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Finnish Vocational Students' Perceptions of the Special Support in Their Studying

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Abstract

Purpose: This article draws on the dissertation (Ryökkynen, 2023), which addresses the needs and expectations of the marginalisation (two per cent) of vocational students in Finland. The study participants are students who have severe learning difficulties, disabilities or serious health problems and thus need intensive special support for their studying. The dissertation aims to give them a voice to understand what elements of support would enhance their studying, sense of belonging and would be at the core of good vocational education and training (VET).

Methods: The studies summarised in the dissertation used multiple methods (content analysis, narratives positioning and actantial analysis). The multiple methods have answered different research questions. However, their primary aim has been to support the core qualitative-driven approach, the overarching research questions, and the dissertation's aim. Combining several methods, the study sought a holistic understanding of students' perceptions.

Findings: The participants' needs and expectations culminated in understanding. Understanding teachers, employers, parents, and friends created the foundation for students' success in vocational studying. It supported their sense of belonging and created the foundations for good VET. The VET system should provide enough time for students to form and re-form their perceptions of themselves as young people, as a student and as a member of the workplace and society. The findings addressed that VET is more than a qualifying, competence-based, subject-oriented and effective student system. It has a solid socialising and subjectification domain which means that the whole VET system and its teachers function as inductors into workplaces, as well as into everyday life and society.

Conclusion: The study argues that understanding students' special needs is essential though insufficient, and the concept of understanding should be elaborated and elucidated. Although different individually tailored measures and methods of special support and guidance make apparent that understanding is essential for the success of students with special needs, the study suggests that recognition is the most fundamental element in enhancing students' studying and sense of belonging. This means that the significant others depict the students in a broad-minded and positive way, not only as students with special needs but as students with valuable skills and knowledge.

Keywords: vocational education and training, special education, belonging, theory of recognition

1 Introduction

The aim of the dissertation (Ryökkynen, 2023) summarised in the article is to gain a deeper understanding of the elements of support that Finnish vocational students who receive intensive



learning support perceive as the most relevant for enhancing their studying, sense of belonging and what would create the domains for good VET. The research consisted of three studies (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b) in which the students and their experiences, expectations and needs created the core.

Improving the social and educational position of people with learning difficulties and disabilities has been the main objective of international and national policies (Kauppila et al., 2020). The measures to improve their situation have systematically focused on education and are based on the view that improving educational opportunities will make these people more independent and employable (Kauppila et al., 2018). Even so, the employment rate and social participation of disabled people are still low (Sjöblom, 2016). Remarkably, the number of persons with some chronic disease or disability which has subjective effects on their working ability or employment is about 600 000 in Finland (Mäkinen, 2021). Thus, it is increasingly important to determine what elements enhance their studying, sense of belonging and create the premise for good VET.

The Finnish education system aims to leave no one behind. According to the Act on VET (531/2017, 61§), students in VET are entitled to receive teaching and guidance to achieve professional skills and knowledge consistent with the qualification requirements. Furthermore, they are entitled to special and intensive special support (Act on VET 531/2017, 64§; 65§) if they have learning difficulties, disabilities or serious health problems and therefore need long-term and regular special support. Intensive special support is intended for students with severe learning difficulties, disabilities, or serious health problems. It is provided in vocational institutions, called vocational special education colleges, mandated for this: five Finnish- and one Swedish-language vocational college. Six general vocational colleges have a restricted mandate to provide intensive special support for their students. Thirteen per cent of all Finnish vocational students needed special support, and two per cent intensive special support for their studying during 2018-2020 (Vipunen - Education Statistics Finland, n.d.).

First, the significance of the study (Ryökkynen, 2023) summarised in the article derives from the importance of investigating the needs and expectations of students with special educational needs. They represent the 2% minority of Finnish vocational students, and their experiences might not be heard, are marginalised or shunted off. Furthermore, the students' study paths might have been intensively supported and guided since their primary education years, maybe even earlier (Hakala et al., 2013; Niemi, 2014; Niemi & Kurki, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to listen to their voice.

Secondly, though Finnish VET is closely connected with the workforce and even though many employers lack skilled workers, students with intensive special needs have difficulties in finding their place in the labour market: Only a quarter of the students with initial vocational qualification do paid work after their VET studying (Vipunen -Education Statistics Finland, n.d.). Finland promotes justice through education for all, but it seems that the labour market is not equal. However, those in less competitive groups, like the partially disabled or with special needs, are often excluded from the labour market (Kuptsch & Charest, 2021; Mäkinen, 2021).

Thirdly, there is a lack of scholarly knowledge of the VET system providing intensive special support as national and international VET research has focused on the pedagogical practices and methods of the general vocational education system (Wheelahan, 2020). The study provides students' perspectives on the issues. The overarching research questions are:

- RQ1) Of vocational students receiving intensive special learning support, which elements do they perceive as enhancing their studying?
- RQ2) Of vocational students receiving intensive special learning support, which elements do they perceive as enhancing their sense of belonging?
- RQ3) What are the students' perceptions of what constitutes the elements of good VET?

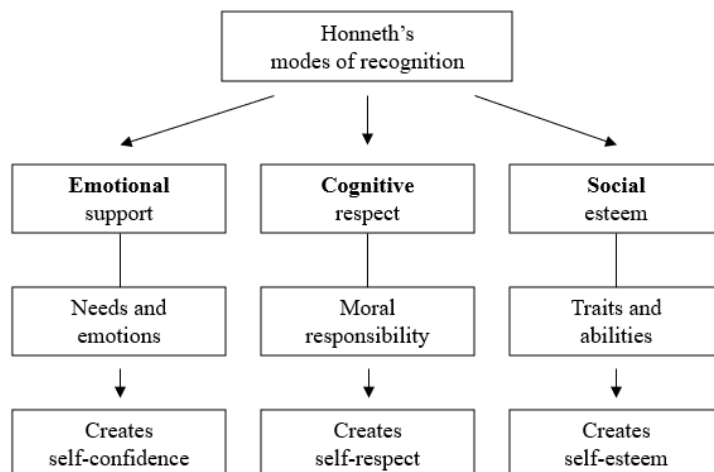
2 Theoretical background

Theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1994), sense of belonging (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Pirskanen et al., 2020; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Stewart, 2013; Sun et al., 2020) and good education (Biesta, 2010, 2020) create the theoretical core of the dissertation. Next, these approaches are introduced in an outline.

2.1 Theory of recognition

Honneth (1995) stated that the whole human life is a struggle for recognition. Human agency is constituted in and through relationships with others. When we talk about how others see us, how others treat us, or how we should treat others and acknowledge each other in everyday life, we are talking about recognition. Honneth's theory of recognition which is the most significant theory in the study operates in three spheres: Emotional, cognitive and social (See Figure 1). One's formation as an ethical subject and agent is dependent on the responsiveness of significant others concerning care for one's needs and emotions (emotional support), respect for one's moral and legal dignity as a member of society (cognitive respect), and esteem for one's social achievements, abilities and traits (social esteem). These spheres of recognition are coupled with three aspects of practical self-relation: (1) Self-confidence; (2) Self-respect; (3) Self-esteem. Self-confidence depends on emotional support, self-respect on cognitive respect and self-esteem on social esteem. (Honneth, 1995; Laitinen, 2003; van den Brink & Owen, 2007.)

Figure 1 Honneth's (1995) modes of recognition

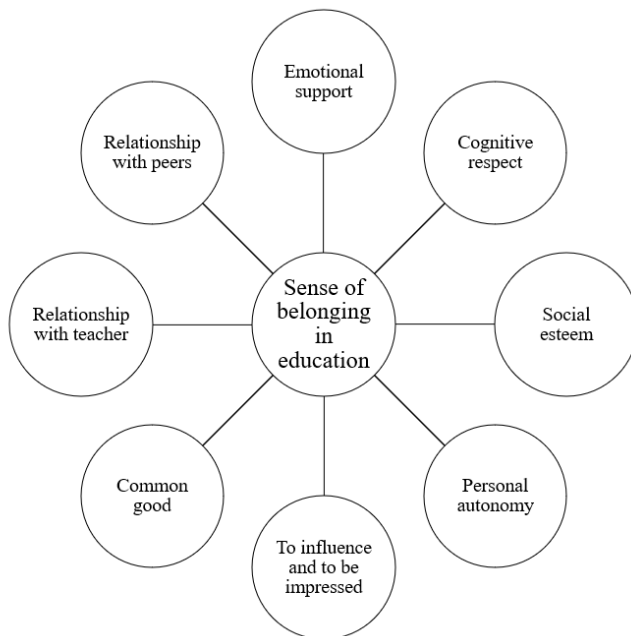


2.2 Sense of belonging

Earlier studies have demonstrated that social interactions and sense of belonging are essential parts of human life. Individuals cannot flourish nor function alone (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006; Pirskanen et al., 2020; Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014; Stewart, 2013; Sun et al., 2020). Social relations have a powerful effect on our happiness and other aspects of well-being (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2011; Laitinen, 2003; Taylor, 1994). Our fundamental needs are to belong and to be recognised by significant others (Honneth, 1995). As presented in Figure 2, a vocational student's sense of belonging is composed in many ways. It relates to many objects of attachment through different situations in different learning environments and everyday life (May, 2013). These complex interactions between environmental and personal factors hinder or promote a student's sense of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The feelings of external connectedness are grounded in the context or referent group to whom the student chooses, wants, and feels permission to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Honneth,

1995; Leary, 2001; Mahar et al., 2013). Shame and pride as social emotions are closely related to the student's social bonds and sense of belonging. Social emotions are both experiences and are instrumental for academic achievement and personal growth (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Experiencing excessive anxiety about school assignments and social relationships can hamper a student's academic performance and negatively influence his or her psychological and physical health (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014).

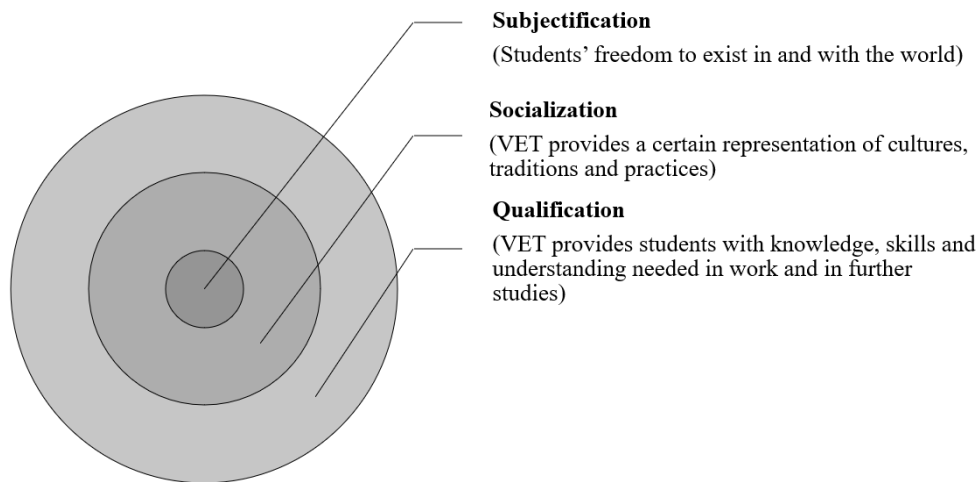
Figure 2 Elements of sense of belonging in education



2.3 Good education – qualification, socialization and subjectification

The third theoretical approach used in the dissertation to deepen the understanding of students' needs and expectations is Biesta's (2010, 2020) domains for good education. The domains are qualification, socialization and subjectification, which could be represented as concentric circles (See Figure 3). First, the aim of the Finnish VET is that students learn skills and knowledge according to the vocational qualification requirements which are implemented in curriculums. This creates the qualification domain of VET. Second, attaining a vocational qualification provides a particular way of (re)presenting the world. This forms the socialization domain of VET, which is explicitly connected with the worker citizen's identity and position in society, as the Finnish VET system emphasises labour market needs and students' employability in its discourse. Third, the subjectification domain of VET impacts students as individuals by enhancing or restricting their capacities and capabilities. Biesta (2015, 2021) states that there is a range of ways in which human beings exist, and education should instead be about opening up these options than only providing students with the position of the learner or the worker on the labour market. Defining the constitution of good VET necessitates acknowledging all these three domains of education because when we engage with one dimension, we always impact others (Biesta, 2010, 2020).

Figure 3 Domains of good VET (Ref. Biesta, 2010, 2020).



3 Methods

Because the participants in the study were students who represent the minority of Finnish vocational students and whose study paths are intensively guided and supported, this study was qualitative and interpretative by nature but also emancipatory and critical. It means that VET was considered to be much more than vocational qualifications and measurable outcomes. VET was seen as a starting point for social equality and democracy though it can also be among the leading causes of inequality (Beach & Sernhede, 2011; Kalalahti et al., 2020; Power, 2012). VET may have essential inclusive functions in providing alternative learning careers for people, supporting their study motivation and vocational identities (Larsen & Thunqvist, 2018). Nevertheless, it seems that the expansion of education does not significantly impact relative social class disadvantages (Lynch, 2019; Mattila, 2020). Disabled people, people with special needs and other less competitive groups, have challenges in both employment and social participation (Kuptsch & Charest, 2021; Mäkinen, 2021; Sjöblom, 2016).

The study paradigm is grounded on social constructionism, according to which truth is constructed through social interactions as vocational students engage with the world and each other (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). The ontological dimension of social constructionism assumes that reality is a social construct generated from multiple negotiations of interpretations people give the world (Sandu, 2016). 'Social constructionism holds that individuals seek to make meaning of their lives and that the researcher has to examine the question through multiple lenses of the individuals involved, to obtain the definition of the situation, to see how they make sense of their situation and to focus on interactions, contexts, environments and biographies' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 23). Therefore, the study uses multiple methods to strive for a holistic understanding of students' needs and expectations.

Study 1 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020) was directed at students' experiences in interacting with their teachers and the guidance they received. It used semi-structured interviews and content analysis to investigate the students' descriptions of interacting with their teachers. Study 2 (Ryökkynen et al., 2022a) concentrated on the students' definitions of good VET by reflecting on their narratives with Biesta's (2010, 2020) domains of good education: qualification, socialization and subjectification. As an analytical tool for Study 2 (Ryökkynen et al., 2022a), narratives positioning analysis was chosen because it provided an opportunity to examine and interpret the participants' narratives as social actions in the VET context where they have been told (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). The third study (Ryökkynen et al., 2022b) focused on the dynamics of social emotions and social bonds between students and teachers. A case story of each student interview was written to deepen the understanding of the

elements enhancing students studying and social belonging. Study 3 (Ryökkyne et al., 2022b) used Greimas' actantial model as an analysis tool to recognise the actors in the case stories and to scrutinise the thematics of pride and shame between these actors (Greimas, 1983; Schleifer & Harré, 1987). Table 1 introduces a summary of the focus, keywords, data and data collection, methods of the analysis and research questions in Studies 1-3.

Table 1

A summary of the focus, keywords, data and data collection, methods of the analysis and research questions in Studies 1-3

Study	Focus	Keywords	Data & data collection	Methods of the analysis	Research questions
Study 1 Interaction between students and class teachers in vocational education and training: 'Safety distance is needed'	The experiences of students with special educational needs. Interaction between a student and a class teacher. The guidance provided.	VET; interaction; critical pedagogy; guidance; power; social justice; content analysis	Semi-structured interviews (N=11) as mp3 format 11h, transcribed.	Content analysis (Krippendorff 1980; Schreier 2012)	RQ1) How do VET students receiving intensive special support describe the interaction with their class teacher? RQ2) What is the purpose and orientation of the interaction according to students? RQ3) What guidance is provided in the interaction between students and class teachers?
Study 2 Learning about special educational needs students' experiences of qualification, socialization and subjectification in Finnish vocational education and training: A narrative approach.	Students' experiences of good VET: qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta 2010, 2020).	VET; intensive special support; qualification; socialization; subjectification	Semi-structured interviews (N=18) as mp3 format 5.5 h, transcribed	Deductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Narratives' positioning (Bamberg, 1997, 2004a, 2004b; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008)	RQ) To what extent are Biesta's dimensions of good education - qualification, socialization, and subjectification - audible in the narratives of Finland's VET special educational needs students?
Study 3 From the shade into the sun: Exploring pride and shame in students with special needs in Finnish VET.	Social belonging and emotions of shame and pride in students' descriptions.	VET; special educational needs; social emotions; social belonging; student voices	Semi-structured interviews (N=11) as mp3 format 11h, transcribed.	Abductive content analysis (Brinkmann, 2014; Rinehart, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012); Greimas' actantial model (1983)	RQ1) What experiences related to the dynamics of pride and shame did students narrate in their social bonds with their class teachers? RQ2) What do these experiences tell us about participants and about their activity and needs?

Overall research questions	RQ1) Of vocational students receiving intensive special learning support, which elements do they perceive as enhancing their studying?; RQ2) Of vocational students receiving intensive special learning support, which elements do they perceive as enhancing their sense of belonging?; RQ3) What are the students' perceptions of what constitutes the elements of good VET?
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4 Results

Studies 1 and 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022b) explored the elements enhancing students' studying and sense of belonging. All three Studies (Ryökkynen 2020, 2022a, 2022b) investigated the students' perceptions of good VET. To achieve the aim of the dissertation, the focus of Study 1 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020) was directed towards the interaction between a class teacher and a student. Study 2 (Ryökkynen et al., 2022a) reflects the students' experiences on Biesta's domains of good education, qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta, 2010, 2020) and contributes to the discussion about what is good VET. Study 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2022b) investigates the dynamics of social emotions and social bonds between students and class teachers. These individual studies propose more nuanced questions to further explore the overarching research questions: RQ1) Of vocational students receiving intensive special learning support, which elements do they perceive as enhancing their studying? RQ2) Of vocational students receiving intensive special learning support, which elements do they perceive as enhancing their sense of belonging? RQ3) What are the students' perceptions of what constitutes the elements of good VET? Next, the results are summarised.

4.1 Elements enhancing studying

Two significant elements emerged in Studies 1 and 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022b) pertinent to enhancing students' studying: 1) Understanding, support and guidance; 2) Students' ability to see positive development. Studies 1 and 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022b) showed that students who received intensive learning support adapted their voices. They had very modest expectations for their career and future. The study participants spoke highly about their teachers and appreciated their opportunity to study and gain vocational competence. They respected understanding and helpful teachers, teaching staff and work-life representatives who had enough time. It seemed that students needed repeated opportunities to be accepted as themselves in different learning environments and among their peers in the school and the workforce.

It was not only teachers', teaching staff's and peers' actions and understanding which were significant for students' success in their studying and social interactions but their ability to allow themselves success and to receive respect. Many participants in the study had encountered bullying and exclusion in their earlier studying. Hence, they had difficulties accepting and believing someone would appreciate their efforts and performance. The results demonstrated that studying at a vocational special college had given students a new start, a turning point in their lives. If a student could seize this chance, then his or her story was embedded in pride; if not, shame was a powerful element of the student's story.

4.2 Elements enhancing sense of belonging

Studies 1 and 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022b) explored the elements enhancing students' sense of belonging intertwined with the elements enhancing their studying. Two themes emerged: 1) Understanding, support and guidance; 2) Social and subjective domains of education.

Teachers' understanding, support and guidance were needed to bolster students with special educational needs to see their opportunities and value. The question was not only about

career conversations related to students' vocational qualifications and professional careers but also about what was recognised as an acceptable form of being, doing and dreaming.

It became apparent in both studies that the VET system should provide enough time for students to form and re-form their perceptions of themselves as young people, as a student and as a member of the workplace and society. The results of Studies 1 and 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022b) addressed that it is essential to see the teaching profession and the whole meaning of the VET more broadly as a qualifying, competence-based, subject-orientated and effective system and as a socializing and subjectifying element in students' lives. This means an opportunity to figure out who is a student among others and what is a good life for them.

4.3 Elements of good VET

Students' definition of good VET could be compacted into four topics: 1) Understanding, 2) time and presence, 3) subjective and social empowerment, and 4) vocational qualification. The essential element that emerged in Studies 1, 2 and 3 (Ryökkynen et al., 2020, 2022a, 2022b) was teachers' and other stakeholders' understanding attitude. The study participants highlighted teachers' and other VET stakeholders' help and support to attain the qualification requirements of VET and the workforce and to strengthen their social skills and sense of belonging. The findings indicated that students need time and presence, which contradicts the Finnish VET policy, which emphasises efficacy, efficiency and agility. The results of the studies demonstrated that the students wanted to belong, to be understood, valued and respected by their teachers, employers and peers. They appreciated individual solutions and special educational support in their studying. However, they wanted to be part of the students' community and to live, learn and work like any other young person. The socialization and subjectification domains of education were emphasised in the results of the studies even though students respected the vocational qualification they received. It seemed that the vocational qualification also served the purposes of socialization and subjectification, as it bolstered the students' self-confidence and sense of belonging in the workforce and society.

5 Conclusions

The study (Ryökkynen, 2023) aims to gain a deeper understanding of the elements of support that vocational students who receive intensive learning support perceive as the most relevant to enhance their studying, sense of belonging and what would create the domains of good VET. The results of the three studies summarised in the dissertation indicate that the essential element enhancing students' studying, their sense of belonging, and what would create the foundation for good VET culminates in understanding. Students who receive intensive special support for their studying need enough time to attain both vocational, subjective and social competence needed in the workforce, which contradicts the effective working school system and labour market. The study participants expressed gratitude and took pride in their vocational qualifications. However, subjectification and socialization domains of education were emphasised in their descriptions. The students wanted to find their place in work and society. They wanted to be depicted and function as independent members of society with valuable skills and knowledge recognised and appreciated by significant others like teachers, employers and peers. The participants in the study have undoubtedly benefitted from the multidisciplinary and multi-professional support in their studying, which aims to help them attain the qualification requirements and support their well-being and rehabilitation. However, many of these students have competed with underrepresentation and negative stereotypes. They are attentive to indications that could communicate that they do not belong or are not fully included (Walton & Carr, 2012a, 2012b).

Understanding students' needs is essential to create individually tailored measures and methods of special educational support and guidance in VET. However, the study suggests that

understanding is not enough, but recognition is fundamental in enhancing students' study and sense of belonging. Honneth (1995) states that recognition is the prime mover in our lives. It is much more than understanding, which could be defined as a cognitive process or a result of such a process (Baumberger, 2014; Baumberger et al., 2017). In the context of Finnish VET, the purpose of which is to serve labour market needs, this implies that more attention should be paid to eliminating barriers to learning and participation and diversity engagement of employers. It means awareness rising that a student with special needs in one area of life can be a top expert in another. Teachers and teaching staff work as change agents or pioneers whose attitudes, activities and values are crucial. Students with special needs call for time to recognise their capabilities and strengths. They need encouragement and opportunities to practise how to express their preferences but, at the same, how to voice their support needs. They need emotional support, cognitive respect and social esteem (Honneth, 1995).

Finally, by applying Salonen and Bardy's (2015) definition of ecosocial Bildung, the study calls for responsibility, fairness and mutual recognition in VET practices and the labour market. Improving sustainable development and enhancing students with special needs studying and their sense of belonging cannot be built on egocentric freedom and individual ownership. It should be built on the principles of mutual recognition (Salonen & Bardy, 2015). VET processes can strengthen the sense of personal accountability, the tendency to see others as distinct individuals, and the willingness to raise a critical voice (Nussbaum, 2010). Vocational colleges work as pioneers in building sustainable futures through their work by noticing each student and the valuable potential they possess as they may flourish beginning from their strengths.

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