

Modifying the Curriculum for gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive classroom; The experiences of a student teacher

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Abstract: Modifying existing general curriculum has been an effective way to create more accessible learning environments to support all students and their teachers in various educational contexts. The study sought to establish how the implementation of the modified curriculum by student teachers can assist in the learning of the gifted disabled learners in the primary schools in Zimbabwe. The study used a qualitative research design. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select twenty student teachers studying a Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University and was on attachment in primary schools in Bulawayo. In-depth individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were used. Conclusions showed that student teachers used play-based strategies in teaching gifted disabled learners. The study also concluded that the student teachers' lack of competency in managing their inclusive classrooms posed a serious problem on their daily discharge of duties. The study recommended that there is need for curriculum modification for the gifted learners with disabilities in inclusive classes so that they will be able to attain their full potential.

Key Terms: curriculum, curriculum modification, student teachers, gifted learners, gifted learners with disabilities, inclusive classrooms

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The need for every learner in schools to gain equal access to education regardless of colour or creed, physical appearance and intelligence levels has always been yearned for at national as well as international platforms. The Dakar (2000) Framework for Action goal number (1) one, seeks to expand and improve education especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. This goal clearly indicates the need to make provision for vulnerable and disadvantaged children while no child is to be barred from accessing education. Efforts need to be made to cater for disadvantaged children especially those with disabilities and yet they are gifted. The Zimbabwean Education Act of (1987), states in clear terms that every child in Zimbabwe shall have the right to education. The Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999) recommended that the inclusive type of education be adopted at all levels of education and for all learners including the gifted, disabled learners. While the government has directed all primary schools to incorporate gifted, disabled learners some schools

do not have proper infrastructure, equipment, adequate teaching and learning materials for the children with disabilities. Student teachers are also ill equipped as far as requisite expertise on handling the modified curriculum for gifted learners with disabilities is concerned. Impliedly, the wider spectrum of gifted learners with disabilities do not access adequate educational programmes contrary to the now much proclaimed spirit of inclusion. This paper seeks to explore the implementation of the modified curriculum for gifted learners with disabilities in inclusive classrooms by student teachers.

Hribkova' (2010) posits that the issue on the need to give attention to gifted disabled learners has been researched on and been seen to be fertile ground that is worth to be given attention. Heward (2013), defines giftedness as an individual's ability in a selected area, recognised by the socio-cultural environment, which is quantitatively and qualitatively more developed in comparison with their peers. In other terms, gifted learners with disabilities are those learners who possess an outstanding gift or talent and are capable of high performance, which they cannot easily achieve due to some certain disability in them. Tomlinson (2013) recommends a modified curriculum and differentiated instruction that provides guidance for teachers in dealing with concerns that focus on children's differences in terms of their readiness, interest and learning profile with the aim of optimizing each learner's potential.

1.1 Inclusive education for the gifted learners

All children in Zimbabwe have a right to access education and every school must avail them with the opportunity to attain an acceptable level of learning. Despite this, school administrators, student teachers and learners often find themselves to be faced with a dilemma with the real implementation of inclusive teaching learning for the gifted, disabled learners in mainstream classes. There has been a lot of debates in the educational sector at international as well as at national level on whether all learners, particularly the gifted but disabled learners should receive equal access to education in inclusive classes without facing any level of stigmatisation as postulated by the Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1949). The depth and breadth of the perpetual struggle for the

gifted, disabled children to penetrate equal access to education has been a long and windy journey as revealed by Mukheiyi and Dryden (2014). In fact, Warmock (1978) recommended that such children be incorporated into the main stream schools. The United Nations Conventions on the rights of persons with disabilities [CRDP] guaranteed children with disabilities the right to inclusive education. It acknowledged education as a human right while it also enacted some articles that impelled every school to coopt every gifted, disabled learner into the mainstream curriculum and into every befitting social factor. Inclusive education has been a subject of debate at global level platforms and worth noting is the fact that the (1993) World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons under article 20 states that, “all member states agree that education for persons with disabilities should be carried out as far as possible within the general school system “thus making it also fundamental that gifted, disabled learners in Zimbabwe also be exposed to inclusive education. In 1989 the Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledged the special needs of children with disabilities and stated that these children must be guaranteed, “effective access to education in a manner conducive to the child achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development”. Such notion was further proclaimed by the 1990 World Conference on Education which was held in Jomtein (Thailand) where much emphasis was on Education for All. This was a move towards the abolition of discrimination of learners according to their disability. The 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education which was held in Salamanca (Spain) focused on inclusive education and it recommended that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic and other such conditions. Croft (2010) points out that the World Education Forum meeting that was held in Dakar in the year 2000 also reaffirmed the vision of inclusive education. Primarily, it is worth noting that teachers and in particular student teachers in Zimbabwe have all along been used to the practice of excluding gifted disabled learners from the mainstream classes. This was with the understanding amongst most educators that the special needs learners would best receive requisite attention if placed in their own secluded classrooms where they would not have to compete with the able bodied counterparts and would be under the special care of specialist teachers. The government of Zimbabwe has, however, made a policy to have children with disabilities included in regular schools. Most communal and urban schools have started enrolling learners with disabilities in ordinary regular classes to do the same curriculum as the non-disabled. This prevailing state of affairs places the student teachers at the core of having to teach the gifted, disabled learners whom they find under the care of mentors to whom they are attached and at times they have to teach these learners independently in certain situations. Although this is so, it is noted with great concern that disabilities tend to suffer under this inclusive education even though it is intentionally meant to curb gifted disabled learners’ challenges. Student teachers

apparently may not have specialist training to handle inclusive environments.

Mutepfa, Mpfu and Chataika (2007) posit that inclusive education in Zimbabwe seeks to enhance the civil liberties of learners with disabilities as supported by some government policy documents and through implication by several pieces of legislation. Through their eyes, this, is, however, yet to be a common reality in Zimbabwe owing to a probable lack of commitment by some policy makers towards issues concerning gifted learners with disabilities., the likely, shortage of resources to support special needs learning environments, lack of expertise by classroom practitioners especially the general majority of teachers (mentors to the student teachers) and specifically restricted knowhow in the student teachers to handle gifted disabled learners in inclusive classrooms amongst other possible hindrances which have probed this paper to be undertaken.

The incumbent need for inclusive education however, remains binding to all stakeholders since giftedness and disability are living realities within the Zimbabwean schools and thus the thrust of this paper. Many scholars have churned out knowledge on various teaching methods but not much has been touched on how the gifted, disabled Zimbabwean learners can be assisted to attain optimum gains in their efforts to gain education. This paper therefore, seeks to come up with teaching methods that can be employed in the teaching of gifted, disabled learners in an inclusive class. Ordinary teacher training capacity to teach gifted, disabled learners may be limited or nonexistent. This has stirred this paper to investigate what challenges student teachers experience in teaching gifted disabled learners in an inclusive class. The recent declaration by the Ministry of Primary and secondary schools through the New Curriculum Framework (2015-2022) that all schools must practice inclusive education has been received with skepticism by some core implementers of the school curriculum, [the teachers] for a number of reasons to be explored in this paper. In the context of this issue, there is a dire need by gifted learners to be given due attention and equal opportunities like all other learners in a school set up.

1.2 Curriculum modification for learners with special needs

The development of a country is hinged upon the progressive inclination of its curriculum. Curriculum itself is the outline of concepts meant to be taught to learners so that they meet the set content standards. It is what is taught in a given learning area. It entails the interactive systems or instruction and learning with intentionally set goals, content, strategies, measurement and resources. In fact, Tyler (1949) in Scott (2011) defines curriculum as all learning of students which is planned and directed by the school to attain its educational goals. Curriculum modification on the other hand is an educational strategy that permits special needs learners to have better access to information and resources. As noted by the governments of Europe and those of many other developing countries like Zimbabwe, the implementation of

new programmes and curriculum modifications are critical components of educational reform. Davis, Florian, Ainscow, Dyson, Farrell, Hick, Humphrey, Jenkins, Kaplan, Palmer, Parkinson, Polat, Reason, Byers, Dee, Kershner and Rouse(2004) state that the government of England has made a firm commitment to a high quality of education for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and has realised that building the capacity of teachers and schools to teach learners with a diverse range of SEN is key to raising the achievement of such learners.

According to Mutepfa, Mpfu and Chataika (2007) inclusive education in Zimbabwe seeks to enhance the civil liberties of learners with disabilities as supported by some government policy documents and through implication by several pieces of legislation. It is however yet to be common reality in Zimbabwe owing to lack of commitment by some policy makers towards learners with disabilities. The incumbent need for inclusive education remains binding to all stakeholders and thus the thrust of this paper.

The development of the curriculum therefore, would be incomplete if it does not place equal value to the gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive classroom. The development of the curriculum must consist of the adjustments that allow access to educational resources in the schools by all learners including learners with special needs. Curriculum modification, in a way, should involve the implementation of a strategy through the use of a set of resources that are to be intentionally channelled to give equal access of information to special needs learners. Curriculum modification entails intentional planning, methodology, content and assessment of work to be adaptable to the particular needs of the disabled learners. The radical modification of curriculum remains integral in any society as it ensures issues of social inclusion which put emphasis on the need not to exclude any learner on grounds of their physical or mental differences. The full economic and social development of any country is based on the ability of all its members to be able to contribute to the national basket. This can only be attainable if all learners in the schools are given a fair opportunity to explore their academic development so that in future they become productive citizens who are adequately prepared to meet the evolving developmental aspirations. The radical reconstruction of any education system is essential for the economic and cultural development of the country; for national integration and for the ideals of sustainable development. Similarly, Zimbabwe's vision is to provide a curriculum that is modified to develop the country and meet its economic developmental needs. For education to be an effective driver of sustainable development, its curriculum must meet societal expectations of every learner in the schools as also stated by the President of Zimbabwe during the 8th Session of the Parliament of Zimbabwe in the year 2013. [The New Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education 2015-2022]

Curriculum modification sees the education as a system involving more accommodation of inclusive systems that recognise the unique skills even in the gifted learners with disabilities, and thus have everyone concern themselves with listening, dialoguing and embracing the needs of diversity in educating the nation. This, therefore, suggests that curriculum modification is not an option but a vehicle through which gifted learners with disabilities can be elevated to have improved access and quality education in the national as well as global context. Gifted disabled learners may face challenges such as rejection, segregation, stigmatisation negative attitudes and or labelling by the teachers, other able bodied learners. Schools now pay a lot of attention to fulfilling discussions on inclusion and yet in actual practice very little is being done to truly address the needs of the gifted, disabled hence this paper sought to find solutions to this prevailing challenge.

The Human Rights Watch [2018] states that the European Union and its member states have ratified the United Nations Conventions on the rights of persons with disabilities[CRDP] guaranteeing children with disabilities the right to inclusive education. Consideration of challenges faced in the implementation of the modified inclusive curriculum seem to have received little or no empirical research attention, and thus this tends to elude syllabus curriculum developers and the central government. This state of affairs has implications on the effectiveness of the implementation of the new modified inclusive curriculum in terms of teaching-learning processes of the gifted disabled learners. Syllabus implementation is crucial as it is at this stage that the syllabus is consumed by its target users, especially the learners. Whichever way one looks at it, syllabus implementation involves two major stakeholders: the teachers and learners. This is because teachers are the main interpreters or implementers and the learners are the main targets or direct consumers of the syllabus. The modified curriculum for gifted, disabled learners is to be mastered by the student teachers for meaningful implementation to take course.

1.3 Student teachers' experience in teaching gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive class

A vast majority of challenges go with the implementation of the modified curriculum for gifted and disabled learners by student teachers in inclusive classes. First and foremost, the student teachers are generally not trained to handle gifted, disabled learners in inclusive classes. It is realised that most such special needs learners have dispositions that restrict easy access to academic as well as social freedom when placed in simultaneous environments with their able bodied counterparts. This state of affairs poses challenges to the student teacher who then has to come up with solutions on the spot on how to manage the learning environment for meaningful gains to be realised. Oliver and Reschly (2010) propel the notion that regular teachers are insufficiently prepared to handle learners with special needs in the classroom. On the other hand, Ramos (2018) proffers the idea

that learners with severe and profound disabilities require more adaptation and medical attention than do the average learner. This then calls for the student teachers handling these such learners to have expert skills to prepare all embracing lessons plans that will be delivered to cover every learner's needs including the gifted disabled learners in the class. Failure by student teachers to adhere to such expectations may pose inexplicable frustration on all learners as well as the student teachers in charge of such inclusive learning environments. Some gifted, disabled learners have medical and dietary conditions that call for close monitoring which the student teachers may fail to take care of. Fallon, Zhang and Kim (2011) conducted a study, which was aimed at capacitating teachers to be in a position to manage the behaviours of disabled learners in inclusive classes. Such on the job training remains paramount as it empowers teachers with skills on how to best handle inclusive learning environments. A plethora of challenges are married with the issue of inclusivity in as far as student teachers are concerned. Mafa (2012) points to the fact that lesson preparation, writing of resource materials, planning on organisation of content to be taught places a heavy demand on teachers in inclusive teaching-learning environments. This scenario may depict an unrealistic picture on the teacher especially if he /she is to be assessed and in a case such as where they may be viewed through a class with a multiplicity of needs that may seem to be compromising performance by the rest of the class due to the presence of gifted disabled learners who would require an extra milestones of attention. (Chakuchichi, Nyaruwata and Chataika 2012). This is to say the amount of effort exerted by the teacher to balance attention to all learners in an inclusive class may erode the teacher's innovativeness and generally slow down the teaching –learning process due to the administrative elements. Forlin (2001) asserts that the administrative demands that accompany a child with special educational needs are seen to be overwhelming. Gifted, disabled learners may become more aggressive, demanding or attention seeking more than their peers in the classroom which teachers also find it difficult to successfully manage inclusive classes due to competing demands.

Choruma (2007) posits that large numbers of learners in classes have become a hurdle in the way of implementation of inclusivity. Not only are the numbers big but there are inadequate facilities for gifted, disabled learners in schools. As if that is not all, the school administrators also do not have relevant knowledge needed to fully accommodate gifted, disabled learners in as far as admission, curriculum, methodology of giving instruction as well as resource utilisation.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The assumed limited understanding of the modified curriculum for gifted learners with disabilities in inclusive classes by student teachers and resistance in some instances in its implementation is posing challenges that may derail its effective implementation of curriculum in the primary schools

in Zimbabwe. The problem, therefore, is how the implementation of the modified curriculum by student teachers can assist in the learning of the gifted disabled learners in the schools.

2.1 Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study was to enhance strategies towards the effective implementation of the modified curriculum for the gifted and disabled learners in Primary school education system of Zimbabwe.

2.2 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions:

- What teaching methods can be employed by student teachers in teaching gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive classroom?
- What challenges do student teachers experience in teaching gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive class?
- How would gifted learners with disabilities benefit from a modified curriculum in an inclusive class?

III. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative design was used. Qualitative designs are normally used when the study aims at describing and understanding a phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). Since the present study sought to establish how the implementation of the modified curriculum by student teachers can assist in the learning of the gifted disabled learners in the primary schools in Zimbabwe, the design was deemed suitable

The inquiry was conducted as a basic qualitative study which was embedded in an interpretive paradigm. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select the participants. Twenty student teachers studying a Diploma in Education at Zimbabwe Open University and are on attachment in primary schools in Bulawayo province were approached to participate. The classes they were teaching were having gifted learners with disabilities. The twenty student teachers of the selected schools voluntarily agreed to partake in the research inquiry.

Qualitative data collection methods included in-depth individual semi-structured interviews with the twenty student teachers and two semi-structured focus group interviews. An interview schedule was employed in both the individual and focus group interviews. The student teachers were divided equally between the two focus groups. Qualitative content analysis was used to reveal themes that were constructed from the data. Qualitative content analysis is an approach to analysis that focusses on interpreting and describing, meaningfully, the topics and themes that are evident in the contents of communications when framed against the research objectives of the study. In other words, it is any qualitative data reduction and sense making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings, (Patton, 2002:453). It is defined

as "the systematic reduction of content, analyzed with special attention to the context in which it was created, to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of the data" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015:232)

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 *The teaching methods that can be employed by student teachers in the teaching of gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive classroom*

The following responses were given by student teachers

Student teacher A: *I teach the gifted learners with disabilities separately from the rest of the class, but they are problems.*

Student teacher B, C, G and H said they: *used differentiated reading material that is appropriate for the gifted learner.*

Student teacher D, M O and P: *higher-performing readers were paired with lower-performing readers to practice critical reading skills. Typically, the teacher rank orders all the students in the classroom based on reading skill level, using recent reading assessment data.*

Student teacher K N Q: *Introduced play-based strategy. This strategy is based on the fact that oral language is learned spontaneously in childhood, mostly by imitation, but that written language requires more specific education.*

Student teachers R, S, O, D and A: *cooperative learning where learners are organized and work together in small heterogeneous (mixed ability) groups to maximize their own and each other's learning. After receiving instructions from the teacher, the learners work on an assignment until all group members successfully understand*

From the above responses, cooperative learning has shown to promote social inclusion, in the form of increased student acceptance and liking, for all students, including the gifted with disabilities. The researchers found that when learners without disabilities collaborate with their peers with disabilities on instructional tasks, their sense of empathy and altruism as well as an ability to view situations from a variety of perspectives improves. The benefit of cooperative learning include higher level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions, greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another, increased creativity and higher levels of self-esteem

In order to successfully include students with different types of disabilities, multimodal instruction within the cooperative learning framework should be implemented. The researchers also found out that the student teachers used play based strategies in teaching gifted disabled learners. Play-based strategies combine analytical and emotional learning by helping learners to learn new skills while having fun in the classroom. When students participate in a play-based learning process, they tend to be more actively engaged than when teachers use more didactic strategies. This approach promotes

better acquisition of the learning material and makes the process more interesting, accessible and effective.

Differentiate instruction is a necessary approach for teachers to use to address the needs of all students in an inclusive class-room. Differentiate instruction does not require expensive technologies, but rather evidence-based low-tech teaching strategies. Tomlinson (2005) define differentiate instruction as a philosophy of teaching that is based on the premise that students learn best when their teachers adjust their instruction according to the difference in student readiness levels, interests and learning profiles The main objective of differentiate instruction is to maximize every student's ability to learn (Tomlinson, 2005).

4.2 *The challenges that student teachers experience in teaching gifted learners with disabilities in an inclusive class*

The responses from student teachers from Bulawayo Central schools revealed that there were a number of challenges that were evident in the employment of teaching methodology when it came to implementing the modified curriculum with gifted disabled learners in inclusive classes.

Students teachers A, D, H, K and N pointed out that inclusive classes have replaced special needs classes that assisted gifted disabled learners. This created challenges in as far as sources of material required contact (time allocation) between the teacher and the learners as well as the teaching methods that need to be put in place in order that student teachers effectively access all learners in inclusive classes.

In addition, the responses from the participants showed that student teachers were not skilled in handling disabilities and or creating lesson plans based on individual differences or abilities of gifted but also disabled learners. Student teachers were unable to treat children with special needs according to their diverse needs for them to develop to their full potential. Thus inclusive education demands a lot of work on the part of the teachers. This was pointed out by one the participants from the focus group discussions who pointed out that:

Teachers lacked specific skills to teach children who are at different levels of the curriculum in inclusive settings (Student teacher M)

Lack of practitioners' knowledge and skills about how to effectively work with children who have special needs creates an inevitable barrier to the implementation of inclusive practices. Participants revealed that teachers also faced the shortage of training programs and strategies to prepare them for such situations at the workplace. These strategies have been floated to be very crucial and instrumental in ensuring there is success in the learning experiences of the learners.

The participants also raised concern on the sizes of the classes. Most inclusive classes are comprised of a large number of learners with different needs, and *it is the responsibility of the teacher to control the learners and to*

deliver the lessons effectively using curriculum modification (Student Teacher S). Since the responsibility of taking care of the individual needs of each learner lies on the shoulder of a single teacher, it become a very tedious process. It has become difficult to administer their lesson plans in a mixed-ability class since every student has a different level of understanding

One of the challenges the participants in focus group discussions was that gifted learners with disabilities could get bored as the teacher tried to make further explanations to the learners with moderate to low levels of knowledge absorbing capabilities. Failure by the teacher to address the needs of every learner often makes the active learner maintain their active state whilst their more passive counterparts remain passive, with no positive development (Hedge, 2000). There is always a huge disconnection between these two types of learners and thus, no progress in learning is recorded. This means that the teacher should employ different teaching methods and techniques to meet each individual learners' needs; this is a challenging task, as it is usually not practical, especially with large numbers of students to handle. In most cases, the teachers turn to employing average teaching methods in a bid to achieve a healthy balance in the middle ground.

The fact that the modified curriculum is impelling all teachers to practice inclusivity has raised a strong debate on how possible it is to really cater for the needs of gifted disabled learners in inclusive classes. It remains a big question if the student teachers have the right skills to teach such learners. It still remains to be noted however that the modified curriculum offers all learners with a broad based curriculum from which they acquire the necessary competences to cater for their diverse talents, interests, aptitudes and abilities.

4.3 How the gifted learners with disabilities benefit from a modified curriculum in an inclusive class

Participants from the focus group discussions pointed out that modifying existing general curriculum has been an effective way to create more accessible learning environments to support all learners and their teachers in various educational contexts. The modified curriculum enabled gifted learners with disabilities to compensate for intellectual, physical, or behavioral challenges and to create learning environments which allow them to use existing skill repertoires while promoting the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. The gifted learners, the learners with special needs, and the average achievers had the opportunity to attain high grades through the learning contract's activities. These classes provide interesting learning environments because they are composed of a rich pool of diverse skills, dispositions and perspectives. Most importantly, the interactions in these classes enable the learners to be more creative and innovative as they learn from each other's unique abilities.

Curriculum modification can be used with learners who are gifted and talented as they usually require more advanced and

or challenging conceptual difficulties in instruction and application. This enriches their abilities.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concluded that gifted learners with disabilities presented their teachers with marked difficulty in teaching effectively. Student teachers felt out of touch with gifted learners with disabilities. The student teachers' lack of competency in managing their inclusive classrooms posed a serious problem on their daily discharge of duties as it made them feel stressed and less confident.

McGough, Carey and Ware (2005) posit that for children with special needs practitioner expertise is a critical factor in mediating the learning environment and constructing differentiated practices required for meeting the complexity of gifted learners' needs. Hence teachers should be involved in the training programs and be equipped with the ideal skills to help them deal with any challenging situations that arise in their learning environments. This will help student teachers to use effective strategies in the classrooms to create a thriving learning environment that satisfies the needs of all learners giving them unforgettable learning experiences. It was shown that student teachers used a variety of teaching methods to teach gifted learners with disabilities and this included cooperative learning. The benefit of cooperative learning include higher level reasoning, more frequent generation of new ideas and solutions, greater transfer of what is learned within one situation to another, increased creativity and higher levels of self-esteem

The study also concluded that student teachers need to coordinate efforts and understand the needs of learners in terms of developing skills and lesson plans. Student teachers have to treat children with special needs according to their diverse needs for them to develop to their full potential. To this point Ramos (2009) states that teachers must be skilled in handling disabilities and create lesson plans based on individual differences or abilities.

The study also concluded that curriculum modification enabled the gifted learners, the learners with special needs, and the average achievers to attain high grades and to be more creative and innovative as they learn from each other's unique abilities. It is important that students with disabilities have meaningful opportunities to access the general education curriculum, interact with peers in the same classroom, and receive instruction from general education teachers.

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