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The Impact of Teachers Interpersonal Characteristics on Acquisition of Reading Skills among Grade Three Pupils in Public Primary Schools in Bungoma County, Kenya

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Abstract: The acquisition of requisite reading skills plays a crucial role in scaffolding learning and more so when children start their education. These reading skills form an important pivot around which most learning revolves. Nevertheless, studies globally indicate that majority of school-age pupils are not being taught the relevant reading skills at an appropriate age and grade hence most of them attain the age of eleven years before acquiring these skills. The integral role played by the teacher in enabling learners to acquire reading skills cannot be over-emphasized. They are, in fact, an important axis around which all educational processes revolve including the success in the acquisition of the children's literacy skills. The purpose of this study was to find out the impact of teacher interpersonal characteristics on the acquisition of reading skills among grade three pupils in public primary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya. Vygotsky's (1978) theory was fundamental to this study. A descriptive survey research was adopted in the study focusing on grade three pupils, their class teacher and the headteachers in Bumula Sub-County. Simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the study sample of 32%. Data was collected using questionnaires, interview schedules and reading tests for grade three pupils to determine their level of reading skills. The researcher designed a pupil test to determine the levels of reading across the Grade III Learners. The study found out that teachers' interpersonal characteristics had an impact on the acquisition of reading skills among the grade III learners. The study further established that Grade III pupils in Bungoma County have overall poor reading skills as manifested by their dismal sound recognition, comprehension, word recognition, and reading fluency. Furthermore, the study established that Grade III teachers are neither aware nor apply their interpersonal skills, but rely on their skills to help Grade III learners acquire reading skills. The study recommended that Bungoma County's Ministry of Education should use these findings for policy implementation as a way or improving teacher interpersonal relationships, through modification of the curriculum of teacher training colleges.

Keywords: Acquisition, Impact, Interpersonal characteristics, Reading skills

Introduction

The acquisition of reading skills early in the life of learners is an important step towards their development and education. Research has shown that the academic development of a child depends largely on the acquisition of reading skills, which in turn becomes the pillar upon which learning in other subjects is based. Mwoma (2017) reported that reading skills is a central subject which influences the academic achievement of a pupil through better performance in other subjects. His assertions were also emphasized by Seebruck (2015) who showed that learners are likely to understand other subjects better if they had acquired reading skills earlier in their life. The learning process of children takes place when such a process is reinforced through instruction by a teacher. This, therefore, brings in a new factor: the teacher. The characteristics of the teacher, herein investigated as "the teacher's interpersonal characteristics" have for a long time been claimed to influence the learning process of a pupil.



Extensive research has been focusing on the school factors which affect the acquisition of the literacy skills of the learners in a teaching and learning environment. On the contrary, a teacher plays a crucial role in the learners' process of acquiring reading skills through the delivery of quality instructions, but there is little knowledge regarding teacher interrelationship skills that affect the acquisition of reading skills by learners. According to Fehintola (2014) acquisition of reading skills depends on the teachers who determine the efficiency of the educational process through which the children acquire reading skills. These reports recognize the importance of reading in the academic excellence of the learners, but it is the works of Snow and Mathews (2016) acquisition of reading skills is a determinant of the future success of children in other aspects of life, such as their career growth.

The development of reading skills among children is a global concern because it remains a challenge not only for the developing but also developed nations. A great deal of research has been focusing on the acquisition of literacy skills. Wegner (2015) concurs that the past five decades have been instrumental to the improvement of reading skills among children. Importantly, reading skills, as a factor of literacy, remains central to policy debates in both developed and developing nations. Additionally, even world organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been influential in ensuring that a sizable population of children across the globe acquire basic reading and literacy skills, where reading is a priority.

Reading skills are not acquired in an automatic process similar to language acquisition. It is an intricate intellectual route which is determined by many factors, but the characteristics of teachers have a profound impact on its application. Consequently, children may require skilled instruction from qualified teachers who ensure the development of dependable reading skills among the learners. Nevertheless, there is a growing knowledge claim that teaching reading skills may also depend on teacher interrelationship characteristics besides academic qualifications. Here, factors such as the interpersonal skills of teachers have been shown to influence the development of strong reading skills among learners. However, there is a need to strengthen the connection between teacher interrelationship characteristics and its impact on the acquisition of reading skills by learners.

A collection of school factors affect the ability of learners to acquire reading skills. Nevertheless, the teachers' interpersonal characteristics (otherwise known as people skills) underscore the academic achievement of pupils, and ongoing research has shown that it does so in a multidimensional manner. Ezeanwu and Anychebelu (2020), and Brady (2014) asserted that the development of interactive relationships between teachers and learners has a deep effect on the learning outcomes of the students. The special ingredients concerning interpersonal characteristics which the teacher should have to improve the acquisition of reading skills focus majorly on communication enhancement between the teachers and pupils. This implies that there should exist an interactive environment, considering the influence of the teacher on the participation of pupils in reading sessions. This points to the need for teachers to apply interpersonal skills to ensure that reading skills are effectively acquired by the learner in a manner that a lasting learning experience is felt by the pupil (Fan. 2012). On the contrary, there are many interpersonal skills which are applicable towards fostering a good relationship between the teachers and their pupils to enhance the acquisition of certain skills. For example, reading skills imply that the communication process between the teacher and the pupil is enhanced through a written message, where the pupil, as the recipient, must decode the information to complete the communication process. This allegation was justified by Bainbridgske (2016) who posited that a learner must acquire basic skills such as listening, watching, understanding, and speaking as sub-skills which precede writing and reading skills. This indicates the growth and development of a child in reading and writing skills are characterized by the following crucial step. Firstly, the child must draw a clear connection between written numbers and letters on a page, and the sounds which such letters and numbers illustrate. Secondly, the child must further develop skills to combine sets of syllables and sounds into spoken or written words. Researchers argue that comprehension, phonemic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary awareness are the key components which a child must have to acquire reading skills, but a good relationship between the teacher and the learner can foster their acquisition. Interpersonal skills become useful not only in acquiring reading skills but also in interactions among adults too.

Interpersonal skills enhance the communication process in a teaching and learning environment where a teacher effectively applies skills such as, dependability, responsibility, motivation, Empathy, patience, and active listening. Such interpersonal characteristics point to the importance of a teacher to the acquisition of reading skills by pupils, especially considering the Grade III levels of education. Ahmad, Shaharim, and Abdullah (2017), and Otetange and Githinji (2018) noted that teachers who nature good friendship with learners are those that skillfully apply their interpersonal skills in teaching the students hence creating an enabling environment for learning. The teacher's interpersonal relationships are pivotal to the success of any given educational system, as claimed by Goldhaber, Quince, and Theobad (2018). Consequently, teacher characteristics are influential agents in the learning process because they influence the acquisition of basic skills, such as the ability to read, among learners. However, while interpersonal characteristics are just a section of overall characteristics which have a crucial impact on the acquisition of reading skills, Khalilzadeh and Khodi (2018) argued that a collection of behavioral traits from the teachers are needed for effective learning. Their findings show that the teacher's interpersonal skills cannot be overlooked because they determine the way pupils acquire reading skills. The low levels of reading in the East African region have been, and remain, an area of concern for both educationists and policy-makers. In this breath, a report by Uwezo (2011) revealed that about three-quarters of Grade III pupils were poor at reading Grade II narratives written in both Kiswahili and English. Uwezo considered these two critical subjects because they are East Africa's official language's with the exception of a few countries. This was a wake-up call for educationists considering the role played by teachers in the preparation of the pupils to acquire necessary reading skills. The low reading skills trends remained crucial considering each East African country individually. Studies in individual counties in Kenya showed even more shocking results. A study conducted for Kisii County (Kenya) revealed that pupils were able to handle numeracy problems as opposed to literacy skills such as reading (Ouko, 2015). Similar findings were noted by Piper (2011) according to his report for the former Nyanza Province (Kenya). If these findings are dependable and generalizable, there is an urgency to improve literacy skills such as reading in a given language, and it implies that reading skills must be acquired early in the life of the learners.

Earlier studies which focused on the East African countries (Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) established the reading levels among the Grade III learners were very low. For instance, an Uwezo (2012) study established that reading levels among Grade III pupils in Bungoma County are less than 35% in comparison to the national level standards. The findings corroborated a study by Ouko (2015) who established that Kisii County of Kenya has low reading levels among Grade III learners, where the learners showed higher numeracy skills than reading skills.

Importantly, most studies contacted in Kenyan learning settings focused majorly on the learners' levels of reading and literacy levels. On the contrary, little is known regarding the impact of teachers' interpersonal skills on the acquisition of reading skills among Grade III learners. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to establish the impact of teachers' interpersonal characteristics on the acquisition of reading skills among grade three pupils in public primary schools in Bungoma County, Kenya, as guided by the following objectives.

- i. To determine the impact of teacher interpersonal characteristics on the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners in Bungoma County, Kenya.
- ii. To establish the view of teachers on the impact of teacher interpersonal characteristics on acquisition on reading skills.
- iii. To establish the level of influence of teacher's interpersonal characteristics on the acquisition of reading skills among grade iii learners.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the constructivism approach to the learning process. Constructivism perceives the process of learning as contextualized, active activity where learners construct knowledge contrary to acquiring it. Accordingly, the learner assumes both cultural factors and known past experiences to the situation at hand. However, learners in the same environment could possess a different approach to the way they interpret and construct knowledge for a given setting and situation. Here, Vygotsky's (1978) theory was fundamental to the study considering the three themes it asserts. Firstly, the theory declares the need for social interaction as a fundamental requirement for the cognitive development of children. Accordingly, the development process succeeds social learning process in a given teaching and learning environment. Secondly, the theory posits that knowledge acquisition by the learner takes place in an environment where the learner interacts with someone who has a higher level of knowledge, concerning a particular concept, task, or process. Vygotsky referred to this as the influence of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO in this case is usually a teacher, but others could be technologically enabled knowledge sources such as the internet, or peers. The last theme presumes that there exists a gap between a learner's ability to use guidance or collaboration with peers, and the ability of the learner to solve a problem without such guidance. Vygotsky referred to this gap as the Zonal Proximal Development (ZPD) and insisted that this zone is instrumental to the learning process. This theory implies that teachers must approach the learners' ability to acquire reading skills in three dimensions. First, the teacher must consider the learner's current reading abilities. Secondly, teachers should assess the help needed by the learners under guidance. Lastly, the teacher should impart the reading skills considering the requirements of the learner in the presence of the More Knowledgeable Other.

Methodology

A descriptive study design was adopted for this study because of its appropriateness for the collection of both intensive and extensive data, followed by an in-depth examination of the collected data, according to the proposition of Bogdan and Biklen (2007). Bungoma County (Kenya) is located in the Western parts of Kenya and has nine Sub-Counties. The Bumula Sub-County was purposively sampled from the other nine Sub-Counties. The target population was Grade III pupils, the respective class teachers, and respective headteachers from all the 107 public primary schools. Consequently, the target population was 107 class teachers, 107 headteachers, and 5,350 pupils from Grade III. The total target population was 5,564. The collected data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, the collected data was analyzed descriptively using percentages and frequencies. Qualitatively, the collected data was thematically analyzed along with this study's objectives, and narrative forms were adopted for their presentation.

Results and Discussions

This section presents the data analysis, mode of presentation, and the interpretation therein. Importantly, the study had three objectives which sought to investigate the impact of teacher's interpersonal characteristics on the acquisition of reading skills among Grade III pupils. The following were the findings and their respective presentation, analysis, and interpretation.

The View Of Teachers Concerning The Impact Of Their Interpersonal Characteristics On Acquisition Of Reading Skills Among The Grade Iii Learners

This objective investigated the views of the teachers concerning the presumed impact of their interpersonal skills on the acquisition of reading skills among the Grade III learners in public primary schools. Table 1 illustrates the results of the findings.

Table 1: The Grade III teacher's views regarding the impact on teacher interpersonal skills on the reading skills of pupils

	Rating						
Type of the Test Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree		
	%	%	%	%	%		
Teachers' Motivational abilities improved the learners performance in reading skills	82.5	7.5	1.0	6.0	3.0		
Teachers empathic traits are related to improved reading skills of the learners in Grade III	80.5	9.5	3.0	4.0	3.0		
Dependable teachers apply different teaching methods to ensure the efficiency of reading skills knowledge transfer	85.0	5.5	1.5	6.0	2.0		
Grade III pupils who are taught by teachers who have active listening skills have excellent reading skills	70.5	15.5	0.0	10.0	4.0		
Responsible teachers have a higher understanding of the pupils reading needs.	86.5	10.5	1.0	1.5	0.5		

Table one shows that 82.5% of Grade III teachers strongly agreed that motivational traits improve the reading skills of the learners, as supported by a further 7.5% who agreed. On the contrary, 1.0 % of the respondents were undecided, as opposed to 6.0% of the teachers who disagreed. Furthermore, 3.0% of the Grade III teachers strongly disagreed to the allegation. One of the class teachers noted:

"I have been teaching this class for more than five years and I found the motivation to be a crucial interpersonal skill when teaching reading skills in Grade III."

These results confirm the findings of Goldhabar, Quince, and Theobald (2018) that the teachers' professional approaches, particularly the ones related to the ability to understand what the learner requires to grasp a concept, are important to the learning outcomes. Considering emphatic interpersonal traits, 80.5% of the teachers strongly agreed, while 9.5% agreed. On the contrary, 3% of the teachers were undecided, 4% disagreed, and a further 3% strongly disagreed. An even higher percentage (85.0%) strongly agreed that dependability are a necessary interpersonal characteristic in teaching reading skills among Grade III pupils, as supported by a further 9.5% who agreed. Nevertheless, 1.5% of the Grade III teachers were undecided, 6% disagreed, and an insignificant 2% strongly disagreed. One of the headteachers noted that: "I have observed that teachers who are committed to their work in my school, their learners have better reading skills hence learners fully depend on them"

Active listening posted mixed results because, as opposed to the findings for all other traits, the Grade III teachers who strongly agreed were below 80% (70.5%), and a further 15.5% agreed. Furthermore, this test item 0.0% rate for the respondents who were undecided, a significant 10% of Grade III teachers disagreed, while 4.0% (the highest amongst the entire test items), strongly disagreed.

The study further sought to establish the impact of responsibility as an interpersonal characteristic on the reading skills of Grade III pupils. Table one showed this trait as one of the test items which scored the highest rate (86.5%) for the respondents who strongly agreed, and a further 10.5% who agreed. Furthermore, a mere 1.0% were undecided, 1.5% disagreed, and a paltry 0.5% (the lowest across the five test items) strongly disagreed. One of the headteachers remarked that "Grade III learners whose class teachers are responsible portray better reading skills than those whose class teachers are irresponsible"

The findings affirm the knowledge claim that interpersonal skills such as teacher responsibility, dependability, motivational abilities, emphatic traits, and active listening skills are important in laying a foundation for the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners. Furthermore, the findings imply that the teacher's interpersonal skills are an indicator of a basis upon which the successful acquisition of reading skills by Grade III pupils in Bungoma County. Notably, the teachers in Bungoma County could be lacking these vital skills, because the below-average reading levels of Grade III pupils in the following section affirm these findings. The findings have policy implications to the ministry of education in Bungoma County to lay groundwork for the acquisition of these vital skills be the teachers.

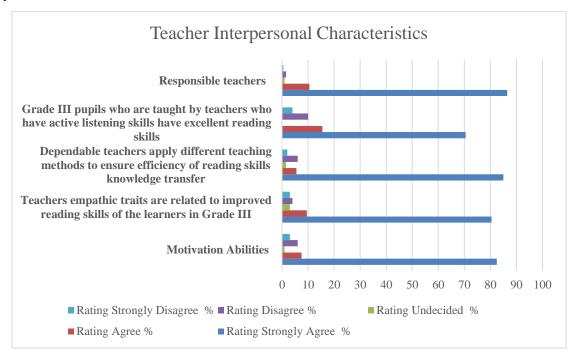


Figure 1: Graphical Representation of Teacher Interpersonal Characteristics

Reading Skills Levels Among Grade Iii Pupils

This was the second objective of the study which determined to establish the reading skills levels of the Grade III pupils in primary schools. The test items (which indicated the levels of reading skills) were Comprehension, Letter Identification, Word Identification, Reading Fluency, and Sound Recognition. Table 2 below shows the findings for this objective.

Table 2: The Reading Levels of Grade III pupils

Type of Test Reading Skills	Above Average		Avei	Average		Below Average		
	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Letter Identification	18	36	7	14	25	50		
Comprehension	15	30	8	18	27	54		
Word Identification	20	40	5	10	25	50		
Reading Fluency	17	34	5	10	28	56		
Sound Recognition	9	18	6	12	35	70		

Table 2 reveals mixed results for the levels of reading amongst Grade III pupils. However, the overall findings show that there is concern regarding the reading levels across the five test items. Firstly, the letter identification aspect of the test items reveals that 36% (n=18) of the investigated pupils have an above-average score, 14% (n=7) were average, and while 50% (n=25) of the participants could not identify the letter at all. These findings corroborate a report by Uwezo (2011) which alleged that lower primary learners in East Africa are unable to read essays meant for a class which is lower their grade, thus corroborating the findings of an UWEZO (2012) report.

Furthermore, the comprehension test showed that a mere 30% (n=15) were above average, supported by a further 16% (n=8) who were able to apply comprehension skills during reading. Disappointingly, 54% (n=24) were below average. Ouko (2015) asserted that reading skills are poorly performed as opposed literacy skills. His assertion found credence in the word identification test item in this study because only 40% (n=20) of the Grade III pupils scored above average in the test. Furthermore, a paltry 10% (n=5) had an average score. However, 50% (n=25) of the Grade III pupils were unable to identify words during the reading skills test. One of the headteachers noted that the "Majority of learners in my school have got challenges in reading simple comprehension passages and word identification."

On reading fluency 34% (n=17) of the Grade III pupils scored above average, 10% (n=5) had an average score while 56% (n=28) which is the majority scored below average. Sound recognition was even the poorest across the five test items. The above-average score was represented by 18% (n=9) of the pupils, and a further 12% (n=6) had an average score. Nevertheless, a discouraging 70% of the Grade III pupils could not recognize the sounds especially when the test was administered through dictation. Sound recognition is an important a crucial requirement because a learner needs to combine letters and their sound during reading and dictation lessons to improve comprehension skills.

These findings confirm the findings of Ouko (2015) which showed that the reading levels among Grade III learners are appealingly low, as indicated by a study Gucha County in Kenya. Importantly, as more and more studies focus on individual counties, the findings across counties corroborate each other, because they show on

average that Grade III learners have poor reading skills. These findings are consistent with other findings from a study by Mwoma (2017), which indicated that reading levels are especially low in rural school of Kenya. Thus, the findings significantly reveal that there is a gap in the education system concerning the lack of crucial teacher interpersonal skills which are necessary to the acquisition of reading skills early in the lives of Grade III learners in Bungoma County. The findings further affirm that there is a strong relationship between the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners and the teacher's interpersonal skills.

Level Of Influence Of Teacher'S Interpersonal Characteristics On The Acquisition Of Reading Skills Among Grade Iii Learners

This was the study's third objective which was measured in terms of teachers' experience in teaching, awareness of the five interpersonal characteristics, and the application of one or more interpersonal characteristics during classes. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3: The level of influence of teacher's interpersonal characteristics on the acquisition of reading skills among Grade III learners

			y Frequently		Sometimes		Never	
Type of Test Reading Skills	Ver	y Frequently						
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Experience in Teaching	25	50	7	14	15	30	3	6
Awareness of the Skills	8	16	15	30	7	14	20	40
Application of interpersonal Skills	1	2	15	30	8	16	26	52

Table 3 reveals that 50% of Grade III teachers very frequently rely on their Experience in teaching to influence the pupils' acquisition of reading skills, while a further 14% confirmed that they frequently use their experience in teaching to impact the reading skills of the learners in Grade III. However, 30% of the teachers agreed that they sometimes rely on their teaching experience. Only 6% of them confirmed that they never use their experience in teaching to influence the acquisition of reading skills among the Grade III pupils in public primary school found in Bungoma County. One of the headteachers noted that "I have found out that grade III learners whose class teachers have many years of experience perform better in reading skills than those taught by teachers who have just joined the profession"

The findings confirm that the experience of teachers is a crucial competency which influences the teachers' ability to impart reading skills. Therefore, the findings imply further that continuous professional development of teachers fosters better reading outcomes among Grade III learners.

Additionally, awareness of the importance of interpersonal skills was another test result explored under the study's third objective. Table 3 shows that 16% were very frequently aware of the importance of interpersonal skills on the acquisition of reading skills amongst Grade III learners, as opposed 30% of the teachers who responded that they frequently attached importance to interpersonal skills for the acquisition of reading skills amongst Grade III learners. On the contrary, an even higher percentage (40%) of the Grade III teachers affirmed they were never aware of the importance of interpersonal skills, but only 6% responded for sometimes being

aware of the importance of teacher interpersonal characteristics. The findings imply that awareness of the importance of interpersonal skills is necessary to improve the acquisition of reading skills by learners in a teaching and learning environment.

The findings show that many teachers in Bungoma County are not aware of the importance of teacher interpersonal relationships, and their contribution to the reading skills of Grade III learners. These findings are very significant because they have urgent policy implications to the County's Ministry of Education. The ministry should implement a policy which fosters teacher awareness of the importance of interpersonal relationships to the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners. The findings are consistent with the findings of Goldhaber, Quince, and Theobald (2018), which revealed that there is a gap in teacher quality competencies which has resulted in poor reading skills early in the life of learners.

Furthermore, Table 3 Reveals that 2% of the Grade III teachers very frequently apply interpersonal skills to enable Grade III learner acquire the reading skills. A further 30% agreed to frequently apply their interpersonal skills, while 16% said they sometimes apply the skills. A higher percentage 52% of the Grade III teachers responded that they never use their interpersonal skills to help the Grade III learners acquire their reading skills. When one of class teachers was asked she said 'Am usually not keen on applying my interpersonal skills while teaching reading skills to grade three learners I only focus on content delivery and nothing more.'

The findings lend more acceptance to the assertions of who posited that the competence of a teacher is crucial to the success of the pupils in a learning environment. The results for the three objectives show that influencing the acquisition of reading skills among Grade III learners is a complex process which requires the teachers' competence in interpersonal skills, as asserted by Ouko (2015). Furthermore, the findings corroborate the findings from a study by Snow and Mathews (2016), which showed that reading and language skills are important competencies that children must acquire early in life for their future success.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The study revealed that teacher interpersonal skills such as dependability, responsibility, empathy, active listening, and motivational abilities are competencies which impact the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners. However, the Majority of the teachers were in agreement that responsibility is the best interpersonal skill which helps Grade III learners to acquire reading skills.

The study also illustrated that Grade III pupils in Bungoma County have overall poor reading skills as manifested by their dismal sound recognition, and reading fluency. The findings further reveal that Grade III learners have poor letter identification, comprehension, and word identification skills, which are crucial indicators of the learners' reading ability.

From the findings of the study, it is evident that Grade III teachers are neither aware of the importance of their interpersonal skills, nor do they apply interpersonal skills to improve the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners. However, the majority of Grade III teachers apply their experience competencies as a strategy for helping the Grade III learners to acquire reading skills.

Future Recommendations

1. The Ministry of Education in Bungoma County uses these findings a basis for policy implementation regarding the ways of improving the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners in schools.

- 2. Teacher training colleges should revise their curriculum by adding the development of interpersonal skills as a prerequisite for teaching qualifications.
- 3. Further research should be conducted across the county to establish more insights concerning the role of teacher interpersonal characteristics in the acquisition of reading skills by Grade III learners.

Limitations of the Research

The research was a success, but there were some limitations which might inform suggestions for further research. Firstly, Bungoma County has nine Sub-Counties but the sample selection was not representative of the entire population because the selected sample was small and insufficient to warrant statistical measurement. Secondly, there was a lack of extensive previous research studies regarding the topic

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