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Teachers' perspectives on the disciplinary challenges Mapulana male initiates impose on teaching and learning at Mpumalanga Schools

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Abstract

The study investigated the experiences of educators at secondary schools in the province of Mpumalanga regarding the lack of discipline among male initiates at Mapulaneng. Educational and cultural practices should coexist and complement each other. In South African schools, indiscipline is a common problem affecting learning results and instructional efficacy. Teachers at three senior secondary schools in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, persistently raised concerns about the indiscipline of Mapulana males in initiating learners. Leaving this challenge unattended has the potential for dire consequences in providing quality education to learners at the affected schools. Applying qualitative research methodologies based on the social constructivist framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 educators from three high schools. The sample of teachers included males and females from post-level 1 to those in management positions.

The findings revealed the teachers' unhappiness about the behaviour of the male initiates, displayed towards the teachers and other learners, especially towards boys who have not undergone initiation. Further findings suggest that collaborative efforts between educators, parents, and the community

Keywords: Culture, education, learner indiscipline, behaviour, and male initiation school

Introduction

I sometimes dread going to classes where there are male initiate students.
- Reflection of a schoolteacher

For a variety of cultural, social, religious, or medical reasons, male initiation, which frequently entails circumcision, has been practiced (Setswe, Mabaso, Sifunda, Mbhele, Maduna and Mthembu, 2015). One of the oldest medical practices, circumcision is documented in Egyptian tombs dating back to 2345 BC (El-Hout & Khauli, 2007). Neonatal circumcision within the first two weeks of life is a sacred rite in Judaism and Islam, but it has been a frequent practice in the United States since the late 19th century (Van Howe, 1997; Morris, Wright, Trevor, Stiles, Stahl, Snell, Paauwe, and Farndale, 2012). According to Earp and Darby (2017), circumcision during adolescence is a cultural rite of passage into adulthood. The practice of initiating boys into manhood is common in sub-Saharan Africa and is expected to change the behaviour of boys who have reached manhood. In South Africa, the practice of initiating boys into manhood is practised by various ethnic groups, and Mapulana in the Bushbuck region of Mpumalanga is one area where young boys are encouraged to participate.

Being circumcised has been linked to a perceived lack of respect for initiates from other cultures who have not had the surgery, according to research. As De Cremer and Tyler (2011) and Tyler and De Cremer (2005) note, respect is essential in social interactions, since it shows acceptance of, and recognises, a person's social standing, credibility, and sense of belonging. According to Simon, Lucken, and Stürmer (2006), respect in society entails equality, where no one is thought to be better or worse than others.

South African schools (particularly those in rural areas) face various challenges related to learner indiscipline, which hampers effective teaching and learning (Mokoena, 2020). In Mpumalanga Province, Mapulana learners often exhibit behaviours perceived as disruptive, creating a need for a deeper exploration of teachers' lived experiences and coping mechanisms. School discipline can manifest in absenteeism, defiance, and disrespect, which undermine classroom dynamics and the educational process (Zulu, Sandøy and Moland, 2019).

The Masana, Kodumela and Phendule secondary schools, situated in a culturally rich yet socioeconomically challenged area, present a case study of how cultural factors intersect with educational challenges. Teachers at these schools often grapple with maintaining discipline while respecting the learners' cultural backgrounds, which presents a dual challenge. This research presents an opportunity for educators to share their perspectives on the behaviour of the male initiates in their classrooms.

In 2018, Daniel reported that the then-South African Minister of Basic Education, Dr Angie Motshekga, admitted that the initiation rites have varying educational impacts. They can, amongst others, spread bullying behaviours and oppressive practices, leading to a dissonance between the intended purpose of integration and the experience of learners. Traditional male initiation may aggravate disciplinary problems in schools and contribute to gender inequalities, patriarchy, gangsterism, and criminality. Initiation customs are predominant in traditionally rural black schools. In line with universal Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015), of ensuring quality education for all, this research highlights the issue of indiscipline amongst initiates at schools, and how it can negatively affect the achievement of SDG goals.

Literature review

Teachers play a critical part in forming the direction of a learner's capacity to work both in and out of the classroom and are ideally suited to have an impact on numerous aspects of learners' advancement (Baweja, DeCarlo, Vona, Pears, Langley and Kataoka, 2016). The challenge of learner indiscipline has become an increasing concern in schools in the global south.

According to Joubert, De Waal and Rossouw (2004), discipline involves any measures employed to teach a person self-control and satisfactory conduct, in addition to shaping character. Respect and responsibility are significant features of discipline. Any learner who lacks self-control, fails to show respect, or does not assume responsibility is displaying characteristics of indiscipline. Maphosa and Mammen (2011) note that learner indiscipline compromises the instruction and learning taking place in the classroom. The policy on learner discipline in South Africa, according to Magwa and Ngara (2014), calls on learners to behave in a way that respects school authority, complies with rules and regulations, and acts in keeping with the school's code of conduct. Mischievous or anti-social learners hinder the smooth delivery of teaching and the acquisition of learning. It is extraordinarily significant for schools to adopt exceedingly compelling methodologies to control and limit learner indiscipline for effective learning and teaching.

Mohlaloka (2014) contends that cultural initiation practices are performed by several ethnicities, while other tribes do not subscribe to the practice. Conflicting social convictions and values can cause conflict inside the school

setting. Another pressing issue around customary initiation practice is that it creates tension among black school educators in the formal schooling sector. They articulate that male learners who have been to cultural initiation schools contribute to discipline problems at formal schools. Mohlaloka, Jacobs and De Wet (2016) found that whereas educators in formal school's battle with "generic discipline problems", they confront extra challenges with the unacceptable conduct of male learners who return from cultural initiation schools.

Even though learner indiscipline appears to be a cause for concern in South African schools, members of South African townships state that ethnic differing qualities are the most overwhelming figure in indiscipline in secondary schools (Lemmer, Meier, and Van Wyk 2006).

Learner mischief hinders schools' essential purpose, which is to facilitate quality teaching and learning. Joubert and Squelch (2005) emphasise that "good discipline is one of the key characteristics of a compelling school". Without it, successful teaching and learning cannot take place. With the development of Christian missions from the 15th century, Western culture (particularly British), started to enter southern Africa. Western missionaries brought with them Western culture, coming full circle in the presentation of formal instruction, with its emphasis on scholarly and scholarly work (Joubert and Squelch, 2005). European missionaries to southern Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries played a strangely ambiguous role in the history and affairs of the region. On the one hand they were driven by a strong desire to genuinely serve humanity and bring about material and social changes which would improve its quality of life. On the other hand, they were possessed of a moral self-righteousness which led them to make hasty and uninformed judgments upon indigenous mores, norms, and values they were scarcely equipped to understand. Concurring with Adeyemi and Adeyinka (2003), Black African guardians promptly acknowledged these initiation secrets. They sent their children to schools moulded on European educational programmes to learn, slowly setting aside the kind of cultural instruction they had received.

Proponents of social and cultural practices claim that initiation schools instil the virtues of discipline, boldness, continuance, and flexibility in initiates (Le Roux, 2006). The cultural initiation schools which young men attend ordinarily last three months which gives us more than six weeks for Mapulana lineage in Mapulaneng village of Bushbuckridge, in the Mpumalanga area. In essence, the period should not exceed that of the schooling calendar. The argument is that time is regularly spent in the bush or mountain, where initiates are disconnected from all social systems, permitting young men to learn survival skills as part of the custom of transitioning into adulthood (Malisha, Maharaj, and Rogan 2008). *Lebollo* is the type of informal education through which boys are instructed on certain life skills, how to conduct themselves as men, and how to relate to others in the community.

According to Mboweni (2014), learner truancy is prevalent during winter, due to the operations of cultural initiation schools. This is the season when boys from the Bushbuckridge environs enter initiation schools. Although there are guidelines that regulate the duration of initiation schools, numerous traditional surgeons and principals of initiation schools turn a blind eye to these.

Guiding concepts

The conceptual framework guiding this paper was grounded in Cultural Conflict Theory (CCT), which was developed by Sellin (1938). This theory states that all societies have conduct norms, which vary from one culture to the next and could result in violations in one society but not in another. Within each society, those in power can control the definitions of conduct norms and hence determine what behaviours become crimes. This leaves the potential for cultural conflict. In general, Sellin pointed to three ways conflicts between various cultural codes arise: (1) when the codes clash on the border of contiguous cultural areas; (2) when, as may be the case with legal norms, the law of one cultural group is extended to cover the territory of another; or (3) when members of one cultural group migrate to another. The research focused on understanding the perspectives of educators on the misbehaviour of Mapulana initiates at school. CCT suggests that when people from different cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic classes interact, it can lead to conflict over what is considered acceptable behaviour (MacDonald, 2009). This suggests that there is a potential clash between the cultural initiation of male students and school culture, which expects them to behave in a particular way.

Sellin (1938) suggests that wrongdoing regularly arises from the social struggle between the values and standards of a subculture in society and those of the common or prevailing culture.

In contextualising Sellin's theory as a clarification for the degenerate behaviour of initiates, it is contended that even at schools where culture is homogenous, and the values and standards to which learners must adhere are the same for all, somehow clashes occur. In socially heterogeneous school settings, diverse groups follow distinctive codes of conduct. Township schools in South Africa are melting pots of diverse cultures, given the multicultural societies which reside there. Initiated and non-initiated educators and learners belonging to a variety of racial and ethnic groups teach and learn together in township schools.

This study contends that cultural initiations constitute a social subculture with certain values, standards, and positions towards the formal schooling framework. Western standards determine what is or is not satisfactory learner conduct. Sellin's hypothesis regarding the validity of multiple values is supported by Lemmer et al. (2006), who contend that the inability of teachers to recognise the different qualities of various cultures may lead not only to social confinement but also to social disintegration and learning problems, as well as behavioural issues and strife. Lemmer et al. (2006) furthermore contend that distinctive worldviews and social values may cause pressure inside a school setting. Individuals who share comparable convictions, social values, and experiences have a far better chance of seeing reality in the same way. However, there will always be an out-group which does not share those values and experiences.

In the context of this study, this suggests that there may be strife and/or a need for understanding between teachers and learners, or amongst learners, if some have been to a cultural initiation school and others have not, or between learners and/or teachers from different ethnic groups. The social struggle inside a South African formal school framework is vertical (Western governments vs. African traditional) and between diverse ethnic groups. Being mindful of the complexity of culture is fundamental for understanding the conduct of all stakeholders in a school setting. This scenario calls for strategies to be adopted as part of the initiation culture, to inculcate discipline in initiates as they return to school.

Method

The authors employed an interpretive qualitative design to give meaning to the participating teachers' perspectives on the factors contributing to male learners' misbehaviour post-initiation. This design is deemed suitable for this research because, instead of theorising about the situation, the participants' comments will allow for an in-depth interpretation and description, and a better understanding of the phenomenon (Moisey, Campbell, Whitmore, and Jack, 2022). The in-depth interviews facilitated data generation through purposively selected teachers. Because it allows the interviewer to modify the order and phrasing of questions for each session, an interview guide was employed in this study as a data collection tool (Rubin & Babbie, 2016). The discussions were held in various locations within the schools, including classrooms.

Respondents are encouraged to discuss and voice concerns that would not have been thought of through semi-structured interviews (Boyce & Neal, 2014). In-depth interviews are typically carried out one-on-one with a participant who is informed or has insight into the subject, according to Harrell and Bradley (2009). Questioning and additional probing during an in-depth interview enable participants to provide thorough explanations of the research topic.

Six teachers from three distinct high schools made up the sample of participants. To find areas of agreement or disagreement in the three groups of study participants' viewpoints on the study topics derived from the study, those viewpoints are presented separately.

Ethical Considerations

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and they were informed that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Permission for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee residing at the University of South Africa.

Data Presentation

According to Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017), the qualitative data analysis for a study should comprise gathering, merging, coding, breaking up the data into manageable chunks, organising, and drawing patterns from the data. In the following section, the discussion of the findings will show how the themes were addressed. In the discussion of findings, pseudonyms were used in this article to identify stakeholders interviewed. For example, schools, principals, and teachers were named as A, B and C, respectively.

Table 1.1. The biography of participants

Surname & initials	Gender	Age	Designation	Qualifications
Masenyeletxa A	Male	47	Principal	B. Ed (SPF)
Masese T. W	Male	49	Principal	MBA
Mashobye N	Female	50	Principal	STD, ACE & Computer lit
Ramadimetxa R. R	Female	53	Principal	STD, Hons (Ed Man)
Malotane M. E	Male	37	Teacher	B.Ed. (SPF)
Bvuma T. A	Male	33	Teacher	B.Ed. (SPF), Comp
Makata S	Female	43	Teacher	B.Ed. & Hons (Special needs)
Tlholo M. A	Female	48	Teacher	BA & ACE
Malele P.H	Male	44	Parent	B.com Economics

Khudu S. B	Male	50	Parent	Grade A Security
Douglass P.M	Female	66	Parent	None
Kaka S. S	Female	63	Parent	None

The codes that resulted in the development of themes were guided by this methodology. To preserve the privacy of the participants, they were allocated pseudonyms. The codes, categories, and emerging themes were then analysed thematically (Chiavacci, 2020).

The data analysis was intended to capture the diverse perspectives of teachers on the disciplinary challenges presented by school-going Mapulana male initiates. To achieve this, a thematic and narrative analysis of the data collected from the participating teachers could be reflected as findings (Seidel and Prinz, 2013). Several key themes emerged from the interviews, namely "the age of the initiates", "the curriculum at the initiation school", "the behaviours of male initiates towards teachers", and the "legislative distinction of a man from a boy".

Findings

The troublesome conduct that, according to the interviewees, may be attributed to the indiscipline of Mapulana male learners who attended initiation schools, appears to be time-bound, being most prevalent when the boys return to school after the June/July/August initiation period. Initiation schools are displayed amid the school occasions in the Mapulaneng zone of Bushbuckridge (Musehane, 2012). The boys paraded on the community premises or surroundings. These community members do not advertise the initiation schools in traditionally black schools, but the learners themselves display this cultural activity on the school premises.

In the discussion which follows, reference is made to Erikson's (2004) perspective on the interaction between adolescents' rebellious behaviour and cultural conflict, Sellin's (1983) and the ideology of patriarchy, as possible explanations for what educators perceive to be initiates' deviant behaviour.

Concurring with the research in the above paragraph, we were taken aback by the teacher's lamentations on how the male initiates lose out by not attending weekend classes, designed to push and finish the syllabus on time. This normally enables them ample time for revision. To my dismay, teachers experience a high rate of absences by initiated Mapulana learners in class during this winter season. Therefore, deliberate absenteeism gives an impression of the already deteriorated discipline of the initiates towards teachers.

Age as a contributing factor to indiscipline in schools

According to Peltzer and Kanta (2009), there is no "correct age" for initiation among African societies: rather, it differs from culture to culture. While Van Rooyen et al. (2006) note that initiations ordinarily take place between the ages of 10 and 20, Peltzer and Kanta (2009) cite a study by Connolly, Simbayi and Shanmugam (2002) which found that the median age for circumcision amongst black men in South Africa is 18. Ntombana (2011) and Vincent (2008) note that among the Xhosa, customary circumcisions are mostly performed on men between the ages of 15 and 25 years. Venda, Mapulana, Pedi, and Tsonga initiates can be as young as nine years of age (CRL Rights Commission, 2010). Common enactment as guided by customs concerning the age of confirmation, moreover, varies. The Mpumalanga and Limpopo provincial legislatures have, for example, set the age of admission at ten years, while in the Free State and Western Cape, the age of maturity for admission to initiation schools is 18 (CRL Rights Commission 2010).

The interviewees in this study believed that the youthfulness of some initiates is the root cause of their misbehaviour in schools. Masenyeletsa, from Masana Secondary School said:

There was another boy who was from initiation and older and who never gave us problems in class. But these young boys, 13 and 14 years old, are problematic.

During the discussions, participants made a comparison between the Mapulana lineage and the Tsonga learners in terms of their age at initiation. According to the participants, Tsonga boys attend initiation school at any age and in any grade. According to one of the participants, Tsonga boys behave better than Mapulana boys, who attend initiation schools. This suggests an inability on the part of the Mapulana boys to handle their new status.

Sexual instruction and direction concerning hitched life form a portion of initiation schools' educational programmes (Vincent, 2008). As Makata from Kodumela High noted, it is subsequently justifiable, in her view, for initiation schools to focus more on developing individuals, stating:

Initiation prepares the initiates for manhood and womanhood; now you wonder who is going to be married to a thirteen-year-old child.

The participants concurred that it is "ridiculous" for children as young as 13 to be initiated. It is possible to fault the organisers for permitting such young children to attend initiation schools. There is a need to agree on the ideal age or level of development for attending initiation school and outline the social struggle on both the vertical (cultural tension vs. political practices) and horizontal (distinctive ethnic extractions) levels.

The conduct of the initiated boys towards teachers

Khudu, a male teacher from Phendule High, reported not having experienced disrespect from the initiates:

I have not as yet encountered problems with them, they have not tried to use their power on me as yet.

By contrast, Masese, a male teacher from Masana High, alluded that there were understated signs of disregard for him, noting:

Direct disrespect, no, but indirect … like late coming, not doing the work, that is disrespect.

It appears as if the female teachers specifically were challenged by the conduct of the initiated boys, bearing the brunt of their ill-treatment. Several participants mentioned that the initiates deliberately ignored female educators. This is in line with the findings of Coetzee (2001), who argues that patriarchy is entrenched in South African society and its education system. During the interviews, several participants concurred that initiates appeared to be looking for consideration from their teachers, particularly when they were in a group of some kind.

Tlholo, from Kodumela High, said:

We experience problems when they are in a group, but they do take instructions only when they are approached individually.

The participants stressed that this behaviour change was selective: if an educator paid a lot of (positive) attention to an initiate, he would respond positively towards that specific educator, but not to other members of the teaching staff. When a teacher spoke to him, it did not mean that he would respect other teachers. Ultimately, this affected discipline because the initiates only respected a certain group of people. During the discussions, the participants admitted that the initiates' selective bad or good behaviour might create tension among colleagues. One of the participants, Douglas, a male teacher from Phendule High, summarised this insight as follows:

One teacher will say a particular child is stubborn, while another teacher will say, 'No, that child is sweet to me.

Legislative distinction between a man from a boy

Initiation serves as a transition from boyhood to manhood (Venter, 2011). However, this transition is cultural, not constitutional or legislative. Mohlaloka (2016) found that some initiates returning from 'the bush' are arrogant individuals who set themselves apart from their uninitiated fellow learners and schoolteachers. These initiates believe that some school rules do not apply to them, because they are 'men'. Mashobye from Masana High agreed that initiates are still children, even after initiation:

Children who have attended traditional initiation school are children, and they come back as children; there is no such thing as 'they are men'.

The above participant explained that while the community does not regard initiates as men, they are seen as men among their peers. Mashobye was adamant that a boy only becomes a man after reaching the age of 18 and over, or has a family, and is no longer under the care of his parents. According to this participant, young initiates who call themselves adults are crossing a line and cultural tradition does not state that children become men after initiation, and those who say so are contravening traditional law.

Some initiates had the idea that the curriculum they were exposed to at the initiation school should be implemented as part of formal schooling. Malale from Kodumela High shared an experience he had in class, explaining:

In class, I was reprimanding the initiated Mapulana boys. One of them was back-chatting. I then said: 'You are just the same as this one. I don't know why you are talking back.' He then answered: 'I'm not the same as him, this thing is a boy, and I am a man.

In essence, what this learner was saying was that he was no longer a boy and that his conduct was not that of a boy. The same study participant reported that, during sporting activities, there was a lack of cooperation from the initiates, who did not want to mix with uninitiated team members:

They will come to the ground and will go far away from other boys to dress because they say they are not supposed to mix with others [boys].

The above exposition of the theme "I am a man, not a boy" alludes to one of the characteristics of initiation schools, namely the reinforcement of a clear demarcation between children/boys and men, or between men and women (Barker & Ricardo 2005). Barker and Ricardo (2005) argue that these demarcations may reinforce strict segregation of the sexes, gender inequality and patriarchal gender norms, which may have negative consequences for both women and men.

The cultural initiation curriculum informs indiscipline.

In a study conducted by Vincent (2008), it transpired that customary initiation practices are not so much about imparting information, as training boys in the secret code of 'the bush' or 'the mountain'. At initiation schools, participants use terminology and expressions that are understood only by those at these schools. Every day, words acquire new meanings (Musehane 2012). Initiates are able (as pointed out by the participants) to pick up quickly when an educator is unable to understand the so-called 'mountain language' or the cultural initiation curriculum. When they realise that a teacher has not undergone the cultural initiation rites, s/he becomes a 'plaything', because they will talk about things the educator will not understand. This is especially problematic for female educators, as Kaka, a male teacher from Phendule High, explained:

There is virtually no way that a female educator will understand the language. Now this situation brings about […] challenges in discipline. They will mock you because you don't understand what they are saying.

The participants pointed out that it is particularly problematic when initiates use initiation terminology when referring to weapons and illegal drugs. That means the initiation school language becomes a vehicle for criminal activities. Ramadimetja from Masana High said:

You would not even know where the knife is hidden; where the assegai, cigarette or dagga, or marijuana is hidden; you will never know, because they do not use the language you know; if you did not hear or understand the language, the knife will finally be used right inside the school premises.

The possibility that initiates may be involved in criminal activities, and that initiation schools may be a breeding ground for crime and delinquency, as suggested by some of the participants, is in line with findings reported by Ntombana (2011). Arguably, initiation schools have become a place where criminal activities are committed, and the practice of initiation no longer contributes to the building of society but instead contributes to the moral decline of the communities concerned.

Conclusions

In his article we explored the perspectives of teachers on the disciplinary challenges which Mapulana male initiates present to teaching and learning at three Mpumalanga schools, thereby addressing a gap in research in this field. The behaviour of male initiates at the selected schools posed a challenge to the provision of a quality education, which warranted an investigation.

The findings suggest that the indiscipline of male learners returning from traditional initiation schools may cause additional disciplinary problems. To guarantee long-lasting personality changes, there is a need to consistently reinforce the lessons learnt during their initiation. The key teachings of the initiation process (beyond the actual circumcision) can be reoriented, re-formulated, and taught continuously, to accomplish this. Disciplinary measures must also be put in place to deal with antisocial behaviour and assist initiates in becoming strong representatives of the ideals of customary initiation. This will help to guarantee that initiates remain respectful as learners and that their educational journey is uninterrupted.

While the findings from the present study cannot be generalised to represent the experiences of all educators in South Africa, they provide insight into the experiences of initiated and uninitiated educators in the teaching of Mapulana male initiates of Mapulaneng in Bushbuckridge, Mpumalanga. The article contributes to the body of knowledge by suggesting that we should be aware that South African educators are often faced with generic disciplinary problems, such as poor performance, substance abuse, a lack of parental involvement, and a lack of school policies and/or policies that do not work. Several periodic disciplinary problems were identified in this case. Initiates showed disrespect towards the uninitiated, refused to speak in class, and used their 'mountain language' (the language they were taught during the period of initiation) disrespectfully. The conflict between the boundaries set by the formal schooling system and those set by initiation schools may result in initiates unintentionally acting defiantly in class. Traditional initiation practices are an indelible part of most indigenous cultures in South Africa. Rather than calling for a discontinuation of initiation schools, the researchers recommend that a holistic approach be followed in dealing with disciplinary problems arising from initiates' behaviour.

Recommendations

Based on the insights gained from the study, the following recommendations may be made to schools on how to deal with the problems of indiscipline on the part of initiated male learners who portray deviant behaviour:

Schools should follow customary policy guidelines to establish an in-school disciplinary system. Once such a disciplinary policy has been developed, it must consistently be applied by school stakeholders such as the school code of conduct. Educators who underwent cultural initiation must play an important role, as they have insight into the expected outcomes for initiated learners, and how they are supposed to behave. Schools should invite

the organisers and surgeons to their respective schools to speak to new initiates and give guidance to non-initiated educators. This may create a mutual understanding of the conflicting cultural norms and different boundaries for acceptable behaviour prevailing in heterogeneous township school settings. Several problems arise when boys attend initiation schools at too young an age. Based on the insights gained, this study recommends that a standardised age of admission be established, while being sensitive to traditional and cultural differences, and in line with national legislation dealing with children, such as the Children's Act 30 of 2005 (RSA 2005).

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