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Turkish EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Classroom Management

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to reveal perspectives of novice EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in Turkey on classroom management. This qualitative study employed phenomenological research design. Data were collected through written interviews including twenty-four open-ended questions from twenty EFL teachers whose teaching experience changed between 1-3 years. Data were analyzed through the use of content analysis by considering the predetermined categories. These categories included instructional, people and behavior management dimensions of classroom management. It was found that novice EFL teachers were not satisfied with physical conditions in their classrooms. Although teachers were negatively influenced by physical constraints, they still try to be humanistic and not to use much power over their students. This study may contribute to the understanding of the nature of classroom management in language classrooms in Turkey and help teacher education programs guide their pre-service teachers on how best to manage their classrooms.

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There have been several studies in the literature reporting that classroom management is of great importance to achieve educational goals (e.g. Brown, 2001; Kagan, 1992; Laut 1999; Wolff, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2017). Brown (2001) asserts that when teachers understand classroom management, they can develop their skills as a teacher, which will contribute to the classroom energy positively. In the same vein, Laut (1999) defines an effective teacher as the one who manages the classroom effectively. He also states that the value of teaching and learning might be increased through appropriate classroom management. More importantly, Kagan (1992) suggests that teachers should possess two kinds of knowledge for effective instruction, which are knowledge of subject matter and knowledge of classroom management. Above all, as Wolff et al. (2017) states, "Classroom management can be considered fundamental to successful teaching and learning: it is intrinsically linked to both the content being taught

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and the pedagogical processes through which content is delivered.” (p. 296). It seems that maintaining classroom order plays a key role in teaching and learning in an effective way.

Although the terms classroom management and discipline are often used interchangeably, Baldwin and Martin (1994) define classroom management as “an umbrella term that describes all teacher efforts to oversee the activities of the classroom including learning, social interaction, and student behavior” (p.3) while discipline is about the rules which describe expected student behaviors and efforts to make sure that students follow these rules. Accordingly, we can say that classroom management is not just about disciplinary issues contrary to the common belief (Wolff et al., 2017).

As mentioned above, the role of classroom management is undeniable as it ensures learning. How teachers evaluate their classroom management skills is equally important. If teachers have a negative evaluation of their classroom management skills, they can suffer from exhaustion and stress (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000). Even worse, when teachers consider themselves incompetent in classroom management, their level of burnout will get higher (Friedman & Farber, 1992). Thus, teachers’ evaluation of their own classroom management abilities is of importance as well.

Numerous studies have argued that classroom management is a challenging issue (for example, Doyle, 1986; Veenman, 1984; Wolff, van den Bogert, Jarodzka, & Boshuizen, 2015; 2017; Wubbels, 2011). These studies have stated that there are lots of teachers who run into difficulties with classroom management. For instance, Wolff et al. (2017) indicate that it is complicated for teachers, especially novice teachers, to learn how to manage a classroom. If teachers cannot execute their classes effectively, their self-efficacy beliefs will be affected negatively. All in all, without effective classroom management, it would be a waste of time and energy to try to teach something in the classroom.

2. Classroom Management and Novice Teachers

Level of experience is considered to be one of the factors that determine different conceptualization of classroom management among teachers (Wolff et al., 2015). In other words, there are differences between experienced and less experienced teachers’ representations of classroom management events. Wolff et al. (2015) assert that while novice teachers view management from the points of classroom rules and discipline, experienced teachers emphasize student attention and how to improve learning processes. They also claim that it takes time for novice teachers to develop and gain automaticity of their management routines. In that case, novice teachers will learn how to go beyond simply coping with classroom problems and focus on the reasons that cause these problems as they get experienced.

Classroom management is a topic of concern especially for beginning teachers during their early teaching years. To explain this issue, Kagan (1992) focused on “the lack of connection between the information provided in teacher preparation course work and the real classroom” (p. 156). It is possible that these teachers will not be adequately prepared to handle classroom management issues because of the lack of enough experience. Studies show that novice teachers are more worried about how to manage a classroom while experienced teachers automatize the things which are associated with classroom management (Nunan, 1992). Moreover, Veenman (1984) states that novice teachers encounter with more problems than they expected when they start teaching and they lose their idealism under the reality of the classroom. He adds that teachers might have difficulties in getting rid of this reality shock in their first years of teaching.

3. Dimensions of Classroom Management

Brown (2001) states that classroom management encompasses lots of factors which range from physical arrangement of a classroom to teaching styles. Teachers need to know how to plan instructions, make

effective decisions and construct relations with students as well (Doyle, 1990). Similarly, Martin, Yin and Baldwin (1998) define the classroom management as a multi-faceted construct that included “three broad, independent dimensions- instructional management, people management and behavior management” (p.4).

The first dimension, instructional management, incorporates what teachers do to enable students to learn. It includes aspects such as establishing and maintaining classroom routines, arranging physical environment, and monitoring learning behavior. The second dimension, people management, is about how teachers perceive students as persons and what they do to establish and develop the student-teacher relationship. The third dimension, behavior management, which was previously called as discipline management by Baldwin and Martin (1994), aims at preventing undesirable behaviors before they occur and maintaining order in the classroom environment. It incorporates rule setting, acknowledgment of appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

4. Classroom Management in Language Education

Classroom management problems are an important area of research in general education (Doyle, 1990; Kagan, 1992). Although there has been interest in classroom management in general education, far too little attention has been paid to classroom management in language classrooms. As Wright (2005) stated, “Classroom management is the central element of every teacher’s daily professional experience, but it is a neglected topic in debates on language education.” (p. 1). Obviously, it is necessary to identify how foreign language classroom management differs from managing classrooms in other subject areas and prepare teachers accordingly as language teachers might need to employ unique sets of classroom management strategies in language classrooms.

We know that language teachers need to foster communicative skills because there has been a growing increase in encouraging students to communicate. Teachers are expected to make their instruction more communicative and more interactive (Savignon, 1983). There are some studies which referred to the fact that communicative language teaching makes classroom management difficult (e.g., Lewis, 2002; Williams & Burden, 1997). In communicative language teaching, students have more freedom in the class and this makes classroom management more problematic. Conducting communicative classes and managing classes at the same time seem to be challenging, as stated by Lewis (2002):

“Language teachers are familiar with the intended outcomes of CLT, namely, for students to use the new language in speech and in writing for a variety of purposes and in a range of contexts. Teachers also have access to many textbook setting out activities for doing this. What they often struggle with in their own classes is how to manage classroom learning to achieve these ends” (p. 40).

Another issue that makes managing language classrooms difficult is the expected roles of students. Students are expected to become active during the classes. Moreover, the communicative approach requires more cognitively demanding tasks. Students can be confused with these kinds of tasks and this can lead to no classroom participation (Sakui, 2007). Another problem is that although teachers are encouraged to use target language, they use L1 to maintain control over classroom environment, to save time and avoid confusion (Littlewood & Yu, 2009). It seems that foreign language classroom is unlike the others. For this reason, it is necessary not to overgeneralize the challenges with classroom management encountered by language teachers. We need to consider the uniqueness of language learning environment as it necessitates more interaction and communication than any other subjects.

All in all, while classroom management is a worldwide concern for novice teachers, novice language teachers may encounter with additional difficulties because of the nature of the language

classes. Hence, it is crucial to understand the classroom management concerns of novice language teachers in order to support their teaching practice and improve teacher education programs.

5. Method

5.1. Aim of Study

This study aims to provide information about the perspectives of novice English teachers in Turkey on classroom management. Their perspectives will be analyzed in terms of three different dimensions of classroom management, which are instructional, people and behavior management. The study also aims to find out these teachers' suggestions for teacher education programs about classroom management. More specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of novice English teachers in Turkey on classroom management?
2. What are the suggestions of these teachers for teacher education programs about classroom management?

To the best of my knowledge, there have been no studies which have specifically looked at the perspectives of novice English language teachers in Turkey on different dimensions of classroom management. Hence this study will contribute to the understanding of the nature of classroom management in the classrooms of novice English language teachers and help teacher education programs guide their pre-service teachers on how best to manage their classrooms.

5.2. Design

This qualitative study employed phenomenological research design. In a phenomenological study, "various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon" (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hull, 2012; p. 432) are investigated. The aim of this design is to provide insights into the world of the participants and reveal their perspectives. Researchers study multiple perspectives on the phenomenon as experienced by different people and attempt to determine what is common to these perspectives. As Frankel et al. (2012) stated, researchers extract what they consider "to be relevant statements from each participant's description of the phenomenon and then cluster these statements into themes".

5.3. Setting and Participants

This study was carried out in Turkey where teacher candidates need to attend a state exam, which is used to appoint these candidates to state schools, after graduation from at least a four-year education faculty. During their training at education faculty, student teachers take courses related to their subject field, general knowledge and pedagogy as well. Among these pedagogy courses is also classroom management which is mostly provided during the third year and not subject specific. During the final year, student teachers have to attend practicum, which includes School Observation and Teaching Practice, each for one semester respectively.

Convenience sampling method was used for the study. Participants of this study were twenty novice EFL teachers who work at different types of state schools in Turkey; one teacher in a primary school, five teachers in both primary and secondary schools, five teachers in secondary schools, two teachers in high schools, three teachers in vocational high schools, two teachers in Anatolian high schools, one teacher in a multi-program high school and one teacher in a primary, secondary and also a high school.. The participating teachers graduated from education faculties of different universities and work in different cities in Turkey. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 3 years. All teachers had taken a

classroom management course during their pre-service teacher education. Their ages ranged between 24-28, with a mean of 25.

5.4. *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data for this study were gathered in the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic year through written interviews which included 24 open-ended questions. Participating teachers were expected to provide information regarding physical conditions of the classrooms where they work, classroom rules and practices, common problems in their classrooms and the strategies they employ to deal with these problems. Data were subjected to content analysis in order to examine the common codes and thus categories. In a content analysis, descriptive information can be converted into categories in two ways (Fraenkel et al., 2012). The first one is to allow the categories to emerge as the analysis goes on. The latter is to determine the categories before the analysis process. In this way, the categories are based on previous knowledge and researchers use predetermined categories. For this study, the second way was followed.

As mentioned before, a number of factors fall into the domain of classroom management. For this reason, it is necessary to narrow down these factors for the study. Hence, the classroom management dimensions which were defined by Martin, Yin and Baldwin (1998) were used for data analysis procedure. These dimensions were instructional management, people management and behavior management. They were determined as categories for data analysis procedure, and data were coded based on these pre-determined categories. Participating teachers' statements which were considered to be relevant were extracted and clustered into pre-determined categories.

6. Results and Discussion

Although the questions rendered overlapping answers, these answers were grouped into three categories based on the dimensions of classroom management: Instructional, people and behavior management. Comments regarding the physical environment and L1 use were included in the instructional management category while the category people management included comments on nature of students, teacher' role and student-teacher relationship. Then, under the behavior management category were comments on rule setting and in/appropriate student behaviors. Finally, teachers' suggestions for teacher education programs about classroom management were reported.

6.1 *Perceptions of novice English teachers in Turkey on classroom management*

6.1.1 *Instructional management*

Physical environment. The physical environment includes characteristics like the size of the classroom, seating arrangement, classroom equipment and the number of students. We can say that students' learning is easily affected by physical environment, and inappropriate conditions can also make teachers discouraged and less willing to teach. Williams and Burden also (1997) emphasized the importance of immediate classroom environment to create a positive classroom climate for language learning. Moreover, as Lewis (2005) stated, teachers believe that physical constraints are among the things which prevent them from managing an ideal learning atmosphere. In order to reveal the physical conditions in language classrooms, participants were asked questions about the number of students, seating order and classroom equipment in their classrooms.

It was found that the number of students ranged between 18 and 40, with a mean of 28. Six of the teachers complained that classrooms were too crowded and it affected the quality of lessons negatively, especially in terms of communication. Here are some quotations about this problem:

“The number of students is not suitable to make different seating arrangement so we always have traditional seating.”

“It is difficult to have activities like role play in these classrooms. Classrooms are too small and what is more, they are too crowded. So we have no other way than traditional seating.”

When we consider the necessity of communication and speaking activities in language classrooms, the number of students and physical conditions seem to be problematic. Almost all of the participants stated that they had traditional seating, with an exception to three teachers who had U-shaped seating plan. These exceptions were the ones who had English classrooms in their schools. The lack of English classrooms in schools may also cause other problems. Students can learn a lot of things that they see around and it is important to provide students with peripheral learning. However, the following remark indicates that teachers may not feel comfortable with doing anything that they want to in their classes.

“We prepare materials together and stick them on the wall so that students can see them around and learn from them but other teachers criticize us for that.”

The small size of the classroom was also another problem. Teachers found it difficult to change seating plan because of classroom size and the number of students in the classroom. One of the participants commented on this issue as follows:

“Classroom and sitting order of the pupils is a traditional one. The pupils do not see the other pupils’ faces, they see directly the board. The classroom is small-sized and it is pretty hard to move the desks around. This makes applying communicative activities very difficult. I am unable to form study or discussion groups and ask the pupils to work in groups. Only pair-work is appropriate in such a situation.”

Eighteen out of twenty teachers complained about unsatisfactory physical conditions. Here are some quotations about physical constraints:

“Physical conditions do not allow us to teach four skills. It is difficult to enable language acquisition under these circumstances. It is nearly impossible to teach the basic things which can be used in their daily lives.”

“I believe the physical conditions are not sufficient to teach English in a communicative way. They are not that bad, but still not enough. I think it would be far better if we had portable-moveable desks. When I want the pupils to work in groups on a task, there strikes out a chaos. Most of the time, the pupils need to sit with their friends, three or four sharing the same desk. It would be better if we had a computer or a smart board in class, but we do not have these facilities either.”

These answers indicate that ELT teachers suffer from physical constraints. When we consider the necessity of interaction for language classroom, these constraints seem to cause problems for learning. Language teachers sometimes may need to ask their students to change their desks for an activity so their spatial needs are different from those who run a more traditional class. However, it is clear from the comments that classroom conditions do not allow it to be possible.

L1 use. As mentioned before, there are some classroom management issues which are exclusive to language education. One of the reasons for this exclusiveness is the use of language in the classroom (Evans, 2012). It is also believed that using L2 as the language of instruction will create a more manageable classroom atmosphere (Putman, 2009).

“ACTFL recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom. In classrooms that feature maximum target-language use, instructors use a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and support meaning making” (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2010)

As it is clear from the recommendation of ACTFL, 90% target language use is considered to be a necessity for language education. For this reason, student teachers are encouraged to use the TL to communicate the content and manage the classroom. However, it is clear from the comments of participants that most of them use Turkish for specific classroom tasks. While eighteen teachers reported that they used L1 in their classrooms, only two of them stated that using Turkish in the class was forbidden. Some of the teachers said that they have to use Turkish although they don't want to. Two of them also stated that they were in favor of not using L1 in the classroom but they changed their style because it led to some problems. Here is a remark about this issue:

“Before starting the job, I believed that L1 was unnecessary but I understood its importance when I started working in a village. If you insist on speaking English, you exacerbate students' existing prejudice and you lose the interest of students in time. Moreover, Speaking only in English is 2-3 times tiring. At some points, Turkish explanations are also needed. “

More than half of the participants believe that using L1 is obligatory. Contrary to what Putman (2009) stated, the participants believe that using L2 as the language of instruction do not help to create a more manageable classroom atmosphere. Instead, it makes the things worse. Teacher education programs should also consider this issue again and make the teacher candidates aware of these kinds of problems which they will face in the future in order to prepare them for the reality.

6.1.2. *People management*

Nature of students. “Practices of classroom management affect, and are in turn influenced by, motivational forces” (Wright, 2005, p. 168). This quotation emphasizes the importance of motivation for classroom management. However, almost all of the teachers in the study reported that students were not willing to participate in the lesson and they were prejudiced. They also stated that most students viewed English as an unimportant subject and non-applicable to their lives. The following comments of teachers are related to the negative attitudes of students towards English:

“They do not want to participate in the lesson because they don't like it much and find it difficult.”

“Most of the students are reluctant to take part in the English lesson because they are afraid of making mistakes.”

Although they complained about negative attitudes of students and unmotivated students, seven teachers' comments showed that they like their students and their job. These comments indicate that teachers' perceptions of their students are positive:

"They generally do not like English. However, there are few who seem to enjoy studying English and spend much effort. Even their existence gives me power and raises my motivation."

"Despite everything, my students are always valuable for me."

"I believe that the way to a student's brain is through his heart. So I try to make my students like me first. When they like me, they get more motivated for the lesson."

Teachers also reported that they resorted to group activities in order to help students build their confidence.

"I believe that group work is necessary. For me, it is important to create heterogeneous groups as it enables students to motivate each other and learn from more successful ones. It also develops their sense of responsibility and builds their confidence."

"I use pair and group work frequently and the students seem to like it. I mean most of them. But there are some students who want to work alone. I, myself, have been an independent learner and have not enjoyed group work that much. So, when I want them to work in groups, that does not mean it is a must. Pupils wishing to work on their own could do so. As I said, they seem to like group work, but since the physical environment is not an appropriate one, we have problems such as undesirable student behaviors and noise."

What teachers choose to do is influential on the behavior of the students. Participants were also asked whether they motivated their students, as the classroom environment is also influenced by how teachers motivate unmotivated students (Lewis, 2002). Teachers stated that they tried to change the negative attitudes of their students in order to motivate their students. Here are some comments on this issue:

"I try to use different materials not to lose their interest and persuade them that they can learn English."

"I mention the necessity and advantages of learning English in order to motivate my students."

"I rarely use teacher correction. I try to help them correct their own mistakes by providing some clues."

Although it seems that students are not so interested in the English lesson, the remarks show that the teachers try to motivate their students and change their negative attitudes towards English. They also care about their students and try to build their confidence. It is certain that increasing students' motivation will also affect classroom management positively.

Teacher's role and student-teacher relationship. Teachers' roles in the classroom and their relationship with the students have a profound influence on the classroom environment. Out of twenty participants, twelve consider themselves as a guide, five both as a guide and an authority, one an authority, one a leader, one all roles.

"I guess I am a guide. I believe that every person should carry the responsibility for his own. Personally, I do not want the others to dictate what needs to be done and I hate this. That is why I do not urge the kids to do something. I explain what it is, why it needs to be done and what the consequences it might bear- either positive and negative. Then I leave the rest to them. I have a relaxed atmosphere in the class."

It seems that although students have negative attitudes towards English, teachers report that they have good relations with their students and they believe that they are mostly guides for their students.

Twelve participants stated that their perspectives changed a lot after they started the job. Most of the teachers stated that teaching was more difficult than it looked. Here are some comments of teachers whose prior beliefs underwent a change after starting the job:

"I have worked for nearly one year but I certainly believe that this year contributed me a lot more than my four years at university. I have never thought that teaching was an easy job. I will learn more as I gain more experience."

"Teaching is not as easy as it looks. I used to imagine that students would be eager to learn English but it is not like."

Three of them stated that they were idealist teachers at first but it changed in time. We can understand from their answers that most of the teachers were not happy about their students' reluctance and bias towards English. Seventeen of them reported that they were negatively influenced by these problems while three of them reported no change in their perspectives. Here are some comments of teachers who lost their idealism during the job.

"I started the job as an idealist teacher but later I understood that it was not so easy. It is my first year in the job. However, I feel that I am too tired."

"Before you start the job you see the classrooms through rose-colored glasses. So you are an idealist. Then when you face the reality, you search for the ways to deal with the challenges. You also feel mental fatigue, an issue I had never thought of."

6.1.3. *Behavior management*

Rule setting. Half of the teachers stated that they set the rules on their own, while nine stated that they set rules together with their students. One of them stated that she had no rules in the classroom.

"I think it is a better idea to set rules together because when they are involved in the process, they will comply with these rules more easily"

They were also asked about three important rules for themselves. The most common answers are being respectful for teacher and friends, not speaking without permission, bringing lesson tools, listening to teacher and friends, not roaming around. Their answers were also checked to determine whether they put these rules in order to enable learning or for discipline.

Inappropriate behavior. "All problems call for teachers' management skills" (Lewis, 2002, p. 41). Hence, it is important to know what kinds of problems teachers are faced with and how they handle these problems. The teachers in the study were asked about the most frequently experienced problems in their classrooms and how they responded to these problems. The most common problems were the reluctance of students to attend the classroom and inattentiveness. There were few complaints about disruptive behavior.

While three of the teachers stated that they ignored inappropriate behaviors, they mostly preferred warning especially when students misbehave. Only three of them stated that they consulted to punishment when students insisted on misbehaving.

"When I encounter undesirable events and actions in my classes, I warn the students. I do not shout or talk harshly to them, but I talk about the consequences of that action."

6.2 Suggestions of teachers about classroom management

As Labaree (2004) also points out, “teaching is an enormously difficult job that looks easy” (p. 39). He also emphasizes that there are lots of complex elements in the classroom and he criticizes teacher education programs for creating generalized classroom management rules and strategies so that pre-service teachers can apply them to their own setting in the future. However, the answers show that teacher education programs ignore reality in the classroom and do not prepare teacher candidates for every condition. Almost all of them complained that pre-service training was not sufficient, only two were satisfied. Here are some suggestions of teachers to increase the quality of classroom management:

“We went to practicum during BA years. But this has not helped me so far. The classroom atmosphere is an artificial one. Few hours a week, you go to a class- another teacher’s real class and teach English. Most of the time, the students behave themselves. You are a stranger there. However, in real life things do not work that way. I believe they could change the scope of practicum experience and increase the hours.”

“There is a huge difference between what we learned during in-service training and what we are faced with in real classrooms. I think practicum should start at Year 1 and student teachers should visit different schools. Practice should be replaced by theoretical knowledge.”

One of them also suggested going to different schools in order to become familiar with both and good conditions.

“My in-service training didn’t contribute to me a lot. Only good schools of the city were chosen for practicum. Life is different here. Nobody told us how to teach and manage a class in a village.”

LePage, Darling-Hammond, Akar, Gutierrez, Jenkins-Gunn and Rosebrock (2005) pointed out that “in the past, most teachers reported that they learned how best to manage their classrooms once on the job, and not during their teacher preparation” (p. 350). They also added that teacher education programs are increasingly paying attention to the explicit instruction of classroom management strategies. However, these results show that teacher education programs still do not seem to help teachers manage their classrooms.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to explain the nature of classroom management in language classrooms in Turkey and give information about the perspectives of novice EFL teachers in Turkey on this issue. After the analysis of the answers to 24 open-ended questions from twenty EFL teachers in terms of instruction, people and behavior management, it was also found that teachers were not satisfied with physical conditions, the number of students in the classrooms and complained that students had preconceived opinions about English.

Teachers reported that they were negatively influenced by constraints; however, it seems that they still try to be humanistic and use not much power over their students. In light of the data obtained from the participants, most frequently encountered problem of language teachers was lack of motivation for language classes. The study also indicated that there are also a few teachers who feel helpless in terms of classroom management. As Brouwers and Tomic (2009) pointed out, it can cause burnout if teachers are not successful in managing their classes. Some of the participating teachers didn’t feel that teacher education programs prepared them for classroom management sufficiently and they recommended that duration of practicum be increased and the gap between the theory and practice be bridged.

As the study is limited to twenty teachers, we need to be cautious about generalizing the findings. More studies can be conducted to understand the nature of novice EFL teachers better. Moreover, as this study is limited to self-reports, it is necessary to gain more insights into this issue using triangulation and having more participants. A longitudinal study can also be carried out in order to see the progress of how classroom management orientations develop over time.

In order to prevent the burnout of novice teachers who feel helpless in terms of classroom management, some precautions might be taken by the Ministry of National Education and Teacher Education Programs. This issue can be included in the agenda of in-service training programs and teachers who have a negative evaluation of their classroom management skills can undergo training. Teacher education programs should also take this issue into consideration in order to prevent the reality shock experienced after starting the job. Instead of having generalized classroom management lessons, field-specific classroom management lessons can be provided.

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