

Enhancing the Quality of Learning Effected in the Co-operating Teacher Scheme

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Abstract

This Action Learning Project aimed to enhance the quality of learning effected in the Co-operating Teacher Scheme (CTS. This is a scheme that places an increased demand for the school teachers' support when compared with traditional teaching practices. The project was designed with the purpose of enhancing the quality of learning by improving: i) the psychological preparation of the student-teachers towards teaching practice; and ii) the quality of guidance provided by the Co-operating Teachers. An intervention that included training sessions for the Co-operating Teachers was organised. The sessions included an introduction to recent educational theories, classroom observation skills, basic counselling skills, and the background to the teacher education programme. In indicating the support from the Co-operating Teachers, student-teachers were interviewed after their teaching practice in the CTS. The student-teachers were also asked to record their conversations with the Co-operating Teachers by using checklists and writing journals during the teaching practice period. The findings from the checklists and the interviews indicated that the Co-operating Teachers who had attended the training sessions offered quality support to the student-teachers. The trained Co-operating Teachers made good use of different opportunities in the school to engage in discussions with the student teachers. They were more likely to help the student-teachers in their lesson preparation and provide psychological support at any convenient time. The support and suggestions provided by the trained Co-operating Teachers were more diverse and were also more concrete.

Background

The Co-operating Teacher Scheme

With the establishment of the Hong Kong Institute of Education in 1994, the arrangement for the field experience component of the teacher education programmes was revised. A Co-operating Teacher Scheme (CTS) was set up for the first time in the two-year Certificate of Education (Primary) programme. The scheme involved active participation from the school in the sense that the primary teachers were invited to become Co-operating Teachers for the student-teachers during the teaching practice period. The school administration was asked to match a Co-operating Teacher with each of the student-teachers engaged in teaching practice in their school. The work of the Co-operating Teacher included offering advice, sharing teaching experience and observing lessons taught by the student-teacher. The support provided by the Co-operating Teacher was given usually on a voluntarily basis.

The research team had conducted a prior study to explore the experiences of the participants in the CTS. It was found in the interviews with Co-operating Teachers, that they would like to have more current knowledge of education theories and teaching strategies (Cheng, & Research in Practice [RIP] 96 team, 1996). The findings of a study by Cheng, Wong, So, Kong, & Chow, (1997), demonstrated that student learning in teaching practice was very much influenced by the Co-operating Teachers and, in some cases, the student-teachers were confused in the complex teaching situation. For example, one student-teacher stated:

I did not provide any activities for my pupils in the first two weeks in my teaching practice because my Co-operating Teacher commented that doing activities will make the class difficult to control. However, I later found that the class was uncontrollable even without activities. I therefore tried to introduce some activities in my class. To my surprise, it worked. The pupils were more interested, more attentive and so there are fewer discipline problems with activities.

As a result of these findings, the research team was motivated to design ways of supporting the work of the Co-operating Teachers and thus facilitate the learning of the student-teachers.

Defining the Role of the Co-operating Teacher

The term 'Co-operating Teacher' was identified in documents as early as 1971 when Haberman (1971), Spillane, & Levenson (1976) and Bowman (1979) questioned the effectiveness of the university supervisor and recommended eliminating the position. These educators suggested that the Co-operating Teacher should take full responsibility for the supervision of students. This meant that the Co-operating Teacher should conduct all observations, conferences, evaluations and the many duties which were previously the domain of the university supervisor. The uniqueness of the field experience, as compared with other parts of the teacher education programme, is a result of the support, at this stage, coming from both the school and the teacher education institute.

There were attempts to shift the balance of support from the teacher education institute to the schools. The IT-INSET project initiated by Ashton (1989) suggested a school-based programme of collaborative learning. The programme demands intensive involvement of both the tutor and the teacher. A basic 'learning unit' of six students, a teacher and a tutor spend one half day or a whole day per week in school, where they work together to plan, execute and discuss the learning which may or may not have taken place. The underpinning principles utilised were:

- observation of practice;
- analysis of the practice and application theory which may have been derived from academic study, from research, or from everyday experience;
- evaluation of the curriculum;
- development of the curriculum;
- team work; and
- involvement of other teachers from the school in the process.

This approach suggests that teachers assume more important roles in the learning of the student-teachers than in traditional field experiences.

With teachers undertaking more important roles, studies were conducted which aimed to define the role of the mentor or the Co-operating Teachers. The Co-operating Teacher was identified by Abell, Dillon, Hopkins, McInerney, & O' Brien (1995) as a support or backup, a colleague, and a scaffolder. They argued that a person who gives support is one who is a source of

information, a person who knows what the student-teachers are going through and who can talk to them when they do not feel safe with anybody else. Fish (1995) and Grimmett, & Ratzlaff (1986) proposed that the Co-operating Teacher should be expected to:

- i. provide student-teachers with basic information (i.e. about school rules, policies, and physical set-up of school and classroom) to enable them to make adjustments to the practice situation;
- ii. ensure student-teachers acquire resource materials (i.e. teacher's guide, teacher's manual, textbooks, teaching aids, etc.);
- iii. involve student-teachers in planning and evaluating learning experiences;
- iv. model teaching and general classroom management;
- v. team-teach with the student-teachers;
- vi. observe the student-teachers;
- vii. conference with student-teachers at regularly scheduled times to include analysing and discussing the student-teacher's performance;
- viii. evaluate student-teachers' progress and development (in collaboration with the university advisor) through regular observations and feedback;
- ix. highlight what students can learn from an analysis of practice.

Although points i. and ii. can be satisfied by most Co-operating Teachers, points iii. to v. are demanding and require pre-requisite knowledge or skills, for example, observation skills, current knowledge of education theories, ability to undertake critical analysis of one's own and other people's lessons. This indicates a need for preparation of the Co-operating Teachers so that they are equipped with the necessary skills, and better understand the needs of the student-teachers so that they are able to provide adequate support.

Psychological Needs of the Student-teachers

In order to have a better understanding of the needs of the student-teachers, a review of studies relating to the experience of the student-teachers during the field experience was undertaken. They indicated that the student-teachers experienced much conflict and stress during their field experience. The stress related to learning to teach, may result in feelings of incompetence and have implications for the confidence, attitude, behaviour and performance of the student-teachers. Disposito (1980), found that student-teachers' attitudes towards teaching and school became less favourable following the teaching practice experience. So, Cheng, & Tsang (1997) found that student-teachers in Hong Kong had a diminished perception of their competence following the teaching practice.

In a more extensive study, Sacks, & Harrington (1982) identified six stages of development from student to teacher. Stage 1, *Anticipation*: characterized by eagerness, excitement and great anxiety, and occurs before they begin to work in the classroom. Stage 2, *Entry*: demonstrated in the students' being excited at the beginning the experience but worried that the challenge is too great. Stage 3, *Orientation*: characterised by students feeling inadequate and incompetent, and painfully aware of the complexity of teaching. Stage 4, *Trial and Error*: a longer stage when student-teachers struggle to find the correct way to teach and to develop into being independent teachers. Stage 5, *Integration/Consolidation*: students begin to concentrate on the needs of pupils rather than on their own personal needs. Few students can attain Stage 6, *Mastery* which indicates an understanding of self as person and teacher and a recognition that there are many ways by which the goal of being an effective teacher can be attained. These findings

imply that the learning experience of teaching practice is occurring in the midst of much emotional turmoil.

Interventions in the Project

Interventions in the present project occurred in two phases: before and during the teaching practice; and in two domains: the Institute and the school. The interventions were based on research findings concerning three areas of teaching practice:

- the psychological needs of student-teachers;
- the role of Co-operating Teachers; and
- communication between the Institute and the schools.

The project began in the academic year 1997-98 and to date 2 cycles of the project, as proposed by Kember and Kelly (1993), have been completed.

The first part of the intervention involved conducting workshops for the student-teachers, the goal of which was to improve their preparation for teaching practice by reducing their anxiety and stress. The workshops included sessions aimed at enhancing student-teachers' self-understanding and confidence so that they were better prepared psychologically for teaching practice. Moreover, the social skills developed in the sessions were able to be applied when relating to colleagues in the school context. The next concern centred on the quality of learning resulting from the guidance of the Co-operating Teachers.

The second part of the intervention included preparation sessions for the Co-operating Teachers. Members of the project team included the facilitators in the training sessions. Letters were sent to the school principals inviting them to nominate teachers to participate in the workshop. The workshops took place in the school hall of a primary school and were held on Saturday afternoons. The three half-day training sessions for the Co-operating Teachers included the following topics:

- An introduction to the skills and purpose of classroom observation;
- The design of an observation instrument;
- Basic counseling and communication skills;
- Recent teaching approaches in Chinese, Mathematics and General Studies.

Such training aimed to provide background information of the two-year teacher education course organised in the Hong Kong Institute of Education so that the Co-operating Teachers could understand better, students' preconceptions of teaching. The training also equipped teachers with the pre-requisite skills and knowledge for effective observation and critical analysis of the lesson with the student-teachers. By participating in the training sessions, it was also hoped that the Co-operating Teachers would acquire certain counseling skills so that they could provide psychological support to the student-teachers. The sessions also offered a professional development opportunity for the teachers.

Evaluation of the Project

The aim of the evaluation was two fold:

- to estimate the quality of the learning of student-teachers; and

- to examine the quality of guidance provided by the Co-operating Teachers.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The student-teachers and the Co-operating Teachers who participated in the project were invited to complete a questionnaire. In addition, ten student-teachers and their respective Co-operating Teachers were interviewed following teaching practice in the CTS. The interview questions for the student-teachers were framed to describe:

- their difficulties in teaching practice;
- their relationships with the Co-operating Teachers;
- the support that they obtained from the Co-operating Teachers;
- how they compared the advice from the Co-operating Teachers with the learning from the Institute.

The student-teachers were asked to record the conversation they had with their Co-operating Teachers making use of a checklist. They were also asked to keep journals about their experiences in the teaching practice situation.

Findings and Discussion

The findings in the study were drawn from an analysis of the journals written by the student-teachers, the records of conversation, and the interviews with the student-teachers and Co-operating Teachers in the two phases of the study. In both the first and second phase of implementation, the findings from the checklists and the interviews indicated that the Co-operating Teachers offered quality support to the student-teachers. This support was demonstrated by their awareness of the areas in which student-teachers needed to improve, by making use of opportunities to discuss with the student-teachers a wide range of issues related to teaching practice.

Journals from 24 student-teachers were analysed. The following extracts indicate the support from the trained Co-operating Teachers which student-teachers experienced. They also exemplify the themes which emerged from an analysis of the data. In their journals, the student-teachers recorded their interactions with, and the support they received from, the Co-operating Teachers. These interactions included information about the pupils' backgrounds, advice on establishing relationships with pupils, suggestions relating to teaching methods as well as classroom management, and comments about their teaching performance.

Advice about the Student's Teaching Performance

The following are examples of the advice received from the Co-operating Teachers by students on their teaching performance.

My Co-operating Teacher was like a guide. She analysed my teaching performance with me and gave me some suggestions about how to stimulate pupils' motivation to learn.

Whenever the Co-operating Teacher observed my teaching, I received a lot of feedback and suggestions about teaching. Frankly speaking, I started not to worry about being observed but instead hoped to be observed as often as possible, because I can really share with them their teaching experience.

They (the teachers in the school) asked me whether we had problems in teaching or not. Then they shared their experiences about teaching methods and teaching tools. They provided lots of help and suggestions,

Co-operating Teacher's Help in the Preparation of Teaching Resources.

Another student-teacher described how she appreciated the Co-operating Teacher's help in the preparation of teaching resources.

My Co-operating Teacher video-taped the programme so that we could view it whenever we wanted. He provided lots of help on preparing the videotape recorder and related affairs.

Concrete Advice about Teaching

The student-teachers described how the Co-operating Teacher shared her personal experiences of teaching and provided concrete advice about teaching.

My Co-operating Teacher shared with me her teaching experience. With her guidance, I have thought about new ways of teaching. The groups of pupils who behaved well should be first allowed to go to the base area in the classroom. The pupils would then try to compete among themselves and behave better.

One day, I was so angry with one of my pupils that I scolded him, 'You are really hopeless!' My Co-operating Teacher overheard this and he asked me what had happened. Having described the incident to him, he reminded me that I should never use the word 'hopeless' in class again. He said that I am a teacher and should be careful with my words. The word 'hopeless' would severely damage the self-esteem of my pupil. I reflected on this afterwards and I do feel that my attitude was inappropriate.

Suggestions from the Co-operating Teachers about Counselling Pupils and Communicating with Parents

There were also suggestions about how to handle pupils, counselling pupils and communicating with parents, like:

The Co-operating Teacher provided a useful suggestion. He told me to get the handbook of that naughty pupil. Once he violated the rules, I wrote the event onto his handbook immediately.

I discussed this event with my Co-operating Teacher. She met (the pupil's) her parents and found that they indulged her very much. Then my Co-operating Teacher counselled that girl and she was sorry for what she did. I appreciated her approach in handling this situation. She tried to find out the cause first and then offered appropriate help to the pupil.

My Co-operating Teacher suggested that talking to pupils was a good way to understand pupils. It was helpful to establish a good relationship with pupils. This helped a lot in handling class and student behaviour.

My Co-operating Teacher was like a counsellor in this case. She met the mother of that pupil. She had no time to take care of her son and his academic performance, so we let that pupil do his homework during recesses. Finally, he made some improvement.

My Co-operating Teacher is very experienced and has provided me with a lot of examples to think about. With her experience and knowledge of the pupils, she knows how to cater for their different needs.

Co-operating Teachers as Role Models

The student-teachers also related how they appreciated the personal concern showed by the Co-operating Teachers. They found that the Co-operating Teachers could be their role models.

I do appreciate the concern shown by the Co-operating Teacher, my family and my classmates. They have all reminded me to take care of myself and not to make myself too exhausted.

From my Co-operating Teacher, I have really learnt a lot. She is serious about teaching and often encourages her pupils and us (the student-teachers). Her pupils found her to be pleasant and supportive. She is ready to try new teaching methods to increase pupils' participation in the lessons. This really helps to create a good learning atmosphere. I should really learn from her.

The student-teachers were asked to make a checklist of the number of exchanges that they had with the Co-operating Teachers during the teaching practice period indicating when the exchange occurred. The content of the exchange was recorded and categorised. The student-teachers who were supervised by the trained Co-operating Teachers reported in both cycles that the content of their discussions was diverse and covered all three areas (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Analysis of the conversation records between the trained Co-operating Teachers and the student-teachers in cycle one

Area discussed	Occurred before lesson observation	Occurred after lesson observation	Occurred at random	Total (no. of times)	Total (%)
Teaching schedule, subject knowledge, teaching content, aims, teaching method, assignments, teaching resources	26	8	10	44	40
Teacher's attitude and behaviour, use of voice, communication skills, non-verbal communication, time control, pupil participation, classroom management, teaching atmosphere	3	30	4	37	33
Pupils' problems, relationship with parents, adapting to the school, sharing experiences of teaching, sharing experiences of life, emotional support	2	30	23	30	27

However among the student-teachers who were supervised by untrained Co-operating Teachers, the topic of conversations focussed mainly on the first and second areas (Figure 2). On the whole, less attention was paid to the third area, the conversations focussing less on handling pupils' problems in their discussions with the student-teachers.

The results suggested that the trained Co-operating teachers were more skillful than the untrained in choosing the topics for discussion at different times during the period. They were more ready to talk to the student teachers, and their discussions could be held at any convenient time during or before the observed lesson. In the second cycle, among the trained Co-operating Teachers, there were also more randomly occurring exchanges (45%) than pre- and post-lesson observations (29% and 26% respectively). The Co-operating Teachers appeared to make use of

all possible opportunities during the school hours. The untrained Co-operating Teachers, however, tended to use only the pre- and post-lesson observations (37% and 42% respectively) for discussion with the student teachers.

Figure 2: Analysis of the conversation records between the untrained Co-operating Teachers and the student-teachers in cycle one

Area discussed	Occurred before lesson observation	Occurred after lesson observation	Occurred at random	Total # times	Total %age
Teaching schedule, subject knowledge, teaching content, aims, teaching method, assignments, teaching resources	4	24	12	40	45
Teacher's attitude and behaviour, use of voice, communication skills, non-verbal communication, time control, pupil participation, classroom management, teaching atmosphere	1	23	13	37	42
Pupils' problems, relationship with colleagues, communication with parents, adapting to the school, sharing experiences of teaching, sharing experiences of life, emotional support	1	4	7	12	13

The interview questions were focused to determine the views of the student-teachers about areas which they found difficult in teaching practice, the perceived support provided by the Co-operating Teachers, whether they found the support provided by the Co-operating Teachers helpful, and whether they found the suggestions made by the Co-operating Teachers congruent with the learning in the Institute.

The most frequently reported difficulties by student-teachers were classroom management, approaches to teaching, and dealing with difficult pupils. Other concerns included time-management, academic knowledge of the subject, learning ability of the pupils, time for lesson preparation, and some basic skills such as the rate of speech. The support from the Co-operating Teachers (Figure 3) generally met the needs of the student-teachers as all the areas of concern reported by the student-teachers were discussed. The support provided by the Co-operating Teachers involved many areas when one considers the types of difficulties encountered by the student-teachers. Apart from providing comments about teaching performance and advising on management and teaching, they provided psychological and personal support in terms of giving encouragement and showing concern. They provided student-teachers with background knowledge of the subject, alternative teaching methods and advice about classroom management. They also created opportunities for student-teachers to raise their problems, to team-teach, to brainstorm, to share teaching experience, and to prepare lessons together. The student-teachers who were supervised by the untrained Co-operating teachers, however, were less able to articulate the support or advice they had received, and while the general comment of "giving advice" was frequently mentioned, the student-teachers could only recall giving advice, but not what kind of advice was given.

Figure 3: Support and suggestions provided by the Co-operating Teachers (collated in the two cycles)

Support and Suggestions	Occurrence Amongst Trained Teachers	Occurrence Amongst Untrained Teachers
Personal or Psychological Support		
Giving some encouragement	0	2
Showing concern	0	1
Reminding student about correct attitude in teaching	0	0
Brainstorming (reflecting about teaching)	1	0
Comments and Advice Based on Teaching Performance		
Commenting on performance	4	7
Giving advice	2	5
Academic Subject Knowledge		
Providing knowledge about subject	1	0
Management and Teaching		
Advising on classroom management	2	3
Handling difficult pupils	0	4
Providing information about pupils' backgrounds	2	1
Suggesting alternative teaching methods	1	0
Sharing teaching experiences	1	0
Preparing the lesson together	1	0
Active Support or Direct Intervention in Teaching		
Helping conduct the lesson	1	0
Asking student-teacher if/s/he had anything to discuss	1	0

When the student-teachers were asked to compare the suggestions provided by the Co-operating Teachers with their learning in the Institute, five of them mentioned that they were different (Figure 4). Others described the differences in terms of the relevance to the teaching context, the content of the advice being more focused on classroom discipline and the advice being more specific to the needs of the student-teachers. These results suggest that the student-teachers recognised the context-specific support provided by the Co-operating Teachers. They were also able to appreciate the specific nature of the support provided which catered for their needs and the context of teaching.

Figure 4: Congruence between the suggestions provided by the Co-operating Teachers and Institute-based learning (collated in the two cycles)

Suggestions	Occurrence
Advice from the Co-operating Teachers is more realistic	5
Compared with the Institute, advice from the Co-operating teachers is more context driven	2
The Co-operating Teacher has more advice about classroom discipline than teaching	2
Advice from the Co-operating Teachers is more specific to the needs of student-teachers	1
Advice is different from that expected following institute-based study	5

In the analysis, the findings from the interviews of the student-teachers were compared with those from the interviews with the Co-operating Teachers in an attempt to determine whether the support provided matched the needs of the student-teachers. From the findings in cycle 2, all except one of the Co-operating Teachers provided support to the student-teachers which matched their needs. Each interview demonstrated that the student-teachers perceived difficulties in classroom management and the Co-operating Teachers were able to support them in different ways to address the problem. The support included:

- providing information about the different types of pupil behaviour in the classroom;
- advising the student-teacher about taking the initiative to talk to the pupils;
- giving the student-teacher an outline about running a class and how to communicate with pupils; and
- providing advice following classroom observations.

The Co-operating Teachers were also asked in the interviews to comment on the workshop. A number of positive comments such as the following were made:

- It provided a chance to observe student-teachers teaching;
- I learnt the skills and strategies for assessing student-teachers;
- The content was well selected;
- It has stimulated the participants to reflect on their own teaching;
- It has provided a chance to open up and share personal opinions.

However, there were a number of negative comments. In the first cycle of implementation, the Co-operating Teachers stated that three half-day workshops were too time consuming and so in the second round the workshops were compacted into a one day programme.

While the positive outcomes of the project suggested that the training workshops and the present mode of operation were supportive of the learning of the student-teachers, directions for further improvement were indicated from the negative comments of the participants in the study. In spite the various forms of support reported by the student-teachers, they also described a number of incidents in their journals about situations when their Co-operating Teachers could not offer much help, such as:

My Co-operating Teacher acted as a guide, but her suggestion was not that good because the suggestion was not specific to suit the needs of the naughty pupil.

My Co-operating Teacher provided a suggestion, but it didn't work, because they were pupils who were unable to calm down easily. The worse was that my lesson was after their PE lesson and it was the last lesson.

My Co-operating Teacher just told me that the level of these pupils was below standard, but she didn't make any suggestion.

These comments illustrated situations where the Co-operating Teachers were faced with management problems which they themselves found difficult to overcome and were unable to offer concrete advice to the student-teachers. Moreover, it was also possible that the culture in the school did not encourage either collegial support or discussions between teachers. One of the student-teachers who was placed in such an environment made the following comment,

My Co-operating Teacher was very passive. If I didn't approach him, he would leave me alone, so I missed something and made mistakes because I didn't have sufficient understanding of the school operations.

Under these circumstances, the learning of the student-teachers is influenced by the wider school context. Hence, efforts to support the student-teachers could be seen to be provided at two levels: i) the interactions with, or the support from, the Cooperating Teacher and ii) the school context.

Based on the following three major findings, the intervention strategies in the project can be considered to be successful.

- Firstly, the trained Co-operating Teachers were good at making use of every possible opportunity in the school to discuss or share their experiences with the student-teachers, with the content of the discussion covering a wide range of professional issues.
- Secondly, the journals of the student-teachers suggested that the Co-operating Teachers provided support in a variety of ways, from professional to personal concern and encouragement.
- Thirdly, the Co-operating Teachers found the workshops to be informative, and offered an opportunity for them to share experiences with other teachers.

Negative comments from the Co-operating Teachers were summarised to determine directions for further improvement of the CTS. These pointed to the issue of examining ways to support the Co-operating Teachers in their personal professional development and in developing collegiality among teachers in the school.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the support of student-teachers by the Co-operating Teachers can be categorised into three main areas.

- Firstly, the support is direct, for example, they may provide resources, information about the school or the pupils, or make direct suggestions about teaching.
- Secondly, the support is indirect or is mainly reflective. Instead of providing directions about teaching, they help the student-teachers reflect on their teaching so that they identify their own solutions or targets of improvement.
- Thirdly, the Co-operating Teacher may provide emotional support or show personal concern for the student-teachers.

These are areas that were apparent in the findings from the journals, conversation checklists and interviews.

When compared with the expected roles of the Co-operating Teacher as described by Grimmett and Ratzlaff (1986), the three areas of support largely covered the list of roles. The first area of support was consistent with the description given by Greene and Campbell (1993), and Black and Booth (1992) who stated that direct and constructive advice was given. The third area was congruent with the recommendation for emotional support made by McIntyre and Hagger (1994). Interestingly, instead of categorising the ways in which the Co-operating Teachers provided support, Edwards and Collison (1996) classified the nature of support in terms of those that facilitate the learning of the pupils and others that enhance the professional development of the student-teachers. The former level includes areas such as general advice as well as management and teaching. The latter level comprises suggestions that help the student-teachers to adjust to the role of a teacher. Areas like psychological support and advice about academic subject content exemplify this level.

With the support provided by the teachers, it is apparent that the workshops achieved the aim of better equipping teachers for the roles. It is therefore essential that the Co-operating Teachers should be informed about the needs of the student-teachers, the areas that the student-teachers perceive as difficult, and the diversity of potential areas of support. The workshops should introduce possible ways of offering support, such as team-teaching and verbal encouragement. The importance of the Co-operating Teachers in the learning process of the student-teachers should also be highlighted.

Finally, the findings of the study pointed to a new direction for exploring the issue that student-teachers' learning is influenced by the school culture. It is important that teachers share a culture of collegial support. By being accustomed to supporting each other in school, it is more likely that they will similarly support the student-teachers.

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