrate notable differences in learning styles, socio-economic backgrounds, and academic achievements. In such a heterogeneous environment, teachers are required to develop adaptive, reflective, and creative pedagogical competencies in order to design inclusive learning experiences that accommodate various student profiles. As Darling-Hammond (2017) emphasizes, pedagogical competence is not merely about mastering content knowledge, but also about the teacher's ability to understand learners deeply and to facilitate learning that nurtures every student's growth. The pedagogical competence of teachers in Indonesia is formally regulated by Ministerial Regulation (*Permendiknas*) No. 16 of 2007, which stipulates that teachers must understand the characteristics of learners, master learning theories, and develop a curriculum relevant to students' learning contexts. These competencies align with the principles of differentiated learning, which demand an in-depth understanding of individual differences in the classroom. Teachers are expected to exercise professional judgment in adapting instructional strategies to ensure that no student is left behind. Consequently, pedagogical competence becomes a moral and professional responsibility for educators to cultivate equitable learning opportunities. From a Biblical perspective, the call to recognize and respect the uniqueness of every child is deeply rooted in Scripture. Psalm 139:13–14 declares, *"For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made"* (NIV). This passage affirms that each child is uniquely created and precious in God's sight. Therefore, a Christian teacher is called to view every learner as a reflection of God's creative work-worthy of attention, compassion, and individualized guidance. Jesus Himself modeled differentiated teaching through His ministry: He interacted with people according to their specific needs, showing empathy and providing personal responses to each individual's situation (Luke 5:31–32). His example underscores the theological foundation of differentiation-not merely as a pedagogical technique but as an act of love that acknowledges the divine image in every learner. The practice of differentiated learning becomes a tangible expression of Christian pedagogy-one that integrates professional competence with spiritual values. Teaching, from a Biblical

worldview, is not only about transmitting knowledge but also about nurturing the whole person in truth, faith, and character (Proverbs 22:6).

## METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of how teachers exercise their pedagogical competence in implementing differentiated learning at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan. The qualitative descriptive method, emphasizes a systematic process of data reduction, presentation, and interpretation to describe real-life phenomena within their natural context. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the complexity of teachers' teaching practices and their reflective experiences in addressing the diverse needs of students. The qualitative nature of this study enables a comprehensive exploration of not only what teachers do, but also why and how they make pedagogical decisions that support equitable learning environments. The study was conducted at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan, a public elementary school that accommodates approximately 320 students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The school employs 12 teachers, and from this population, and five classroom teachers were selected as research participants through purposive sampling. The selection criteria were based on the participants' teaching experience, active involvement in curriculum planning, and engagement in differentiated learning initiatives. This context provides a suitable setting for exploring pedagogical competence because it reflects a microcosm of Indonesia's diverse educational landscape, where teachers face challenges in catering to students' varied learning styles, readiness levels, and interests. Classroom observations were used to identify how differentiation principles were applied in daily instruction, including adjustments in content, process, and learning products. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and school leaders to explore their perceptions, experiences, and reflective practices related to pedagogical competence. Meanwhile, documentation such as lesson plans, teaching journals, and reflective notes provided complementary insights into teachers' planning and evaluation processes. During data reduction, relevant information was organized and categorized based on emerging themes. Data display involved synthesizing the findings into narrative and visual formats for deeper interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn inductively to describe patterns and relationships between teachers' pedagogical competence and their implementation of differentiated learning. This empirical investigation was supported by a systematic literature review, integrating recent scholarly works on pedagogical competence and differentiated instruction to strengthen the analytical framework and connect field findings with broader educational and theological perspectives.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of interviews and classroom observations at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan indicate that most teachers possess a basic understanding of differentiated instruction, often describing it merely as "varied learning activities" or "different teaching methods."

Only two teachers demonstrated a more comprehensive understanding consistent with Tomlinson's (2014) framework, which emphasizes differentiation across three dimensions-content, process, and product-tailored to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This limited conceptual depth reflects a gap between policy expectations and classroom practice. Teachers tend to equate differentiation with variety rather than with purposeful adaptation to individual needs. Similar findings were observed by Santangelo and Tomlinson (2012), who noted that many teachers globally recognize the importance of differentiation yet struggle to translate it into systematic practice due to limited theoretical grounding and professional support. This limitation underscores that teaching, particularly in Christian education, is not merely a profession but a calling and ministry. As stated in Colossians 3:23-24, teachers are called to serve wholeheartedly as if serving the Lord, not merely fulfilling human obligations. Thus, differentiated instruction can be understood as an act of divine compassion-a pedagogical reflection of God's love for the uniqueness of each creation. Each child, formed "fearfully and wonderfully" (Psalm 139:13-14), deserves to be taught according to his or her individual potential. Therefore, strengthening teachers' pedagogical competence in differentiation is not only a technical demand but also a theological responsibility to honor the image of God within each learner.

Observation data revealed varying levels of pedagogical competence among teachers. Several teachers demonstrated commendable efforts to implement interactive and student-centered methods, including group discussions, project-based learning, and educational games. However, others continued to employ uniform teaching approaches, assigning identical tasks to all students regardless of ability. This uniformity suggests that teachers have not yet fully internalized the principle of learner diversity in their instructional planning. According to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, effective teaching occurs when educators scaffold learning experiences within each learner's developmental range. The study found that only a few teachers deliberately adjusted lesson content or task complexity to match students' ZPD, indicating partial mastery of pedagogical differentiation. From a Christian educational standpoint, this principle resonates with the example of Jesus as the master teacher, who adjusted His methods and messages to the readiness and context of His listeners. For instance, He spoke in parables to common people, debated scholars with Scripture, and offered compassionate understanding to children and sinners alike (Mark 2:16-17). This adaptive, empathetic approach embodies the essence of pedagogical differentiation in its most spiritual form-an education grounded in love and attentiveness to each learner's journey. Thus, teachers in Christian contexts are called not only to understand educational theories but also to embody Christlike teaching that nurtures both intellect and spirit. The study identified several differentiation strategies practiced in classrooms. Content differentiation involved simplifying materials for students with lower readiness and enriching them for those who learn faster. Process differentiation was implemented through varied instructional media such as visual aids, games, and cooperative learning to cater to diverse learning styles. Product differentiation appeared in the form of assignment options-students could choose between creating posters, writing essays, or delivering oral presentations. These practices reflect emerging awareness among teachers about the importance of accommodating individual learning needs. Teachers

frequently design differentiated tasks spontaneously, without a structured pedagogical plan or formative assessment data to guide their decisions. This aligns with the findings of Heacox (2012), who emphasized that successful differentiation requires systematic design, ongoing assessment, and reflective planning, rather than intuitive improvisation. The lack of structured planning observed in this study indicates that differentiation remains at a surface level, functioning as ad hoc adjustments rather than integral pedagogical design. In Christian educational philosophy, intentionality in teaching is a moral and spiritual obligation. As 1 Corinthians 14:40 instructs, *"Everything should be done decently and in order."* Thus, differentiation should not be seen as a random act of kindness, but as an expression of God's orderly wisdom-structured, purposeful, and rooted in love for each learner. Teachers are called to embody stewardship in their pedagogy, recognizing that every student represents a unique trust from God that must be nurtured with care, equity, and excellence.

Differentiated instruction aligns profoundly with biblical values of love, justice, and service. The concept of love and personal care is reflected in John 10:14, where Jesus declares, *"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."* This verse underscores personal recognition and relational teaching-principles that parallel the individualized attention promoted by differentiated learning. Similarly, the biblical notion of justice in education corresponds to the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30), where each servant is entrusted with resources according to his ability. This mirrors the equity principle of differentiation: every learner receives support aligned with his or her capacity, not uniform treatment that disregards individual differences. Service through love is central to the Christian understanding of teaching. As 1 Peter 4:10 states, *"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace."* Teachers exercising pedagogical competence are thus fulfilling a sacred ministry-using their knowledge, patience, and creativity to guide students toward holistic growth. This view is reinforced by Knight (2006) and Estep, Anthony, and Allison (2008), who describe Christian educators as teachers who are "able to teach" not merely through instruction, but through the integrity of their lives. In this context, the results of the systematic literature review conducted for this study further substantiate these findings. Research by Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010) highlights that differentiation enhances learner engagement and equity, yet its success relies on teachers' deep understanding of students' profiles. Meanwhile, Levy (2008) stresses that differentiated instruction fosters motivation and self-efficacy when grounded in continuous reflection. From an Indonesian perspective, Suprihatin (2021) and Hidayat (2022) reveal that teachers often face challenges in implementing differentiation due to limited pedagogical competence and contextual constraints. These studies confirm that teacher training, reflective practice, and faith-based values are essential to sustain differentiated learning in diverse classrooms. Every human being is created in the image of God and thus deserves respect, understanding, and personalized care. Education that ignores individual differences risks denying the sacred worth embedded in each child. When teachers integrate differentiation with biblical values, they move beyond mere academic instruction toward spiritual formation, nurturing students who are not only intellectually capable but also spiritually grounded. The findings from UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan reveal that teachers are in the early stages of understanding and implementing differentiated instruction.

Their efforts, though limited, reflect a sincere desire to serve students better. To advance these practices, professional development should focus on deepening teachers' theoretical knowledge, promoting reflective teaching, and embedding theological insights into pedagogy. Differentiated instruction, when rooted in faith and guided by pedagogical competence, becomes more than a teaching strategy-it becomes an act of Christian ministry that mirrors Christ's inclusive love and pedagogical wisdom in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that teachers' pedagogical competence plays a decisive role in the successful implementation of differentiated instruction, particularly in contexts where student diversity is high, such as at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan. The findings demonstrate that while most teachers recognize the need for varied instructional approaches, their understanding and application of differentiation remain at a basic level. Teachers tend to equate differentiation with the mere use of multiple methods or activities, rather than as a purposeful, theory-informed adaptation of content, process, and product to meet students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. This gap between conceptual understanding and classroom practice highlights the urgent need for continuous professional development focused on both the theoretical foundations and practical implementation of differentiated learning. The research also shows that teachers' pedagogical competence is not only technical but deeply relational and reflective. Effective differentiation requires teachers to know their students-academically, socially, and emotionally-so they can design learning experiences that promote both equity and engagement. Teaching becomes most effective when it occurs within each learner's zone of proximal development, where guidance and challenge are balanced. However, many teachers still struggle to operationalize this principle, often providing uniform assignments that fail to account for individual readiness levels. Therefore, cultivating pedagogical competence entails not only mastering educational theories but also developing reflective, adaptive, and empathetic teaching practices. These pedagogical insights are profoundly aligned with Christian values of love, justice, and stewardship. Scripture emphasizes that every human being is created uniquely in the image of God, as declared in Psalm 139:13-14: *"For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb."* Consequently, differentiated teaching becomes a theological act of recognizing and honoring the sacred individuality of each learner. Teachers who engage in differentiated instruction embody the compassionate ministry of Christ, who addressed people according to their needs-offering truth to the learned, healing to the broken, and encouragement to the marginalized (Luke 5:31-32). In this light, the teacher's pedagogical competence transcends technical expertise; it reflects a spiritual vocation to love and serve learners as Christ served humanity. Differentiated instruction resonates with the biblical notion of equity and justice in education. The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) illustrates that each person is entrusted with different capacities and opportunities, and faithfulness lies in developing what has been given-not in comparing oneself with others. Likewise, differentiation seeks to provide learning opportunities suited to each student's ability, ensuring that no one is left behind. This approach transforms the classroom into a space of grace, where diversity is celebrated as part of God's creative design rather than as a problem to be managed. The

integration of theological principles with modern pedagogical theories underscores that Christian education is holistic, addressing both cognitive and spiritual dimensions of learning. Teaching is therefore not merely the transmission of information but an act of formation-of mind, heart, and character. As 1 Peter 4:10 affirms, *"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace."* Teachers who practice differentiated instruction exercise faithful stewardship by using their pedagogical gifts to nurture the potential within each child.

The systematic literature review conducted in this study corroborates these conclusions. Differentiated instruction enhances engagement and self-efficacy when grounded in ongoing reflection and assessment. However, studies in the Indonesian context reveal persistent barriers such as limited training, large class sizes, and insufficient resources. These challenges mirror the realities faced by teachers at UPT SD Negeri 060914 Medan, where differentiation is often implemented intuitively rather than strategically. Addressing these issues requires institutional commitment to teacher development, mentorship, and curriculum design that explicitly supports inclusive pedagogical practices. The study affirms that differentiated instruction, when guided by pedagogical competence and illuminated by biblical principles, represents a transformative model of Christian pedagogy. It embodies the harmony between educational excellence and spiritual purpose-where teaching becomes both an intellectual endeavor and an act of ministry. Teachers who view their vocation through this integrated lens are better equipped to foster classrooms that are just, compassionate, and responsive to the diverse image-bearers of God. Thus, differentiation rooted in faith is not simply a method; it is a manifestation of love in action-teaching that honors every child as uniquely created, fully known, and deeply valued by God.

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