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Reflections on policy and practice of inclusive education in pre-primary schools in Cyprus

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In July 1999 the House of Parliament in Cyprus passed the Education Act for Children with Special Needs, according to which all children have the right to be educated in their neighbouring regular school together with their age-mates. An important component of this law is that it introduces, for the first time, inclusive education into pre-primary education. A child can be considered as having special needs only when he/she has attained the age of 3 years or older. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the policy of inclusive education is implemented in pre-primary schools in Cyprus, to investigate whether some children are still marginalized (after the implementation of the new law) and, if they are, to identify factors influencing marginalization or acting as a barrier to inclusion. We also briefly present the results from a study we conducted that supports the discussion of the issues raised in this paper.

Introduction

During the past 25 years, there has been an international interest in the inclusion of children with special needs in regular schools (Ballard, 1998; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Ainscow, 1999). In the past, children with special needs were educated in special schools and institutions separately from their peers. The perception that education should be provided to all children regardless of their differences and needs has led to the development of inclusive education; the philosophy has been

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strengthened in the 1990s (e.g. Unesco, 1994), and it promises to treat all children with special needs as individuals who have equal rights to education.

Inclusive education opposes the practice of separation and is based on the notion of equity: emphasis is given to the needs and rights of children, including their right to education. It accepts all children as they are, providing them with adequate resources and support according to their needs. When talking about integration, we shall refer here to the integration of an individual into a school in which he/she was not previously accepted. Inclusive education does not simply refer to the placement of children with special needs into normal schools, but it is also concerned with the conditions under which we can educate effectively all children (Barton, 1997). Sebba and Ainscow (1996), for example, define inclusive education as the process with which schools try to respond to all pupils as individuals, reviewing the organization and provision of their curriculum.

Inclusive education is the practice that provides school experiences to children with special needs, in the same school and classrooms they would have attended anyway had they not had special needs. It is a process during which all children, regardless of their abilities and need, *participate in the same school* (see Thomas, 1997). The main purpose of this process, then, is the education of *all* children, regardless of differences, difficulties and problems, and to maintain a vision of a school for all. Such a school accepts all children, understands their individuality and responds to their individual needs: a school for all is a place where every child can develop according to his/her abilities, skills and talents.

In July 1999 the House of Parliament in Cyprus passed the Education Act for Children with Special Needs (Cyprus, 1999), and it was followed by the publication of the regulations that govern the implementation of the Act (Cyprus, 2001). According to this law all children with special needs have the right to be educated in their neighbourhood regular school, together with their age-mates and with the support of special teachers. An important component of this law is that it also introduces inclusive education into pre-primary education. According to the new legislation, a child is considered as having special needs only after attaining 3 years of age. With the passing of the 1999 Act, we now ask the following questions:

- How does inclusive education function in pre-primary schools in Cyprus?
- Are some children still marginalized (after the implementation of the new law)?
- If some children are still marginalized, what factors influence their marginalization and present barriers to inclusion?

In this paper, we address the above questions via a critical policy analysis and using data collected from a class in a pre-primary school. While considering special education policy in Cyprus, we will also discuss how barriers to equal participation in teaching and learning can be overcome. First, we look at the context of Cyprus, with particular focus on the status of inclusive education, and then briefly analyse the methodological background of the research conducted in this field. We present two vignettes, through which we investigate the situation of inclusive education in pre-primary schools in Cyprus, and identify those factors that act as barriers to the

inclusion of all children. The vignettes, together with our data, serve to ground the discussion regarding inclusive education in Cyprus, and present suggestions for overcoming obstacles to inclusion.

This study seeks to contribute directly to the improvement of the education environment in Cyprus and elsewhere by enabling policy-makers to overcome obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education. In addition, it seeks to enable teachers to identify and deal with those factors that act as barriers to the provision of equal education opportunities for all children in their classrooms.

The Cyprus context

The education service in Cyprus is highly centralized. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) controls the curriculum, and provides the textbooks and other resources needed to deliver it. Local school Boards are funded by the Ministry, their role being restricted to matters of school buildings, maintenance and supplies. Schools are directly controlled by the Ministry via the Inspectorate and the school headteachers, the latter having less devolved responsibilities in Cyprus than in many other education systems.

Education is compulsory in the early years, beginning at the age of 3, and it is within the parents' jurisdiction to decide whether and when they should arrange a placement for their children in a public or private nursery school. Primary schools provide a six-year compulsory programme for children who have attained 5 years 9 months. Secondary education extends over six years (12–18); it is divided into two cycles: the lower, or gymnasium (12–15), and the upper, or lyceum (15–18). In Cyprus education is compulsory up to the age of 15 years and almost 100% of students attain to this level (Hansen, 1993), as education in Cyprus enjoys a high priority among all social groups.

Classes in Cyprus are formally organized as mixed-ability groups. 'Mixed-ability teaching' implies teaching children with different abilities within the same classroom, and working on individual or group tasks with full respect for all. However, mixed-ability teaching may not be carried out precisely in this manner in practice. There may be an absence of flexible use of extension materials in the form of assignment sheets, theme studies and topic projects; in addition, very few classrooms are arranged for group work. Mixed-ability teaching naturally demands a higher level of resources for learning than does direct exposition in homogeneous teaching groups. Generally the whole class should work on common core materials, with extension material for the more able and the less able. In Cyprus there is often no evidence of such materials being available to teachers. Most teaching is carried out using a direct expository mode to the class as whole, using standard textbooks, with little additional material for the very able or the less able pupil and with little support for children with special needs (Unesco, 1997).

In Cyprus the provision for disabled children has traditionally taken place in special schools, where they are segregated from their peers (Barnard, 1997). In 1979 this practice was made statutory by the Law for Special Education (Cyprus, 1979), whose

most important provision was the education of disabled children in segregated settings. The 1979 law remained in force until 1999, when a new law was passed (Cyprus, 1999) giving the right to all children to attend their neighbourhood school; new legislation has been criticized for continuing to speak only of 'children with special needs' (Phtiaka, 1999).

During the past decade, the government of Cyprus has encouraged and supported the education of children considered as having special needs within the mainstream education system. Furthermore, a 'special' teacher for the support of these children has been placed in almost all schools. In most cases, special teachers are part-timers, covering two or three schools per week. They are obliged by the MEC to be provided with a small classroom where each pupil is taught individually. In some schools where there are many pupils deemed as having special needs, special teachers teach them in groups of two or three.

In light of the changes in thinking and practice currently occurring in this area throughout the world, Cyprus, like many other countries, is reviewing and developing its educational system in an effort to increase the participation and learning of those children who are considered as having special educational need. As Cyprus becomes a member of the European Union on 1 May 2004, the concept of inclusion has tended to replace that of integration and has in fact become an educational priority; however, as of today, this is far from becoming a reality. Like many other countries, Cyprus is in the process of expanding provision for previously marginalized children through policies of inclusion. Such a process, of course, requires solid planning, together with a careful examination of the situation, and a strong political will.

The traditional field of 'special' education, in Cyprus as elsewhere, is currently facing one of its deepest challenges in merging with mainstream education (Booth & Ainscow, 1998); moreover, children who may in the past have been served primarily by special teachers in segregated settings are increasingly becoming the concern of every educator. Now mainstream schools are required to be transformed in ways that will increase their capacity to respond to all children; and the implication of this is that all teachers are required to modify their practice in order to be able to teach effectively those children who are considered as having special needs, and to put into operation the policies of inclusion.

Teachers in Cyprus are mainly educated at the University of Cyprus, whose training curriculum contains two courses related to special education. Student teachers graduating from the university are under no obligation to attend in-service training on their appointment in schools; the Pedagogical Institute, responsible for teachers' in-service training, organizes regular seminars but participation is voluntary. Teachers appear to be experiencing difficulty in teaching pupils who have been assessed as having special needs. Although many pupils previously attending special schools are now educated in mainstream schools, the MEC has not undertaken the necessary measures in order to train teachers to teach all children successfully. The MEC has appointed more special teachers instead, most of whom are insufficiently trained for teaching pupils with disabilities. For instance, a large number of the newly appointed special

teachers are nursery teachers, having no additional specialization. Moreover, the MEC has paid little attention, in terms of its policy-making, to the children's views, or to their background, relationships and emotional development and well-being.

Methodological background

As a result of the issues and concerns we have raised above, we entered a Cypriot pre-primary school and observed what happened there on a normal day. Our aim was to study and make sense of the situation in schools regarding inclusive education, given the existence of the new law that gives the right to all children to be educated in their neighbourhood school. In collecting our data, we have followed the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles, 1990; Angelides, 2001). One of the researchers (Charis) became participant observer for four months in the classroom recording her experiences regarding the inclusion of the children and their teaching and learning. Based on the observations and interviews with the class teacher, we present here some incidents and vignettes in order to engage in a critical discussion of inclusive education in Cyprus. The researcher also interviewed all the children (30) in the class, in an effort to get their own perspectives. (For further details concerning the interviewing procedure see Angelides, 2001.)

The research field

The research that informed this paper took place at a pre-primary school, located in a northern suburb of Nicosia. The staff at the school consisted of the head teacher and six teachers, together with three support staff. The class from which we collected our data was a class with 30 children aged between 5 and 6 years. Among them there were four children who were considered, according to the 1999 law (Cyprus, 1999), to be children with special needs. These children are referred to by the pseudonyms Myrto, Giannis, Elina and Katerina. According to the legislation, these children had the right to receive special education from a special teacher. The special teacher came to school twice a week and taught each child individually in a separate room for about 40 minutes

Giannis and Elina, who were twins, shared, according to their teacher, a syndrome that is accompanied with mental retardation, and they had learning difficulties. Both were very sympathetic children, rather weak with black eyes and black hair. Giannis was hyperactive and very friendly, and Elina was very quiet, shy and rather 'closed in' on herself. The third child, Katerina, was a beautiful hemiplegic girl, tall with black hair and green eyes. Katerina, like Elina, was rather shy and rarely got involved in games and activities with the rest of the children. Myrto was a six-and-a-half-year-old girl with blue eyes, almost a year older than her classmates. The educational psychologists described her as hyperactive and with concentration problems. For these reasons, according to her teacher, she got a one-year reprieve from the primary school. In class she came with a school assistant, who was responsible for her safety. During

the period of conducting our research, the participant observer took the role of the school assistant in order to have a more active role in the class she was observing.

In what follows, we present two vignettes, which helped us to address our research questions. The reason for selection of these two vignettes, out of many, is that they present to the reader a clear picture of our interpretative purposes, in examining how in Cyprus the policy of inclusive education is implemented in pre-primary schools, and investigated whether some children are still marginalized (after the implementation of the new law), and if so, to identify factors supporting their marginalization and acting as a barrier to inclusion.

Because of the gaps in the legislation and policy on inclusive education, certain issues need to be addressed, including the government's requirement that teachers teach in special classrooms, the lack of educational infrastructure, the pre-service and in-service training of teachers and the perceived role of the children themselves as factors influencing inclusion.

Vignette 1

(Narrated by Charis Charalambous)

> It was a Monday morning in September during my first days at the school, before knowing all the children very well. I was at the entrance welcoming children who arrived at the school. One of the children who came was Myrto, accompanied by her mother. After our introductions, Myrto's mother told me: 'Myrto is a difficult child but she is full of love. She needs love.' I took Myrto's hand and we moved towards the classroom. There, we met the teacher who, seeing me holding Myrto's hand, told me: 'Myrto is a nice girl but I didn't have a choice with her; I could not accept her in my class without a school assistant. It is very difficult for me. If I move my eyes from her for a second, she can destroy the whole classroom. She throws things down and hits other children. Her case is a very difficult one, not only for me but also for the children'.
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> Observing the situation in the classroom, I could distinguish a certain suspicion in the eyes of the teacher and the other children that was directed towards Myrto. For example, during lunchtimes no child wanted to sit next to Myrto.

In discussing this situation with the teacher herself, we obtained much interesting background information that helped us to interpret the situation:

- Mrs Eleni (the teacher of the class we observed and interviewed) was not informed by anybody about the implications of the new law for special education. She had merely heard about it. In the school archives there was a copy of the law, sent by the MEC, but Mrs Eleni said that she did not know of it.
- She stated that she did not know how to deal with a child presenting with special needs. She considered that to be a special teacher's job.
- She had a very typical relationship with the special teacher since she came to the school only twice a week.
- She did not know exactly why Myrto had been considered as having special needs; she just knew that Myrto was hyperactive, and she did not have any particular support programme for her.

● She wanted to learn more about inclusive education. She reported that she 'felt alone', that she needed support in order to cope with her teaching and did not know whom to approach to ask for help since her superiors (head teacher and inspector) did not share her worries.

From analysing this vignette, some important issues emerge, pointing to factors that act as barriers in the Cypriot education system to including children in mainstream schools. The actual existing situation in Cypriot schools is different than the one that is described by the senior officers of the Ministry of Education. Inclusive education exists, but without the necessary educational infrastructure and organization for its successful implementation. Combining the issues here with what Mrs Eleni had said in her comments, above, and what other teachers had also reported to us, it appears that one important barrier to implementation of inclusive education in Cyprus is the government's policy. While the law refers to *inclusion*, the practice of special teachers, as the Ministry of Education defines it, is to withdraw children from their classes and to teach them in a separate classroom, so reinforcing their marginalization. Of course, this practice is on one level more 'inclusive' than previous practices have been, where children deemed to have special needs were not accepted into mainstream schools and attended special schools.

Moreover, there are several issues that should have been addressed before the implementation of the Education Act for children with special needs. A very important issue concerns the training and support that is given to teachers. Previous research on teachers' training that investigated whether or not teachers are able to teach *all* children (e.g. Angelides *et al.*, 2002) has shown that pre-primary school teachers in Cyprus lack both the necessary knowledge and attitudes in order to support or provide inclusive education.

Through the words of Mrs Eleni, it seems to us that some teachers do not create in their classrooms learning conditions favourable to all children, including those deemed to have special needs. What actually happens in practice is that teachers like Mrs Eleni, lacking the necessary knowledge and attitudes, find themselves unable effectively to include all children in their teaching.

Teachers too have the power to cultivate an atmosphere in the classroom that is helpful to children with special needs regarding their acceptance by their classmates, and to be considered as equal members of the society. In addition, they can sensitize the children and so develop in the classroom feelings of safety, acceptance and certainty for all. In order for inclusive education to succeed, we must exploit every available resource (Saleh, 1998), for the notion of inclusion requires development of a logic that aims primarily at bringing about improvements of educational strategies and programmes, and better use of all available resources. Teachers, as the operators of school processes, have a key role in helping all of the children (Mauroeides, 2000). Therefore, we argue for the need for in-service training for *all* teachers. This training should be developed by the Ministry of Education, focused on the development of teacher skills, knowledge, self-awareness and skills of adaptation to the education environment (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). In addition, it requires to be focused on

the development of teachers' positive attitudes towards children with special needs. We believe further that in-service education should be offered not in the lecture-room, but rather take place in schools and in the classrooms where Ministry officers work collaboratively with teachers to develop practices that provide equal opportunities to teaching and learning for all children (Angelides, 2002).

Although the Cyprus education system is very centralized and government policy is a major influence on education, we believe that significant progress can be achieved without necessarily having the need of first changing educational policy. Progress in inclusive matters is highly dependent on the attitudes, experience and knowledge of those who are in every-day contact with children with special needs. In other words, teachers have the power to contribute significantly in an effort for the successful implementation of inclusion, by modifying their plan and action, and responding themselves to the needs and personal responses of the pupils. In addition, teachers can differentiate their teaching according to the content of the lesson, the interests of each child and his/her pace and level of learning, and by their responses to questions and activities and the structures and methods of teaching (Lewis, 1992).

Vignette 2

(Narrated by Charis Charalambous)

> It is 10 o'clock in the morning. The children rush to the playground for break. They play different games. Elina looks around. She is looking for company. She goes to the opposite side of the yard where her classmates play, to try to get involved in their company. The girls do not pay any attention to her and continue with their game. After a while, they turn their back on her and leave. Elina is alone again. She goes to the little plastic house that is located on the eastern side of the playground. She sits on the little chair and plays with the dolls. She does not seem to enjoy herself, though. So, after a few moments, she leaves the dolls and runs onto the grass. There she meets Katerina. Katerina is a hemiplegic 5-year-old girl. They begin playing together. They run to the other side of the yard. They look happy. The teacher does not let them continue their game for a long time because she calls them back to their classroom. Elina and Katerina return to the classroom holding hands.
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> Going to the class, later on, Katerina asked me to play with her in the doll's house. We took a doll each and began playing. During our game, I observed her using mainly her left hand since the right one was partially disabled. Mrs Eleni stopped our game and asked Katerina to go and do her *papier colle* (cutting pieces of coloured paper and sticking them together) like all the other children. That day the children had to do a house, with glowing paper on its doors and windows.
>
> In order to make the doors and windows of the house, Katerina used only her left hand without using the right one at all. As a result, she could not complete successfully her activity. Thus, she asked me to help her. When some of the other children heard her asking for help, they began to say: 'Ha! Ha! She cannot do it'. After this reaction from her classmates, Katerina's eyes misted with tears. The teacher intervened and said to the other children: 'Stop making fun of her'.

From the analysis in the previous sections, it would seem that in Cyprus the prime factors considered as important for the success of inclusive education are:

policy-making, the teachers and the schools, the curriculum and the available resources. Very little attention has been paid to children's own views, their personal emotions and responses or their relationships, and they are not investigated to see how all these might influence the success of inclusive education. In response to the above vignette, the following questions emerged:

- Is it likely, despite the efforts towards inclusion, that some children are marginalized, differentiated or excluded by their classmates?
- Is it likely that the relationships among children and the marginalization of some of them through these relationships are factors that act as barriers to the success of inclusive education?
- What is the attitude of teachers towards the relation of children with and without special needs?

Throughout the above, it appears that despite the efforts in implementing inclusion there exists a division still between 'normal' children and those children having special needs. We see Elina trying to play with some children during a break-time but most of them do not want her in their company. Elina is marginalized by her classmates.

Roll (1998) notes that despite the fact that children with or without special needs share the same space and are involved in similar activities, children with special needs remain marginalized. Schools should be 'modified' in such a way as to cultivate in *all* children an acceptance of *all* their classmates, as they are (Ainscow *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, 'normal' children should be taught to accept the differences that some of their classmates might have. The Cyprus education system provides insufficient preparation of 'normal' children for the successful inclusion in the classroom of new groups of children. According to Roll (1998), inclusive programmes for children with and without special needs will achieve their goals only when real friendships among pupils are created. Although coexistence might be a necessary element for social inclusion, most of the time it is not enough. Rejection and prejudice by their classmates might significantly impact upon the emotions of children with special needs (Zoniou-Sideri, 1998); and we can see this rejection and marginalization by other children in the above example, where Elina tried to get involved with the other girls but they turned their backs and left.

The above vignette also clearly shows that some children have a negative attitude towards children with special needs. According to our own observations, many of the so-called 'normal' children sometimes made fun of and belittled some of their classmates with special needs. The above incident is only one example. This attitude, according to the teacher, depended on the values or prejudices cultivated in children by their family at home. Zoniou-Sideri (1998) is in agreement with this, noting that individual children without special needs and who come from a home holding negative or stereotyped views in relation to special needs children, will not attempt to 'knit up' with those considered different.

Although the teacher in this study supported the argument that the responsibility for the children's attitudes belongs with parents, our opinion is different. We believe

that teachers, through their instruction, have the power directly to influence and shape children's attitudes towards difference. It is the teachers' duty to teach children that every individual is different from the rest with different abilities, and that some people are good in one area and some in another. The above teacher could have cultivated within the children positive attitudes towards their peers through her instruction. We believe too that it is the MEC's duty to help teachers in achieving this goal.

In Katerina's example, the teacher's attitude seemed to worsen the situation. She stopped Katerina's game with one of the researchers and asked her to go and do *papier colle*, an activity that the teacher knew in advance that Katerina could not complete because of her disability. The philosophy of inclusive education gives emphasis to the involvement of all children in all school activities; however, we should not be very rigid, but rather flexible. If a child experiences real difficulties with an activity, we can arrange an alternative or even engage in a team activity where *papier colle*, for example, will no longer be an individual activity but a collaborative one. So, the child's weakness, instead of leading to marginalization, can in fact result in their contribution to the team.

Furthermore, when the children made fun of Katerina, who was unable to finish her activity, the teacher said: 'Stop making fun of her', and by this comment seemed not to make any effort to change the attitude of the other children towards Katerina. In contrast, her approach seemed to reinforce their negative attitudes with regard to children with special needs. She seemed to maintain and preserve that mentality reinforced by the traditional school structure. We believe the class teacher could have explained through a lesson the reasons for not laughing at classmates, and that the views, attitudes and behaviours of teachers in the classroom can influence significantly the success of inclusive education. A great part of the success of inclusion lies in the degree to which teachers are capable of helping the children develop friendships with their peers.

Another issue that is raised by our analysis of the above vignette, and would seem to act as a barrier to participation of all children in the classroom, is the teaching methods used by the teachers. Through our observations we realized that the methods employed by the teacher differed significantly from those suggested in the literature relating to successful inclusive practice (Ainscow, 1999, 2000). For example, Ware (1995) argues that particular methods of teaching can facilitate the 'materialization' of inclusive education; such methods are based on collaborative learning and problem-solving. Following these methods, children with special needs learn and develop through their active participation in the classroom. In contrast, teachers who segregate children, giving them individual work that might be difficult for them to complete by themselves, reinforce marginalization (Solity, 1992). These children should be considered as providing useful information for evaluating the classroom activities, instead of considering them as presenting problems to be solved (Ainscow, 1998).

Some final thoughts

Coming back to our initial questions, we argue that despite the fact that the legislation provided in the Education Act of 1999 for children with special needs, and which

makes provision for inclusive education, is now in force, there remain still certain poli-cies and practices that marginalize or even exclude some children from receiving equal educational opportunities in Cyprus. An important factor that appears to receive less attention than it should by the MEC—and that actually seems to lead directly to the marginalization of some children—concerns the part played by the children them-selves. We observed, in many instances, that children deemed to have special needs tended to be treated as 'different' by their peers, having no place among them.

What seems to be a dominant theme is that the behaviour of 'normal' children, as well as the behaviour of teachers, is socially constructed within the school itself, through those taken-for-granted values and beliefs transferred from generation to generation (or from one academic year to the next) by both teachers and pupils. These norms perpetuate the existing culture of marginalization and prevent the devel-opment of a new inclusive practice. Children, with the unconscious help of teachers, construct certain behaviours that tend to maintain and promote values set by the traditional school. The traditional school tends to reinforce those children with high achievement and to 'punish' low-achievers. High-achieving, quiet children promote the interests of the teachers; and in contrast, low-achievers and children with behav-iour difficulties violate their interests. Children considered as having special needs are often placed in this second category and, therefore, the existing culture tends to marginalize them. This culture is transferred through teachers directly to the children, and every effort should be focused on changing the existing culture and replacing it with a new and more inclusive one. In achieving this, inclusive practices should be gradually introduced by the MEC in order to change the norms, values and beliefs of all involved and in such a way as to recognize each child as being different.

The Cyprus education system seems at the present time not to value difference, rather there is a tendency to emphasize similarity and to reinforce associations with individuals who have similar abilities, skills and indeed appearance. As a result, there is a tendency to avoid and exclude those individuals who differ regarding these same characteristics. Individuals who are 'different' appear to be integrated into a separate category and to which is attributed several characterizations. These individuals are often considered as 'second-class' individuals, in need of help or protection. Foucault (1967), in commenting upon this issue, has said that 'normal' individuals tend to treat difference differently in order to establish themselves as 'normal'. In other words, the 'other' in Cypriot schools becomes the subject of the normalizing practices of the 'normal'.

In our brief analysis, we have identified some factors that have acted as barriers to the implementation of an inclusive education in pre-primary schools in Cyprus. Further consistent researches are, of course, needed for a better understanding of these and other factors that militate against improvement and development. Govern-ment policy should be grounded on such research findings and, in addition, teachers should participate in in-service training courses, so that *all* teachers are able to teach *all* children equally. The most important factor here is that the children themselves, their views together with the emotions they bring and their relationships, should be taken into account.

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