

Differentiated Instruction in School Practices: Managerial Implications for Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Schools increasingly serve students from diverse backgrounds, placing new demands on education to ensure holistic development and equitable learning opportunities. Differentiated Instruction (DI) is recognized as a promising approach to reconcile curricular goals with varied learner needs. This study investigates how subject-head teachers in Vietnamese lower secondary schools perceive and implement DI, as well as the challenges encountered. Using a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 74 survey respondents and 17 focus-group participants. Results show widespread acknowledgment of DI's value but uneven application, with greater emphasis on content and environment adjustments than on process and product differentiation. Teaching experience and subject specialization shaped practices, while barriers included institutional constraints, heterogeneous learner profiles, and limited pedagogical preparedness. Findings highlight the need for context-sensitive professional development and managerial supports, positioning subject-department heads and school leaders as critical actors in advancing inclusive teaching within Vietnam and comparable Southeast Asian settings.

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Introduction

As societies undergo rapid socio-economic change, education systems are shifting from knowledge transmission toward cultivating learner competencies, considered essential for both personal growth and workforce adaptability. This transition, while progressive, has also heightened classroom complexity, with teachers facing diverse student abilities, motivations, cultural backgrounds, and learning paces. Differentiated Instruction (DI) has thus gained prominence as a response to learner diversity (UNESCO, 2022). Rather than prescribing uniform approaches, DI encourages educators to adapt strategies that respect individual student needs (Tomlinson, 2017). Its premise is that students learn differently and require varied supports, demanding teachers' professional agency to ensure equitable opportunities for success (Aliakbari & Haghighi, 2014; Valiandes, 2015; Yavuz, 2020). More than a method, DI represents a mindset grounded in equity, responsiveness, and pedagogical care. This philosophy has influenced international policy discourse. Frameworks such as UNESCO's inclusive education agenda and the Southeast Asia Teacher Competency Framework (2017) emphasize adaptive pedagogy as central to addressing learner variability (UNESCO, 2015). National reforms have also embedded DI, with Singapore's SkillsFuture for Educators, Malaysia's Education Blueprint, and Indonesia's Guru Penggerak initiative highlighting its role in teacher training and professional learning (Halil et al., 2024). Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum reflects this shift by adopting competency-based learning and personalized

instruction to develop problem-solving, creativity, autonomy, collaboration, and subject-specific competencies, alongside qualities such as responsibility, honesty, and compassion (MoE, 2018). Despite policy advances, research on DI in Vietnam remains limited. Since 2018, only 11 studies have addressed DI, primarily within single-subject or narrow pedagogical contexts. Absent, however, is analysis of subject-head teachers, who hold dual responsibilities as classroom instructors and pedagogical leaders guiding colleagues and shaping school-wide practice. This study investigates how subject-head teachers in lower secondary schools perceive, implement, and confront barriers to DI. By examining their experiences, it seeks to generate insights for teacher development strategies, strengthen professional learning systems, and support Vietnam's broader pursuit of inclusive and responsive education.

Literature Review

The growing diversity in classrooms has prompted educators to reconsider equitable instruction. When students differ not only in knowledge but also in how they learn, uniform teaching approaches prove insufficient. Differentiated instruction (DI) has emerged as a comprehensive response, acknowledging and working with learner variability (UNESCO, 2022). DI views students as distinct individuals, requiring teachers to attend to readiness, motivation, and thinking, then make purposeful adjustments (Tomlinson, 2017). Tomlinson's model identifies four domains: content, process, product, and learning environment (Hanover Research, 2018; Onyishi & Sefotho, 2020). Content involves adapting

subject matter; process refers to scaffolding and strategies; product allows varied demonstrations of learning; and environment shapes safety and motivation. Ideally, these elements operate dynamically. In practice, however, teachers often limit differentiation to content, such as simplified texts or tiered tasks (Halil et al., 2024; Padmore & Ali, 2024). More transformative practices (process and assessment personalization) are less common due to demands on expertise, time, and management (Ogunkunle & Henrietta, 2014; Yavuz, 2020). Evidence shows DI improves achievement, engagement, and confidence (Halil et al., 2024; Valiandes, 2015), yet barriers persist: inadequate preparation, heavy workloads, rigid curricula, and limited autonomy (Al-Shaboul et al., 2021; Lavania & Nor, 2020). In Southeast Asia, enthusiasm for DI often contrasts with weak implementation models. Singapore has embedded DI in teacher training, but countries like Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines still face capacity gaps (SEA-PLM, 2019). In Vietnam, training is often surface-level or fragmented, with digital tools used more for administration than pedagogy (Maknun et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2021). Teachers express strong interest in DI, especially given increasing heterogeneity in academic and socio-economic profiles (Taylor, 2017). The literature underscores not only the value of DI but also the conditions for its success. Bridging the gap between philosophy and classroom constraints is essential. This study therefore examines how teachers with dual instructional and leadership roles interpret and apply DI in practice.

Research Questions/Objectives

Despite the expanding global discourse on DI, the specific roles, competencies, and practices of subject-head teachers remain insufficiently examined. This gap is especially pronounced in Southeast Asia, where policy frameworks

increasingly promote DI, yet empirical insights into instructional leadership practices are limited. Given the centrality of subject-head teachers in guiding curriculum delivery and mentoring colleagues, this study aims to explore how subject-head teachers in lower secondary schools engage with DI. The inquiry is driven by four key research questions:

1. How do subject-head teachers perceive student diversity within their classrooms?
2. In what ways do subject-head teachers implement DI – across content, process, product, and learning environment – in their school practices?
3. What barriers do subject-head teachers encounter in the effective implementation of DI?
4. What strategies, at both the managerial and professional development levels, could enhance their capacity to lead and support DI practices within their schools?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods design to capture both the measurable and interpretive dimensions of DI as practiced by subject-head teachers. Rather than privileging one form of data, the research adopted an exploratory orientation to reveal not only how DI is applied, but also why certain practices emerge, persist, or falter in school settings. Quantitative and qualitative strands were conducted in parallel. The quantitative data offered an overall picture of teacher perceptions and the extent of DI implementation, while focus group discussions provided qualitative insights by allowing the researcher to observe, listen,

and probe for clarification on actual practices, challenges, and recommendations. Quantitative data highlighted patterns in teachers' perceptions and instructional choices, showing how particular practices were distributed and how differentiation was approached across the four domains. To examine the reasoning, constraints, and beliefs behind these patterns, qualitative focus groups were used. These discussions created space for deeper reflection and dialogue among participants. The integration of methods was thus more than procedural; it was an intentional strategy to strengthen the richness, validity, and trustworthiness of the findings.

Participants and Sampling

At the core of this study are subject-head teachers who both deliver subject content and assume leadership roles in mentoring peers, guiding instructional planning, and facilitating professional development aligned with school priorities. This hybrid position (part practitioner, part leader) renders them critical agents in advancing DI. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, not to generalize across all teachers but to focus on those with positional authority and pedagogical responsibility influencing DI implementation. These teachers hold strong professional expertise, manage departmental educational activities in accordance with school plans, and serve as intermediaries between school leadership and faculty. Their feedback thus provides a multidimensional perspective on teaching and learning while enabling them to propose measures and advise leadership on instructional improvements. In total, 74 subject-head teachers were recruited from 36 public lower secondary schools in a selected Vietnamese province.

Participant selection was guided by three core criteria: (1) current service as a subject-

head teacher; (2) prior nomination by their school leadership to attend a "train-the-trainer" professional development program, and (3) voluntary consent following a clear explanation of the study's purpose and procedures.

Instruments

The study employed a two-pronged data collection strategy, grounded in both quantitative and qualitative instruments. The questionnaire served as the backbone of the initial data collection phase. Its structure was informed by Tomlinson's well-established DI framework, which articulates four interrelated dimensions of differentiation: content, process, product, and learning environment. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha. Only those subscales that demonstrated acceptable reliability thresholds ($\alpha \geq .60$) were retained for analysis.

Recognizing the limitations of surveys in probing deeper instructional beliefs and contextual nuances, the study also incorporated a semi-structured interview protocol for use in focus group discussions. This tool was designed to explore two key areas in greater depth: (1) the practical and institutional challenges that teachers face when implementing DI, and (2) their reflections and suggestions for strengthening professional development systems to better support DI practices. While the survey results provide a broad assessment that lacks depth, the focus-group interview data are used to validate, compare, and reinforce the quantitative findings, thereby enabling a more persuasive and comprehensive explanation. Together, the survey and interview tools provided a layered and multifaceted understanding of how differentiated instruction is perceived and enacted by instructional leaders.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher contacted the Deputy Director of the Provincial Department of Education, outlining the study's objectives, scope, and contributions. After formal approval, an education officer coordinated with school administrators to identify subject-head teachers meeting the selection criteria. A list of 87 potential participants was compiled, each contacted individually with clear information on purpose, procedures, ethical safeguards, and the right to withdraw. Seventy-four teachers consented and completed the survey. Subsequently, 17 agreed to participate in focus group discussions. Although no ban existed, some teachers expressed concern about being identifiable by voice. To protect anonymity and psychological safety, sessions were not audio-recorded; instead, the researcher kept detailed field notes capturing themes, illustrative quotes, tone, and group dynamics. Notes were organized under two themes – “challenges” and “reflection and suggestions.” After each theme, summaries were read back to participants for verification and accuracy. These notes became the primary qualitative dataset and were analyzed thematically to complement survey results. Ethical protocols were rigorously observed: participants' identities were anonymized, and their insights treated with care. This approach ensured data richness and trustworthiness, grounded in a respectful relationship between researcher and participants.

Findings and Discussion

Participant Demographics and Subject Distribution

The data reflects a moderately diverse teaching workforce, with a majority of respondents identifying as male (68.9%), while female teachers accounted for 31.1%. Most participants

fell into the 30-39-year-old range (55.5%), followed by teachers aged 40-49 (36.5%). Only a small portion were either younger than 30 (2.7%) or over 50 (5.5%). When examining teaching experience, the most frequently reported range was 11-15 years (36.5%), tenure typically associated with strong classroom familiarity. Teachers with over 20 years of experience formed the smallest group (18.9%), while others reported 5-10 years (24.4%) and 16-20 years (20.3%), reflecting a healthy range across stages of professional maturity. The distribution across disciplines was as follows:

- Mathematics (21.6%)
- Literature (20.3%)
- Natural Sciences (14.9%)
- History and Geography (12.2%)
- Physical Education (9.5%)
- Arts and Foreign Languages (each 6.8%)
- Computer Science and Extracurricular Education (each 4.1%)

Unsurprisingly, core academic subjects like Mathematics and Literature were the most represented, reflecting an imbalance in DI-related training opportunities across disciplines. Teachers in non-core areas such as the arts, physical education, and extracurricular subjects remain underrepresented in capacity-building efforts, despite the 2018 General Education Curriculum's emphasis on holistic student development.

Perceptions of Student Diversity and Instructional Approaches

The survey findings suggest that while subject-head teachers are broadly aware of the diversity that exists within their classrooms, this recognition does not always translate into nuanced pedagogical responses. A majority of participants (66.2%) acknowledged substantial

variation in students' academic needs and abilities. However, a smaller subset, approximately 12.2%, viewed their students as relatively homogeneous, while a notable 17.6% remained uncertain. Strikingly, 25.7% respondents still believed that a single instructional approach could meet all learners' needs which runs counter to the philosophy of DI, which is learner-centered, recognizes student diversity, and requires diversified approaches to accommodate students' varied learning needs and profiles. These misperceptions may be symptomatic of broader pedagogical cultures shaped by teacher-centered traditions, where uniformity is often equated with order, and differentiation with complexity. Although familiarity with the concept of DI appeared relatively widespread among participants, evidence of deep conceptual understanding or consistent application was more limited. This aligns with earlier findings from Lavania and Nor (2020) and Yavuz (2020), who noted that surface-level familiarity with DI often coexists with traditional teaching practices that resist adaptation.

Within the Vietnamese context, this tension is particularly pronounced. Educational hierarchies and longstanding norms regarding teacher authority present real barriers to the uptake of student-centered pedagogies. Implementing DI is not simply a matter of technical skill; it demands a reorientation of mindset – a shift from “delivering content” to “designing for diversity.” This is where the role of subject-head teachers becomes especially consequential. Their ability (or reluctance) to model differentiated practices has a ripple effect, influencing not only their own classrooms but also those of the colleagues they supervise and mentor.

Differentiation Practices Across Core Elements

The total overall mean score from Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 is 4.06, which suggests a moderately high level of engagement with DI practices; however, a closer look reveals that implementation was not evenly distributed across all domains. Among the four areas, the learning environment with overall mean score of 4.26 (Table 4) received the highest attention, followed closely by content differentiation ($M = 4.07$) in Table 1. These two domains often reflect more visible and manageable adjustments, and teachers seemed more confident in these areas. By contrast, process differentiation in Table 2 ($M = 3.96$) and product differentiation in Table 3 ($M = 3.98$) commonly practiced. These aspects demand deeper pedagogical planning with multiple approaches that allow learners to choose methods suited to their individual needs to achieve the learning objectives, alongside flexible assessment forms. Notably, these areas also require the teacher to relinquish some control, empowering students to navigate learning pathways at their own pace or express understanding in diverse ways. For many teachers, especially in hierarchical or exam-focused systems, this can be an uncomfortable shift. The uneven implementation pattern signals what might be described as a procedural orientation toward DI – one where basic accommodations are made, but deeper personalization remains limited. This finding mirrors broader trends observed across Southeast Asia (SEA-PLM, 2019), where the formal adoption of inclusive teaching frameworks has often outpaced the development of corresponding classroom-level practices. In such contexts, subject-head teachers occupy a critical bridging role. Yet without adequate support, even the most committed leaders may struggle to embed DI in meaningful, sustained ways. It calls for pedagogical courage, deeper instructional fluency, and systemic

conditions that encourage innovation rather than penalize deviation from the norm.

Inconsistencies and Statistical Variations

Although overall engagement with DI appeared moderate to high, a closer statistical look reveals a more uneven landscape.

Table 1

Differentiated Instruction and its Implementation in Practice

No.	Item	Mean	SD
<i>Q. Content</i>			
QC1	The teacher defines learning objectives for different groups of students while assuring general objectives are achieved.	3.61	1.05
QC2	Various approaches are applied to ensure the covered contents are understood.	4.27	0.68
QC3	The teacher provides diverse materials (Ex: videos, readings, case studies, project) to respond to learners' learning styles.	4.16	0.70
QC4	Using different demonstrations and relating lessons to students' real-life experiences for their learning motivation and interest.	4.0	0.77
QC5	The teacher adjusts their instruction according to students' learning preferences or the needs of grouped learners.	4.08	0.75
QC6	Teachers provide different kinds of learning resources to accommodate learners' readiness and interest.	4.11	0.80
QC7	Provide opportunities and resources for exceptional students to optimize their learning capacity.	4.24	0.77
QC8	Teachers use different approaches to help learners retain learned knowledge.	4.07	0.74
Total mean		4.07	

Several survey items exhibited relatively high standard deviations. For instance, the item on defining learning objectives for different student groups had a mean of 3.61 but a standard deviation of 1.05, signaling significant variability in how this foundational practice is approached.

Table 2

Differentiated Instruction and its Implementation in Practice (Process element)

No.	Item	Mean	SD
<i>Q1. Process</i>			
Q1.P1	Teachers adjust the teaching pace according to student's ability	3.92	0.85
Q1.P2	Teachers flexibility give learning tasks according to student's ability and learning styles	4.36	0.67
Q1.P3	We are providing a variety of assignments at various levels to inspire and challenge students' thinking.	4.30	0.65
Q1.P4	Students are flexibly grouped to enhance interaction and develop mutual support for learning.	4.26	0.74
Q1.P5	Teachers use different kinds of group work to respond to learning needs.	3.96	0.74
Q1.P6	Students have the opportunity to join in group work both based on choice and assigned	3.24	1.04
Q1.P7	Students can select a different sub-topic within a unit and use their way to demonstrate their acquired knowledge.	3.41	0.85
Q1.P8	Teachers provide exceptional support to struggling students	4.01	0.76
Q1.P9	Students are provided means, materials, and pedagogical support to construct knowledge.	4.22	0.64
Total mean		3.96	

Similar patterns emerged with items like group work organization ($M = 3.24$; $SD = 1.04$), use of varied assessment formats ($M = 3.31$; $SD = 1.07$), cumulative assessments ($M = 3.42$; $SD = 1.36$), and classroom interaction ($M = 3.69$; $SD = 1.09$).

Table 3

Differentiated Instruction and its Implementation in Practice (Product element)

No.	Item	Mean	SD
<i>Q2. Product</i>			
Q2.P1	Learning is assessed through specific criteria and rubrics	4.31	0.84
Q2.P2	Students are allowed to express learning in their own way according to their preferences.	3.97	0.93
Q2.P3	I am using various assessment forms to accommodate students' styles	3.31	1.07
Q2.P4	Evaluation is authentic, reflects their learning and achievement.	4.15	0.78
Q2.P5	Student's learning is assessed by the complex tasks	4.31	0.61
Q2.P6	Students are allowed to showcase their learning outcomes in different means.	4.09	0.74
Q2.P7	Students are assessed according to the outcomes of the semester rather than a single assignment	3.42	1.36
Q2.P8	Teachers regularly use both formative and summative assessment to monitor learning and to modify instruction	4.35	0.69
Total mean		3.98	

Table 4

Differentiated Instruction and its Implementation in Practice (Learning environment)

No.	Item	Mean	SD
<i>Q. Learning environment</i>			
QL1	Students conveniently move and interact with others in the classroom	3.69	1.09
QL2	Teachers present their welcome and respect to all learners	4.54	0.66
QL3	Students quickly approach teachers for learning support	4.39	0.80
QL4	Create an atmosphere that provides different opportunities for all students to participate in learning activities	4.46	0.66
QL5	Teachers flexibly design activities to increase students' motivation and activeness toward learning	4.39	0.61
QL6	Teachers monitor to support students' learning behaviors	4.38	0.65
QL7	Students are encouraged to participate in planning learning activities.	4.00	0.95
Total mean		4.26	

These results suggest that while the terminology of DI is familiar, its systematic integration into lesson planning, assessment, and student engagement routines is far from uniform.

Additionally, findings from ANOVA in Table 5 pointed to statistically significant differences in DI practices based on specific variables.

Teachers' subject specializations were found to influence their likelihood of defining learning objectives for diverse groups ($p = .04$),

Table 5

Test of the Significant Differences between Demographic Profiles and Variances

Statistical Measures		QC1	Q1.P6	Q2.P3	Q2.P7	QL1
Levene Statistics	Age	2.36	0.23	0.26	0.53	2.10
	Years in service	0.66	0.88	0.99	3.52	1.30
	Subject taught	2.17	0.79	0.56	0.79	1.75
df1	Age	3	3	3	3	3
	Years in service	3	3	3	3	3
	Subject taught	8	8	8	8	8
df2	Age	70	70	70	69	70
	Years in service	70	70	70	69	70
	Subject taught	65	65	65	64	65
Sig.	Gender	.10	.90	.76	.39	.54
	Age	.079	.87	.85	.65	.1
	Years in service	.59	.45	.40	.01*	.28
	Subject taught	.04*	.61	.80	.60	.10

*Note: *p<.05*

while their teaching experience was linked to differences in the use of varied assessment methods ($p = .01$). It indicated that professional role and experience shaped how DI was implemented. The data imply that subject-matter context and years of classroom practice may affect how easily teachers adopt and sustain DI strategies. These variations serve as a reminder that one-size-fits-all training approaches are unlikely to yield widespread pedagogical change. Instead, tailored capacity-building that reflects teachers' disciplinary realities and experience levels will be essential for fostering deeper, more consistent integration of differentiated practices.

Barriers to Implementation

While most participants supported the principles of DI, they identified persistent barriers to classroom application. Since Vietnam's 2018 General Education Curriculum, in-service training has raised baseline awareness,

particularly in content adjustments and inclusive environments. Yet, many found these efforts surface-level, with DI often reduced to procedural tweaks rather than deeper shifts in formative assessment, scaffolded learning, or flexible design. This gap between policy and practice mirrors challenges in Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Myanmar, where DI frameworks exist but professional development has limited classroom impact (SEA-PLM, 2019). Singapore stands out, embedding DI into teacher preparation and evaluation. The Ministry of Education, in partnership with the National Institute of Education, has supported new pedagogical strategies, technological competence, smaller class sizes, diversified assessments, and greater teacher autonomy ensuring alignment between policy and practice. Vietnamese teachers emphasized increasing learner diversity, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, noting limited parental cooperation: "Most parents are blue-

collar workers... the responsibility shifts to the school.” Structural constraints – overcrowded classes, rigid schedules, limited resources – further impede DI: “Each class has over 40 students... simply finishing mandated content is already a challenge.” High-stakes assessments and prescriptive curricula discourage risk-taking: “We have autonomy only within the Department’s framework... implementing DI in Content and Product feels risky.” Despite these challenges, teachers expressed strong interest in targeted, practice-based training and greater autonomy in designing assessments. Many saw ICT as a potential enabler, easing workload and supporting flexible assessments. Yet, despite Vietnam’s digital transformation since 2020, integration remains fragmented, constrained by inconsistent access, limited training, and absent classroom models. Teachers consistently called for practical, context-sensitive support rather than additional theoretical input.

Teacher Capacity and Professionalism

Across the focus group discussions, teachers described DI as requiring deep professional judgment, responsive planning, and flexibility – capacities they admitted, “we haven’t really been trained to handle.” This reflected a recurring frustration: while teachers understood DI’s purpose and promise, their training was often too abstract or generic to bridge the gap to classroom practice. DI assumes instruction must meet all students’ learning needs through well-designed activities, flexible interactions, and formative assessments that guide adjustments. Yet the dilemma lies in readiness, not resistance. Teachers are expected to personalize instruction, manage diversity, and adapt continuously, but without hands-on, iterative training that builds confidence. Current professional development remains overly theoretical, detached from

classroom realities. Participants emphasized the need for embedded, continuous training tied to their own instructional contexts. Without such support, DI risks remaining aspirational rather than actionable.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several layered implications while the general value of DI is widely recognized, this study reveals a striking unevenness in its implementation, especially in the more complex domains of instructional process and assessment. This echoes patterns observed in previous research (e.g., Lunsford, 2017; Yavuz, 2020), but it also adds nuance by centering the experience of subject-head teachers who are simultaneously expected to teach, lead, and model innovation.

To begin with, there is a urgent need to reframe how professional development is conceived. Familiarity with DI principles exists among many teachers, but such understanding remains shallow unless grounded in practice. It is not enough to introduce DI as a concept; what is needed is sustained, embedded support that helps teachers translate these ideas into daily action. This is especially pressing in school cultures where instructional authority is traditionally top-down and where risk-taking in pedagogy may be culturally discouraged. Therefore, to make DI successful, the school leadership should empower the leadership role of subject-department heads in pedagogical work, especially in decision-making on their department’s instructional plans. These heads, across all subjects, must receive ongoing professional development so they can proficiently implement DI across all components. Strong subject expertise and DI competence, together with their advisory participation in whole-school planning, will shape teachers’ trust

and confidence in DI within each department. In turn, this becomes a key driver of change in the school's pedagogical practice, fostering the comprehensive development of students' competencies and character. A second implication lies in how training programs are designed. The study's data suggest that DI adoption is not uniform across teacher groups. Subject specialization and teaching experience emerged as statistically relevant factors. This indicates that training efforts must be differentiated, ironically, much like the instruction they aim to support. Teachers of core subjects may require deeper exposure to assessment design, while newer educators might need help building routines for process differentiation. Equally, peer mentorship and school-based professional learning communities could offer sustainable pathways for growth, especially if senior teachers are empowered to support their colleagues through co-teaching. Above all, the subject-group head who manages and leads the group's pedagogical work should be empowered by the principal and supported to build a core team that mentors new teachers, working alongside them to apply DI to the specific realities of each class and subject. In doing so, DI will diffuse more widely and drive instructional transformation. Third, the issue of coherence cannot be overstated. Across many schools, DI-related training is delivered in fragments – disconnected sessions, overlapping initiatives, or policy directives that shift before they settle. Even ICT integration efforts, often feel misaligned with the real pace and pressure of classroom life. What's needed is a training architecture that builds over time: one that moves from awareness to experimentation to mastery, and that links digital tools to actual instructional needs rather than treating them as add-ons. Strategic alignment at all levels – ministries, departments, and schools – is essential to make this happen, to avoid fragmentation and even

overlap among professional development topics. To achieve this, the principal as the school's highest representative should actively collaborate with the Department of Education in planning professional development activities, tailor professional development themes to the school's specific context and the faculty's actual capacities, and integrate professional development content into a coherent system aligned with the goal of strengthening teachers' DI competencies.

Finally, the findings speak to a deeper structural tension. Many of the barriers teachers described are not matters of teacher will but of system design. Without changes to these conditions, even the best-prepared teachers will struggle to realize DI's full potential. In the current context of school autonomy, the school leadership, specifically the principal should make full use of education socialization by mobilizing resources to support DI, such as providing teaching tools and materials, applying technology to learner management, and designing individualized instructional activities, with policies that support teachers implementing DI in large-enrolment classes. In addition, the principal should work with the Department of Education and Training (DoET) to identify solutions that enable DI, such as flexible assessment practices, curriculum adjustments, and latitude in implementing instructional content within the DoET's plan. Moreover, the DoET should review teacher evaluation criteria and update them to encourage pedagogical innovation, while ensuring coherence among regulations, actual implementation, and outcome measurement through teacher evaluation indicators. Policymakers must therefore go beyond mandating change and begin clearing the space for it by offering schools more flexibility, revisiting assessment mandates, and investing

in the human infrastructure of educational reform.

Conclusion

This study examined how subject-head teachers in Vietnamese lower secondary schools perceive, implement, and struggle with DI. Findings reveal a mix of aspiration and constraint: while teachers recognize DI's value, practice remains uneven, concentrated in content adaptation and environmental adjustments rather than the deeper demands of process and assessment. Teachers understand learner differences, yet translating this belief into transformative pedagogy is limited, with DI often reduced to procedural shifts. Effective implementation requires coordination between school leadership and the DoET to ensure systematic, practice-based professional development. Importantly, subject specialization and teaching experience shape both perceptions and instructional decisions, indicating that training must be targeted and personalized. Subject-heads should play an active role in proposing training topics aligned with faculty needs, while schools foster cultures of mentorship and experimentation to narrow the gap between policy and practice. Structural barriers also persist. Standardized curricula, high-stakes exams, rigid schedules, and resource shortages undermine personalized teaching. Addressing these challenges calls for systemic reform across levels, with subject-head teachers positioned at the intersection of policy and practice. Supporting them thus requires not only training but also rethinking the institutional conditions that frame their work. The study's limitations include its geographically restricted sample and reliance on manual note-taking, as participants declined audio recording, constraining verification and depth of analysis. Broader research across

provinces, school types, and contexts is needed to enhance generalizability. Further exploration of demographic variables and comparative studies across Southeast Asia would help identify common barriers and context-specific innovations, informing regionally grounded strategies to strengthen DI, improve instructional quality, and advance educational equity.

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4. Ethical approval: The survey was approved by the Deputy Director of the Department of Education in the province. All participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any time. To maintain confidentiality, participants' identities were anonymized in all reports and publications.
5. Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing
6. The author used the Google translation tool to translate English to Vietnamese and vice versa for meaning accuracy. After the

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Bionote

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