



TENSIONS IN PEDAGOGICAL COMPETENCE OF ELEMENTARY MADRASAH TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING

**Hasan Al Banna^{1*}, Vina Febiani Musyadad², Rendi Atnanto³, Muhammad Reza Pahlevi⁴,
Mia Audina Musyadad⁵**

^{1*}Islamic Education Management Study Program, Faculty of Islamic Education,
Rakeyan Santang Islamic Institute

^{2,3,5}Elementary School Teacher Education Program, Faculty of Islamic Education,
Rakeyan Santang Islamic Institute

⁴English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Singaperbangsa
University, Karawang

*Email: hasanalbanna181@gmail.com, vinamusyadad@gmail.com, rendi.atnanto@gmail.com,
mreza.pahlevi@fkip.unsika.ac.id, minamusy@gmail.com

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Abstract

Transformation of learning in elementary education requires teachers to accommodate diverse student characteristics through a differentiated approach. In Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic elementary school), this demand overlaps with the responsibility to strengthen Islamic values, giving rise to unique dynamics in pedagogical practice. This study aims to analyze the tensions between teachers' pedagogical competencies in implementing differentiated learning at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al-Umm Klari. The study employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies, then analyzed interactively through reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions. The results indicate that differentiation has been attempted through a variety of tasks and learning products, but has not been consistently integrated into the process and assessment aspects. School policy support is normative, while technical implementation relies on teacher initiative. Tensions arise from administrative burdens, time constraints, and classroom management challenges in managing diverse activities. These findings confirm that the implementation of differentiation is not only related to teachers' conceptual understanding but also to the readiness of the school system. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of strengthening operational guidelines, ongoing training, and professional collaboration to support a more adaptive learning transformation in madrasahs.

Keywords: Pedagogical Competence, Differentiated Learning, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, Professional Tension, Qualitative Case Study

1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of 21st-century education demands learning that adapts to the diversity of student characteristics (Francisca et al., 2025). This paradigm positions differentiation as a strategic approach to ensure each child receives learning experiences tailored to their readiness, interests, and learning profile (Dung, 2026). Within the framework of social constructivism, the learning process is understood as a dynamic interaction between individual potential and environmental support (Ruscica et al., 2026). Learning is no longer oriented toward uniformity, but rather toward strengthening each student's unique potential (Francisca et al., 2025). Teachers are required to possess pedagogical competencies that are flexible, reflective, and responsive to classroom dynamics (Joseph et al., 2026). This challenge becomes even more complex when applied to religious-based elementary education.

In the context of Islamic basic education, Islamic elementary schools face dual demands, including academic achievement and religious character development (Nurfaisal et al., 2024). Teachers serve not only as learning facilitators but also as role models for moral and spiritual values



(Jumatullailah et al., 2024). Implementing differentiated learning in an Islamic elementary school environment requires planning, assessment, and classroom management skills integrated with Islamic values (Anshori, 2025). However, the reality on the ground shows that this approach has not been fully implemented optimally. The complexity of the curriculum and the heterogeneity of student abilities often present challenges (Wang & Chen, 2025). This creates internal dynamics within teachers' pedagogical competencies.

Specifically at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic elementary school) level, the diversity of students' social backgrounds, literacy abilities, and learning styles has become increasingly apparent following the adjustment of the national curriculum (Fitriadi et al., 2024). Teachers are faced with the need to design strategies that can reach high-ability students while providing support for those who need to strengthen their foundations (Barbier et al., 2022). At the same time, administrative burdens and demands for learning reporting continue to increase (Woelert, 2023). This situation has implications for limited space for in-depth pedagogical reflection. Learning often continues to take place in a uniform, classical pattern (Lombard et al., 2025). This situation demonstrates the dynamic between policy ideals and classroom practice.

Various policy reports from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia emphasize the importance of improving the quality of madrasah teachers by strengthening pedagogical competencies based on student needs (Mahdiyyah et al., 2025). Results from academic supervision and the Teacher Working Group forum indicate that teachers have a conceptual understanding of differentiation but face difficulties in its technical implementation. Initial observations in several Madrasah Ibtidaiyah classes show that variations in learning strategies are still limited to different tasks without differentiation in processes and assessments. Discussions with teachers also indicate confusion in systematically mapping student learning readiness. These conditions demonstrate the challenges in translating policy into practical practice. These facts reinforce the urgency of an in-depth study of teacher pedagogical competency in the context of differentiation.

The main focus of the issue lies in the tension between professional demands to implement differentiated learning and teachers' pedagogical capacities. This tension is not merely a technical issue, but also concerns the conceptual, emotional, and structural dimensions of teaching practice. Teachers are required to be innovative, but are often constrained by school culture, long-standing habits, and limited resources (Supriatna et al., 2025). This research examines the phenomenon where differentiated learning is often perceived as an additional burden for teachers, thus hindering the improvement of classroom interaction quality. The study was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al-Umm Klari, an institution that has adopted a differentiation policy in its curriculum and has diverse student characteristics. The main focus of this research is to analyze teachers' pedagogical competence in designing, implementing, and evaluating this learning strategy comprehensively. By supporting the madrasah's openness to quality development, this research is expected to provide practical solutions to the challenges of implementing differentiation in the context of elementary education.

Theoretically, the concept of differentiation, as developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson in Hasan et al., emphasizes the adjustment of content, processes, products, and learning environments based on student needs (Hasan et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the theory of teacher competency formulated by Lee Shulman in Susana through the concept of pedagogical content knowledge requires the integration of material mastery and delivery strategies (Susana, 2020). In practice, the integration of these two frameworks often does not run smoothly because teachers place more emphasis on material delivery than on strategy adaptation. The existing conceptual framework does not fully explain the psychological and institutional dynamics that influence the implementation of differentiation in madrasahs. This indicates the need for more contextual theoretical elaboration. Therefore, this study seeks to deepen understanding of the relationship between pedagogical competence and differentiation in the context of basic Islamic education.

Empirically, several previous studies tended to highlight the effectiveness of differentiated learning on student learning outcomes without delving into the internal dynamics of teachers. Tamrin



and Masykuri's study on visible learning focused more on the strategy's impact on academic achievement (Tamrin & Masykuri, 2024). Other research in the context of public schools has shown increased student participation, but has not specifically examined the realities of Islamic elementary schools. The reality in Islamic elementary schools exhibits unique characteristics that have not always been addressed in previous research. Therefore, a study that positions teachers as the primary subject in the dynamics of differentiation implementation is needed. This approach is expected to provide a more comprehensive perspective.

Recent developments in differentiation studies indicate a shift from mere instructional strategies to approaches based on school culture and instructional leadership (Kusuma & Setiawan, 2025). Recent research by Mulhakim et al. demonstrates the importance of integrating teacher capacity and systemic support (Mulhakim et al., 2025). This study broadens the scope of analysis to include aspects of professional reflection and teacher learning communities. In Indonesia, the discourse on differentiation has begun to be linked to the implementation of the independent curriculum and the strengthening of the Pancasila student profile. However, exploration in the context of Islamic elementary schools (madrasah ibtidaiyah) remains relatively limited. This study's position lies at the intersection of pedagogical competence theory and differentiation practices in Islamic elementary education.

This study focuses on an analytical approach that combines the perspective of pedagogical competence with the institutional dynamics of madrasahs to understand the implementation of differentiated learning in greater depth. The research, conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al-Umm Klari, aims to analyze teachers' experiences, identify factors causing tension in teaching practices, and formulate competency strengthening patterns relevant to the characteristics of Islamic education. The research focuses not only on student learning outcomes but also utilizes teachers' reflections and adaptive strategies as a conceptual lens for understanding the ongoing pedagogical transformation process. This research is crucial to ensure that differentiation is not merely understood as an administrative requirement but rather as a concrete effort to improve the quality of inclusive and equitable learning. The results of this study are expected to provide strategic recommendations for teacher professional development and contribute to quality improvement policies in madrasah environments.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth and contextual exploration of teachers' subjective meanings, experiences, and dynamics in implementing differentiated learning. Case studies allow for intensive exploration of phenomena within a specific setting, allowing for a comprehensive portrayal of the unique characteristics of the institution. This design aligns with Robert K. Yin's view that case studies are relevant when researchers seek to understand contemporary phenomena within a real-life context (Yin, 2018). Furthermore, this approach allows for analysis of the interaction between pedagogical competence and institutional culture. Therefore, this methodological choice aligns with the study's focus on tensions between teachers' pedagogical competence.

The research was conducted at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al-Umm Klari, a location that has implemented a differentiated learning policy. The location was selected based on contextual relevance and data accessibility. The study spanned one semester to continuously observe the dynamics of implementation. This timeframe allowed researchers to observe the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning. Furthermore, this timeframe provided space to build trust with informants. Adequate time context was crucial for generating in-depth and reflective data.

The research subjects were classroom teachers at Al-Umm Klari Elementary School who were directly involved in the implementation of differentiated learning. The primary informants consisted of classroom teachers, while supporting informants included the principal and curriculum coordinator. Informants were selected purposively, considering their experience and involvement in differentiation practices. This strategy aligns with a qualitative approach that emphasizes participant selection based



on the relevance of the information. The participation of various parties allows for the triangulation of perspectives related to the dynamics of pedagogical competence (Creswell, 2019). Thus, the data obtained is expected to reflect reality in its entirety.

Data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. Observations were conducted to understand differentiated learning practices directly in the classroom. In-depth interviews were used to explore teachers' perceptions, experiences, and reflections regarding tensions that emerged in pedagogical practices. Documentation in the form of lesson plans, teaching modules, and assessment results was analyzed to determine consistency between planning and implementation. This combination of techniques enabled rich and multi-layered data collection. This multimethod approach supported the depth and validity of the findings (Sugiyono, 2023).

The primary research instrument was the researcher herself, who played a role in collecting and interpreting data. To support this process, a semi-structured interview guide and observation sheets were used, compiled based on pedagogical competency indicators and the principle of differentiation. The instrument was developed based on the concept of teacher pedagogical competency and the principle of differentiation. The instrument was flexible to adapt to field dynamics (Tomlinson, 2017). Content validation was conducted through discussions with experts in Islamic elementary education. Therefore, the instrument used had a clear conceptual foundation.

Data analysis techniques were conducted interactively through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. This process occurred cyclically from the beginning of data collection to the final stage of the research. This analysis model refers to the framework developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman regarding interactive qualitative data analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Data reduction was carried out by grouping findings based on the theme of pedagogical competency tensions. Data presentation was carried out in the form of descriptive narratives and a thematic matrix. Conclusions were drawn reflectively, considering consistency across data sources.

Data validity was tested through source and technique triangulation, member checking, and extended researcher participation in the field. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing data from teachers, madrasah principals, and learning documents. Technique triangulation was conducted by testing the consistency of observations, interviews, and documentation. Member checking was conducted by requesting confirmation from informants regarding the preliminary research results. This step aimed to ensure the researcher's interpretations aligned with the participants' experiences (Moleong, 2019). This procedure ensured the credibility and reliability of the data.

The research procedure begins with a preparatory phase, which involves a literature review and the development of a research proposal. This is followed by obtaining research permits and coordinating with the madrasah. Data collection is conducted through systematic observation, interviews, and documentation. After data collection, the researcher conducts a step-by-step analysis and compiles the research findings. The final phase involves compiling a report and submitting recommendations to the madrasah. This procedure is designed to ensure the research is structured and adaptable to field dynamics.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that the implementation of differentiated learning at Al-Umm Klari Elementary School is not entirely linear. Three major patterns were generally found: inconsistent variations in learning strategies, the influence of school culture on teacher flexibility, and tensions in pedagogical decision-making. Teachers have attempted to adapt learning based on student readiness and interests, but implementation is still limited to modifying assignments. Classroom observations show product differentiation, while process differentiation and assessment have not been optimally implemented. Learning planning documents also indicate adjustments to objectives and activities designed to accommodate student learning needs. However, this implementation has not been fully integrated systematically into daily classroom learning practices

Research findings demonstrate a gap between conceptual planning and operational



implementation in the differentiated learning process. Teachers develop a variety of strategies by grouping students and assigning them different assignments based on their ability levels. This approach is implemented in an effort to provide a learning experience more tailored to students' academic abilities. In an interview, one teacher stated, *"We try to divide students based on their reading ability, so those who are fluent can move on to analytical assignments, while those who are not yet fluent continue to receive guidance."* This statement demonstrates teachers' efforts to adapt learning strategies to diverse learning needs. This effort demonstrates a pedagogical awareness of providing differentiated learning support according to student characteristics

From the statements above, it is clear that teachers interpret differentiation as adjusting the difficulty level of assignments based on students' academic abilities. This statement demonstrates an awareness of differences in learning readiness in the classroom. However, differentiation is primarily focused on the final product, in the form of assignments, rather than on the overall learning process. Observations indicate that learning interactions still take place in a class setting before assignments are assigned. The lesson plan document also displays variations in instruction but does not detail alternative learning methods. Thus, the strategies implemented are partial and do not address all components of differentiation. Furthermore, teachers utilize simple media to accommodate students' learning styles. One teacher stated, *"For practical fiqh material, I give choices: some present, some practice directly, and some make posters."*

Based on the interview results above, teachers attempted to provide students with alternative forms of expression for their learning outcomes. This statement demonstrates flexibility in determining learning products. Classroom observations showed students appeared more active when given a choice of assignment formats. However, the choice of options was still determined generally without a structured mapping of interests. Assessment documents indicate that assessment criteria had not been fully adapted to the variety of products selected by students. This reflects a lack of standardized adaptation efforts.

Table 1. Classification of Main Findings

Focus/Subfocus	Indicators	Implementation Methods	Data Sources
Learning Strategy	Readiness Differentiation	Grouping based on ability	Interviews, Observations
Learning Strategy	Product Differentiation	Presentation, practice, and poster options	Interviews, Documents
School Culture	Policy Support	Madrasah principal's guidance on differentiation	Interviews
School Culture	Teacher Collaboration	Discussions in internal KKG forums	Documentation
Pedagogical Tensions	Administrative Burden	Lesson Plan Simplification when time is limited	Interviews

School culture also influences the implementation of differentiated learning within the madrasah environment. The principal stated, *"We encourage teachers not to generalize students' abilities, but it does take a process to get used to it."* This statement demonstrates institutional encouragement for teachers to be more sensitive to differences in student learning abilities. This support is also reflected in various internal forums discussing the development of more adaptive learning strategies. Teacher meeting documents show that responsive learning issues are frequently part of the professional discussion agenda. This situation indicates that institutionally, there are efforts to direct learning practices toward a more differentiated approach.

The statements above indicate that the school's policy commitment has not been fully followed by a structured implementation mechanism. Field observations indicate that differentiation practices still rely heavily on individual teacher initiative in the classroom. Furthermore, no written technical guidelines were found that detailed the standards for implementing differentiation in madrasahs. This suggests that policy support is more normative than operational. Teachers also mentioned the importance of internal collaboration as a space for sharing pedagogical experiences. One teacher



stated, *"We often have discussions in the Teacher Working Group (KKG), but the practices in the classroom still vary."*

Based on the interview results above, teacher discussion forums have been established as spaces for professional reflection. This statement indicates communication between teachers regarding learning strategies. However, observations revealed significant variation in implementation across classes. Meeting minutes indicate that discussions were still general in nature without technical follow-up. This situation suggests that collaboration has not yet fully resulted in uniformity in practical direction. Thus, the school culture is supportive in discourse, but not yet systematically integrated. Tensions arise when teachers face time constraints and administrative burdens. One teacher stated, *"I understand differentiation conceptually, but sometimes time is spent on administration, so not all plans can be implemented."*

The statements above demonstrate a discrepancy between conceptual understanding and practical implementation. Teachers acknowledged understanding the principle of differentiation, but faced structural barriers. Observations indicated that some lesson plans outlined in the document were not fully implemented in class. These statements also illustrate the pressures of work influencing pedagogical decisions. The planning document displayed a fairly detailed format, but implementation was more streamlined. This situation highlights internal dynamics within teachers' pedagogical competencies. Another teacher added, *"If everything has to be adjusted one by one, it's difficult to control the class."*

Based on the interview results above, concerns emerged regarding classroom management when differentiation is fully implemented. These statements indicate the challenges of simultaneously managing diverse activities. Classroom observations revealed that teachers tended to revert to classical methods when classroom situations were less conducive. Learning evaluation documents indicated that assessments were still conducted uniformly across several materials. This demonstrates a tension between the need for adaptation and the demands of classroom order. This dynamic is a key component of this study's findings.

Research findings indicate that learning strategies, school culture, and tensions over pedagogical competencies are interrelated in shaping patterns of differentiation implementation. Teachers' efforts to adapt assignments are influenced by normative school policy support. However, technical and structural limitations limit consistency of classroom practice. Collaboration between teachers provides space for reflection but has not yet resulted in uniform operational standards. The tensions that emerge are not isolated but are interconnected with factors such as time, classroom management, and workload. Overall, the findings demonstrate a pattern that differentiation has been attempted but is still at a gradual adaptation stage.

Overall, the research results indicate that differentiated learning at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al-Umm Klari has been implemented in the form of varied assignments and learning products. The school culture provides normative support for this practice, although it has not been fully operationalized in technical guidelines. Tensions in pedagogical competence emerged in the form of time constraints, classroom management, and implementation consistency. Observational data, interviews, and documents revealed a gap between planning and implementation. These findings have answered the research question regarding the dynamics of teachers' pedagogical competence in implementing differentiation. Furthermore, these results will be analyzed in more depth in the discussion section to examine their conceptual implications and meaning.

Discussion

This study found that the implementation of differentiated learning at Al-Umm Klari Elementary School (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah) is adaptive but not yet fully systematic. Differentiation has been attempted through a variety of tasks and learning products, but has not consistently addressed aspects of process and assessment. School policy support comes in the form of normative encouragement, although it has not been formulated in operational technical guidelines. Tensions over pedagogical competence arise primarily in aspects of classroom management, time constraints, and administrative burdens. Teachers demonstrate a conceptual understanding of differentiation, but its



implementation is influenced by structural and cultural factors. The most prominent trend is the tension between the ideals of responsive learning policies and the reality of still-classical classroom practices.

The findings regarding partial differentiation indicate that pedagogical transformation does not occur instantly, but rather through a process of professional negotiation. Teachers attempt to adapt learning based on student readiness, but these adjustments are easier to make in the final product than in the learning process. This is understandable because modifying assignments is relatively simpler than designing variations in methods, media, and assessments simultaneously. In the madrasah context, the responsibility for reinforcing religious values also occupies teachers' attention, thus dividing the space for pedagogical innovation. This situation suggests that differentiation is practiced within the boundaries of teachers' professional comfort. Thus, the incomplete implementation reflects a transitional stage toward a more adaptive learning model.

The identified tensions in pedagogical competencies do not merely indicate teacher weaknesses, but rather illustrate the complexity of the profession's demands. Teachers are in a position to balance administration, classroom management, and learning innovation. When differentiation is fully implemented, classroom control becomes more dynamic and requires advanced managerial skills. Under these conditions, teachers tend to revert to classical methods as a strategy to stabilize the situation. This phenomenon demonstrates that pedagogical change is strongly influenced by the readiness of the support system, not just individual capacity. The uniqueness of this finding lies in the madrasah context, which combines academic and religious dimensions within a single learning practice.

The results of this study are related to the concept of differentiation developed by Carol Ann Tomlinson in Hasan et al., which emphasizes the adaptation of content, process, product, and learning environment (Hasan et al., 2025). Field findings indicate that the product aspect is more dominant than the process and environment, so that only part of Tomlinson's framework is implemented. This study also shows that comprehensive implementation requires strong systemic support. From the pedagogical content knowledge perspective formulated by Lee Shulman in Ismaniati and Lindra, the integration between material mastery and delivery strategies is key to effective learning (Ismaniati & Lindra, 2025). The findings indicate that this integration has been attempted, but has not been fully stable in practice. Thus, the results of this study expand the understanding of how theoretical concepts are gradually translated in the context of Islamic elementary education.

Compared to John Hattie's findings in Andilah et al.'s study on visible learning, which emphasized the impact of learning strategies on student achievement, this study focuses more on the internal dynamics of teachers before these impacts emerge (Andilah et al., 2025). Furthermore, the case study approach, as popularized by Robert K. Yin, emphasizes the importance of context in understanding educational phenomena (Yin, 2018). This study supports this notion by demonstrating that school culture and administrative burdens influence the implementation of differentiation. Unlike several studies in public schools that show significant increases in student participation, the madrasah context demonstrates a more gradual adaptation process. Thus, this study does not contradict previous studies but provides a more specific contextual nuance. These findings enrich the literature by presenting an underexplored perspective on Islamic primary education.

The results obtained directly address the research question regarding the dynamics of teachers' pedagogical competence in implementing differentiated learning. The research successfully identified the forms of implementation, supporting factors, and sources of tension that emerged in practice. The objective of analyzing the relationship between school policies and classroom practices was also achieved through findings regarding normative support and operational limitations. Furthermore, classroom management and workload factors were revealed as integral parts of the dynamics of pedagogical competence. Thus, the research's diagnostic and constructive orientation was realized through mapping actual conditions in the field. All findings provide a comprehensive picture of the process of adapting to differentiation in madrasahs.

The results of this study contribute to the development of differentiated learning practices in



Islamic elementary education. The findings highlight the need for strengthening technical guidelines and ongoing training for madrasah teachers. Theoretically, this research enriches the discourse on integrating pedagogical competencies with a differentiated approach in a religious context. Practically, schools can design more structured teacher collaboration models to ensure consistent implementation. Teacher quality improvement policies also need to consider administrative burdens to ensure optimal pedagogical innovation. Thus, this research contributes to strengthening the quality of learning that is more adaptive and contextual.

This study is limited by its location, which only covers one madrasah, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study's one-semester duration does not fully capture the long-term dynamics of differentiation implementation. The data obtained also focused on the perspectives of teachers and madrasah leaders, without involving in-depth analysis of student experiences. Further research could expand the scope to include several madrasahs with different characteristics to obtain a comparative picture. Future studies could also use a mixed-method approach to quantitatively examine the relationship between the dynamics of pedagogical competence and student learning outcomes. This development will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of differentiated learning in madrasahs.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the research results above, it can be concluded that the implementation of differentiated learning at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Al-Umm Klari has taken place in the form of gradual adaptation characterized by variations in learning tasks and products, but has not been fully integrated into the process and assessment aspects. Tensions in pedagogical competence arise as a consequence of the interaction between professional demands, administrative burdens, classroom management, and institutional support that is still normative. These findings indicate that the implementation of differentiation depends not only on teachers' conceptual understanding, but also on the readiness of the school system to provide adequate operational support. Thus, the research objective of analyzing the dynamics of teachers' pedagogical competence in implementing differentiated learning has been achieved through mapping the forms of implementation, supporting factors, and sources of accompanying tensions. Scientifically, this research enriches the study of the integration of pedagogical competence and differentiation in the context of Islamic basic education, while providing practical implications for strengthening teacher training and developing technical guidelines in madrasahs. These findings open up space for developing strategic recommendations that can be followed up in the next section. Future researchers are advised to expand the scope of the study to several madrasahs with different characteristics to obtain a more comprehensive comparative picture.

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