Teachers' Challenges And Their Perception - An Interventional Study Through Reading And Reflecting For Collaborative Learning

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Abstract

Teaching is complex and multi-dimensional, and it has multiple challenges, like academics, classroom management, relationship with students, peers and parents and handling such challenges requires multiple skills. The objective of this study was to assess the change in perception of teachers towards their challenges by an interventional approach of reading and reflecting. This was measured by administering a questionnaire, where the teachers rated their perception of challenges in their profession before and after the reading sessions. The reading was done online (Zoom) with 25 to 35 teachers attending the session. A structured questionnaire (developed by the researcher, validated and tested for reliability with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.94) was administered before and after the intervention. Data was analysed using mean analysis and t-test. Factor analysis was used to categorise the challenges. Results showed a significant reduction in the degree of difficulty the teachers experienced regarding the academic and student challenges.

Keywords: Challenges, Teacher, Perception, Learning, Reading, Reflecting

1. Introduction

Teaching is not only complex and multidimensional, but is considered a highly social and emotional profession (Dolev & Leshem, 2017). This makes this noble profession into a daunting and challenging task. Especially in this VUCA world where changes are happening at a fast rate with new technology emerging every minute, a teachers role is evolving and looks very unpredictable. This could be very scary and demotivating for a teacher to carry on with their job. Those challenges can weigh them down if they don't train and learn how to cope with them, cognitively and emotionally. There are innumerable training modules that CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education, India) and other institutions have devised to upgrade the skills and knowledge of the teachers on the cognitive level. But if the challenge itself is perceived as daunting and difficult, that negativity will impact deep learning and

change (Postareff et al., 2015). Is there any means by which that perception of their challenges can be altered? Could bringing in a shift in the perception of the challenges be a way to enable teachers to cope and learn irrespective of challenges? Teachers have certain perceptions about the challenges which could have different intensity, ranging from "highly challenging" to "less challenging". And this has a direct implication on their willingness to overcome those challenges. If teachers could be taught to shift this perception from high to low challenging, the probability of overcoming those challenges is very high, which impacts positively on the performance of the teacher and the teacher-student relationship. That requires teachers' willingness to learn.

Learning is primary to teach. Without being open to learning, one cannot be a good teacher. And this learning needs to happen on the level of communities. Success of communities is

more palpable than individual success and that depends on how well people live and learn together (Petrich, 2015). Healthy conversations give birth to communities, enabling contagious learning where enthusiasm and struggle is shared (Petrich, 2015). This activity is an attempt to build a healthy community of teachers where learning happens together. If teachers get enrolled into the benefits of community learning (co-learning), then, they can create the same environment in the school system. It's well known that a parent or a teacher's reading and literary skills affects the next generations reading and literary skills. Studies have proved the efficacy of reading and listening on comprehension and academic performance (T. G. Devine, 1976; Divaris et al., 2008; Petrich, 2015; Ryan Wagar, 2016). Very little research is reported on the influence of reading, listening and reflecting on the perception of challenges that people face in their profession, especially teachers. This study is an attempt to measure this influence and evaluate the contribution that listening to book reading can make on a altering the perception of the challenges faced by the teachers. The intervention employed to accomplish this is the reading, listening and reflecting of a book addressing the community of teachers.

Perception of challenges

Stanford psychologist Gregory Walton in a new paper in Psychological Review, says "People try to make sense of challenges in their lives, but sometimes their explanations get in the way of solving them. And most of the times people draw negative conclusions about situations they face". This could be because of the default narratives and evidences they already have from their past experiences regarding challenges. Walton found that what helped students who had challenges in belonging, were stories from diverse, older students showing that worries about belonging are very normal and natural when they come to college and they pass with time (WITTE, 2018). This shift in their perception of the challenge of belongingness altered the way the challenge was dealt with. So, when students gave attention to the similarities of what the older students had gone through, their perception of the challenge altered. Giving attention to new knowledge or awareness can have far reaching influence on subjective perception (Lupyan, 2017) of challenges.

Teachers have similar challenges all over the world. Whether it is academic challenges like preparing lesson plan or managing teacherstudent relationship or teacher-parent relationship or the admin related issues. When searching for studies and research work conducted regarding challenges faced by teachers in a normal main stream, not many studies popped. Papers published related to Challenges in teacher research, challenges with children who are disabled, challenges faced by teachers during Covid, professional learning challenges, challenges faced by new teachers. are dominant, but research papers or studies concerning challenges faced by regular teachers in a regular school atmosphere have been scanty. The link between culture and teacher and hence on the challenges that they face has great potential and answers in developing pedagogical resources to address the future pathway in the field of education. This is highly needed at a time when technological advances are moving fast and teachers would end up facing innumerable challenges which needs to be studied and measures solutions appropriate and recommended. This is also in line with teachers behaviour directly impacting the teacher-student interpersonal relationship and its fallout on the students performance and outcomes.

There is a very high influence of the students perception of teaching-learning environment on the quality of learning and their intent to deeply understand the content (Parpala et al., 2010; Postareff et al., 2015). If we want the students to learn deeply v/s on a surface level (rote-level), then we need to have a positive teaching-learning environment (TLE) (Parpala, 2010). When teachers perception to the challenges of the environment can be made more positive and approachable, there is a direct influence on TLE which enhances the quality of deep learning of students.

In a study with dental students, it was found there are different learning styles and preferences among students and hence education content need to be delivered through variety of methods (Divaris et al., 2008). Even though these students are older in age, this could be extrapolated to the school scenario. If the teachers have to understand the difference between 'teaching' and 'learning', they need to understand the students different needs (which is challenging) and that's when they will have the information required to make the TLE conducive. And for that, the teachers perception of that challenge needs to have a positive shift. And hence this intervention, which has proved this is possible with simple group activities like reading, listening and reflection of motivational books.

Teachers perception of either challenges or about their students' abilities can positively or negatively shape the expectations of their students, which then impacts their academic performance (IRIS centre, n.d.). This research has given an access to shift that perception to train teachers in taking responsibility of their perceptions and their impact on students.

Reading, Listening and Reflecting

One of the modes that learning can happen is by reading. Reading a book alone is one way, and reading to or listen to someone reading is another way to read a book. This makes reading and listening similar. Both these skills enhance the ability to learn and decode the components of communication, even though they make different demands upon the person who is receiving the communication (T. G. Devine, 1976). The reader is alone with the page, whereas a listener has not only the reader in front, but also has access to other forms of communication to learn from. However, listeners, unlike readers are vulnerable to be influenced by the peculiar impact of the spoken words (T. Devine, 1978). In spite of similarities and dissimilarities of reading and listening, their link to literature and increasing knowledge is symbiotic (Ryan Wagar, 2016). A study carried out by Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson in 1985, found that the most significant activity for increasing reading skills and comprehension for children is to read them aloud to them, (Ryan Wagar, 2016) where they listen. Lundsteen (1971) defines listening as "the process by which spoken language is converted to meaning in the mind", even though she further cautions that listening is not something that can be defined in a sentence or paragraph (T. Devine, 1978). And, when inspirational narratives are read out loud, someone listening tends to get inspired and motivated. Added to that, reflection helps people revisit what they have learnt for improvement and for in-depth learning (Chang, 2019). David A Kolb suggests that "reflective observation transforms concrete experiences into learning experiences", and "experiences are re-thought in order for the perspective to change" (Chang, 2019), and when teachers stop, think, reflect and consider, they ask themselves questions like 'How can I use this information?' or 'How will it help me in my classroom?' (Helyer, 2015). This results in higher chances of that learning staying with them for long.

The Book

The book chosen was "Ordinary people Extraordinary teachers", authored S.Giridhar, COO of Azim Premji University. This book is a compilation of the qualitative study that Azim Premji foundation conducted to record the 'good' work that the resource people had initiated, and the emergence of heroes who imparted education in the most compassionate way to the under-privileged children in government schools in the inner most rural India. These are fascinating chronicles of teachers from the states of Karnataka, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan who went beyond all limitations of resources within themselves and outside too, just doing their work with one premise, which is "every child can learn". The altruistic attitude of the teachers in the rural areas where resources are scant and the need for education is inevitable, has the ability to awaken and motivate people.

The author has had authentic conversations with teachers providing scintillating insights into their lives, hopes, difficulties and frustrations. The narratives capture the work of these teachers, their perspective on education, the struggle (personal and professional) they underwent to learn and unlearn, display of empathy and the way these translate into equity and quality in the classroom. The stories also include glimpses of their everyday lives, routines and the struggles thev encountering. These are very human issues that have been recorded and very connectable to all teachers. Also, what really is touching about the heroes in these narratives is the commitment to devise their own strategies to solve rural issues and their determination to consistently improve their own capabilities. These stories are apt to inspire and motivate the teachers and enable them to appreciate the efforts that their fellow teachers have taken and learn from them.

2. Methodology

This study used mixed intervention design to accomplish the results with both quantitative and qualitative methods being employed. Descriptive design using survey method was employed for getting data for quantitative analysis. Open-ended questions were used to get data for content analysis to help us explore and understand the different ways the intervention (reading and reflection) can benefit.

Every challenge that a teacher can face were listed down after a thorough discussion with some teachers from a reputed school. Then, we categorised an exhaustive list of challenges and spelled it out as shown in Table II.

A structured questionnaire validated, was used to get the responses of the teachers for quantitative analysis. Also, open ended questions were asked where qualitative replies were received, which provided us with details of what they learned in the process.

The researcher sent out a message (Table I) on WhatsApp to all the groups and contacts and requested them to send that out to as many teachers as possible in their circle. Sixty teachers accepted the invitation and came to the call. Again, they were briefed on the process and asked to choose if they would be part of this reading session for research. Forty nine teachers gave the consent. They filled up the questionnaire which consisted of questions regarding the challenges they were facing in their profession and to rate their perception of their challenges. Relevant demographic details required for the study were also collected. They were told that there will be ten sessions spread out over a span of ten weeks (One hour every Saturday, 9 reading sessions and 1 concluding session), starting July 24th till October 2nd, 2021.

The study was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of doing a baseline assessment of teachers' perception about the issues and challenges faced by them, by having

them answer the questionnaire and rating the challenges. This was done on the first reading which was July 24th. The same day, Book reading and reflection started as the intervention. Every reading session, some time was given for teachers to share their reflections from the narrative that was read. The reflections were collected either orally as sharing during the sessions or in written form using google.

During phase II, the second assessment was made after nine reading sessions to measure the difference in the perceptions. Teachers who attended at least four sessions were included in the study. Hence, teachers who had filled both the questionnaires, but had not attended minimum four sessions were excluded from the study. And during every session, open ended questions (through google forms) were asked and the teachers were requested to articulate their reflections. These answers of the teachers gave us information on how the reading influenced their thinking or perception of the challenges.

Before every reading session, a request was made to the teachers in the form of an instruction. The instruction given was "Your problems or circumstance may not be as similar or same as that of a rural teacher. Or even if the situations are similar, that strategy may not connect to you. All I want you to do is to see the approach, ways of thinking, their stand and

the openness the teacher is looking at the circumstance that is a challenge". This helped teachers not assuming or discounting the challenge and listen more closely to the reading.

After the data was collected, factor analysis was used to reduce these eight categories into just three categories, namely, Academics and Students, School Environment and Personal Issues. The list can be found as Table III. Academics and Students consisted of factors relating to Lesson plan, notes correction, volume and nature of syllabus, keeping the children engaged in projects and assignments, exam preparation, dealing with parents and children expectations, need to upgrade their skills, creating discipline in class, dealing with difficult expectations and dealing with different capabilities of children.

2.1 Questionnaire – The instrument

A structured questionnaire (developed by the researcher, validated and tested for reliability with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.94) was deployed and administered before and after the intervention where the challenges were rated on a 10-point scale where 1 is "less challenging" and 10 is "highly challenging". The questionnaire had statements which required teachers to answer through rating for quantitative analysis and also questions that gave us qualitative answers that could help us explore the learnings. The questionnaire had five sections and it was administered as a google form online. Their consent to be a part of this research was asked and only if they said "yes" did the form allow them to fill the questionnaire. Demographic details of the teachers were collected to understand different aspects of their background. The school they taught, how many children do they handle, gender, subjects and grades they teach, educational qualifications, years of experience, were asked. Totally twenty four challenges were considered.

Twenty-seven challenges were listed that the teachers would be facing. Then a discussion with some active teachers helped to validate the challenges and on their suggestion, only twenty four were considered. The list of twenty-four challenges is listed in Table II and Table 1 depicts these challenges along with the coding and the variance which was analysed using Factor Analysis in JMP Pro software.

Every week, after the reading of two narratives, the teachers were encouraged to reflect and share what they are learning, either orally in the session or by filling a google form.

After nine weeks of reading, the same questionnaire with another section added was administered to the teachers. Another section added was to know the learnings they got overall out of listening to the reading and how it made a difference to them.

2.2 Objective of the study

1. To measure the teachers' perception of the challenges they face in their profession before and after the intervention of book reading. 2. To measure the level of significance of the shift.

Every profession has its own challenges and so does teaching. And the probability that those challenges weighs too heavily on the teachers is high. An attempt was made through reading to reduce the weight of these challenges and shift the mindset of the teachers on these challenges and have them be more approachable to resolve these challenges. The purpose of

this study is to check the efficacy of a simple activity or intervention to shift the perception of these challenges.

The research Questions that were addressed are:

1. Does reading and reflecting to case studies about overcoming struggles of teachers in groups, enable other teachers to overcome their challenges? What's the impact of listening to case studies (of overcoming challenges & problem solving) on teachers?

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Quantitative Analysis:

In phase I, forty-nine teachers filled up the questionnaire and during phase II, thirty four teachers filled the second questionnaire. The sample size for the study comprised of these 25 teachers who had filled both questionnaire and also attended minimum four reading sessions.

Everyone in the study were women and we had a mixed group of language and subject teachers and equal mix of primary and high school teachers (13 primary teachers and 12 high school teachers). 12 teachers were between 36-45 years of age and only one was above 55. Eighteen (72%) teachers had B.Ed. as their highest qualification and seven (28%) teachers were post-graduates. All the teachers in the study represented CBSE board teaching and hence followed same pedagogy. Seventeen (68%) teachers had more than ten years of experience and four (16%) had less than five years of experience.

A. Factor Analysis for grouping the challenges

The list of twenty four challenges were analysed using Factor Analysis and were grouped into 3 main factors (categories),

- 1. Academic and Student Factor
- 2. School Environment
- 3. Personal Issues

Factor analysis was done using JMP Pro software for Varimax rotation. The factor loadings and the variance explained by each aspect of the factors are explained in Table III & IV. Table III gives all the factors with appropriate loadings and Table IV shows the variance too. JMP Pro software was used for the statistical analysis.

Table III: "Result of Factor Analysis out of the data collected from teachers with coding" to be inserted here.

Teachers also rated the three top most challenges of their profession, when they were asked a direct question "Please list down the top 3 challenges that's important for you among the above", the teachers mentioned,

- Dealing with Parents expectations
- To keep children engaged with project work and assignments
- The need to upgrade your skills and self-development

The top most challenge reported by the teachers as analysed using Factor analysis was SEXP(0.879), followed by EXPE (0.867) and ONLINE (0.853), which was different from the answer they reported when directly asked. This could be due to the distinction between what

teacher 'think' is their topmost challenge (when asked directly) and what they 'feel' or 'experience' as their topmost challenge (when they rated the challenges).

The challenges they directly answered were rated 7th (PEXP), 4th (P&A) and 5th (S&SD) with factor loadings of 0.75, 0.84 & 0.82 respectively. However, it was very surprising to find 76% of teachers specifying, 'dealing with parents expectations' as the topmost challenge they face. This is in line with a qualitative research study conducted in 2018 at Netherlands which states "Teacher and parent interaction" as the most important concerning issue as they said that parents have become

more enforcing and they go against the advice of the teachers (Want et al., 2018). The teachers in this study seem to echo this concern and challenge. The second most challenge was keeping the children engaged. With technology growing and exposure to students at its highest level with internet around, finding creative ways to keep children engaged and interested is a challenge indeed. This needs the teachers to be upgrading and training themselves ongoingly, which very clearly has emerged as the third most challenge.

B. Mean Analysis & t-test:

The analysis was done at two levels. One was at a Group level where, rating of all teachers was considered challenge-wise and another, at individual level where each teachers' mean score was analysed before and after. There is a significant difference in the mean calculated at group level. But no significant difference at the level of individual teacher. However, when only Academic and Student factor was considered, there is a significant difference at the individual teacher level too.

- The difference between mean ratings of all the challenges of all teachers at the group level before (Mean – 4.61) and after (Mean – 4.28) the intervention was 0.33. Subsequent two tailed t-test gave a p-value of 0.01 (< 0.05) which confirms that the mean difference is significant. This explains the significance of the group collectively. Barak (2018) says "To share burdensome emotions with others and to feel socially involved in the group have shown to result in a sense of relief" (Smedberg et al., 2016). Wenger (2004) argues that individuals get influenced by the views of others and group and community sharing (Smedberg et al., 2016). This explains the shift in perception of the teachers during reading, listening and reflecting sessions. This not only reduces their stress levels, but also helps in creating a more open mind in them. This directly creates a positive teaching-learning environment (TLE) for the students in the classroom. This promotes an environment conducive for deep learning to happen since the teachers also tend to indulge in that.
- b. On the individual level, results showed significant shift only in teachers' perception regarding Academic and Student factor (12 challenges categorised in Table II) with the

difference in mean before (5.81) and after (5.02) the intervention much higher at 0.79 and significant (p = 0.00003). The graph depicting the ratings before and after the intervention is shown in Figure A. The highest shift (23.63%) was in the aspect of 'Exam preparation and evaluation', followed by 'Lesson planning and preparation'(21%) and 'To keep children work engaged with project assignments'(20.99%), which could be due to the examples shared in the narratives which could have given more ideas in this aspect. One more

Fig a: The shift in perception of teacher challenges (academic & students) Before and after reading intervention to be inserted

The difference perceptions in school regarding factors pertaining environment and personal issues were not very The intervention made significant. significant difference to the teachers' perception pertaining to challenges faced in school environment and personal issues. This could be due to absence of these issues being mentioned in the narratives. This could also be due to the professional protocol of reminding people to keep personal life away from professional life. And, since the teachers are answering this questionnaire keeping their profession in mind, they may have not thought of the personal challenges, or may have felt that this could be socially inappropriate to mention here or may not have mentioned to avoid looking bad.

c. The factor that explained the variance to a large extent is 'Academic & Students', which was 33.83%. Variance explained by School environment is 20% and Personal Issues explains 19.2% of the variance. Totally, these three factors explains 73% of the

variance. This finding is in accordance with many reports published by Times of India, Gamalearn, Edsys, where the highest challenges are to do with Lesson planning, examination, understanding and satisfying students' needs, and then comes the admin issues or parental issues or issues with management(Gamalearn, n.d.; Tadas, 2019).

Table IV: The Variance and Loadings chart given by the Factor Analysis done using JMP Pro software to be inserted

The results give enough evidence that when teachers participate in simple activities like reading, listening and reflecting, intensity of the perception of challenges they face diminished. And when challenges smaller, there is a high probability of teachers willingness and the ability to overcome those challenges increasing. This is evident in the reflection of this teacher saying, "Education using local things, projects, local exploration are the things I would like to take with me", or the teacher saying this accepting their limitations, "When I think of me, sometimes I gave excuses for my failures in reaching out the students due to my family issues. I think by knowing Maheshwari I learnt lesson of not giving excuses to accomplish tasks as a teacher". These reflections show that the teachers are willing to open their minds to accept their shortcomings and look at new possibilities.

Do teachers perceive such interventions can make a difference in the way they handle challenges with students? Teachers answered this in the affirmative and were interested to take this to the classroom and saw that this can made a difference to the children. However, this is not a conclusive evidence since the sample used in this experiment is small.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis of the reflections received:

Qualitative analysis helps in naturalistic understanding of human experiences and opinions which are subjective in nature and require a different theory to interpret in the individual differences and narratives (Ong'ong'a, 2021). Teachers have expressed their learnings through the reflections that they posted using the google form every week. Hence

qualitative method of analysis is also used to bring forth a variety of individual reflections and create a pattern of those interpretations.

Reflection is an "Intentional, dynamic process that allows improvement in one's actions, abilities, and knowledge by learning from past experiences" (Castleberry et al., 2016), and also from others past experiences as the teachers were listening to the narratives that were read. This allows the teachers to think and learn on a deeper level, stays with

them for a longer time and probability of putting the learning into action would be high.

Reflections can be categorised into three types. First one is based on their function where reflection includes personal and classroom practice reflection, second is based on structure, where reflection includes reframing and debriefing what's been read, and the third is the temporal reflection based on time, reflecting on the past, present activities or future planning

(Chang, 2019). Asking a question after reading each narrative was employed to encourage teachers to reflect.

The question that was asked to the teachers after every narrative and reading sessions was

"What are your take away, learning or reflections of today's narratives?". The responses can be grouped into the three types as mentioned above.

a. Based on function:

1. **Taking away new ideas**. "The school has everything a private school can have. The best idea I liked is introducing a book in assembly. I think this is a great idea to develop reading in the students. The school itself is an example that if you develop concepts properly in the students they do well in higher grades. Education

using local things, projects, local exploration are the things I would like to take with me."

2. **Relating to the new techniques.** "Being a Math teacher I can relate with place value concept taught by Mukesh Nautiyal. I could imagine the class room and was amazed by his idea of using roll no's as Teaching Learning materials. The Application and liking towards Mathematics will definitely grow in this way of teaching Math."

b. Based on Structure:

- 1. **Mentioning what about the teacher** in the narrative inspired them, like "Liked the experimental mindset of Parameshwaraiah"
- 2. **Taking a feather from the teacher in the book.** "Cannot believe somebody can be so committed towards their passion, irrespective of her difficulties at home. It's an inspiring story. My take away: will continue to

write my diary and be motivated whatever is the situation at home as in Rameshwari's story.

- 3. **Objectively**, like "Time management, Connecting to nature, Organising"
- 4. **Directly sharing what they learned**, like "To focus on the children who needs extra help and never give up on them"
- 5. **Inspired by the act of the teacher in the book**. For example, "Mukesh is really a hero in our teaching field though he could pursue great positions with his qualifications, he dedicated his life to make every child to achieve their goal. Even I appreciate their team work. I know team work will always bring the results in

flying colours."

c. Based on time:

1. Shared experiences connecting to their own life, authentically accepting their shortcomings, like one teacher sharing, "It is awesome of the teacher's dedication towards teaching though she had other calls to attend and her carrying her baby with her wherever she goes is another thing which inspired me. When I think of me, sometimes I gave excuses for my failures in reaching out the students of my family issues. I think by knowing Maheshwari I learnt lesson of not giving excuses to accomplish tasks as a teacher."

4. Limitation

This study was a novel approach to make learning available and possible in simple environments with simple tools like books and a group of teachers available, and test the

efficiency and efficacy of these methods of learning. However, even though the study started with 49 teachers, only 25 teachers stayed back till the end of the study and hence the sample size reduced in quantity. Hence the results cannot be generalised to larger groups or even to heterogeneous groups. Also, the teachers participated willingly in this activity and so it is not clear whether this will work when teachers are forced into participating, which could happen in school scenarios if this is made mandatory for training purposes. Even then, there is a ray of possibility presented through this experiment conducted for 10 weeks.

5. Conclusion

With this experimental research, it is evident that this intervention of a simple group activity of reading, listening and reflecting has the ability to positively shift the teachers perception of the challenges they face and the activity is a simple, inexpensive and can-bedone-anywhere-anytime pursuit. This is a group of teachers who voluntarily chose to listen to the reading and hence there was willingness to learn. But if this is done as a mandatory activity in schools and teachers are forced to attend, would we get the same result? This can be explored if we can partner with schools and conduct this study. Also, this was done online and still resulted in producing a good result, and if done face-to-face, would it give better result and outcome? Further studies can be pursued, not only one time with bigger sample, but also longitudinal studies with a larger cohort can give us insights on the efficacy of reading and reflecting and using this method to enable and empower teacher to the next level. Future research is invited in this area to understand how this shift happens and whether the shift got translated into action in the school environment. This could give us a clear access to creating a harmonious and a positive teaching-learning environment in schools with simple, ingenuous, modest and minimal tools that can encourage deep learning happening.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [Padmashree G S]. The data are not publicly available due to teachers confidentiality statement.

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