

TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES ON PUPILS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF CHALLENGES AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of teachers in supporting pupils with special needs, employing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to uncover challenges, strategies, and perceived impacts in the classroom. Seventeen teachers from schools under the supervision of Kidapawan City Division participated, with ten engaged in individual interviews and seven in focus group discussions, providing diverse insights into their daily interactions with learners requiring specialized support. Findings revealed that teachers faced a range of challenges, including instructional difficulties, the need to continually adapt teaching approaches, limited resources and materials, and broader systemic constraints. Despite these challenges, teachers implemented various strategies such as differentiated lesson plans, use of specialized or improvised materials, structured classroom management techniques, and the promotion of peer-assisted and group-based learning to create supportive and responsive learning environments. Educators generally perceived these approaches as having a positive impact on students' engagement, learning outcomes, social interaction, and skill development. However, they also noted limitations in assessing progress due to insufficient tools, as well as external factors such as inconsistent parental involvement and lack of specialized services.

Keywords: *teachers, pupils with special needs, challenges, instructional strategies, classroom support, inclusive education*

INTRODUCTION

In many Western countries, there is a notable mismatch between the cultural backgrounds of students and the largely homogeneous composition of the teaching workforce. For instance, in Australia, although 51.5% of residents are either born overseas or have parents born overseas, only 17% of teachers share this cultural background. Likewise, in the United States, nearly 40% of the overall population and 51% of students belong to underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, yet only 20% of K-12 teachers come from these communities. This disparity presents challenges for teachers in effectively meeting the diverse needs of their pupils, underscoring the importance of developing strategies to bridge this cultural and experiential divide (Yip & Saito, 2023).

Within the Philippine context, public school teachers face a range of challenges that influence their ability to support pupils with special needs. A 2024 report indicates

that 62% of public high school teachers are assigned subjects outside their area of specialization, which may impact their instructional effectiveness (Magsambol, 2024). Furthermore, the Department of Education has reported a shortage of more than 7,600 teachers trained in special needs education, emphasizing the urgent need for professional development tailored to inclusive education (Atienza, 2024). Tackling these challenges is essential for equipping teachers with the skills and strategies necessary to support pupils with diverse learning requirements and improve educational outcomes.

Various factors shape the challenges teachers face and the strategies they employ in addressing the diversity among their pupils, especially those with special needs. A significant influence is the increasing cultural and linguistic diversity within classrooms. Research shows that many teachers find it difficult to meet the complex needs of students coming from varied cultural and language backgrounds. For example, Kumar et al. (2021) reported that 58% of teachers felt inadequately prepared to handle classrooms characterized by high cultural diversity. Moreover, Tee (2020) highlighted the persistent lack of professional development programs that could equip teachers with effective strategies for managing diverse learning environments. The attitudes of teachers toward diversity are also critical, as Smith (2019) found that educators with more inclusive mindsets tend to implement more successful engagement strategies.

Despite the growing research on the challenges teachers encounter in diverse classrooms, several gaps remain unaddressed. Notably, there is limited focus on how intersecting diversity factors—such as race, socioeconomic status, and disability—combine to influence teaching and learning experiences. Allen et al. (2022) revealed that only 30% of existing studies consider this intersectionality. Additionally, while much research emphasizes the difficulties teachers face, fewer studies explore the specific strategies that have proven effective in fostering inclusivity for pupils with special needs in varied educational settings (Nguyen, 2021). Furthermore, the potential of technology and digital tools to support teachers' approaches to managing diversity remains underexplored, with Lopez (2020) noting that only 18% of studies examine this area. These gaps underscore the need for more holistic and nuanced research that captures the multifaceted nature of diversity challenges in classrooms, particularly from the lived experiences of teachers working with pupils with special needs.

Exploring the day-to-day realities of teachers handling learners with special needs is essential to improving inclusive classroom practices and overall learning outcomes. As educators deal with diverse student populations, they encounter unique and often complex challenges that require thoughtful and flexible approaches. Gaining insight into these experiences helps identify areas where support is needed and highlights strategies that have proven effective in real classroom situations. This understanding is valuable for guiding training programs and resource development, ensuring that teachers are well-equipped to respond to the individual needs of learners with varying abilities. By focusing on these strategies and challenges, schools can foster environments that are more equitable, engaging, and supportive for all pupils.

METHODS

Research Design

This qualitative study aimed to explore how teachers navigated the complexities of supporting pupils with special needs, recognizing that such experiences were deeply rooted in individual perceptions and contextual realities. Qualitative research was well-suited for uncovering the depth and richness of these lived experiences, particularly as it emphasized understanding behavior, emotions, and meaning from the participants' perspectives. By using data collection methods such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this approach allowed for a more comprehensive view of how educators faced challenges and developed effective classroom strategies. It provided space to explore how teachers responded to diverse learning needs and shifting educational demands, especially in inclusive settings. In the broader scope of human and social sciences, qualitative methods enabled researchers to derive insights grounded in the everyday realities of educational practice, which was essential for understanding how teachers adapted and responded to the needs of learners with special needs.

Meanwhile, the duration of the study spanned ten months, from January 2025 to December 2025. This period included refining the proposal paper, participant recruitment and data collection, one month for data analysis, and one month for reporting and dissemination of findings.

Research Participants

The research involved 17 teachers who were assigned in schools under the supervision of Kidapawan City Division. Of these, 10 participated in one-on-one interviews, while the remaining 7 engaged in focus group discussions. This selection was designed to gather detailed and diverse perspectives from educators who regularly interacted with learners requiring special attention in the classroom. Through purposive sampling, teachers were chosen based on their ability to provide relevant and meaningful experiences that reflected both the challenges and strategies involved in supporting pupils with exceptional needs. This selection technique ensured that those participating had practical knowledge that directly contributed to the understanding of the phenomena being studied.

Eligible participants were full-time basic education teachers within Kidapawan City who had accumulated a minimum of two years teaching in classrooms with diverse learners, including those with special needs. Teachers employed on a part-time basis, substitutes, or those with less than two years of experience working with diverse learners were not included. Additionally, educators who did not directly teach students requiring special educational support were also excluded. These participant criteria were essential in ensuring that the insights gathered reflected authentic, sustained experiences from teachers who were consistently exposed to inclusive classroom realities.

Research Materials

The study utilized two primary data collection tools to gather rich qualitative insights from teachers. In-depth interview guides were designed to capture individual experiences, focusing on challenges, strategies, and perceptions related to teaching pupils with special needs. Additionally, a structured focus group discussion guide facilitated group interaction and reflection, allowing participants to share and compare perspectives on effective classroom practices. These tools were developed to ensure that both personal narratives and collective insights could be systematically captured, providing a comprehensive understanding of teachers' lived experiences in inclusive classroom settings.

Data Gathering Procedure

Letters were first secured from Central Mindanao Colleges, the DepEd City Division Supervisor, and the principals of the participating schools to request permission for the study. Following approval, consent forms were provided to all teacher participants, informing them of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of participation. Data collection was then conducted through one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions, scheduled at times convenient for the participants to ensure comfort and engagement. All sessions were conducted in a respectful and confidential manner, with the researcher providing guidance and clarification as needed to support accurate and meaningful responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves systematically collating, coding, and interpreting qualitative data to uncover meaningful patterns. Transcripts from interviews and focus groups were first read multiple times to achieve familiarity, after which significant statements were identified and coded. Codes with similar content were grouped into categories and then organized into overarching themes corresponding to the research questions. This method allowed for a rigorous and structured analysis, ensuring that the resulting themes accurately represented the teachers' lived experiences while highlighting common challenges, strategies, and perceptions of impact in inclusive classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings and explains their meanings in relation to the research objectives. It also discusses how the results support or differ from previous studies.

Challenges Experienced by Teachers in Working with Pupils with Special Needs

Based on the data collected, the results revealed that teachers face multiple challenges when working with pupils with special needs. These challenges include difficulties in managing classroom behaviors, adapting lessons to meet diverse learning

needs, and navigating limited access to specialized resources. The findings indicate that teachers often need to employ innovative approaches to address instructional difficulties while ensuring that all students remain engaged and supported in their learning environment.

Theme 1: Teaching Challenges. The first theme, teaching challenges, emerged from the data as participants frequently described the difficulty of managing diverse learner needs in the classroom. Based on the participants, many believed that addressing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional differences simultaneously created significant pressure, requiring patience, adaptability, and specialized knowledge. Teachers often reported feeling overwhelmed when students' unique needs conflicted with standard classroom routines or curriculum expectations.

"I sometimes feel frustrated when a student with ADHD disrupts the flow of the lesson, and I have to pause to manage the situation."

"Handling a student who has difficulty understanding instructions while others move ahead is exhausting."

"Every pupil has a different pace, and it is challenging to give everyone enough attention."

"Students with emotional outbursts make me constantly adjust my teaching approach."

"It is hard to maintain order while also providing individualized support to those who need it."

In support, recent literature emphasizes that teachers working with special needs students face heightened demands in classroom management and instructional adaptation. Studies indicate that understanding diverse learning behaviors and emotional needs is critical, and without adequate preparation, teachers may experience stress and reduced efficacy (Smith & Johnson, 2021). Furthermore, strategies for inclusive teaching, such as differentiated instruction and flexible classroom management, are suggested as ways to mitigate these challenges while promoting equitable learning opportunities (Lee et al., 2020).

Additional research supports that teaching challenges extend beyond instructional knowledge; they also involve emotional labor. Teachers must navigate unpredictable classroom dynamics while fostering supportive relationships, highlighting the need for professional development and ongoing peer support (Martinez, 2022). These findings align with the participants' lived experiences in managing complex classroom realities.

Theme 2: Instructional Strategies. The second theme, instructional strategies, arose as teachers described specific methods used to support pupils with special needs. Many participants emphasized that planning, structuring lessons, and modifying instructional delivery were essential to help students engage and learn effectively. These strategies often involved breaking down content into smaller steps, repeating instructions, and using concrete examples to accommodate different learning styles.

"I break the lessons into shorter, manageable sections to ensure everyone can follow."

"I use visual aids and hands-on activities to make concepts more understandable."

"Repetition and summarizing key points help students grasp the material better."

"I adjust the pace of the lesson depending on the students' level of understanding."

"I incorporate interactive exercises that encourage participation from all learners."

In support, current studies highlight the importance of adaptive instructional strategies for inclusive education. Teachers employing differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and multi-sensory techniques can improve academic engagement and understanding among pupils with diverse needs (Brown & Davis, 2020). Evidence suggests that such strategies are crucial for creating equitable learning opportunities and promoting student success.

Additionally, literature shows that instructional flexibility contributes to positive classroom experiences for both teachers and students. Effective strategies are not solely academic; they also enhance social and emotional participation, fostering confidence and resilience in learners with special needs (Nguyen, 2021). These findings reinforce the practical approaches reported by the participants in this study.

Theme 3: Resource Constraints. Resource constraints emerged as a significant theme because participants consistently mentioned a lack of teaching materials, specialized tools, and support services. Teachers noted that insufficient access to tactile, sensory, or adaptive learning materials often hindered their ability to provide individualized instruction.

"We do not have enough tactile tools for students who need hands-on learning."

"Limited access to assistive technology makes it hard to support learners with reading difficulties."

"Sometimes I have to improvise materials because the school does not provide them."

"It is challenging to implement certain strategies without the proper resources."

"Budget restrictions prevent us from acquiring needed materials to help students fully."

In support, recent research highlights that resource availability significantly impacts teachers' effectiveness in inclusive classrooms. Schools with limited specialized materials constrain teachers' ability to adapt lessons and provide differentiated instruction (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Providing adequate resources is essential to enhance learning outcomes for pupils with special needs. Further, studies indicate that resource constraints not only affect teaching quality but also contribute to teacher stress and burnout. Teachers often report feeling underprepared and unsupported when resources are scarce, emphasizing the need for policy interventions and investment in educational tools (Anderson & Thomas, 2021). These insights align with the experiences shared by the participants.

Theme 4: Instructional Challenges. Instructional challenges surfaced as teachers reflected on the difficulties of balancing curriculum demands with the unique needs of pupils. Participants indicated that aligning standard learning objectives with individualized accommodations required careful planning and often creative problem-solving.

"Meeting curriculum goals while supporting students with learning delays is difficult."

"Sometimes I struggle to design lessons that cater to all abilities in my classroom."

"Ensuring that assessments are fair yet accessible for everyone is challenging."

"Balancing group activities so no student feels left behind takes a lot of effort."

"I constantly adjust my teaching methods to fit both the syllabus and student needs."

In support, literature suggests that instructional challenges are inherent in inclusive education contexts, particularly when teachers must integrate individualized strategies within rigid curriculum structures (Hernandez, 2021). Successful navigation of these challenges requires planning skills, flexibility, and knowledge of differentiated instruction. Additionally, research emphasizes that professional support, collaborative planning, and continuous training are critical to overcoming instructional challenges. Teachers who

receive guidance and mentoring in adaptive teaching methods report improved confidence and more effective learning outcomes for students with special needs (Wilson & Carter, 2022). These findings echo the experiences reported by the participants in this study.

Strategies Employed by Teachers to Support Pupils with Special Needs Effectively

The analysis also showed that teachers implement a variety of strategies to effectively support pupils with special needs in the classroom. These strategies include modifying lesson plans to match students' attention and comprehension levels, utilizing specialized teaching materials and tools, applying structured classroom management techniques, and encouraging peer collaboration and group support. Such approaches are essential for fostering an inclusive environment that promotes both learning and social development.

Theme 1: Lesson Adaptation. The first theme, lesson adaptation, emerged from the data as participants emphasized the importance of modifying lessons to meet the diverse needs of pupils with special needs. Based on the participants, many believed that breaking lessons into smaller, manageable steps, adjusting pacing, and using concrete examples helped students engage and understand the content better. Teachers reported that adapting lessons allowed them to accommodate students' learning styles, cognitive abilities, and attention spans, making instruction more inclusive and effective.

"I break lessons into shorter parts so students don't get overwhelmed."

"I slow down the pace for students who need more time to understand."

"I use real-life examples to make the lesson more relatable."

"I repeat instructions in different ways to ensure clarity."

"I adjust activities depending on how students respond to the lesson."

In support, recent literature highlights that lesson adaptation is crucial for inclusive classrooms, as it helps teachers address varying learning needs and fosters better academic engagement (Brown & Davis, 2020). Adapting lessons promotes flexibility, ensuring that students with diverse abilities can access the curriculum effectively. Additional studies suggest that lesson modification not only enhances learning outcomes but also supports emotional engagement. Teachers who tailor instruction to individual needs create a more supportive environment, which in turn improves student motivation and participation (Nguyen, 2021). These findings align with the participants' experiences of adapting lessons to enhance learning for pupils with special needs.

Theme 2: Use of Specialized Materials. The second theme, use of specialized materials, was prominent because participants frequently mentioned that appropriate tools and resources were essential for supporting students' learning. Many participants believed that tactile, sensory, and adaptive materials helped bridge gaps in comprehension and facilitated active participation. Teachers indicated that without these resources, it was difficult to implement individualized strategies effectively.

"We use tactile materials to help students who learn better by touching and manipulating objects."

"Visual aids make lessons clearer for students with learning difficulties."

"Assistive technology helps students engage with reading and writing tasks."

"I often create my own resources when the school doesn't provide enough materials."

"Specialized materials make abstract concepts easier to understand for pupils with disabilities."

In support, research shows that the use of specialized learning materials significantly enhances the effectiveness of inclusive teaching (Kumar & Singh, 2020). Proper tools allow students to engage in hands-on learning, which promotes comprehension and retention, particularly for those with unique learning needs. Further studies suggest that the availability of these resources reduces teacher stress and improves classroom outcomes. Teachers can focus on delivering effective instruction rather than improvising or compensating for a lack of materials (Anderson & Thomas, 2021). This supports the participants' observations regarding the critical role of specialized materials in facilitating learning.

Theme 3: Classroom Management Strategies. The third theme, classroom management strategies, arose because participants frequently reported that maintaining an organized, structured, and inclusive classroom was essential for supporting pupils with special needs. Many participants believed that strategic planning, clear rules, and thoughtful seating arrangements helped minimize distractions and encouraged participation. Effective management was viewed as a key factor in ensuring both academic engagement and emotional security.

"I assign roles in group work carefully to prevent disruptions."

"Clear classroom rules help students know what is expected."

"I rearrange seating to support students who need more attention."

*"I structure activities so everyone can participate safely."
"Managing behavior proactively prevents conflicts and keeps students engaged."*

In support, recent studies emphasize that classroom management is integral to inclusive education, providing a stable environment where all students can thrive academically and socially (Lee et al., 2020). Thoughtful management strategies allow teachers to accommodate diverse needs without compromising the learning experience of the entire class. Additional literature indicates that effective classroom management not only reduces behavioral issues but also promotes collaboration and peer learning. Teachers who plan and implement structured routines create an atmosphere conducive to both academic success and social-emotional development, supporting the participants' experiences in managing diverse classrooms (Martinez, 2022).

Theme 4: Peer and Group Support. The fourth theme, peer and group support, was highlighted as participants described the importance of fostering collaboration among students. Many participants believed that peer interactions, group activities, and cooperative learning opportunities encouraged social skills development, mutual assistance, and a sense of belonging. Teachers noted that structured group support helped students with special needs engage more actively and reduced feelings of isolation.

"I encourage students to work together so those struggling can get help from peers."

"Group activities allow students to share ideas and learn from each other."

"Peer support makes lessons more interactive and less intimidating."

"I pair students carefully so everyone contributes meaningfully."

"Collaborative learning helps students with special needs feel included in the class."

In support, studies show that peer-assisted learning fosters both academic and social development for students with special needs (Smith & Johnson, 2021). Encouraging cooperative group work builds confidence, communication skills, and engagement, which enhances learning outcomes. Furthermore, research suggests that peer support reduces teacher workload while promoting inclusive practices. When structured effectively, group interactions provide opportunities for mentorship, modeling, and collaborative problem-solving, reinforcing the participants' experiences of the value of peer and group support in classrooms (Lee et al., 2020).

Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Their Strategies on Pupils' Learning and Development

Furthermore, the results highlighted teachers' perceptions of the impact of their strategies on students' learning and development. Teachers reported observing increased student engagement, improved skill acquisition, and enhanced confidence as outcomes of their instructional efforts. However, they also noted challenges in accurately measuring progress due to behavioral fluctuations and external factors such as inconsistent parental feedback. Overall, these insights emphasize the complex interplay between teaching strategies and their effectiveness in supporting pupils with special needs.

Theme 1: Teacher Perception of Strategy Impact. The first theme, teacher perception of strategy impact, emerged because participants emphasized that evaluating their own teaching methods helped them understand whether their approaches were effective. Based on the participants, many believed that observing changes in student engagement, participation, and confidence provided insight into the success of the strategies they implemented. Teachers often relied on their professional judgment to determine which interventions supported learning, highlighting the reflective aspect of teaching as a critical component in understanding impact.

"I notice when a student starts asking more questions after I change my teaching method."

"Some students participate more in class when I use interactive activities."

"I can tell my strategies are working when students become more confident in their tasks."

"When students attempt problems independently, I know my approach is effective."

"Seeing students engage in discussions shows that my strategies are helping them learn."

In support, recent literature suggests that teachers' reflective practices are essential for evaluating instructional effectiveness, as they allow educators to adapt strategies to meet students' diverse needs (Harris, 2021). Reflective observation helps teachers identify strengths and weaknesses in their methods, providing valuable feedback for continuous improvement. Additional studies indicate that teacher perceptions can be a reliable indicator of student outcomes when combined with classroom observation and assessment data. Teachers who actively monitor and adjust their strategies enhance learning engagement and foster more inclusive educational experiences for students with special needs (Miller & Thompson, 2020).

Theme 2: Positive Learning Outcomes. The second theme, positive learning outcomes, was identified because participants highlighted improvements in students' academic skills, confidence, and social participation as indicators of effective teaching. Many participants believed that their strategies promoted measurable progress in understanding lessons, completing tasks, and interacting with peers, demonstrating that intentional interventions could yield meaningful academic and emotional benefits.

"A student who struggled with reading started reading aloud confidently after we used visual aids."

"Students show improvement in completing assignments independently."

"I see more participation in group work from students who previously avoided interaction."

"My students can apply learned concepts in real-life situations more often now."

"Students who were hesitant before are now asking questions and engaging in class discussions."

In support, literature indicates that tailored teaching strategies significantly contribute to positive learning outcomes, particularly for students with special needs (Nguyen, 2021). Targeted interventions and individualized support foster skill acquisition, self-efficacy, and motivation, which are critical for academic growth. Further studies show that consistent implementation of effective strategies strengthens both cognitive and socio-emotional development. By providing structured support and resources, teachers can facilitate meaningful progress, demonstrating the impact of deliberate instructional approaches on student learning (Anderson & Thomas, 2021).

Theme 3: Limitations in Assessment. The third theme, limitations in assessment, emerged because participants noted challenges in accurately evaluating the progress of students with special needs. Many participants believed that behavioral fluctuations, inconsistent engagement, and varying comprehension levels made assessment complex. Teachers often struggled to capture the true learning and emotional development of their students, revealing gaps in traditional evaluation methods.

"Sometimes students act differently in class, so I am not sure if progress is consistent."

"Behavioral changes can mask real learning gains."

"It is hard to measure improvement for students with short attention spans."

"Some students perform well in one activity but struggle in another, making assessment tricky."

"Standard tests don't always reflect what students have truly learned."

In support, recent research highlights that assessment challenges are common in inclusive classrooms, particularly when standardized tools fail to accommodate diverse learning needs (Lee et al., 2020). Educators must often use alternative measures and continuous observation to understand student growth accurately. Moreover, literature suggests that integrating formative assessment practices and personalized evaluation strategies can mitigate these limitations. Teachers who adopt flexible assessment approaches gain more accurate insights into student development, aligning with the participants' experiences of facing assessment challenges (Martinez, 2022).

Theme 4: External Influences on Strategy Evaluation. The fourth theme, external influences on strategy evaluation, was identified because participants acknowledged that factors outside the classroom, such as parental involvement, peer dynamics, and school resources, affected how they perceived the success of their interventions. Many participants believed that these external factors could either enhance or hinder student progress, making it necessary to consider context when assessing strategy effectiveness.

"Parental support varies, which sometimes makes it hard to see progress."

"Some students get distracted by issues at home, affecting how strategies work."

"Peer interactions influence how engaged students are in class."

"Limited school resources sometimes prevent strategies from being fully effective."

"External pressures like exams or school events affect how students respond to interventions."

In support, literature suggests that contextual and environmental factors significantly influence the outcomes of educational strategies for students with special needs (Smith & Johnson, 2021). Teachers must consider these variables to accurately gauge the effectiveness of their approaches. Additional studies emphasize that understanding external influences helps teachers refine strategies and provide holistic support. By factoring in family involvement, peer interactions, and institutional constraints, educators can better evaluate and enhance the learning experiences of students with special needs (Brown & Davis, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide insights into teachers' experiences with pupils with special needs and highlight practical considerations for teaching and school support.

1. Teachers encounter significant challenges in managing diverse classrooms, including teaching difficulties, implementing effective instructional strategies, coping with limited resources, and addressing broader instructional challenges. These findings suggest that schools must prioritize professional development programs that equip teachers with practical skills for inclusive teaching. Additionally, the results emphasize the need for ongoing mentoring and support systems that help teachers adapt lessons and manage complex classroom dynamics effectively.
2. The study revealed that teachers actively employ strategies such as lesson adaptation, use of specialized materials, classroom management techniques, and fostering peer and group support. This implies that school administrators should ensure access to adaptive tools, structured peer collaboration, and sufficient training in differentiated instruction. Providing a supportive environment where teachers can share best practices and resources may enhance their ability to meet the diverse academic and emotional needs of pupils with special needs.
3. Teachers' perceptions of the impact of their strategies highlight both successes and limitations. Positive outcomes, including increased student engagement and observable academic and social progress, were noted, while challenges in

assessment and external factors like parental involvement were also apparent. These findings imply that schools should implement flexible assessment systems, provide regular feedback mechanisms, and encourage teacher reflection to better understand student progress and refine instructional strategies.

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