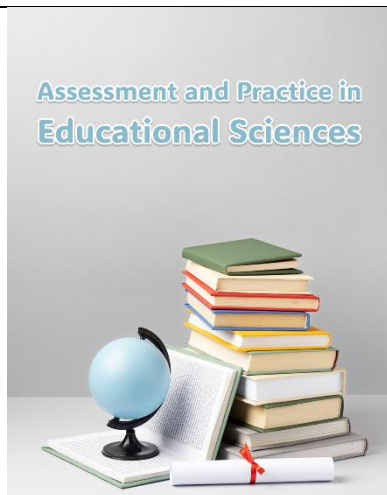




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Teachers' Strategic Use of Formative Assessment to Support Students With Learning Difficulties

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how teachers strategically use formative assessment to support students with learning difficulties in inclusive classroom settings. This qualitative research employed a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of teachers implementing formative assessment practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 teachers from primary and secondary schools in Tehran, Iran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that all had direct experience working with students diagnosed with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, ADHD, and auditory processing disorders. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, supported by NVivo software. Theoretical saturation was reached by the 30th interview. Three overarching themes were identified: differentiated assessment strategies, pedagogical responsiveness, and professional and contextual constraints. Teachers employed a range of adaptive techniques such as multimodal tools, scaffolded goal setting, and tiered tasks to accommodate learners' needs. Pedagogical responsiveness included real-time instructional adjustments, emotional support, and culturally sensitive practices. However, systemic barriers—such as institutional pressure, lack of training, and emotional fatigue—limited the consistent application of formative assessment. Teachers emphasized the need for flexibility, emotional awareness, and student-centered planning in their formative assessment approaches. The study reveals that while teachers possess the skills and commitment to strategically use formative assessment for students with learning difficulties, external constraints hinder full implementation. Effective formative assessment in inclusive classrooms requires pedagogical expertise, institutional support, and an assessment culture that prioritizes learning over standardization. Policy reforms and professional development are essential to enable teachers to assess responsively and equitably.

Keywords: Critical reflection, graduate education, assessment strategies, reflective pedagogy, qualitative research, higher education, faculty development, Tehran.

Introduction

In contemporary inclusive classrooms, where students with a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral profiles learn together, formative assessment has gained renewed importance as a pedagogical strategy that can bridge equity gaps and foster deeper learning for all students, especially those with learning difficulties (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Learning difficulties, which may include specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and auditory processing disorders, often hinder students' ability to engage effectively with traditional summative assessments. For these students, formative assessment provides not just a way to evaluate progress, but a dynamic process through which

learning can be enhanced in real time (Brookhart, 2017). However, the effectiveness of formative assessment in such contexts hinges not merely on the application of assessment tools but on the strategic and responsive decisions teachers make to adapt these practices to their students' unique needs (Heritage, 2010).

Formative assessment, also referred to as assessment for learning, encompasses a wide range of evaluative practices designed to monitor student learning, provide feedback, and inform instruction (Sadler, 1989). It is widely acknowledged that when used effectively, formative assessment can enhance student motivation, foster self-regulation, and support differentiated instruction (Wiliam, 2011). Nevertheless, these benefits are often contingent upon the teacher's ability to interpret student responses and modify instructional practices accordingly. This responsiveness becomes especially critical when working with students with learning difficulties, for whom learning is not a linear or uniform process. These students may need repeated scaffolding, multimodal inputs, or assistive technologies to access content and demonstrate learning effectively (Tomlinson, 2014).

In inclusive classrooms, where diversity is the norm rather than the exception, the teacher's role evolves beyond content delivery to include diagnostic observation, moment-by-moment decision-making, and emotional support. Formative assessment enables teachers to fulfill this expanded role by providing continuous, actionable insights into students' learning trajectories (Clark, 2012). For students with learning difficulties, formative assessment not only helps identify misconceptions and cognitive gaps but also validates their learning processes in ways that reduce anxiety and improve engagement (Torrance, 2012). However, the challenge lies in tailoring formative assessment practices in ways that are accessible, equitable, and pedagogically sound without overburdening teachers or compromising academic rigor (Shin, Sutherland, Shin, Conroy, & McKenna, 2020).

Empirical research has shown that teachers who adopt flexible and student-centered assessment strategies are more successful in addressing the needs of students with learning difficulties. For example, Andrade and Brookhart (2016) found that students performed better when teachers integrated self-assessment and goal-setting activities into their daily routines, helping students develop a sense of agency over their learning. Similarly, Lee and Reusser (2021) demonstrated that formative feedback tailored to students' learning profiles resulted in significantly higher levels of comprehension and retention among students with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Yet, despite these promising findings, many teachers report feeling ill-equipped to implement such strategies effectively, often citing institutional constraints, time pressures, and lack of professional training as barriers (Flórez Petour, 2021).

Another important dimension of this issue is the teacher's pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and assessment literacy. Effective formative assessment is not only about selecting the right tools but also about knowing when and how to use them to inform instruction in real time. According to Heritage and Niemi (2006), assessment-literate teachers are those who can interpret evidence of student learning and adapt their pedagogy accordingly. For students with learning difficulties, this means that teachers must be able to differentiate not only content but also the ways in which learning is assessed and supported. This often includes the use of visual organizers, oral assessments, frequent check-ins, and technological supports that align with students' cognitive and sensory processing styles (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014).

There is also a growing emphasis on the affective and socio-emotional dimensions of formative assessment. Students with learning difficulties often struggle with low academic self-concept, test anxiety, and fear of failure, which can negatively influence their performance on traditional assessments (Katz, 2012). When teachers use formative assessment as a tool for encouragement rather than evaluation, they can create safe learning environments where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process. This emotional scaffolding can be particularly powerful in fostering motivation and persistence among

vulnerable learners. According to Swaffield (2011), effective formative assessment must be dialogic, relational, and embedded within a culture of trust.

Despite the promising potential of formative assessment, existing literature also highlights significant challenges that hinder its effective implementation in inclusive settings. Teachers frequently encounter difficulties in balancing curriculum coverage with responsive teaching, particularly when class sizes are large or resources are scarce (Looney, 2005). Moreover, many school systems emphasize summative data for accountability purposes, leading to a misalignment between pedagogical intentions and institutional expectations. Such systemic pressures may limit the frequency and quality of formative assessment practices, especially when the needs of students with learning difficulties are not prioritized in policy frameworks (OECD, 2013).

Given this context, there is a critical need to explore how teachers strategically employ formative assessment to support students with learning difficulties in authentic classroom settings. While much of the literature has focused on general principles or intervention studies, few have examined how formative assessment practices are enacted and adapted in real-time by teachers navigating complex classroom environments. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the strategic, responsive, and contextualized ways in which teachers use formative assessment in inclusive classrooms. It aims to understand not just what teachers do, but why and how they do it, drawing on their lived experiences and professional judgment.

Specifically, the study focuses on three key areas: (1) the differentiated strategies teachers employ to assess and support students with learning difficulties, (2) the pedagogical responsiveness required to adjust instruction based on formative evidence, and (3) the institutional and emotional constraints that shape assessment decisions. By examining these dimensions through a qualitative lens, the study seeks to offer nuanced insights that can inform teacher training, curriculum development, and policy design. Ultimately, it argues that the strategic use of formative assessment is not a technical fix but a deeply relational and adaptive practice that requires both pedagogical expertise and institutional support.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how teachers strategically use formative assessment to support students with learning difficulties in inclusive classroom settings. A phenomenological approach was selected to capture participants' lived experiences and insights, providing in-depth understanding of the strategies, challenges, and contextual factors involved in formative assessment practices.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with direct and relevant experience in supporting students with learning difficulties were included. The final sample consisted of 30 teachers (18 female, 12 male) from various primary and secondary schools across Tehran, Iran. All participants had a minimum of five years of teaching experience and were actively engaged in classrooms that included students with diagnosed learning difficulties such as dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and auditory processing disorders. Participants represented diverse subject areas, including language arts, mathematics, and science, thereby enriching the dataset with a range of perspectives on formative assessment across disciplines.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in probing individual experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. The interview guide was developed based on relevant literature and included open-

ended questions focusing on formative assessment strategies, decision-making processes, perceived challenges, adaptations for students with learning difficulties, and outcomes observed. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was conducted in person at the participants' respective schools or via secure online platforms when necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The process of data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached—when no new themes or insights were emerging from subsequent interviews. Saturation was achieved after 30 interviews, suggesting sufficient depth and breadth of data to answer the research questions.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The analysis was supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which facilitated the systematic organization, coding, and retrieval of textual data.

Open coding was used to identify key units of meaning, which were then grouped into categories and themes that reflected patterns across the data. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were employed to enhance credibility and minimize researcher bias. Themes were continuously compared and refined throughout the analysis process to ensure internal consistency and alignment with participants' narratives.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Differentiated Assessment Strategies

Adaptive Questioning Techniques

Teachers often adjusted their questioning methods to better align with students' cognitive processing capacities. Simplified prompts, extended wait times, and the use of visual cues were frequently employed to scaffold understanding. One participant explained, "If I ask a complex question, I'll break it down into smaller parts and wait patiently. Some of my students need more time to process language."

Use of Multimodal Tools

To meet diverse sensory and cognitive needs, educators relied on tools such as graphic organizers, realia, videos, and manipulatives. These helped students visualize abstract concepts. As one teacher stated, "Instead of writing a response, I sometimes ask them to draw their answer or use a chart. It works better for visual learners."

Tiered Assessment Tasks

Participants described designing tasks with varying levels of difficulty to accommodate differing learning levels. These included adjustable time limits, leveled instructions, and optional scaffolds. A teacher remarked, "I might give three versions of the same math problem. Some students just need simpler numbers, but they're doing the same kind of thinking."

Ongoing Feedback Mechanisms

Formative feedback was offered through verbal comments, checklists, peer feedback, and progress journals. These mechanisms helped students track their learning over time. A participant shared, "Instead of grading everything, I talk to them during the task and tell them what's working. It builds confidence."

Formative Use of Assistive Technology

Educators integrated tools like text-to-speech software, speech recognition programs, and interactive apps tailored to students' needs. One interviewee explained, "There's a boy in my class who uses speech-to-text. He couldn't write fluently before, but now he can express himself better."

Scaffolded Goal Setting

Many teachers co-constructed learning goals with students and broke them into manageable steps. This approach helped maintain focus and fostered ownership. "We sit together and plan small weekly goals," one teacher said. "It makes big tasks feel possible."

Embedded Check-Ins During Tasks

Frequent formative check-ins were embedded during tasks to assess understanding and adjust pacing. These included quick verbal quizzes, gestures like thumbs-up/thumbs-down, and teacher-student conferences. A participant stated, "I do little check-ins during the lesson. Just asking 'How are you doing?' can reveal a lot."

Theme 2: Pedagogical Responsiveness

Real-Time Instructional Adjustments

Teachers often adjusted lessons on the spot by reteaching content, changing group structures, or modifying pacing based on ongoing assessment cues. "When I see confusion, I don't push ahead. I stop and re-explain using a different example," one teacher described.

Recognizing Individual Learning Profiles

Educators emphasized the importance of understanding students' unique strengths, weaknesses, and processing styles to tailor assessment. This often came from observations and past experience. "I know one of my students learns better if I let him talk out the answer instead of writing it," a participant shared.

Emotional Responsiveness in Assessment Contexts

Teachers noted the emotional dimensions of assessment, especially anxiety or frustration among students with learning difficulties. They implemented strategies like reassurance and positive framing to support emotional regulation. "Some of them get really anxious during assessments," one teacher said. "So I frame it like a game or a challenge to reduce stress."

Empowering Student Self-Monitoring

Teachers facilitated students' use of rubrics, checklists, and reflection journals to track their own progress. This encouraged metacognition and accountability. "They use a simple checklist to see if they've included everything. It helps them become more aware of their learning," said one teacher.

Culturally Sensitive Assessment Practices

Some educators adapted assessment tasks to reflect students' linguistic or cultural backgrounds, avoiding bias and supporting comprehension. One teacher noted, "I make sure examples aren't unfamiliar or culturally confusing. A math problem about snow doesn't make sense for some students."

Sensitivity to Fatigue and Attention Spans

Participants acknowledged that some students struggled with sustained focus and required tasks to be chunked or delivered in shorter intervals. "I give them small tasks with breaks. Long activities just overwhelm them," one educator shared.

Theme 3: Professional and Contextual Constraints

Institutional Policy Limitations

Participants voiced concern over rigid curriculum requirements and an emphasis on summative exams, which limited their ability to employ formative strategies. "There's so much pressure to prepare for the final test that formative stuff gets sidelined," a teacher lamented.

Time and Resource Constraints

Teachers reported that large class sizes, limited materials, and insufficient planning time hindered their ability to adapt assessments effectively. “With 32 students and no assistant, I can’t always individualize like I want to,” said one teacher.

Lack of Specialized Training

Many participants expressed that they had received little to no formal training on inclusive assessment strategies. “Most of what I do, I learned by trial and error,” one educator explained. “We don’t get much support on how to assess special learners.”

Peer and Parental Expectations

Teachers noted that both peers and parents often held traditional views of assessment, expecting grades rather than developmental feedback. “Parents sometimes ask, ‘Why isn’t my child getting an A?’ when I’m trying to show learning in a different way,” a teacher noted.

Emotional Burnout and Teacher Load

The demands of addressing diverse needs while navigating institutional expectations led to emotional fatigue for many teachers. “You want to help every student, but it’s exhausting when there’s no support,” one participant admitted.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore the strategic use of formative assessment by teachers in inclusive classrooms, particularly in supporting students with learning difficulties. Through thematic analysis of interviews with 30 teachers in Tehran, three core dimensions emerged: differentiated assessment strategies, pedagogical responsiveness, and professional and contextual constraints. These dimensions provide a nuanced understanding of how teachers adapt, implement, and sustain formative assessment in complex classroom environments.

The first major theme—differentiated assessment strategies—highlights how teachers intentionally tailor assessment formats and processes to meet the diverse needs of students with learning difficulties. Teachers frequently employed adaptive questioning techniques, multimodal tools, and tiered tasks to ensure accessibility. These findings align with previous research suggesting that students with learning disabilities benefit from assessment environments that reduce cognitive load and allow for multiple modes of expression (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014). For instance, the strategic use of visual aids and assistive technologies in the current study confirms earlier findings by Tomlinson (2014), who emphasized the importance of varied instructional modalities in differentiated classrooms. Furthermore, teachers in this study used ongoing feedback and embedded check-ins to continuously monitor student understanding, echoing the assertion by Wiliam (2011) that formative assessment must be frequent and actionable to inform instructional adjustments.

The second theme—pedagogical responsiveness—underscores the dynamic and relational aspects of formative assessment. Teachers described making real-time instructional adjustments, demonstrating high levels of professional judgment and situational awareness. These decisions were often guided by informal cues such as student behavior, engagement, or facial expressions, indicating a highly intuitive and flexible use of formative data. Heritage (2010) argued that formative assessment is most effective when embedded within the instructional cycle and used diagnostically, a notion supported by our findings. Teachers also demonstrated strong emotional responsiveness, attending to the anxieties and self-esteem issues commonly observed in students with learning difficulties. This mirrors the work of Katz (2012), who emphasized the socio-emotional dimensions of assessment and their impact on student learning. Moreover, strategies like student self-monitoring and goal setting were found to foster metacognitive skills and intrinsic motivation, as also reported by Andrade and Brookhart (2016).

Importantly, participants also described the need for culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate assessment practices, reflecting a broader understanding of diversity that goes beyond cognitive differences. This expands the relevance of

formative assessment in multilingual and multicultural classrooms, aligning with the work of Swaffield (2011), who advocated for relational and culturally responsive forms of assessment. The sensitivity to attention and fatigue levels demonstrated by teachers further confirms the adaptive and humanistic ethos of effective formative assessment as a personalized, student-centered practice.

The third theme—professional and contextual constraints—reveals systemic challenges that undermine the potential of formative assessment in inclusive settings. Participants reported institutional policy pressures, such as a curriculum overly focused on standardized testing and summative results, which left little room for formative experimentation. This is consistent with Looney (2005), who warned that national accountability structures often hinder the implementation of innovative assessment practices. Likewise, the time and resource constraints noted by teachers—such as large class sizes and lack of assistive tools—reinforce findings from OECD (2013), which documented similar obstacles across multiple education systems. The issue of insufficient training also emerged, as many teachers felt underprepared to design and implement formative assessments tailored to students with special needs. This supports previous studies emphasizing the need for targeted professional development in inclusive assessment (Shin et al., 2020; Flórez Petour, 2021).

An additional constraint concerned external expectations—from both parents and fellow educators—that prioritized grades over growth. Teachers reported struggling to justify non-traditional assessment methods to stakeholders who were unfamiliar with or skeptical of formative assessment principles. This reflects the tensions identified by Torrance (2012), who noted that conflicting ideologies between formative and summative paradigms often place teachers in difficult positions. Moreover, emotional burnout and workload stress were recurring issues, pointing to the emotional labor involved in constantly adapting assessment strategies under demanding conditions. The emotional toll described in this study corroborates earlier research by Heritage and Niemi (2006), which emphasized the cognitive and affective demands placed on teachers in inclusive contexts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while many teachers possess the pedagogical skill and moral commitment to support students with learning difficulties through formative assessment, their efforts are often constrained by external systems that do not adequately recognize or reward such practices. The tension between what teachers know is pedagogically sound and what the system demands can result in partial or inconsistent implementation of formative assessment strategies. This mismatch underscores the need for a systems-level realignment that supports flexible, student-centered assessment practices.

Moreover, the study illustrates that effective formative assessment is not merely a matter of using the right tools, but rather a deeply contextualized, relational, and adaptive process that depends on teacher agency, student characteristics, and classroom ecology. Teachers are not merely implementers of assessment protocols; they are co-constructors of assessment meaning and culture in their classrooms. This interpretation aligns with Clark's (2012) view of formative assessment as a participatory and dialogic process involving continuous negotiation between teacher and student.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, it relied solely on self-reported data collected through semi-structured interviews. While this approach allowed for rich, in-depth insights, it may also have introduced biases, including social desirability bias or recall inaccuracies. Second, the study was geographically limited to teachers in Tehran, and while the diversity of teaching contexts within the city provided some variability, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other educational settings with different cultural, policy, or infrastructural dynamics. Third, the study did not include classroom observations or student perspectives, which could have offered a more triangulated view of formative assessment practices in action. Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods design that combines interviews, observations, and document analysis to provide a more holistic understanding of formative assessment use in inclusive classrooms.

Building on the insights generated by this study, future research should explore the impact of specific professional development interventions on teachers' ability to use formative assessment with students with learning difficulties.

Longitudinal studies could examine how teacher beliefs and practices evolve over time in response to training or policy shifts. Additionally, research comparing urban and rural school settings could provide a clearer picture of how contextual factors mediate formative assessment practices. Another promising area of inquiry is the role of student voice in shaping assessment strategies—especially how students with learning difficulties perceive and engage with formative assessment processes. Finally, future studies should examine the intersectionality of student needs, considering how learning difficulties interact with linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic variables in assessment design and implementation.

From a practical standpoint, several recommendations emerge from the study. Educational leaders and policymakers should work toward embedding formative assessment into teacher evaluation frameworks, thereby legitimizing its use and encouraging its adoption. Schools should invest in targeted professional development focused specifically on inclusive formative assessment strategies, including the use of assistive technologies and culturally responsive tools. Time and structural supports—such as co-teaching models or dedicated planning periods—should be provided to allow teachers the flexibility needed to design and implement differentiated assessments. Importantly, efforts must be made to educate parents and the broader school community about the value of formative assessment, especially for students with learning difficulties, to foster a supportive ecosystem around inclusive education. Ultimately, fostering a culture of formative assessment requires a shift not only in practice but also in mindset—one that views assessment as a collaborative, responsive, and empowering process for all learners.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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