ENHANCING HIGHER EDUCATION IN KOGI STATE OF NIGERIA THROUGH SOFT SKILLS

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Abstract

This study discusses higher education as a panacea towards ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all through sustainable development goals. The purpose of this study was to analyze soft skill approach as a strategy at Higher Education as prerequisite for a successful implementation of sustainable development. A questionnaire was administered on 215 undergraduates in three colleges of education in Kogi State to determine the relationship among four major soft skills needed for their employability level. The results verified that self-confidence has significant and positive influence on problem solving skills, positive attitude and good communication skill of students. The study concluded that soft skill is necessary in enhancing higher education in Nigeria which can bring about a higher employability rate and improve national development. The study recommends among others that the teachers impacting the soft skills on the students should be trained continuously. Hard skills, inferring the technical requirements that the students are trained as prerequisites to mastering professions, should expectedly be complemented with soft skills, for optimum higher education in Nigeria.

Key Words: Soft Skills, self-confidence, problem solving, positive attitude, good communication

In Nigeria, the term “higher education” is often used to refer to all institutions of learning after senior secondary school. They include such levels as universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and associated learning institutions. Soft skills are generally the affective areas of human learning. The soft skills traits are very numerous, but four major ones, self-confidence, problem solving skills, positive attitude and good communication skill, have been identified and employed in this research.

Statement of the Problem

The career market has become saturated in Kogi State of Nigeria, with multiplied graduates combing the streets without jobs. Graduate unemployment, resulting from un-employability of graduates as a result of lack of skills necessary in the workplace and the expected level of competence required by employers has become a major problem in Nigeria. Candidates acquire hard skills bookish education without corresponding soft skills. Lack of entrepreneurial skills, has not improved the ailing situation. Soft skills have been identified in literature to be effective and efficient method of achieving an attractive way of teaching a particular content. The trait of soft skills has also been identified as a major wish list of employers of labor in Kogi State, hence the need to investigate the necessity on enhancing the trait.

Literature Review

This section reviewed literature relevant to the present investigation:

Education and National Development

Education is one of the most powerful instruments in national development. Much is spent globally by every country to build, sustain and keep education in the forefront of the search for a better life, growth, wellbeing of individuals and national development. No country wants to leave her education to chance; hence much planning and research are devoted to all aspects of education to enable it meet the obligations expected of it. If education is costly, then ignorance may prove costlier, but on the negative side. Ofojebe & Nwafor (2010) opined that in order to get maximum benefit from education, societies and nations must as a matter of necessity expend targeted effort, finance and research into it and must include sustainable national development, as desired by all the citizens and striven for, by their legitimate leaders. Education as an important investment in the environment in which it exists, should concern human and economic development. New discoveries and constant technological improvements demand responses that can suit the labour market patterns and general global environments. If a nation continues on her educational effort to produce graduates that are half-baked with hard skills and hardly knowing or having ability for their vocations for which they have been apparently trained, the probability for such nations to develop faster will be highly hindered and limited. Higher institutions provide the highest echelon of knowledge, research and citizens that will make up for and enhance future developmental goals of the nation. Contemporary dispensation has focused majorly on education as a veritable instrument in launching her efforts into Science and Technology with the hope of creating human advancement for living conditions and development of the environment (Orji & Job, 2013). The fact that higher education accounts for one of the foundational pillars of national growth and development provides one of the reasons for seeking enhancement of its products to be well groomed

to meeting whatever challenges may be faced either by such education or the products of its activities.

The major problems plaguing the Nigeria Higher Education sector is graduate unemployment, resulting from un-employability of graduates as a result of lack of skills necessary in the workplace and the expected level of competence required by employers (National Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Candidates acquire hard skills bookish education without corresponding soft skills. Also, the inability of graduates to take advantage of the fertile non-formal sectors through creation of jobs as a result of lack of entrepreneurial skills, has not improved the ailing situation. As at 2011, graduate unemployment was rated at 42.7(International Labor Organization, 2010; National Bureau of Statistics, 2011), which is too high for a developing economy like Nigeria.This situation is said to be traceable to the declining quality of education because no skill is possessed by the students. Most jobs in Nigeria are either otained by graduates from private Universities who are privileged to have "contacts" or from European universities. Therefore there is a need to determine the relationship among the soft skills available for students to increase the employability rate in the country.

Bernd (2008) pointed out that soft skills should complement hard skills which are the technical requirements of a job the student is trained to do. Educators should take special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' university time, educators have major influence on the development of their students' soft skills. He stressed that embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and an enhancement of soft skills.

Discourse on Soft Skills

From several literatures on the subject of soft skills, it is obvious that issues on soft skills are becoming major topics in the workplaces, classrooms and for developmental purposes. It should necessarily also be of great concern in institution of higher education, such as universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and other associated bodies. The reasons may not be farfetched especially in the Nigerian environment where available jobs are scarce with millions of graduates being produced on yearly basis. According to Coursera (2017), soft skills are high on hiring managers' priority list. In a 2016 study from the Assessment Company Wonderlic, 93 percent of employers said that soft skills are either an "essential" or "very important" factor in hiring decisions. For about 10 years now, more and more interest has been shown by researchers on the subject of soft skill, how it can enhance learning and performance of students in all fronts, behavioural, social, business, medical wellbeing and performance in workplace (Krueger, 2007).

Wikipedia (2007) refers to soft skills as the cluster of productive personality traits that characterize one's relationship in the social environment that one lives or works in. It went ahead to identify several traits that can be characterized as soft skills

to include social graces, communication abilities, language skills, personal habits, cognitive or emotional empathy, time management, team work and leadership traits. Soft skills cover the social relationships among people and the manner that an individual employs his/her approaches to work. Soft skill is described by much phraseology that are all description of what it actually is, such as 'interpersonal skills', 'people skills', 'social skills', 'transferable skills', 'character traits', 'communication skills' and in fact a host of others.

As to the possibility of one having the ability to change his character traits or not is a debatable argument among the academia. According to Fisher (2010), it is temperament, which is biological, that cannot be changed, but character can be changed, and that environment is a huge factor in someone's personality because it steers and focuses it. According to CBS News (August 21, 2010) new studies have indicated that a person's personality trait from younger years remains the same for a long time, but also stated that it was not impossible for it to change if challenged and worked upon, except that it will take time for a permanent change but not impossible. Five principles for such changes were stated to include writing out a specific plan towards the change desired; placing oneself in appropriate environment towards achieving such set goals, keeping a journal to trail performance; telling close associates; giving motivational incentives and rewarding of oneself. As a naturally highly cultured nation of Nigeria, most developmental traits of soft skills are basically learnt from homes, traditions, and religious teachings. These traits are reinforced in primary schools, but gradually pale off towards secondary and university education, respectively because concerted effort is not made towards such areas.

John (2009) believes that education and the general market scenario are changing at a very rapid rate. Some ten years ago, graduates that had excellent academic records and years of experience in a working and tasking environment were those that had an edge and well sought after by corporate bodies, institutions and organizations. On contemporary basis, possessing hard skills and experience are not sufficient any longer for most of the corporate bodies. Employers prefer to employ and promote those staff who are found to be resourceful, ethical, self directed, having good communication skills and with traits of soft skills. The absence of the traits of soft skills in many graduates has been a bane bedevilling the low hiring of college graduates by corporate and associated working bodies. Despite the importance of soft skills, many institutions of higher learning are not making concerted effort to incorporate soft skills training in their courses. Efforts towards this end are either minimal at its best, or none existent in the least. Implied activities and learning in the affective domains of soft skills, in Nigeria, are majorly related either as oral traditions for all to learn from or are best enhanced from religious settings for which Nigerians are best. Issues of honesty, integrity, positive attitude and associated soft skills traits are not concisely taught or infused in the curriculum at higher levels of education (Onabamiro, Onuka & Oyekanmi, 2014).

The Place of Soft Skills in the Area of Employment in Nigeria

The place of soft skills in the area of employment in Nigeria has suddenly become so novel that hard skills are almost becoming second place. This review will mostly concentrate on the four areas of soft skills employed for this research, which are self-confidence, problem solving skills, positive attitude and good communication skill. Bernd (2008) believes that in the tight job-market, to be successful over others will demand a candidate exhibiting a competitive edge that would distinguish him from other candidates with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. This can be achieved by outstanding personal traits and habits. Most establishments would want candidates who would be productive from day one, rather than the ones they would have to train by themselves. Reduction and strict management cost on labour has become a standing practice of most establishments in order to maximize profits. Having to spend much on newly hired staff is avoided by several agencies, companies and establishments. This may be one of the reasons why most advertisements in Nigeria for vacant positions often carry number of years of experience needed to suit and be fit for the job.

The absence of soft skill traits, such as a positive attitude, in the civil service assignments and vocations in Nigeria, has completely incapacitated the developmental goals of the country. The worst of this incapacitation exists in the Local Government services where next to nothing is done by her staff that get paid for work they have not done, or even reported for. These aberrant tendencies run from its lowest ebb in the Local Government offices to state and federal government employments, respectively. The establishments have graduates that are well trained in hard skills but fail to add some affective traits in performance and needs coarsening to be able to work without being supervised. This attitude often leads to extended time lag in completing tasks by days unending, or the job remains undone at all. This has accounted for one of the basic reasons why privately owned establishments and institutions in Nigeria seem to thrive and prosper well beyond government institutions. The private sectors conduct interviews looking for men and women who are not only skilled in the technical areas, but who are self motivated, zealous to succeed and dispense enviable affective traits of soft skills in the job place.

Emphasis in the Nigerian syllabuses, in almost all disciplines, is wholly dependent upon the cognitive domain without an equal attendant provision for affective ones or soft skills. The inference is that whatever is taught to enhance the soft skills in the university education in Nigeria is at the instance of teachers who are experienced, while the others either do not know or do not bother to emphasize on soft skills domain. At best, such teachers count it as a waste of time; yeta teacher's effectiveness is as useful only according to what he knows. Since soft skills are hardly taught, there is a constant stampede on the wheel of progress of the nation. The nation puts much on its developmental activities and only discovering that the more it does so the more work refuses to have reasonable progress.

Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is the assurance or feeling of trust in one's capability, qualities and judgment of doing things well or coming out successful in a given endeavour. The word goes along with others such as composure, assurance, morale, assertiveness, nerve and poise (*www.google.com/search*). The concept of self-confidence is self-assurance in one's personal judgment, ability, power, etc that one is able to achieve a goal. One increases self-confidence from experiences of having mastered particular activities. It is a positive belief that in the future one can generally accomplish what one wishes to do (Wikipedia, 2007). Although self-confidence, like any other soft skills, can be generally improved upon, the attitude or character has either been enhanced from experiences with parents, peers and friends, or has been subdued, in the early lives of individuals. Its place in almost all areas of life cannot be overemphasized.

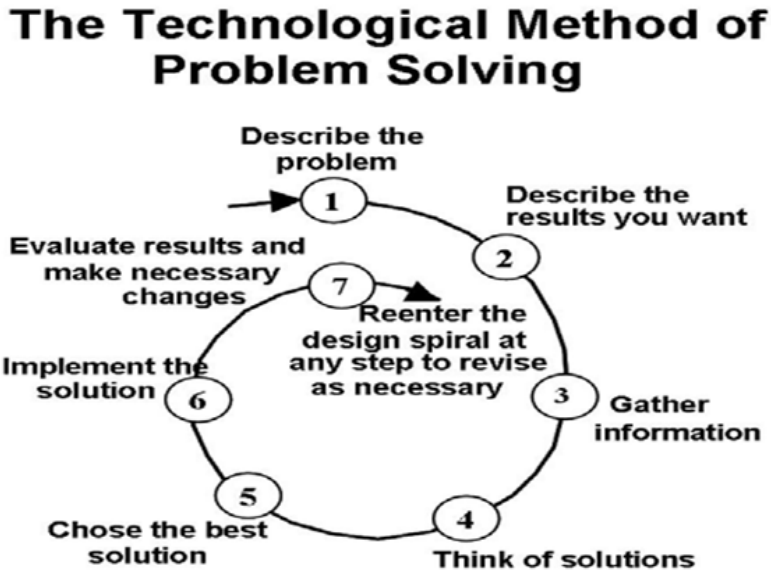
Bandura (1986) who did much study in self confidence pointed out that, in a responsive environment which depends on rewarding performance, the outcomes people expect would necessarily depend so much on their self-confidence that they have the ability to perform the skill needed towards the stated goal. Nobody will ever change or improve performance without the positive self-assurance that he will prevail. Self confidence gives boldness and hope; it attacks its target with zeal, hoping for the very best. Self-confidence gives the language of its user a forward, upward and determined poise and outlook to succeed despite problems and obstacles. One of the most salient positives about geniuses is that they mostly display so much self-confidence that gives them assurance that they will prevail in all tasks on their paths. According to Cho (2006) the greatest threat posing crises for humanity today is the loss of hope without self-confidence. In the face of daunting reality that a task is difficult and not within an individual's capability, self-confidence strides forward to do the unthinkable and most often than not comes with good effort of success. The self-confident knows that the cost he pays for failure is tuition towards his success, so he refuses to bow to stopping even in the face of apparent failure staring from within.

Problem Solving Skills

American Society for Quality (2009) states that problem solving is the act of defining a problem; determining the cause of the problem; identifying, prioritizing and selecting alternatives for a solution; and implementing a solution. Fulya, Safak, & Ayse (2009) believe that problem solving skills is an area of the thinking process, pointing out that several steps are involved in every problem solving situation, but that identifying the problem becomes the first key which is a basic essential for solving either personal or organizational problems. In their study in which they involved students from several different departments to investigate the effect of students' problem solving skills on achievement in the chemical reaction rate and the effect of temperature and concentration on the reaction rate it was discovered that there was statistically significant difference in control groups' post-test scores considering the

departments of students whereas there was no significant difference in the post-test scores of experimental group. They employed Quasi experimental design and comparing the post test scores of groups, there was a difference in results of post-test, aimed to measure students' problem solving skills there was statistically significant difference in control groups' post-test scores considering the departments of students whereas there was no significant difference in the post-test scores of experimental group. It was also discovered in the effect of problem solving skills on achievements of male and female students that were tested that female students performed above their male counterparts.

Problem solving skills has been identified by several literatures to involve several skills. In the course of everyday life contact with others, it looks like some people are just born with stronger problem-solving skills, while others seem to struggle to get their problems solved. Several writers point out that there are strategies that may be employed to improve problem solving skills. The diagram below, from TeachEngineering (Apr 12, 2018), gives a typical sample:



Source:(http://www.teachengineering.org/view_lesson.php?url=collection/cla_/lessons/cla_lesson2_problem_solving/cla_lesson2_problem_solving.xml)

The above problem solving format adapted from the eighth-grade technology textbook written for New York State standard technology curriculum shows details of technological methods of spiral shape iterative process of problem solving procedure. It identifies problem solving stages that are interdependent upon one another and can be

evaluated at any stage. It all begins with identifying and describing the problem to be solved through a gradual process of describing the results of the outcome that is desired, getting the necessary and relevant information towards the goal and then sieving and thinking through probable solutions, before the best action deemed appropriate is chosen. Thereafter, the implementation stage begins and throughout the procedure one can consistently re-enter the entire picture to make summation and inventory of progress towards the desired end, and make appropriate changes in actions until the initially identified goal is reached.

Positive Attitude

Hess (2018) acclaimed the notion that if one really believes a thing and has a positive attitude towards it, he can achieve it and supported the claim from the research of Stanford University where it was discovered that the brain pathway directly links a positive attitude with achievement. In the investigation by Stanford University School of Medicine, 240 children ages 7 to 10 were studied and found that being positive improved their ability to answer math problems, increased their memories and enhanced their problem-solving abilities. Positive Attitude has a tendency to affect one's behaviour by psychologically granting an ability that affects performance in virtually every field of life. It may not always guarantee success, but it definitely opens the door for children to do well. Academic performance of children who struggle with school can be enhanced tremendously by employing positive attitude tool for helping the students meet their fullest potentials. Essays (2013) states that attitude is a form of an evaluative statement of judgment that has to do with objects, people or events. Three components of attitude were stated to include Cognitive Attitude dealing with opinion or belief segment; Effective Attitude which deals with an emotional or feelings segment of an attitude and Behavioural Components being the intention to behave in a certain way towards someone or something. A student's performance is affected by all three stated components.

Good Communication

Spitzberg (2000) hinted that good communication includes multiple reasonable criteria, competency bias, and communication as a function of context, locus, and abstraction. He claims that good communication is a subjective evaluation and not subject to being codified in reductionist models. Skills-you-need (2018) asserted that the ability to be able to communicate, and do so effectively, is one of the most important skills of all life; pointing out that communication is simply the act of transferring information from one place to another. Such transfer of information could be vocal by using the physical voice, written by employing printed or digital media such as books, magazines, websites or emails, visual with the use of logos, maps, charts and graphs; or non-verbal by employing body language, gestures and the tone and pitch of voice. The effectiveness of the communication will dictate how well the information

can be transmitted and received. In discussing further on the importance of good communication skills Skills-you-need (2018) stated that developing one's communication skills can help in all aspects of life, whether it concerns professional life, academic endeavours, social concerns and whatever may be involved.

A good communication skill of information will promote accuracy, clearly stated goal and intentions which is a vital life skill and something that should be encouraged, and can never be assumed too late to start and work on good communication skills and by doing so improve one's quality of life and enhanced performance in all fronts. On a professional level, those applying for jobs or looking for a promotion with their current employer will almost certainly need to demonstrate good communication skills to be able to achieve the desired growth. Communication skills, therefore, are needed to speak appropriately with a wide variety of people because maintaining good eye contact, demonstrating a varied vocabulary and tailoring one's language to the audience, listening effectively, presenting varied ideas effectively, writing clearly and concisely, and working well in a group, are all essential in all professions and these are essential skills that employers would want their employees to possess (Shonubi & Akintaro, 2016).

Methodology

This section deals with the methodology employed in the research:

Research Design: The design of this study was a correlation research design. It is a quantitative research that involves two or more quantitative variables from the same group of participants. Correlation research design also shows whether an increase or decrease in one variable corresponds to an increase or decrease in the other variable. The use of the design was hinged on the fact that it will enhance the relationship between the variables of self-confidence, problem solving skills, positive attitude and good communication skill.

Sample and Sampling Technique: The population for this study are students from three colleges of education in Kogi state, Nigeria. The colleges of education are chosen because of the teachers in training that will also impact on their students when they get to the field.

Multistage sampling technique was used for the study. The three colleges of education in the state were involved in the study. Second, purposive sampling technique was employed in selecting year two students across the schools in the colleges. Simple random sampling technique was used to select 215 students from the colleges of education.

Instrument:

The research instrument used to gather data for the study was a questionnaire. The instrument consisted of two sections A and B. The first section was concerned with socio-demographic variables of respondents, while the second section had four sub-

sections on self-confidence, problem solving skills, positive attitude and good communication skills.

Procedure for Data Collection: The researcher personally administered the questionnaire copies on the respondents. After their consents had been received, each respondent responded to the questionnaire independently.

Data Analysis Technique: Data analyses were conducted using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS 23.0) software, to achieve the purpose and to test hypotheses of this study. Descriptive analysis was used for preliminary results in order to seek the demographic characteristics of the sample. Multiple Regressions was used to test the hypotheses.

Result
Demographic Information

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Gender	N	%
Male	107	50.23
Female	108	49.77
Total	215	100.0

Table 1 reveals that 107 (50.23%) of the respondents were male, while 108 (49.77%) of the respondents were female. This implies that female participated most in this study.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaire Items

N	Item	Mean
SC 1	Ability to build a good rapport, interact and work effectively with others.	3.01
SC 2	Ability to understand and play the role of a leader and follower alternatively	3.02
SC 3	Ability to recognize and respect to other's attitude, behavior and beliefs	2.73
SC 4	Ability to give contribution to the planning and coordinate group work	2.72
SC 5	Responsible towards group decision	3.30
	Average Mean	2.96
PS 1	Ability to identify and analyze problems in difficult situation and make justifiable evaluation.	3.21
PS 2	Ability to expand and improve thinking skills.	3.11
PS 3	Ability to find ideas and look for alternative solutions	3.42
PS 4	Ability to think beyond	2.41
PS 5	Ability to make conclusion based on valid proof.	2.34
	Average Mean	2.90
PA 1	Ability to find and manage relevant information from various sources..	2.62
PA 2	Ability to receive new ideas performs autonomy learning.	2.53
PA 3	Ability to develop and inquiry mind and seek knowledge	2.64
PA 4	Making unbiased decisions	2.01

PA 5	Prompt action to guarantee effect output	2.52
	Average Mean	2.46
GC 1	Ability to use technology during presentation.	2.21
GC 2	Ability to discuss and arrive at a consensus	2.51
GC 3	Ability to communicate with individual from a different cultural background	3.01
GC 4	Ability to practice active listening skill and respond	3.41
GC 5	Ability to expand one's own communicative skill	3.52
	Average Mean	2.99

Note: SC- Self Confidence, PS- Problem Solving, PA-Positive Attitude, GC- Good Communication

Tables 2 above for Self Confidence, Problem Solving,Positive Attitude, perceived credibility and Good Communication reveal an average mean of 2.96 2.90, 2.46 and 2.99. Using a bench mark of 2.50, it therefore implies that students' soft skills of self-confidence, problem solving skills, and good communication skill are high but positive attitude is low.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis and Inter-correlation Matrix of Students Soft Skills

Variables	Mean	SD	N	Self Confidence	Problem Solving	Positive attitude	Good Communication
Self Confidence	32.58	4.70	215	1.00	.13	.77	.46
Problem Solving	20.96	4.53	215	.13	1.000	.56	.45
Positive attitude	59.59	8.70	215	.77	.56	1.00	.58
Good Communication	39.34	6.72	215	.46	.45	.58	1.00

Table 3 reveals the self-confidence was significantly positive with problem solving, positive attitude and good communication skills of students. It was revealed that there was a strong correlation with Self Confidence and Positive Attitude (r= 0.77) as it was above the 0.60 guideline suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2003). However, the correlation that exist between SC and PS (r= 0.13) and SC and GC(r= 0.46) are weak.

Table 4: Result of Multiple Regression Analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	Result
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
SC(Constant)	15.360	1.410		11.054	.000**	
PS	.133	.052	.136	3.617	.001**	Accepted
PA	.021	.027	.052	.786	.000**	Accepted

G	C	.295	.033	.449	9.931	.000** Accepted
R^2	0.85					
Adjusted R^2	0.84					
Sig.	0.00					
F-value	54.64					

** P-value< 0.05 (two-tailed)

Table 4 shows that Problem Solving, Positive Attitude, and Good Communication all have significant relationship with self-confidence. However, they each had different impact on Self Confidence. Of the three components Good Communication was the most influential as it accounted for more of the highest variance. The percentage of variance increased respectively from Positive Attitude and Problem Solving. Hence all the hypotheses were not rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The outcome of this research indicated that self-confidence has significant and positive influence on problem solving skills, positive attitude and good communication skill of students. It agrees with the findings of Fulya, Safak, & Ayse (2009) that found out in their research on the effect of problem solving skills has positive effect on the achievements of male and female students. Students' soft skills of self-confidence, problem solving skills, and good communication skill are high but positive attitude is low.

Conclusion

In the face of the outcome of this investigation of Problem Solving skill, Positive Attitude and Good Communication having significant relationship from Self-Confidence of students in higher education in Nigeria, concerted effort should be made to teach the traits of soft skills in higher institution. It is also of high importance that higher institution students should acquire adequate soft skills that go beyond academic and technical knowledge. The teachers impacting the soft skills on the students should be trained continuously. Beyond academic or technical knowledge provided by hard skills in institutions of higher education, soft skills training should be infused into her curriculum, to provide a balance of knowledge and practice in the workplace. The traits of soft skills create an important role in shaping an individual's personality by complementing hard skills in that candidate's life.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of this research, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Concerted or specific effort should be made to infuse problem solving skill, positive attitude and good communication and self-confidence into the curriculum of higher education, and it should be made compulsory
2. The teachers impacting the soft skills should be trained on a continuous basis for maximum influence on the students.

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