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Managing Behavior in Middle School Classrooms

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This article discusses the findings and implications of a study of eight sixth- and eight eighth-grade teachers and their 628 students. Each teacher was observed six times for a total of 240 minutes. The study focused on 1) how teachers manage their students' behavior and how those management strategies impact teachers' interactions with their students and 2) how these strategies impacted student time-on-task behavior. Data analyses showed that as teacher management behaviors increased student time-on-task decreased and teacher instructional

behaviors decreased. The authors discuss ways teacher educators can help candidates develop important classroom management skills.

Introduction

The climate of any learning environment is greatly influenced by the teacher's ability to form relationships with students that facilitate the achievement of accepted educational goals (Schlechty, 2009). Randi Weingarten stated that managing student behavior, a major factor in determining the relationship between teachers and students, is a complex skill that is very difficult for many teachers to master (Mehta, December 14, 2009). This is not a new concern; managing students' classroom behavior was an issue in the 1830's as Horace Mann fought against the use of corporal punishment in Massachusetts' schools (Cremin, 1957). Thus, the way teachers manage the behavior of their students and the degree to which students comply greatly impacts students' ability to actively participate in ongoing instructional experiences.

Gerald Bracey (2009) explained the importance of studying the way teachers and students interact with one another and how teachers structure the climate of the learning environment to promote and to enhance these interactions. Each classroom is, in effect, a complex society where teachers interact with and influence the academic, social, and emotional growth of their students (Bracey, 2009; Pianta, 2006; Schlechty, 1976). Students also function in this society as they interact with both their peers and teachers. Therefore, studying the social dynamics of the classroom (i.e., the verbal interactions between teachers and their students) may provide a greater understanding of optimal learning environments than does an isolated analysis of student performance on measures of achievement (Bracey, 2009; Eisner, 1984; Jackson, 1968, Pianta, 2006; Schlechty, 1976, 2009; and Waller, 1961).

Administrators of a southeastern school district asked the authors' help in isolating factors that could explain why some teachers seemed to have difficulty keeping students on task while other teachers seemed to have little or no problems in doing so. Essentially, this is a question of a teacher's ability to create a productive learning environment in which students are engaged in instructional experiences. This article shares the results of a sociological study designed to answer the administrators' question.

What Research Tells Us

The following literature review will focus on the distinct factors that guided the current study. These factors include reviews of classroom climate specifically as it relates to the characteristics of middle level students, the importance of teacher-student interactions, and time-on-task.

Classroom Climate for Middle Level Students

Classroom climate research focuses upon the relationships existing between teachers and students and among the students themselves in an attempt to determine the impact that these relationships have on learning. These relationships are formed through interactions that take

place when teachers and students are involved in instructional experiences and when teachers are managing student behavior (Jackson, 1968; Pianta, 2006; Schlechty, 2009). Three decades ago, Evertson and Emmer (1982) reported finding that teachers who could not effectively manage students early in the school year continued to struggle with classroom management issues throughout the entire school year. More recent work by Manning and Bucher (2007) establishes the importance of being able to develop a positive learning environment from the beginning of the school year.

The basis for the modern middle level movement is the position that these students, who are in transition from childhood to adolescence, have a set of common, unique developmental characteristics. In turn, these unique student characteristics should impact teachers as they develop relationships with middle level learners and guide them toward academic success. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) (2010) stressed that middle level students function best in challenging, engaging classroom environments. These learning environments should allow the students opportunities to learn through exploration and interaction with peers, not in passive, teacher centered classrooms. Students need opportunities to explore the environment and apply learning to their everyday lives; these learning environments must provide a safe, inviting, and supportive climate in which students feel empowered to explore challenging curriculum.

Importance of Teacher-Student Interactions

Understanding how teachers and students interact both when instruction is taking place and when behavior is being managed is central to analyzing classroom climate. Nelson-LeGall and Resnick (1998) noted that emotions, perceptions, and motivations are interconnected as they impact these classroom interactions. Schlechty (2009) has emphasized the importance of seeing schools as complex social systems. The complexity and quality of the classroom climate can only be understood through an awareness of how teachers and students interact during instructional and classroom management episodes. Classically, this sociological view of the classroom can be seen in the research of Jackson (1968), Kounin and Gump (1974), and Waller (1961). The work of Osher, Bear, Sprague, and Doyle (2010) and Pianta (2006) are more recent examples of research based on the social dynamics of classroom environments.

Time-on-Task

The climate of an optimal learning environment is typically characterized by students and their teachers being busily engaged in learning tasks, not spending instructional time on non-academic tasks. Research has indicated that behavior problems have a negative effect on classroom climate because they often take the attention of both students and teachers away from instructional activities, and these unwanted interruptions make it more difficult for teachers to focus students back on task. (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2010; Baugous & Bendery, 2000). Prater (1992) suggested that teachers who focus on preventive strategies will have more positive learning environments characterized by less unwanted students behavior which, in turn, leads to greater student time-on-task.

Also, it has been reported that open-ended, high level thinking questions that could be answered with more than one correct answer led to increased student time-on-task (Marshall, 2002). Moreover, it has been reported that as the amount of positive reinforcement used by teachers to reward desired student behavior increased, the amount of student time-on-task also increased (Ratcliff et al. 2010; Rathvon, 1990; Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Stedt, 1985).

Method

This article examines how teachers manage their student's behavior in sixth and eighth grade classrooms, how these management strategies impact teachers' interactions with their students, and how these strategies impact student learning. Also, the analyses provides important data comparing observed middle level classroom climates to the recommended learning environments discussed by the NMSA (2010). The following research questions were asked to guide this study.

1. How do teachers interact with their students when managing behavior?
2. How does time spent on managing student behavior affect teacher instruction?
3. How do students interact with teachers when those teachers are managing their behavior?
4. How do teacher classroom management strategies impact student on-task behavior?
5. How does student behavior affect time-on-task?

Eight sixth- and eight eighth-grade teachers from five public schools in a rural school district located in the southeastern United States were selected to participate in this study. Three of the schools served students in grades six through eight, one school served students in grades four through six, and one school served students in seventh and eighth grades. To be included in the study, a teacher must have taught a minimum of three years, completed a four-year teacher education preparation program in a traditional college setting, and met NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act, 2008) standards for being highly qualified. Final selection of participants was made by each principal who was asked to identify two English/language arts teachers and two math teachers at both the 6th and 8th grade levels; one was to be a teacher considered by the principal to be *strong* while the other was to be a teacher considered *needs improvement*. The principals used annual evaluations and student achievement to select the teachers to include in the study. There were seven white teachers and one black teacher at each grade level. There were seven female teachers and one male teacher in the sixth grade and six female teachers and two male teachers in the eighth grade. The two black teachers were both male; one taught sixth grade and one taught eighth grade. A total of 628 students were observed during this study; since students changed classes, some students were observed in two different teachers' classrooms. Of those students, 37% were Caucasian, 58% were African American, and 5% were Hispanic. All sixth grade classes were heterogeneously grouped; students were assigned randomly by gender and ethnicity by the school administration. Eighth grade students were grouped homogeneously in both mathematics and English.

Data for this study were collected during 40-minute observational segments. Six observations took place in each of the 16 classrooms for a total of 240-minutes, or four hours, per classroom. All observations were unannounced and scheduled at various times throughout the day to include observations of the teaching of reading/language arts and mathematics.

In order to quantify teacher and student interactions occurring in the classrooms, the researchers identified, then operationally defined, specific teacher and student interactions identified in the literature to have an impact on classroom climate. Researchers maintained a continual running record of teacher and student interactions by recording each type of interaction as it occurred. The types of teacher and student interactions tracked in this study were first identified by Schlechty (1976) and later discussed by Hunt, Wiseman, and Touzel (2009).

Teacher behaviors were coded as one of the following five categories: *teacher task behavior*, when the teacher was providing instruction, asking and answering questions, or giving feedback to the students; *teacher normative control*, when the teacher asked students to change their behavior; *teacher remunerative control*, when the teacher manipulated a reward system to control student behavior; *teacher coercion*, when the teacher used physical force, took away property or freedom, or threatened to do either; and *teacher retreatism*, when the teacher failed to react when students violated previously written or stated rules for conduct.

Student behavioral interactions were coded as *student task behavior*, *student conformity*, or *student rebellion*. Student task behavior was operationally defined as normal classroom learning behavior such as asking and answering content related questions asked by the teacher or fellow students, discussing content with the teacher or fellow students, and performing assigned tasks. Student conformity was coded when a student complied with a teacher's behavioral management interaction. Student rebellion was coded when a student overtly refused to comply with an established school or classroom rule (e. g., no fighting) or a teacher's specific behavior management interaction (e. g., sit down).

Finally, the researchers completed five time-on-task scans during every 40-minute observation. Students were considered on task unless it was obvious to the observer that they were not attending to or involved in a learning experience. Time-on-task was recorded as a fraction designating the number of students over the total number of students present during each scan.

Data were collected by college faculty who were trained during a half-day workshop in which they reviewed and discussed operational definitions and recorded observations of a classroom videotape to determine a baseline inter-rater reliability score. Additionally, prior to actual data collection, inter-rate reliability was again established during a classroom observation. Percentage data were obtained by dividing the total number of behaviors recorded in agreement by that number plus those recorded in disagreement, then multiplying by 100. Training continued until data collectors demonstrated inter-rater reliability at or above 90 percent. Moreover, it should be noted that the researchers had used this research protocol and instrumentation in previous studies (Ratcliff et al., 2010; Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Knight, Disney, Savage-Davis, Sheehan, & Hunt, 2012).

The data were translated from the observation record sheets and correlations and regression analyses were run to determine possible existing relationships. Teacher and student interactions were tallied to determine a total number of interactions of each type that occurred at each visit. The average number of students off task for each visit was also calculated.

This research design and the nature of data gathered provide a detailed picture of classroom climate; however, determination of causality cannot be identified through the use of statistical correlations. As with much school-based research, the generalizability to other locations may be limited.

Discussion of Findings

Several constructs were examined to better understand how students and teachers interact in learning environments with the intent of developing a better understanding of the social dynamics common to this sample of middle level classrooms. The discussion of specific findings is organized around the original research questions.

How do teachers interact with their students when managing behavior?

Teachers control students through one of three control interactions: remunerative, coercive, or normative interactions (Schlechty, 1976). It is significant to note how teachers and students interact immediately after the teachers use one of these interactions. If the students rebel (i.e., do not comply with the teachers’ attempts to control their behavior), the teachers might retreat (i.e., ignore the fact that the students have been persistent in their non-compliance). Table 1 provides the mean number of times teachers utilized each of the four teacher behaviors related to the management of students per visit.

Table 1
Teacher Management Behaviors

Teacher Management Behaviors	Frequencies	
	Mean	SD
Coercion	0.88	1.73
Normative Interactions	12.15	13.96
Remunerative control	0.21	0.68
Retreatism	3.15	6.22

The data showed the most frequently employed teacher management behavior was normative interactions (M=12.15, SD=13.96). This finding is consistent with the findings reported in earlier research conducted in second and fourth grades (Ratcliff et al. 2010). Teachers typically use normative control statements such as “Stop talking” and “Don’t do that again” before they use other control strategies. As can be seen in Table 1, coercive and remunerative strategies were used far less frequently. It is interesting to note the frequencies of the use of remunerative control were very small. These middle level teachers also used very little coercion. Given the relatively small standard deviation for coercion, it can be concluded that these middle level teachers were not observed using punitive control strategies nor did they tend to use threats when they controlled student behavior.

The fact that the average number of teacher normative interactions was 12.15 with a SD = 13.96 is a point of concern; this finding indicates that some teachers were characterized by a large number of management issues per 40 minute observations. As Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta (2005) reported, classrooms where there are high-frequencies of management interactions tend to be less effective teaching-learning environments. Obviously, teachers in effective classrooms often find it necessary to use normative control strategies to redirect student behavior; however, the need for excessive use of control strategies is indicative of a high frequency of unwanted student behaviors. It is not the use of normative control that is a concern; it is the need to use them frequently that is worrisome.

How does time spent on managing student behavior affect teacher instruction?

The data in Table 2 indicate that a significant, negative correlation exists between teacher task interactions (instruction) and teacher coercion, teacher normative interactions, and teacher retreatism. The same correlations were also found in the early study of second and fourth grades at the $p < .01$ significance level.

Table 2

Correlations between Teacher Task Interactions and Teacher Management Strategies

Teacher Management Behaviors	Teacher Task Interactions
Coercion	-0.277**
Normative Interactions	-0.305**
Retreatism	-0.389**

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The findings in Table 2 indicate that as teachers were seen using coercion, normative interactions, and retreatism, fewer teacher task interactions took place. Stepwise regression analysis determined that the two management behaviors which combined to significantly predict task interactions were teacher remunerative control and teacher coercion, $\beta = -0.194$, $t(95) = -2.014$, $p < .05$. These variables also explained a significant proportion of variance in teacher interactions, $R^2 = .170$, $F(2.93) = 10.70$, $p < .00$. The significant correlations along with the regression analyses clearly indicate that the more teacher management behaviors a teacher uses the less time that teacher will spend asking questions, answering questions, and providing verbal instruction for students. Interestingly, in the study of second and fourth grade classrooms, it was the excessive use of normative control interactions that significantly predicted teacher task behaviors, not teacher coercion and teacher remunerative control. Ratcliff et al. (2010), Rimm-Kaufman, La Paro, Downer, & Pianta (2005), and Waxman & Wang (1997) all found clear evidence that quality learning environments are characterized by teachers teaching, not managing student behavior. Further research needs to be conducted in this area; however, it can be concluded with great confidence that, based on the findings reported here and in earlier studies, teachers who have fewer management issues spend significantly more time interacting with their students instructionally.

How do students interact with teachers when those teachers are managing their behavior?

Analysis of observational data was completed for student interactions to determine how the students interacted with the teachers as those teachers were trying to manage behavior. Clear relationships appear between teacher coercion, teacher normative interactions, and teacher retreatism and how the students respond to their teacher, as is shown in Table 3. Interestingly, students both conformed to and rebelled from teacher coercion, normative interactions, and retreatism. There was a negative relationship between teacher retreatism and student task interactions explaining that when teachers retreated students tended to disengage from the learning process.

Table 3

Correlations between Teacher Coercion, Normative Interactions, Retreatism and Student Conformity, Task Interaction and Rebellion

	<u>Student conformity</u>	<u>Student rebellion</u>	<u>Student task interaction</u>
Coercion	0.451**	0.391*	
Normative interactions	0.727**	0.556**	
Retreatism	0.212*	0.915**	-.292**

*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

There is a strong positive, significant relationship between the number of times teachers retreat and the number of times students rebel; that is, as teachers display more retreating behavior, students display more unwanted behavior in the classroom. When teachers are aware that a student has broken a stated rule for classroom conduct and that teacher ignores the rebellion, the result will be that student rebellion will increase. As the data in Table 3 indicate, as teachers' exhibit more retreatism, the result tends to be an increase in student rebellion and a decrease in student task interactions (Ratcliff et al., 2010).

How do teacher classroom management strategies impact student on-task behavior?

As seen in Table 4, an analysis of the teacher management behaviors found that coercion, normative interactions, and retreatism are each significantly, negatively related to student time on-task. These results are similar to the results found in previous research conducted in second and fourth grade (Ratcliff et al., 2010).

Table 4
Correlations between Teacher Management Strategies and Time-on Task

Teacher Management Behaviors	Time on-task
Coercion	-0.437**
Normative Interactions	-0.599**
Retreatism	-0.551**

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The amount of teacher coercion, teacher normative interactions, and retreatism clearly impacts the amount of time students spend on-task. Obviously, more student off-task behavior occurs as student rebellion increases. Thus, it seems clear that preventing management problems is a key to increasing student time-on-task. Stepwise regression analysis determined that the two management behaviors which combined to significantly predict student time on-task were teacher normative interactions and teacher retreatism, $\beta = 0.380$, $t(95) = 4.729$, $p < .000$. These variables also explained a significant proportion of variance in teacher interactions, $R^2 = .472$, $F(2.93) = 43.43$, $p < .00$. This finding adds to the evidence that productive classroom climates are characterized by little teacher retreatism and few instances of student rebellion. Obviously, in learning environments where teachers proactively avoid student management issues, there is much less need for coercive corrections; thus, there will be no reason to retreat.

Although no significant positive correlation to time-on-task was found, it should be remembered that remuneration was the only teacher management behavior that did not have a significant, negative correlation to student time-on-task. This finding, along with the significantly, positive relationship that was found between remuneration and student time-on-task in the second and fourth grade study, indicates a need for further study. It does seem reasonable to hypothesize, at this point, that the impact of remunerative control may have a different impact on student task related behavior than does coercion and normative interactions. These findings clearly support researchers who have reported positive relationships between student time-on-task and teacher management strategies (Ratcliff et al., 2010; Baugous & Bendery, 2000; Prater, 1992).

How does student behavior affect time-on-task?

The data in Table 5 coincide well with the findings presented in Table 4. As would be expected from the examination of teacher behaviors, student conformity and student rebellion are significantly, negatively correlated to student time-on-task while student task interactions are positively related to student time-on-task; all correlations were significant at the $p < .01$ significance level.

Table 5
Correlations between student time-on-task and student conformity, rebellion, and task interactions

	Student time on-task
Student conformity	-0.335**
Student rebellion	-0.589**
Student task interactions	0.361**

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Stepwise regression analysis determined that the two student behaviors which combined to significantly predict student time on-task were student rebellion and student task interactions, $\beta = 0.214$, $t(95) = 2.539$, $p = 0.013$. These variables also explained a significant proportion of variance in teacher interactions, $R^2 = 0.377$, $F(2,93) = 26.695$, $p < .00$. As would be expected, as the number of student rebellions decrease in conjunction with an increase in students asking and answering teacher and fellow student content related questions an increase in student time-on-task resulted.

Conclusions and Implications

The data presented here were collected over a four month period of time. Each teacher was observed during six, forty minute periods for a total of 64 hours of observation. The picture of an effective middle school learning environment certainly becomes clearer through an examination of these data. A productive classroom climate is typically characterized by teachers and students verbally interacting about the material under study. It was clear that classrooms where teachers and students were verbally engaged in learning were classrooms where students were on task and teachers spent more time on instruction.

In those classrooms where teachers spent more time asking students to change their behaviors or punishing and threatening students, the students exhibited less time-on-task and teachers spent less time asking questions, answering questions, and providing instructional information. As the NMSA (2010) has stated, productive middle schools are settings that are supportive and safe environments that encourage students and teachers to take part in collaborative learning. In such environments teachers must develop a management system that focuses on the prevention of behavior issues, not a system that focuses on dealing with behavior problems after they occur. It is through prevention that teachers can assure that coercion, retreatism, and excessive normative interactions are avoided. The current study touches on significant characteristics of teachers and students in such a collaborative relationship.

Avoiding retreatism is a key in the development of a challenging, yet supportive, learning environment where students interact while learning. It is clear from this study and others (Ratcliff et al., 2010; Savage-Davis, Costner, Ratcliff, Jones, Sheehan, Scott, and Hunt, 2011) that retreatism leads to the breakdown of the teaching-learning environment. Over long periods of time, teachers are losing hours, even days, of important instructional time because both teachers and students are off task due to increasing behavior management problems in some classrooms. The authors are confident in saying that teachers who retreat when students blatantly break stated rules for conduct have more student rebellion, have more students off-task, and spend less time teaching than teachers who rarely retreat. It is important to note that middle level students were not as quick to comply with verbal requests to change their behavior as elementary level students were in a previous study (Ratcliff et al., 2010). This characteristic of the students

may very well lead to retreatism and the use of coercion by the teachers; of course, both coercion and retreatism were found to be predictive of lower on-task engagement by students and fewer task related interactions by teachers.

This research supports previous findings by Emmer and Stough (2001) who reported that positive educational outcomes are related to the teachers' ability to organize the teaching/learning environment and manage student behavior. Classrooms where less time was spent on instructional interactions and more time was devoted to trying to control student behavior were classrooms where students exhibited more unwanted behavior and less time-on-task.

Since preventing behavior problems is easier and safer than dealing with problems after they occur, a good beginning to the school year is basic to creating the challenging, cooperative classroom climate supported by the NMSA (2010). Moreover, the importance of establishing these critical relationships among teachers and their students at the very beginning of the school year has been stressed by researchers (Evertson & Emmer, 1982; Manning & Bucher, 2007). As discussed earlier, a positive middle school learning environment is challenging and supportive while allowing students to take part in active exploration and interaction with peers. The climate should prohibit personal criticism while promoting peer acceptance (NMSA, 2010).

This study confirms an important finding from the authors' research in second and fourth grades: retreating is a dangerous teacher behavior. Retreatism sends a message to the students that Waller (1961) warned teachers about a half-century ago: retreating tells students that the teacher does not have control of the group. If the teacher is no longer in control Waller warned, the students will take charge of the group. Retreating leads to what Ratcliff et al. (2010) described as a very dangerous cycle of behavior where students misbehave, the teacher ignores the unwanted behavior, and the unwanted behavior continues to increase. The authors' observations indicated that middle school students can become aggressively out of control in a situation like this. We observed a student tell a teacher to "Stop talking so much," while she taught history; another student made vulgar sounds and gestures to the merriment of the class as the teacher just tried to "teach through" the commotion; and we observed a student tell a teacher that she was not going to move anywhere when the teacher tried to move the disruptive student's seat which led to the teacher hanging her head and walking to the other side of the classroom. These teachers commonly exhibited retreatism during every one of the six observation sessions.

Teacher educators should stress the importance of avoiding retreating when students fail to comply with stated rules for conduct. Teacher candidates should be taught to carefully observe student behavior immediately after they have used a behavior control strategy; this is an important step to ensure that students are complying before the teacher continues with any other activity (Hunt, Wiseman, & Touzel, 2009; Jones & Jones, 2013; Marzano, Gaddy, Foseid, Foseid, & Marzano, 2009). Often, teacher candidates do not understand the importance of requiring students to comply with their attempts to manage behavior. In a recent discussion with a student teacher in a middle school placement, the candidate was asked why she failed to follow through when a student refused to comply when she asked him to turn around in his seat. Her reply was, "Well, it really wasn't all that important for him to turn around." This student teacher missed the point that 1) she should not have told the student to turn around if it was not all that

important and 2) after she told the student to turn around, the issue was about the student complying to the teacher, not whether it was important to turn around or not. The student teacher had retreated which could weaken her ability to maintain on-task behavior in the classroom. The following recommendations are suggested to help teachers avoid retreating.

- Quickly recognize and respond to disruptive behaviors.
- Exhibit a calm, non-judgmental, confident demeanor when correcting misbehavior.
- Wait for the student to comply with the request before continuing with the lesson.
- Ignore insignificant behaviors that do not disrupt the learning environment.
- Enforce rules in a consistent, fair manner.
- Ensure every student's dignity by refraining from the use of shame and humiliation as a way to control behavior. (Ratcliff et al., 2010, p. 47)

This paper examined how teacher management strategies impacted the way a sample of sixth and eighth grade teachers interacted with their students and how these same students functioned in the learning environment. Teachers who spend more time answering questions, asking questions, and interacting instructionally in other ways with their students have students who are also engaged and on task. In this environment, teachers have less need to correct behavior; however, all teachers will have occasions where it is necessary to correct unwanted student behavior. It is very important that when students need to be redirected middle school teachers avoid coercive or, in any way humiliating, control techniques. Interacting with middle school students during instruction is a critically important factor in a teacher's success. Teacher candidates need many opportunities to practice this important teaching behavior in classroom settings since it is probably best learned through field experiences. Teacher candidates who can fluently use teacher task interactions (asking and answering questions, discussing concepts, etc.) are well positioned to succeed.

The current study sheds additional light on significant teacher behaviors and their relationship to positive and negative middle school student behaviors. Additional research will be necessary to fully understand these important constructs. In particular, more study is needed to determine if management interactions and time-on-task are related to specific teaching strategies. For example, in an effort to more fully understand the impact of questioning on student engagement, the use of questions in the classroom needs further exploration. It may very well be the level of student questions that holds the key to understanding the thought levels at which students function. Student thought level, of course, is critical to an understanding of classroom climate. With this information, teacher educators and clinical supervisors will better understand how to help candidates create optimal learning environments.

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