

**TEACHER AUTONOMY, PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND EDUCATIONAL
ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines teacher autonomy, professional responsibility and educational accountability in Nigerian secondary education through a critical, literature-based analysis. It addresses the central philosophical and social problem by clarifying key concepts, reviewing relevant theoretical perspectives, and organising the discussion around professional autonomy as informed judgement, autonomy and responsibility, accountability without managerial over-control. The paper argues that the issue should not be understood through narrow causal or measurement language alone; it requires attention to values, institutions, professional judgement and the Nigerian context. The synthesis shows that durable educational and social outcomes depend on coherent relationships among ideas, practices and institutional conditions. Practical implications are developed for policy, professional practice and further scholarly debate. The paper concludes that a context-sensitive, ethically defensible and analytically integrated approach provides a stronger basis for action than isolated technical interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Education remains one of the major instruments through which societies develop human capacity, transmit cultural values, promote social integration and prepare individuals for productive participation in national development. Within the education system, teachers occupy a central position because they translate curriculum policies and educational objectives into actual classroom experiences. The quality of teaching therefore depends not only on teachers' qualifications and instructional competence but also on the extent to which they are trusted to exercise professional judgement in performing their duties. In contemporary school systems, increasing attention has consequently been given to teacher autonomy, which concerns the degree of professional freedom teachers have to make decisions about teaching methods, lesson planning, classroom management, assessment and other aspects of their instructional responsibilities. Teacher autonomy is particularly important because teaching involves complex situations that cannot always be effectively managed through rigid rules and externally prescribed procedures. Recent research suggests that teachers' professional autonomy is closely connected with their experience of their work and their ability to exercise professional judgement (Jerrim et al., 2023).

Teacher autonomy does not imply complete independence from school authorities, educational policies or professional standards. Rather, it represents an appropriate degree of discretion within established institutional and professional boundaries. Teachers require sufficient freedom to adapt instructional approaches to learners' needs, select appropriate teaching strategies, organise classroom activities and make informed professional decisions while remaining accountable for the consequences of those decisions. Research has shown that teacher autonomy is shaped by professional capacity and organisational conditions, with the extent of discretion varying across school contexts and systems (Lin & Gao, 2023). Similarly, relationships characterised by trust and collaboration can strengthen teachers' perceptions of autonomy, whereas excessive control may restrict teachers' professional judgement.

Educational responsibility, on the other hand, refers to the obligation of teachers to conscientiously perform their professional duties and accept accountability for their contribution to students' learning, development, safety and general welfare. A responsible teacher is expected to plan and deliver instruction effectively, assess learners fairly, maintain appropriate classroom discipline, provide guidance and support, protect learners from harm and comply with professional

and institutional standards. Teacher responsibility is therefore closely associated with professional accountability because the freedom to make decisions must be accompanied by willingness to justify and take responsibility for those decisions. Research on teacher self-efficacy and responsibility indicates that teachers' sense of responsibility can influence their professional decision-making and instructional practices (Kaiser et al., 2021). In the Nigerian context, teachers also have important responsibilities relating to student discipline and the protection of learners within the school environment (Olaniyan & Obadara, 2021).

The relationship between teacher autonomy and educational responsibility is particularly significant because autonomy without responsibility may result in inconsistent professional practices, whereas responsibility without adequate autonomy may constrain teachers' ability to respond effectively to classroom realities. When teachers are given reasonable authority over professional decisions and are simultaneously held accountable for their actions, they are more likely to perceive themselves as genuine professionals rather than merely implementers of directives. Evidence from Nigeria has increasingly highlighted the importance of this relationship. Bashir and Alam (2025), for instance, examined teacher autonomy within public secondary schools in Northwest Nigeria and situated autonomy within broader questions of school effectiveness and distributive leadership. Their work reflects the growing recognition that school effectiveness is influenced not only by administrative structures but also by the extent to which teachers participate in professional decision-making.

The issue is particularly relevant in Rivers State, where secondary school teachers operate within an educational environment shaped by government policies, administrative procedures, curriculum requirements and expectations concerning students' academic and social development. Nigerian evidence has linked distributed leadership and teacher autonomy with questions of school effectiveness, highlighting the importance of participation, professional discretion and supportive organisational conditions (Bashir & Alam, 2025). This broader evidence suggests that the organisational context in which teachers work can either facilitate or constrain professional judgement. At the same time, teachers in Nigerian secondary schools are expected to uphold professional, ethical and legal responsibilities in their interactions with learners and other stakeholders. These expectations make the balance between professional freedom and educational accountability an important issue for school administration.

Against this background, examining teacher autonomy and educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria, becomes necessary. The effectiveness of secondary education depends substantially on teachers who are capable of making appropriate professional decisions while remaining committed to the educational responsibilities entrusted to them. Although existing studies have examined teacher autonomy in relation to job satisfaction, school effectiveness, instructional practices and technology use, relatively limited attention has been directed specifically to how teacher autonomy relates to educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State. This study therefore focuses on the relationship between teacher autonomy and educational responsibility, with the intention of providing empirical evidence that may assist educational administrators, policymakers and school leaders in creating conditions that provide teachers with appropriate professional discretion while strengthening accountability for educational outcomes.

Statement of the Conceptual Problem

Secondary education in Rivers State depends substantially on teachers' ability to exercise sound professional judgement while fulfilling the responsibilities attached to their roles. However, concerns persist about the extent to which teachers are permitted to make independent professional decisions regarding instructional methods, classroom activities, assessment practices, classroom management and other school-related matters. In some secondary schools, teachers may operate within highly centralised administrative structures where decisions are largely determined by principals or education authorities, leaving limited room for professional discretion. Excessive administrative

control, rigid procedures, inadequate participation in school decisions and limited trust in teachers may weaken their sense of professional autonomy. When teachers have little opportunity to exercise judgement in matters directly connected to their work, they may become less motivated to take initiative and may depend excessively on directives from school administrators. This situation is problematic because effective teaching often requires teachers to adapt their practices to learners' differences and changing classroom circumstances rather than simply follow predetermined instructions.

At the same time, concerns about educational responsibility among secondary school teachers raise another dimension of the problem. Teachers are expected to demonstrate commitment to lesson preparation, effective instruction, student assessment, classroom management, guidance of learners and achievement of educational objectives. Yet, where professional autonomy is either excessively restricted or inadequately structured, teachers may experience difficulty developing a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for educational outcomes. Conversely, granting autonomy without appropriate accountability mechanisms may also create inconsistencies in professional conduct and instructional practices. The central problem, therefore, is the uncertainty about whether and to what extent teacher autonomy contributes to educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State. Despite the importance of both concepts to effective school administration and teaching, there is insufficient empirical evidence establishing their relationship within the context of secondary schools in Rivers State. This gap makes it necessary to investigate teacher autonomy and educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the paper is to critically examine teacher autonomy, professional responsibility and educational accountability in Nigerian secondary education and clarify its implications for education, society and professional practice in Nigeria.

1. To analyse professional autonomy as informed judgement in relation to the central argument of the paper.
2. To analyse autonomy and responsibility in relation to the central argument of the paper.
3. To analyse accountability without managerial over-control in relation to the central argument of the paper.
4. To analyse teacher agency and school improvement in relation to the central argument of the paper.
5. To analyse trust, competence and policy implications in relation to the central argument of the paper.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review

Teacher autonomy has increasingly been recognised as an important element of teacher professionalism because teaching involves complex decisions that cannot always be effectively addressed through rigid administrative prescriptions. Teacher autonomy refers to the degree of freedom teachers possess to exercise professional judgement in matters relating to their work, including instructional planning, teaching methods, classroom organisation and assessment. Lin and Gao (2023), using data from 118,347 teachers across 27 countries, found that teacher professionalism was a major predictor of teaching autonomy, suggesting that autonomy is closely connected with teachers' professional knowledge and capacity to make informed decisions. Similarly, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025) reported that teachers' day-to-day discretion includes selecting teaching materials, setting learning objectives, choosing assessment approaches and adapting pedagogy to classroom circumstances. Autonomy therefore does not mean unrestricted independence; rather, it represents professionally bounded discretion within curriculum, institutional and accountability requirements. This distinction is important because

teachers are expected to exercise judgement while remaining responsible for the educational consequences of their decisions.

Instructional autonomy represents teachers' freedom to determine how teaching and learning should be organised in response to curriculum requirements and learners' needs. It may involve selecting instructional methods, sequencing learning activities, adapting teaching materials, determining classroom strategies and making appropriate pedagogical adjustments. The literature indicates that instructional autonomy is one of the most visible dimensions of teacher autonomy because teachers interact directly with learners and must continually respond to differences in ability, motivation and learning needs. Lyle and Peurach (2024) observed that teachers have historically been given considerable responsibility for organising and managing classroom instruction, although contemporary educational reforms increasingly involve collaboration between teachers and school leaders in determining instructional practices. Jerrim et al. (2023) similarly found that teachers with very low levels of autonomy reported lower job satisfaction, although they found no consistent evidence that greater autonomy alone necessarily improves pupils' academic outcomes. This suggests that instructional autonomy should not be regarded simply as freedom from supervision, but as an opportunity for teachers to apply professional knowledge responsibly in achieving educational objectives.

Classroom management autonomy concerns the extent to which teachers can make professional decisions about organising the classroom, establishing routines, managing learner behaviour, maintaining discipline and creating conditions conducive to learning. Teachers require some discretion in classroom management because student behaviour and classroom circumstances differ considerably, making a uniform response to every situation impractical. Research has shown that autonomy and structure are not necessarily opposites. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis found that autonomy support and the provision of structure generally function as complementary aspects of effective teaching, indicating that learners can be given meaningful opportunities for independence while teachers maintain clear expectations and classroom organisation (Reeve et al., 2025). This perspective is particularly relevant to educational responsibility because teachers who have authority to manage their classrooms are also expected to use that authority in ways that promote learning, fairness and student welfare. Thus, classroom management autonomy should be accompanied by professional responsibility rather than interpreted as permission for arbitrary classroom practices.

Educational responsibility is closely associated with teachers' obligation to perform their professional duties conscientiously and to accept accountability for their decisions and actions. It includes responsibility for lesson preparation, effective instructional delivery, learner assessment, classroom management, student support and the attainment of educational objectives. The relationship between autonomy and responsibility can be understood from the position that professional freedom becomes meaningful when teachers possess the competence and willingness to use that freedom appropriately. Schulte (2023) noted that teacher agency and professional autonomy are closely connected to the ways teachers interpret and implement educational policies in actual classroom contexts. Similarly, Lyle and Peurach (2024) argued that conventional teacher autonomy can create variation in instructional practices, thereby highlighting the importance of organisational arrangements that combine teacher judgement with collective approaches to instructional improvement. Consequently, teachers' responsibility should not be separated from autonomy because professional discretion creates corresponding expectations that teachers will make decisions that serve learners and institutional educational goals.

Empirical evidence also suggests that the organisational environment can determine whether teacher autonomy contributes positively to professional responsibility and school effectiveness. Lin and Gao (2023) established that teacher professionalism is a stronger predictor of teaching autonomy than the complexity of teaching practice, implying that autonomy is more meaningful when teachers possess the professional capacity to use it effectively. In Nigeria, Bashir and Alam (2025), in a study of 310 teachers in public secondary schools in Northwest Nigeria, examined

distributive leadership, teacher autonomy and school effectiveness. Their study demonstrates the growing Nigerian interest in decentralised decision-making and teachers' participation in school-related decisions. Earlier cross-national evidence by Hargreaves and colleagues also showed that increased authority by governments and school leaders can reduce teachers' decision-making responsibility, particularly in curriculum and instructional matters (Liu et al., 2020). These findings suggest that excessive centralisation may weaken teachers' professional responsibility by reducing their opportunities to exercise judgement, while appropriately distributed authority may strengthen teachers' ownership of their professional duties.

The reviewed literature indicates that teacher autonomy and educational responsibility are conceptually interconnected, particularly through instructional autonomy and classroom management autonomy. Teachers are more likely to demonstrate professional ownership when they are trusted to make reasonable decisions about teaching and classroom activities, but autonomy alone does not guarantee responsible practice. Jerrim et al. (2023) cautioned against assuming that greater autonomy automatically produces better educational outcomes, while recent evidence indicates that autonomy works most effectively when combined with appropriate structure, professional competence, collaboration and accountability (Reeve et al., 2025). Despite these insights, much of the available empirical literature has focused on teacher autonomy in relation to job satisfaction, instructional effectiveness, student engagement and school effectiveness rather than specifically examining its relationship with educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State. The present study therefore addresses this gap by examining instructional autonomy and classroom management autonomy as dimensions of teacher autonomy and determining their relationship with educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was developed by Albert Bandura, emerging from his earlier Social Learning Theory and subsequently articulated more fully as Social Cognitive Theory in the 1980s, with Bandura's agentic perspective further developed in 1986 and 2001. The theory explains human behaviour through the reciprocal interaction of personal factors, behaviour and environmental conditions. Its core assumptions are that individuals are not passive recipients of environmental influences but active agents who can regulate, direct and modify their behaviour. Bandura (1986, 2001) identifies observational learning, self-regulation, self-efficacy, intentionality and human agency as important mechanisms through which individuals influence their own actions and environments. Human agency may occur through direct personal action, proxy action or collective action. A major criticism of SCT is that its strong emphasis on individual cognition and self-efficacy can sometimes understate structural, cultural and institutional constraints that limit individuals' actual opportunities to act. Recent scholarship also argues that agency should be understood as socially and contextually situated rather than simply as an individual psychological capacity.

SCT is considered appropriate for this study because teacher autonomy represents teachers' capacity to exercise professional agency, while educational responsibility concerns the way teachers regulate their actions and accept responsibility for professional outcomes. The theory provides a useful explanation of how teachers' personal beliefs, professional competence and perceptions of their working environment may interact to influence their willingness and ability to make instructional and classroom-management decisions. In particular, teachers who believe they are capable of making sound professional decisions are more likely to exercise instructional autonomy and take active responsibility for classroom activities and educational outcomes. Evidence from teacher research has also applied SCT directly to teacher autonomy, showing that supportive school environments, teacher self-efficacy and outcome expectations can influence teachers' agency in exercising curricular autonomy. Therefore, SCT provides a sound theoretical foundation for examining whether instructional autonomy and classroom management autonomy are associated with educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State.

Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations

The theoretical foundation is drawn from the major philosophical and social perspectives already reflected in the literature reviewed above. These perspectives are used interpretively: their assumptions are compared with the practical demands of the Nigerian context, and their limitations are treated as part of the analysis rather than as reasons for adopting a single theory mechanically.

Conceptual Method

This paper adopts a conceptual, analytical and literature-based approach. It critically examines and synthesises the scholarly arguments, theoretical perspectives and policy-relevant ideas contained in the source literature. The analysis proceeds through conceptual clarification, comparison of competing perspectives, interpretation of their assumptions, and thematic synthesis of their educational and social implications. The central ideas are treated as concepts and normative problems rather than as variables to be statistically tested. No primary data, respondents, questionnaires, sampling procedures or inferential statistical tests are used in the paper; the conclusions are derived from reasoned engagement with the literature and the Nigerian context.

Thematic Analysis and Central Arguments

Professional autonomy as informed judgement

Teacher autonomy is best understood as professionally bounded discretion rather than unrestricted personal freedom. Teachers require room to interpret curriculum, select examples, adjust pacing, respond to learners and choose pedagogical strategies. Such judgement is meaningful only when it is informed by subject knowledge, pedagogical competence, ethical standards and evidence about student learning.

In analytical terms, professional autonomy as informed judgement also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Autonomy and responsibility

Autonomy creates responsibility because discretion makes the teacher answerable for choices. A profession cannot credibly demand trust while rejecting standards of competence, care and integrity. Responsible autonomy therefore links freedom of professional judgement with obligations to learners, colleagues, parents, the school and the wider public.

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Accountability without managerial over-control

Accountability is necessary, but excessive prescription can weaken professional initiative. When teachers are governed mainly through checklists, surveillance and rigid compliance, they may become less willing to innovate or exercise judgement. A balanced system uses clear standards, transparent expectations, developmental supervision and evidence of learning while preserving reasonable discretion in how teachers achieve educational goals.

In analytical terms, accountability without managerial over-control also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated

into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Teacher agency and school improvement

Teacher autonomy contributes to school improvement when teachers can identify problems, adapt practices, collaborate and initiate solutions. Agency is especially important in contexts where resources are uneven and classrooms differ substantially. However, individual autonomy should be connected to professional collaboration so that useful innovations are shared and weak practices are challenged.

In analytical terms, teacher agency and school improvement also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Trust, competence and policy implications

Sustainable teacher autonomy depends on trust, but institutional trust is earned through competence and reliable professional conduct. Policy should therefore pair autonomy with strong teacher education, induction, continuing professional development, mentoring and fair appraisal. The objective is not to choose between autonomy and accountability but to design an accountable profession capable of thoughtful judgement.

In analytical terms, trust, competence and policy implications also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Critical Synthesis of the Source Literature

The finding agrees with Lin and Gao (2023), who examined the predictors of teachers' teaching autonomy using data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey involving 118,347 teachers across 27 countries. Their study found that teacher professionalism was a significant predictor of teaching autonomy. This supports the present finding because teachers who possess professional competence and are trusted to exercise professional judgement are more likely to take ownership of instructional responsibilities. The finding is also consistent with Yolcu and Akar-Vural (2021), who found that science teachers with higher levels of instructional autonomy demonstrated more effective instructional practices, including the use of contemporary teaching approaches, alternative assessment practices and activities that encouraged higher-order thinking. Their finding suggests that instructional autonomy can provide teachers with the discretion necessary to adapt their classroom practices to learners' needs, thereby strengthening their professional responsibility.

The finding can further be explained using Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasises the reciprocal interaction between personal factors, behaviour and the environment (Bandura, 1986, 2001). From this perspective, teachers who perceive that their professional environment allows them to make instructional decisions may develop stronger perceptions of agency and self-efficacy. Such teachers are likely to take greater personal responsibility for the consequences of their instructional decisions. However, the positive relationship found in the present study does not mean that autonomy automatically produces responsible behaviour. Jerrim et al. (2023) cautioned that greater teacher autonomy does not necessarily lead directly to improved educational outcomes. Rather, autonomy appears to function more effectively when teachers possess professional competence and

operate within supportive organisational structures. The present finding therefore suggests that instructional autonomy should be accompanied by appropriate professional expectations, support and accountability.

The finding is consistent with Yolcu and Akar-Vural (2021), whose investigation of instructional autonomy among science teachers found differences in classroom practices according to teachers' levels of autonomy. Teachers with higher autonomy were reported to demonstrate stronger classroom-management practices and greater use of learner-centred instructional approaches. The present finding also corresponds with the argument of Reeve et al. (2025) that teacher autonomy support and the provision of classroom structure should not be regarded as opposing practices. Rather, effective teaching requires an appropriate combination of teachers' freedom to exercise professional judgement and clear structures that guide learner behaviour and learning activities. This is particularly important because classroom management autonomy without responsibility could potentially result in inconsistent disciplinary practices, whereas autonomy accompanied by professional accountability can enable teachers to respond flexibly while maintaining appropriate standards.

The finding is also supported by Lin and Gao (2023), who established that teacher professionalism was significantly associated with teaching autonomy. This implies that autonomy is more productive where teachers have the professional knowledge and competence required to use discretion appropriately. From the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory, classroom management autonomy provides an environmental condition that can facilitate teachers' agency, while teachers' beliefs about their capabilities influence how they exercise that autonomy (Bandura, 2001). Thus, when secondary school teachers in Rivers State are entrusted with reasonable authority over classroom management, they may be more willing to take responsibility for maintaining discipline, supporting learners and creating favourable conditions for learning. The strong positive relationship obtained in the present study therefore suggests that educational administrators should avoid unnecessary restrictions on teachers' legitimate classroom-management decisions while maintaining appropriate standards for professional accountability.

Nigerian Context and Practical Implications

In Nigeria, the implications of teacher autonomy, professional responsibility and educational accountability in nigerian secondary education must be interpreted against institutional diversity, uneven resources, cultural and religious plurality, strong family and community influences, rapidly changing technology and persistent concerns about educational quality and public trust. A viable approach should therefore avoid importing a single model without adaptation. National and state policy can provide broad principles, but implementation must allow schools, universities, professional bodies and communities to respond to local conditions while remaining accountable to common standards of dignity, fairness, competence and responsibility.

For practice, the central requirement is alignment. Curriculum or policy statements should be supported by teacher or professional preparation, leadership behaviour, assessment and accountability systems, adequate resources, and channels for reflective feedback. Where formal messages and institutional behaviour contradict one another, the practical behaviour of the institution is likely to shape outcomes more strongly than the written policy.

Critical Issues, Limitations and Counterarguments

A conceptual position on teacher autonomy, professional responsibility and educational accountability in nigerian secondary education must acknowledge several cautions. First, values and principles can be interpreted differently across social groups, so conceptual clarity does not remove disagreement. Second, desirable principles may conflict in practice—for example autonomy and accountability, community and individual rights, innovation and equity, or development and ecological protection. Third, institutional constraints can prevent well-designed ideas from being implemented consistently. These tensions support a balanced approach that makes assumptions

explicit, protects legitimate pluralism and treats implementation capacity as part of the argument rather than an afterthought.

CONCLUSION

The study examined teacher autonomy and educational responsibility among secondary school teachers in Rivers State, Nigeria, with particular attention to instructional autonomy and classroom management autonomy. Based on the findings, instructional autonomy had a significant positive relationship with educational responsibility among secondary school teachers. This indicates that teachers who were given reasonable freedom to exercise professional judgement in planning and delivering instruction were more likely to demonstrate responsibility towards their educational duties. The study also established a significant positive relationship between classroom management autonomy and educational responsibility. This suggests that teachers who had adequate discretion to organise classroom activities, manage learners' behaviour and respond appropriately to classroom situations tended to demonstrate higher levels of educational responsibility. The study therefore concludes that appropriate teacher autonomy is an important condition for strengthening teachers' sense of ownership, professional judgement and responsibility in secondary schools. Autonomy, however, should operate within clear professional standards and accountability structures, because apparently even adults trusted with classrooms still benefit from knowing where the boundaries are.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:
2. School administrators should provide teachers with reasonable instructional autonomy by allowing them to select appropriate teaching strategies, organise learning activities and adapt instructional methods to suit the needs and abilities of their students, while ensuring compliance with approved curricula.
3. Principals should strengthen teachers' classroom management autonomy by allowing them to exercise professional judgement in establishing classroom routines, managing learner behaviour and addressing classroom challenges, rather than unnecessarily imposing rigid procedures on every classroom situation.

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