Navigating Differentiated Instruction: A Qualitative Analysis of Non-Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment as a Basis for Instructional Design

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Abstract

Differentiated instruction requires teachers to understand the diverse learning needs of students beyond their academic achievement. Non-cognitive diagnostic assessment can provide information about students' interests, motivation, emotional well-being, learning habits, and environmental conditions, which may inform instructional planning. This study aims to analyze the conceptual role of non-cognitive diagnostic assessment in supporting differentiated instruction and to identify the processes through which assessment information is translated into instructional decisions. The study employs a qualitative literature review with thematic-interpretive analysis of 22 sources, comprising 20 journal articles and 2 education policy documents published between 2021 and 2026. The synthesis is organized around four themes: the function of non-cognitive assessment in understanding students, the translation of assessment results into instructional decisions, the challenges of implementation, and the principles of responsible assessment use. The analysis positions non-cognitive assessment as a complementary source of information rather than a substitute for cognitive assessment. Its educational value depends on teachers' interpretive competence, the alignment between assessment results and learning objectives, and continuous evaluation of instructional responses. The study argues that differentiated instruction becomes more meaningful when assessment functions as a navigation mechanism that supports responsive, flexible, and reflective teaching practices. These findings offer a conceptual foundation for strengthening student-centered instructional planning within the Indonesian educational context.

Keywords: *non-cognitive diagnostic assessment; differentiated instruction; instructional design; student characteristics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Differentiated instruction is a pedagogical approach that treats student diversity as a primary consideration in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of learning. Within a single classroom, students differ in prior ability, interest, motivation, learning experience, and social and emotional condition, all of which may affect their engagement in the learning process (Muliani et al., 2024; Widyawati & Rachmadyanti, 2023). Consequently, instruction that applies uniform strategies, activities, and assignment formats does not always provide optimal learning opportunities for every student. A number of studies report that adjusting instruction to such diversity is associated with improved learning outcomes and classroom engagement at both primary and secondary levels (Agung et al., 2024; Aprima & Sari, 2022; Pane et al., 2022; Sartiana et al., 2024; Suwartiningsih, 2021). The principal challenge for teachers, therefore, is not merely delivering content but understanding the diversity of learning needs and translating that understanding into appropriate instructional decisions.

Within the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, assessment and instruction are understood as a single interrelated process. Initial assessment provides information about students' readiness and needs, while its results are used to adjust instructional strategies. The national guidelines on learning and assessment emphasize the importance of adapting instruction to student development, while also noting that implementing differentiation requires adequate competence, time, and pedagogical judgment (Anggraena et al., 2025). Assessment should therefore not be treated merely as an administrative activity, but as a source of information for determining how learning objectives can be achieved through strategies that are responsive to student needs.

One form of assessment relevant to this process is non-cognitive diagnostic assessment. It is directed at obtaining information about aspects beyond academic mastery, such as interest, motivation, learning habits, psychological well-being, and the learning environment. Such information helps teachers understand factors that may support or hinder student engagement (Lestari et al., 2025). The Center for Educational Standards and Policy explains that non-cognitive assessment can be used to understand students' psychological condition, family situation, activities at home, social relationships, and interests. Diagnostic assessment, however, is not intended as an intelligence test or as an instrument for sorting students into permanent ability groups; its function is to help teachers plan instruction according to the learning needs identified (Pusat Standar dan Kebijakan Pendidikan, 2022).

The availability of non-cognitive information does not automatically produce differentiated instruction. Teachers must still interpret assessment results, consider

learning objectives, relate them to students' prior ability, and select relevant forms of intervention (Septianto, 2024). Information indicating low motivation, for example, cannot adequately be addressed by assigning easier tasks without understanding its causes. Such a condition may relate to difficulty in comprehending the material, learning experiences perceived as meaningless, limited environmental support, or particular emotional factors. The quality of assessment therefore needs to be judged not only by the completeness of its instrument, but also by the appropriateness with which the resulting information is used.

Previous studies have examined the relationship between diagnostic assessment and differentiated instruction across varied contexts. Insani et al. (2023) analyzed diagnostic assessment results as a basis for implementing differentiated instruction in primary schools, while Setiawati et al. (2024) mapped the profile of diagnostic assessment practice at the same level. Lestari et al. (2025) specifically addressed the implementation of cognitive and non-cognitive diagnostic assessment within differentiated instruction, and Widiastuti et al. (2025) examined the optimization of differentiation through diagnostic assessment at the junior secondary level. Other studies have focused on developing diagnostic instruments for designing differentiated instruction (Deviana et al., 2024), on the range of assessment forms used in differentiation practice (Zahro et al., 2025), and on applications within specific subjects (Fathonah & Prayoga, 2026; Hasna & Rakhmawati, 2024; Wulandari et al., 2023). A systematic literature review of publications from 2021 to 2025 by Ulfha et al. (2025) summarizes the development of diagnostic assessment use in differentiated instruction in primary schools, while Septianto (2024) positions diagnostic assessment as a basis for differentiated instruction and Yuniyati (2024) highlights efforts to strengthen teachers' capacity to implement it.

This diversity of focus shows that previous research has attended largely to implementation, mapping, and instrument development. Conceptual accounts of how non-cognitive information is translated into instructional design decisions remain limited, including the distinction between the functions of cognitive and non-cognitive assessment in instructional planning. This gap warrants attention because ambiguity about function may encourage the use of non-cognitive results as the sole basis for selecting strategies or, conversely, reduce assessment to an administrative formality without pedagogical follow-up.

In response, this article focuses on the relationship between non-cognitive diagnostic assessment and instructional design. Its concern is not merely to identify the benefits of assessment, but to explain how information about student characteristics can be translated into purposeful instructional decisions. The conceptual contribution offered lies in the use of the metaphor of *navigation* to explain the function of assessment as a mechanism that guides instructional decisions.

Assessment provides indications of student needs, while teachers remain responsible for interpreting those indications professionally and for testing the effectiveness of the strategies they select. This study therefore aims to analyze the role of non-cognitive diagnostic assessment in supporting differentiated instruction, to identify the stages through which assessment results are translated into instructional design, and to describe the challenges and principles of its responsible use. Theoretically, the study seeks to clarify the relationship between understanding student characteristics and making pedagogical decisions. Practically, its results are intended as a reflective framework for teachers who use assessment as a basis for instruction that is more responsive, inclusive, and oriented toward student development.

2. METHOD

Research Design and Data Sources

This study adopts a qualitative approach using a literature review method with thematic-interpretive analysis. The approach was chosen to examine concepts, arguments, and research findings concerning non-cognitive diagnostic assessment and its use in differentiated instruction. The data comprise scholarly journal articles and education policy documents relevant to student characteristics, diagnostic assessment, instructional design, and the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The study involves neither interviews nor field observation; its results therefore constitute an interpretive synthesis of documents rather than a report of empirical findings from particular schools.

Literature Selection

Literature was selected purposively on the basis of topical relevance, clarity of publication identity, traceability of the source, and contribution to the focus of the study. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Garba Rujukan Digital (Garuda), the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), and the portals of nationally accredited journals indexed in SINTA. The keywords used were “asesmen diagnostik non-kognitif”, “asesmen diagnostik”, “pembelajaran berdiferensiasi”, “karakteristik peserta didik”, “desain instruksional”, and “Kurikulum Merdeka”, paired with the English terms *non-cognitive diagnostic assessment* and *differentiated instruction*. The publication window was limited to 2021–2026 so that the review would reflect developments in assessment policy and practice since the introduction of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The inclusion criteria were fourfold: (1) the publication addresses diagnostic assessment and/or differentiated instruction in the Indonesian education context; (2) the article appears in a journal with a clear publication identity, including journal name, volume, issue, pages, and an accessible DOI or link; (3) policy documents are issued by an authorized ministry or agency; and (4) the full text is accessible. The

exclusion criteria covered duplicate publications, opinion pieces without an underlying study or data, sources whose publication identity could not be traced, and articles whose discussion bore no direct relation to assessment or instructional design. Applying these criteria yielded 22 sources for analysis, comprising 20 journal articles and 2 education policy documents.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through source searching, relevance screening, critical reading, and systematic note-taking. Information from each publication was organized in a matrix covering source identity, research aim, context, the assessment aspects discussed, the main findings or arguments, and relevance to instructional design. Analysis proceeded through repeated reading, identification of significant statements, coding, grouping into categories, and the construction of themes across sources. These themes were then interpreted to explain the function of non-cognitive assessment, the process of translating assessment results into instructional decisions, the challenges of implementation, and the principles of responsible use of assessment results.

Credibility of Interpretation

Credibility of interpretation was maintained by comparing arguments across sources, checking the correspondence between the account given here and the original publications, and distinguishing the findings of source authors from the interpretation developed in this article. Differences in perspective and the limitations of prior research were kept in view so that the synthesis would not yield overgeneralization. All sources are cited accurately, and every specific claim is traceable to its supporting source. Because the data are document-based, the conclusions are confined to the conceptual patterns emerging from the literature analyzed and are not intended to represent the whole of diagnostic assessment practice in Indonesian schools.

3. RESULTS

Non-Cognitive Diagnostic Assessment as a Means of Understanding Student Diversity

The conceptual synthesis indicates that non-cognitive diagnostic assessment can be understood as a means of broadening teachers' understanding of student conditions beyond academic attainment. Learning does not proceed solely through the capacity to comprehend material; it is also shaped by interest, motivation, learning habits, prior experience, emotional condition, and environmental support (Lestari et al., 2025; Zahro et al., 2025). Non-cognitive information therefore supplies additional context for interpreting student engagement. Within this frame,

assessment does not aim to fix a student's psychological identity, but to identify the needs relevant to supporting the learning process.

This understanding positions non-cognitive assessment as a complement to cognitive assessment. Cognitive assessment helps teachers ascertain mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills, whereas non-cognitive assessment helps explain some of the conditions that may affect student engagement. The two serve different yet mutually reinforcing functions (Deviana et al., 2024). Information about interest, for instance, can help teachers select contexts or examples closer to students' experience, while information about prior ability is needed to determine the level of task complexity. Separating these functions matters so that teachers do not treat motivation or learning preference as a substitute for evidence of competence.

Translating Assessment Results into Instructional Decisions

The second theme concerns the process of converting assessment information into instructional decisions. Collected information acquires pedagogical value only when it is used to adjust activities, learning resources, support, or forms of student engagement. In differentiated instruction, adjustments may be made to content, process, and product while clear learning objectives are maintained (Agung et al., 2024). Students may thus be offered varied ways of accessing material, undertaking learning activities, or demonstrating understanding, but such variation must remain tied to the competence to be achieved.

Translating assessment results calls for professional judgment rather than an automatic correspondence between a single response and a single strategy. If a student reports difficulty concentrating, the teacher needs to consider the possible causes and gather relevant information before deciding on an adjustment. Responses worth considering include clarifying instructions, breaking tasks into more manageable stages, providing incremental feedback, or offering a choice of activities consistent with the learning objective. These strategies are possible courses of action to be tested and evaluated, not consequences that apply uniformly to all students giving similar responses.

Challenges in Implementing Assessment within Differentiated Instruction

The third theme shows that implementing diagnostic assessment faces challenges relating to teacher competence, classroom management, available time, and the use of information (Setiawati et al., 2024; Yuniyati, 2024). Data collection may stall as an administrative exercise if teachers lack the time or the skill to analyze the results. Conversely, a simple instrument can remain useful if its questions are relevant, its results are interpreted carefully, and its follow-up is clear. The effectiveness of assessment is thus determined not only by the number of questions or the sophistication of the instrument, but also by the connection between the information obtained and the instructional decisions taken.

A further challenge arises when assessment results are used to group students rigidly. Interest, motivation, emotional condition, and learning habits may change with experience and context, including the learning-style profiles often used as a basis for grouping (Alhafiz, 2022). Assessment results should therefore be treated as provisional information requiring updating, not as permanent labels. Overly rigid grouping risks limiting students' opportunities to try new strategies or to develop their capacities. Developmentally oriented assessment must allow teachers to revise interpretations and adjust support as needs change.

Principles for the Responsible Use of Assessment Results

The fourth theme places ethics and student protection at the center of non-cognitive assessment use. Information about family circumstances, emotional experiences, or personal difficulties is not always appropriate to collect broadly, particularly where it bears no direct relation to learning needs (Pusat Standar dan Kebijakan Pendidikan, 2022). Teachers need to confine data collection to what is relevant, preserve confidentiality, and avoid disseminating data in ways that could harm students. Where student responses indicate needs beyond a teacher's pedagogical remit, follow-up should proceed through the school's support procedures and, where necessary, involve the relevant professionals.

Responsible use of assessment also requires evaluating the consequences of instructional decisions. Teachers need to examine whether the chosen strategy helps students engage more actively, understand the material, and move toward the learning objective. If the response given does not produce the expected progress, the initial interpretation and the instructional strategy need to be reconsidered. Diagnostic assessment thus does not end with mapping needs; it becomes part of a cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, and improvement.

4. DISCUSSION

The conceptual synthesis affirms that the principal value of non-cognitive diagnostic assessment lies in its capacity to supply context for pedagogical decision-making. In practice, it is not enough for teachers to know that students differ. Teachers need to understand the relevance of that diversity to the learning objective and to determine a proportionate form of support. The metaphor of *navigation* used in this article therefore refers to the function of assessment as a source of guidance for instructional decisions, not as a device that automatically determines teaching method.

This perspective aligns with the principle that assessment and instruction form a single cycle. The revised national guidelines on learning and assessment emphasize that information from initial assessment can be used to adjust planning, while formative assessment during instruction helps teachers monitor progress and judge

the effectiveness of the strategies applied (Anggraena et al., 2025). Non-cognitive assessment therefore belongs within a broader sequence of decisions: recognizing needs, setting objectives, selecting strategies, observing responses, and making adjustments. This process guards against treating assessment as an activity completed once the questionnaires have been collected.

Pedagogical navigation does not mean that all instruction must be individualized separately. In large classes, differentiation needs to be designed realistically through activity choices, varied learning resources, staged support, or flexible grouping (Aprima & Sari, 2022; Muliani et al., 2024). Non-cognitive information helps teachers select feasible forms of adjustment, while learning objectives, evidence of competence, and classroom resources set the limits of implementation. Effective differentiation is thus the product of an interaction between understanding students and exercising workable pedagogical judgment.

Non-cognitive assessment cannot stand alone as the sole basis for instructional design. Information about interest, motivation, or learning habits needs to be read alongside evidence of mastery of content and prerequisite skills (Lestari et al., 2025). A student who shows strong interest has not necessarily mastered the targeted competence, while a student whose motivation appears low is not necessarily unable to understand the material. Instructional decisions must therefore distinguish between conditions that affect engagement and the level of competence already attained.

Integrating the two kinds of assessment allows teachers to build a fuller picture of learning needs (Insani et al., 2023; Wulandari et al., 2023). If cognitive assessment shows that some students have not grasped a prerequisite concept, the teacher can provide additional explanation or staged practice. If non-cognitive information also indicates low confidence or weak engagement, support can be supplemented with constructive feedback, opportunities to try again, and meaningful activities. Such examples show that differentiation is not merely a matter of varying tasks, but of matching support to needs that have been considered as a whole.

It is also important to avoid using learning-preference categories deterministically. Preferences reported by students may inform decisions, but they should not confine students to a single way of learning (Alhafiz, 2022). Learning experiences should instead enrich students' capacity to use a range of strategies. Responsive instructional design therefore accommodates current preferences while opening opportunities to develop new capacities.

The success of diagnostic assessment depends on teachers' ability to turn data into sound decisions. A good instrument does not guarantee appropriate follow-up if teachers are not yet able to interpret its results (Setiawati et al., 2024). The competences required include formulating relevant questions, reading patterns of

response, distinguishing information pertinent to the learning objective from information that is not needed, and selecting strategies whose effectiveness can be evaluated. Professional development accordingly needs to go beyond technical training in the use of instruments (Widiastuti et al., 2025; Yuniyati, 2024). Teachers need opportunities to discuss cases, examine assessment results, devise instructional alternatives, and evaluate their effects. Collaboration among teachers can also reduce the individual burden of designing differentiation. When assessment results are discussed professionally while student confidentiality is preserved, schools can build more consistent reflective practice.

Constraints of time and resources should be treated as real implementation problems. An overly long assessment can add workload without yielding information commensurate with the effort expended. Instruments should therefore be concise, relevant, easy to interpret, and accompanied by a plan for follow-up (Deviana et al., 2024). Teachers may also begin with simple adjustments that bear directly on access to learning, and then extend their differentiation practice according to the needs and capacity of the class.

Non-cognitive assessment touches on information that may be personal and therefore requires ethical consideration. Not all information about students' lives needs to be collected for instructional purposes. Data collection must have a clear purpose, use proportionate questions, and observe confidentiality and the provisions governing student protection (Pusat Standar dan Kebijakan Pendidikan, 2022). Teachers also need to recognize that student responses may be shaped by their sense of safety, their trust in the teacher, their understanding of the questions, and the context in which the assessment takes place.

The risk of labeling deserves particular attention. When student responses are converted into fixed categories, information originally intended to help may instead constrain teachers' expectations and students' learning opportunities. Assessment results therefore need to be understood as a provisional picture within a particular context. Interpretation must remain open to correction, and follow-up must be directed at widening learning opportunities rather than setting limits on ability. From the standpoint of educational equity, differentiated instruction does not mean lowering expectations for students who face obstacles.

Differentiation should provide varied routes toward meaningful learning objectives. Teachers can adjust support, process, or forms of engagement without removing appropriate intellectual challenge. Non-cognitive assessment thus serves as a basis for improving access and support, not as a reason to narrow students' opportunities to develop their potential.

Practically, this study points to the need for a workflow linking assessment to instructional design. Teachers may begin by setting the learning objective, selecting

relevant non-cognitive information, collecting that information proportionately, combining it with cognitive evidence, and determining realistic adjustments. Once instruction is under way, student responses need to be monitored to judge the effectiveness of those adjustments. A comparable sequence appears in the use of diagnostic assessment in language instruction (Fathonah & Prayoga, 2026; Hasna & Rakhmawati, 2024), confirming that the quality of assessment is determined by the usefulness of its information in improving the learning process.

Conceptually, this article situates non-cognitive diagnostic assessment within a dynamic process of decision-making. Because the study uses a literature review method, however, the framework offered does not demonstrate that this sequence is always effective across school contexts. Its application may be affected by educational level, subject characteristics, class size, teacher competence, and institutional support (Ulfha et al., 2025). Subsequent research could test the framework through case studies, classroom observation, or design-based research on instruments that assess the relationship between assessment results, instructional decisions, and students' learning experience.

5. CONCLUSION

This study positions non-cognitive diagnostic assessment as a source of information that helps teachers understand students' interests, motivation, learning habits, emotional conditions, and environments. Such information can strengthen differentiated instruction when it is translated into instructional decisions relevant to the learning objective and combined with evidence from cognitive assessment. Assessment therefore does not end with mapping student characteristics; it becomes part of a cycle of planning, implementation, monitoring, and improvement.

The metaphor of *navigation* underscores that assessment provides guidance, while teachers remain responsible for setting the direction of instruction through professional judgment. Its effectiveness depends on teachers' interpretive competence, the availability of time and institutional support, the relevance of instruments, and continuous evaluation of the strategies applied. The use of assessment must also protect privacy, avoid permanent labeling, and preserve equitable learning opportunities for all students. Because the study is based on a literature review, these conclusions are conceptual and require further empirical testing. Subsequent work could examine how teachers use non-cognitive assessment results in actual classrooms and how those decisions affect student engagement and development. The article's principal contribution is a framework proposing that differentiated instruction requires more than assessment instruments: it requires careful interpretation, responsible pedagogical decisions, and continuous reflection on student needs.

Declarations

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