



## Instructional Leadership Strategies of School Principals to Enhance Teachers' Competencies in Differentiated Instruction

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### Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the principal's instructional leadership strategies in improving teacher competence in differentiated learning at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara. The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation involving the principal, teachers, and the school committee selected purposively. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, member checking, and reflection, while data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that the principal implemented four major instructional leadership strategies: teacher capacity development through training and workshops, strengthening an inclusive school culture, improving educational facilities and infrastructure, and enhancing collaboration with internal and external stakeholders. These strategies contributed to improving teachers' pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competencies in implementing differentiated learning. Supporting factors included the principal's commitment, teachers' motivation, a collaborative school culture, and support from the Education Office and the school committee. Meanwhile, the main challenges were limited educational facilities and infrastructure, budget constraints, heavy teacher workloads, uneven understanding of inclusive education, and limited support from Special Education Teachers (SETs).

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## Introduction

Inclusive education is an educational system that provides all learners—including students with special educational needs (SEN), students with disabilities, and those from diverse backgrounds—with equal opportunities to access education alongside their peers in mainstream schools. This approach emphasizes the adaptation of the learning environment, curriculum, and instructional processes to accommodate the needs of every learner in an equitable, inclusive, and non-discriminatory manner. Inclusive education is also understood as an educational service system that enables students with special educational needs to learn together with their typically developing peers in the nearest mainstream school while ensuring every child's right to education through curriculum adaptation, appropriate instructional methods, and learning environments tailored to students' individual characteristics. Efforts to strengthen inclusive education can be optimized when implemented systematically across all levels of education, particularly at the elementary school level. The implementation of inclusive education aims to create a learning environment that is welcoming, equitable, and responsive to student diversity, allowing students with special educational needs to learn alongside their peers within the same educational setting. Effective implementation requires a flexible curriculum, the availability of special education support teachers, accessible facilities and infrastructure, and strong collaboration among teachers, parents, and educational professionals to support successful learning outcomes (Muslimin & Muqowam, 2021).

At the elementary school level, inclusive education is implemented by integrating students with special educational needs into the same classrooms as their typically developing peers. Its implementation includes student identification and assessment, curriculum adaptation, the application of flexible instructional strategies, the provision of special education support teachers, and active parental involvement in supporting the educational process. These components are essential for delivering high-quality instruction that addresses the diverse learning needs of all students (Arriani et al., 2022). The quality of instruction within inclusive education is a critical determinant of its successful implementation. Therefore, improving instructional quality requires comprehensive school readiness, including an adaptive curriculum, competent teachers, the availability of special education support teachers, accessible facilities and infrastructure, and a school culture that embraces diversity. The success of inclusive education depends not only on adequate resources but also on the school's ability to manage instructional processes effectively through leadership that prioritizes teaching and learning quality. One of the key factors contributing to this objective is the instructional leadership of the school principal.

Instructional leadership positions the principal as a leader whose primary focus is improving the quality of teaching and learning. Principals are responsible not only for school administration but also for directing, guiding, facilitating, and evaluating instructional practices to ensure alignment with educational goals. Through effective instructional leadership, principals are expected to foster a positive learning culture, enhance teachers' professionalism, and create an academic climate that supports improved student learning outcomes (Siregar et al., 2025). Within this context, principals also play a strategic role in strengthening teachers' competencies through academic supervision, coaching, mentoring, and the facilitation of professional development programs. They are responsible for promoting curriculum development, improving instructional quality, and fostering a collaborative school culture that enables teachers to provide learning experiences aligned with students' needs, including those of students with special educational needs (Ramadani et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the implementation of inclusive education in elementary schools continues to face numerous challenges that hinder its effectiveness. The most prominent obstacles include teachers' limited competencies in

educating students with special educational needs, the shortage of special education support teachers, inadequate supporting facilities and infrastructure, and limited public and parental understanding of inclusive education. Furthermore, insufficient curriculum flexibility and the persistence of stigma toward students with special educational needs continue to affect the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation (Dewiana et al., 2023).

Based on preliminary observations conducted at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara, several issues were identified, indicating that the implementation of inclusive instruction continues to encounter significant challenges. First, teachers' competencies in educating students with special educational needs remain limited. Many teachers have not yet developed sufficient understanding of the characteristics of these students, effective management of heterogeneous classrooms, instructional modification, or the implementation of assessment practices that accommodate individual learning needs. Second, curriculum adaptation within inclusive classrooms has not been implemented optimally. Adjustments to learning objectives, instructional materials, teaching methods, and assessment practices remain constrained due to teachers' limited competencies, insufficient professional development opportunities, and inadequate supporting resources. Consequently, instructional services have not fully accommodated the learning needs of students with special educational needs. Third, the implementation of differentiated instruction has also not been fully optimized. Teachers continue to experience difficulties in differentiating instructional content, learning processes, and learning products due to limited professional competencies, insufficient support from special education teachers, inadequate instructional resources, and limited time to design instruction that addresses students' individual needs.

These findings indicate that the primary challenge in implementing inclusive education at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara lies in teachers' competencies to deliver adaptive instruction. In essence, inclusive education seeks to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students through instructional services that accommodate learner diversity. One strategy to address this challenge is to strengthen teachers' competencies through the support and guidance of the principal in his or her role as an instructional leader. Teacher competence in inclusive education encompasses pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies that enable teachers to design, implement, and evaluate instruction according to students' individual characteristics. Teachers are also expected to implement differentiated instruction, adapt the curriculum, and select appropriate instructional media to ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to achieve their full potential. In implementing differentiated instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara, teachers are expected to employ instructional strategies that are concrete, visual, and contextual so that learning materials are more accessible to students. Fundamentally, differentiated instruction is an instructional approach that is tailored to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. However, its successful implementation depends largely on teachers' competencies in identifying students' needs, designing flexible learning experiences, and effectively managing heterogeneous classrooms (Koimah et al., 2024).

Evidence from the field indicates that teachers' competencies in implementing differentiated instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara still require considerable strengthening. Therefore, the principal plays a pivotal role as an instructional leader in establishing a vision for inclusive education, facilitating teacher professional development, conducting academic supervision, providing supporting resources, and fostering a school culture that values diversity. The principal serves not only as a policymaker but also as the primary driver of teacher professionalism and the development of an inclusive school culture (Indriyanti et al., 2024). In light of these conditions, investigating the instructional leadership strategies employed by the principal to enhance teachers' competencies in

differentiated instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara is both timely and significant. This study is expected to provide insights into the strategies implemented by the principal to strengthen teachers' competencies and thereby support the successful implementation of inclusive education. In addition to its practical significance, this study also offers a degree of novelty, as previous research has predominantly focused on teachers' competencies or teacher professional development in inclusive education. Studies specifically examining the instructional leadership strategies of school principals in enhancing teachers' competencies for differentiated instruction at the elementary school level remain relatively limited. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to the advancement of educational leadership scholarship while also serving as a practical reference for schools seeking to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education. Accordingly, this study is entitled "Instructional Leadership Strategies of School Principals for Enhancing Teachers' Competencies in Differentiated Instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara."

## Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach using a descriptive research design. The research was conducted at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara, East Kutai Regency, Indonesia, from January to May 2026. The study focused on analyzing the instructional leadership strategies employed by the school principal to enhance teachers' competencies in implementing differentiated instruction within an inclusive education setting. The research site was selected purposively because the school has implemented inclusive education and enrolls students with special educational needs. The study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The research participants consisted of the school principal, teachers, and members of the school committee, who were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in the implementation of differentiated instruction. Secondary data were obtained from various school documents, including curriculum documents, school programs, activity reports, and other records relevant to the focus of the study.

Data were collected using observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The researcher served as the primary research instrument (key instrument) and was supported by observation protocols, interview guides, field notes, and audio-recording devices to ensure comprehensive documentation throughout the research process. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, data credibility was established through source triangulation, member checking, and reflective analysis, thereby enhancing the credibility and consistency of the research findings. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which consists of four interrelated stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The analysis was conducted continuously throughout the research process, from the initial stage of data collection until the completion of the study. This iterative process enabled each finding to be verified through comparisons across multiple data sources, resulting in a credible interpretation of the school principal's instructional leadership strategies for enhancing teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction.

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## Results and Discussions

### 1. Instructional Leadership Strategies of School Principals for Enhancing Teachers' Competencies in Differentiated Instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara

The instructional leadership strategies implemented by the principal of SDN 005 Sangatta Utara were directed toward enhancing teachers' competencies in implementing differentiated instruction. The principal positioned himself as an instructional leader by aligning all school programs with the goal of improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in addressing the diverse learning needs of students. These strategies were realized through the formulation of a school vision that supports inclusive education, the implementation of academic supervision, the facilitation of teachers' professional development, the provision of instructional support facilities, and the strengthening of collaboration with various stakeholders. The findings indicate that instructional leadership extends beyond administrative responsibilities and serves as a catalyst for organizational change by strengthening teachers' professional capacity. The first strategy involved teacher capacity development through training programs, workshops, In-House Training (IHT), technical guidance, and continuous academic supervision. Prior to designing professional development programs, the principal identified teachers' needs through discussions, classroom observations, and performance evaluations. These programs focused on strengthening teachers' pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies, including proficiency in educational technology, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, differentiated instruction, and the integration of digital learning media. Teachers acknowledged that these initiatives enhanced their self-confidence, improved their ability to design more adaptive learning experiences, and strengthened their professionalism in managing heterogeneous classrooms.

The second strategy focused on strengthening an inclusive school culture as the foundation for differentiated instruction. The principal promoted a school environment that values diversity by implementing flexible curriculum policies, encouraging differentiated instruction, facilitating peer mentoring, organizing lesson study activities, establishing teacher learning communities, and conducting ongoing clinical supervision. In addition to providing opportunities for teachers to exchange best practices, the principal continuously evaluated instructional implementation through classroom observations, teacher performance assessments, and collaborative reflection sessions. These initiatives enabled teachers to enhance their capacity to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students, including those with special educational needs. Teacher competency development was further supported through the effective management of instructional facilities and infrastructure. Teachers were actively involved in planning school facility requirements through collaborative discussions, ensuring that procurement decisions aligned with instructional needs. Although the study found that several facilities supporting inclusive education—such as resource rooms, ramps, handrails, and accessible restrooms—remained limited due to budget constraints, the principal sought to optimize available funding through the School Operational Assistance Fund (BOS), regional education funding (BOSDA), and partnerships with external stakeholders. Furthermore, the school began utilizing digital platforms, including the Merdeka Mengajar Platform (PMM), technology-based professional development programs, and various digital learning media as alternative approaches to enhancing teachers' competencies.

The final strategy involved strengthening collaboration with both internal and external stakeholders. The principal facilitated partnerships among teachers, the school committee, parents, and Special Education Support Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus/GPK) through communication forums, evaluation meetings, mentoring activities, and the sharing of instructional best practices.

These collaborative initiatives enabled participants to exchange professional experiences, solve instructional challenges collectively, and deepen teachers' understanding of inclusive education. Parental involvement also emerged as an important supporting factor by providing feedback on instructional practices while strengthening communication between the school and families to support students' academic development. Overall, the findings indicate that the principal's instructional leadership strategies for enhancing teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara were implemented through four primary approaches: (1) teacher capacity development through training and workshops, (2) strengthening an inclusive school culture, (3) improving the management of instructional facilities and infrastructure, and (4) fostering collaboration with various stakeholders. Although challenges related to limited funding and inadequate inclusive education facilities remained, these strategies contributed positively to teachers' competencies, particularly in designing, implementing, and evaluating differentiated instruction that addresses students' diverse learning needs.

Teacher competence is a fundamental determinant of instructional quality and educational effectiveness. Teachers who possess strong pedagogical, professional, personal, and social competencies are better equipped to design student-centered instruction, create meaningful learning experiences, and maximize students' potential. Within the context of differentiated instruction, mastery of these four competency domains becomes increasingly important because teachers are expected to accommodate students' diverse characteristics, learning needs, and learning preferences. This finding is consistent with Mulyasa (2012), who argued that professional teachers should possess integrated pedagogical, personal, social, and professional competencies that enable them to continuously develop in response to advances in knowledge and evolving educational demands.

The findings further demonstrate that the principal of SDN 005 Sangatta Utara implemented instructional leadership strategies specifically oriented toward strengthening teachers' competencies through a variety of professional development initiatives. These strategies included training programs, workshops, In-House Training (IHT), academic supervision, the promotion of an inclusive school culture, effective management of educational facilities, and collaboration with multiple stakeholders. The principal's role extended beyond administrative leadership to that of an instructional leader who continuously supported teachers in improving instructional quality. These findings are consistent with Persada et al. (2025), who reported that training and workshops enable teachers to update their instructional practices, adapt to curriculum reforms, and create more interactive and meaningful learning experiences. Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies continued to face several challenges, including varying levels of teacher motivation, limited time, and insufficient access to high-quality professional development opportunities, as also reported by Yunarti (2022).

Teacher capacity development through training and workshops emerged as one of the most influential strategies for enhancing teachers' competencies. The principal encouraged teachers to participate in professional development programs covering Artificial Intelligence (AI)-based educational technologies, implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, technical guidance on the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), and continuous academic supervision. These initiatives positively influenced teachers' abilities to design effective instruction, integrate digital technologies into teaching, and implement differentiated instruction. This finding supports Yulianti et al. (2024), who concluded that AI-based professional development enhances teachers' productivity and competencies by facilitating instructional material development, instructional administration, and the provision of more personalized learning experiences. Likewise, the theory of AI integration in education proposed by Colic et al. (2025) suggests that artificial intelligence supports adaptive

learning, provides timely feedback, improves accessibility, and assists teachers in fulfilling their roles as learning facilitators.

In addition to teacher capacity development, strengthening an inclusive school culture also contributed substantially to improving teachers' competencies. This strategy was implemented through technical guidance on inclusive education, lesson study activities, peer mentoring, and the application of differentiated instruction, all of which enabled teachers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of students' characteristics and learning needs. These programs encouraged teachers to improve their abilities to design instructional modules, map students' learning needs, and create learning environments that respect diversity. The findings are consistent with human resource development theory, which posits that employees' knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes can be enhanced through systematic training programs. Similarly, Hanil (2023) reported that continuous technical guidance improves the quality of instructional planning, implementation, and evaluation. Furthermore, Rangkuti (2024) emphasized that learning occurs through social interaction and observation of others' practices, highlighting the importance of collaborative cultures in strengthening teachers' competencies.

The findings also reveal that the success of instructional leadership strategies was influenced by effective management of educational facilities and infrastructure, as well as collaboration with multiple stakeholders. The availability of laboratories, libraries, teachers' workrooms, and various instructional facilities supported teachers in developing creativity and instructional innovation. However, facilities specifically designed to support inclusive education—such as ramps, handrails, accessible restrooms, and resource rooms—were not yet available to the extent required, thereby limiting the effective implementation of differentiated instruction. This finding is consistent with Agustari et al. (2025), who argued that limited assistive technologies and inadequate supporting facilities reduce the adaptability of instruction to students' diverse needs. Conversely, Sahbana et al. (2024) reported that supportive working environments equipped with adequate facilities enhance teachers' motivation, self-confidence, and productivity. Moreover, collaboration among schools, local education authorities, school committees, parents, and the broader community through training, mentoring, the sharing of best practices, and continuous evaluation further strengthened teachers' professional development. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the instructional leadership strategies implemented by the principal of SDN 005 Sangatta Utara made a positive contribution to enhancing teachers' competencies, although further improvements are still required, particularly in expanding inclusive educational facilities and ensuring the sustainability of professional development programs.

## **2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors of the Principal's Instructional Leadership Strategies for Enhancing Teachers' Competencies**

The findings indicate that the effectiveness of the principal's instructional leadership strategies in enhancing teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara is influenced by both internal and external school factors. The primary supporting factors include the principal's strong commitment to improving instructional quality, teachers' motivation to continuously develop their professional competencies, a collaborative and harmonious school culture, effective collaboration among teachers, and support from the Department of Education through various training programs, workshops, and professional development initiatives. Furthermore, the active involvement of the school committee, parents, professional learning communities, and the utilization of school performance data and the Education Report Card (Rapor Pendidikan) strengthened the

implementation of instructional leadership strategies, enabling teacher competency development to be carried out in a sustainable manner.

Conversely, the study also identified several barriers that affected the effectiveness of these instructional leadership strategies. The most significant challenges included inadequate instructional facilities and infrastructure, particularly those supporting inclusive education, as well as limited financial resources for procuring educational facilities and implementing teacher professional development programs. In addition, teachers' heavy administrative responsibilities and demanding workloads restricted their opportunities to participate in professional development activities. Other challenges included uneven teacher understanding of inclusive education and differentiated instruction, varying levels of teacher readiness to embrace educational change, and the limited availability of Special Education Support Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus/GPK) to assist in implementing inclusive instructional practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that the success of the principal's instructional leadership strategies in enhancing teachers' competencies depends not only on the principal's ability to design and implement professional development programs but also on the availability of resources, a supportive organizational culture, the commitment of all members of the school community, and adequate facilities and policies that support differentiated instruction. Therefore, strengthening collaboration among stakeholders, providing continuous professional development for teachers, and improving facilities and infrastructure for inclusive education are essential to optimizing the implementation of instructional leadership at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara.

Several factors support teachers' competency development in implementing differentiated instruction. One of the most important factors is teachers' awareness and motivation to engage in continuous professional learning. Teachers who recognise the importance of lifelong learning are more likely to update their knowledge, refine their instructional practices, and create learning environments that are interactive, engaging, and responsive to students' diverse needs. This strong professional commitment also encourages school principals to provide sustained support, resources, and opportunities for teachers' continued development.

A positive and collaborative school climate also provides an essential foundation for improving teachers' competencies. Harmonious professional relationships allow collegial interactions to become opportunities for exchanging ideas, discussing instructional challenges, and developing innovative teaching strategies. Such collaboration helps teachers reduce individual workloads, establish shared understandings, and solve classroom problems collectively. As a result, teachers can design more effective differentiated learning activities while fostering a supportive professional learning culture within the school.

In addition, support from the Department of Education serves as a significant catalyst for teachers' professional growth. Through workshops, training programmes, and other professional development activities, teachers gain the knowledge and practical skills required to implement innovative instructional approaches. These programmes also help teachers align their practices with curriculum reforms and respond effectively to rapid technological developments in the digital era. Therefore, the interaction between teachers' internal motivation, a collaborative school environment, strong collegial relationships, and institutional support plays a crucial role in strengthening teachers' competence in differentiated instruction.

Despite the presence of several supporting factors, the study also identified a number of barriers to strengthening teachers' competencies in implementing differentiated instruction. One of the most significant obstacles is the inadequacy of educational facilities and infrastructure, particularly



in schools with limited financial resources. Although the school has basic facilities such as classrooms and a library, resources specifically designed to support inclusive education remain insufficient. This condition restricts teachers' ability to apply the knowledge and skills gained through professional development programmes and limits the effective use of modern instructional media. Consequently, efforts to improve the quality of inclusive and differentiated learning continue to encounter considerable challenges.

Financial constraints further compound these difficulties, especially in relation to the provision of accessible learning resources and specialised facilities for students with special educational needs. Although government assistance, subsidies, and funding programmes for inclusive schools have helped reduce some of the financial burden, the available resources remain inadequate to fully support inclusive education. In addition, teachers' heavy workloads, particularly administrative responsibilities and reporting requirements, reduce the time and energy available for training, reflection, and continuing professional development. This situation limits teachers' opportunities to strengthen their pedagogical, professional, and social competencies.

Another major barrier is the limited availability of Special Education Support Teachers or Guru Pendamping Khusus (GPK). Without sufficient collaboration with specialists, classroom teachers often experience difficulties in assessing students, responding to diverse learning needs, and designing effective differentiated instruction. The additional responsibility of supporting students with special educational needs may also contribute to emotional fatigue and reduce teachers' capacity to focus on their own professional growth. Therefore, inadequate facilities, limited funding, excessive workloads, insufficient understanding of inclusive education, and the shortage of GPK collectively hinder the sustainable development of teachers' competencies in inclusive schools

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the principal's instructional leadership strategies for enhancing teachers' competencies in differentiated instruction at SDN 005 Sangatta Utara were implemented through four key approaches: teacher capacity development through training and workshops, strengthening an inclusive school culture, improving the management of educational facilities and infrastructure, and fostering collaboration with various stakeholders. These four strategies were implemented continuously and contributed to the enhancement of teachers' pedagogical, professional, social, and personal competencies in implementing differentiated instruction. Nevertheless, the implementation of these strategies has not yet reached its full potential due to several challenges, including inadequate facilities and infrastructure for inclusive education, limited financial resources, heavy teacher workloads, uneven understanding of inclusive education among teachers, and the limited availability of Special Education Support Teachers (Guru Pendamping Khusus/GPK). Conversely, the success of these strategies has been supported by the principal's strong commitment, teachers' motivation for continuous professional learning, a collaborative school culture, effective collegial collaboration among teachers, and support from the Department of Education, the school committee, parents, and the wider community.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Department of Education continue to strengthen teachers' professional development through sustained training programs, ongoing mentoring, and adequate financial support to facilitate the effective implementation of differentiated instruction in inclusive schools. School principals are encouraged to optimize their role as instructional leaders by conducting continuous academic supervision, empowering professional

learning communities, and strengthening collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders to further enhance teachers' competencies. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to expand this line of inquiry by investigating instructional leadership strategies related to the empowerment of professional learning communities, lesson study, and other models of teacher professional development across diverse inclusive school contexts. Such research is expected to generate more comprehensive and practical models for strengthening instructional leadership and improving teachers' competencies in inclusive education.

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