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Social perception on the integration of children with special educational needs in mainstream education

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Abstract: The inclusion of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within the general education system is a complex and persistent issue, considering that although educational policies and national legislation affirm support for the principle of inclusion, it is often implemented only at a declarative level. In the theoretical part, the evolution and progress of inclusive education at the international level was addressed, emphasizing the significant contribution of the United Nations Organization and various international conferences in promoting the individual rights of people with special needs. Another aspect considered the integration of students with special educational needs into the mainstream educational system, highlighting the crucial role and support offered to them. It is also emphasized the importance of the continuous professional development of teachers and the active involvement of parents in the educational process, as central pillars in the promotion of effective inclusive education. The methodology applied in the study regarding the integration of students with SEN in the Romanian educational system has as its main objectives the identification and analysis of teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards the integration process, the differences found between teaching staff from urban and rural environments, as well as examining the correlation between teachers' optimism and their perspectives on inclusion. Another important goal of the research is to identify barriers to the effective implementation of current and future public policies related to inclusive education. The research instruments used include an original questionnaire, entitled „Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes about the Integration of Students with SEN”, intended to assess teachers' perceptions of inclusion, and an optimism measuring instrument, composed of 48 items, used to assess the level of optimism of the respondents. The sample of the study was made up of 60 teaching staff, aged between 25 and 45, divided into two groups, depending on the environment of origin (rural/urban). The analysis of the collected data indicates a greater predisposition towards acceptance and positive attitudes towards inclusion on the part of teachers from the urban environment, compared to their counterparts from the rural environment. Also, the results emphasize the existence of a positive correlation between the level of teachers' optimism and their attitude towards the inclusion of students with SEN. In conclusion, the findings of this research emphasize the significance of increasing the professionalism of teachers in supporting inclusive education and reveal notable disparities between rural and urban teachers in terms of the integration of students with special educational needs.

Keywords. perception, integration, children, educational requirements, education

1. The Evolution of Inclusive Education

The historical trajectory of inclusive education, spanning the 20th and 21st centuries, has influenced educational policies and practices in a multitude of nations. The initiative to promote inclusive education for individuals with special needs originated in the sixth decade of the 20th century.

Prestigious international organizations, including the United Nations (UN), have developed and promulgated fundamental declarations related to inclusive education, including the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (1975) and the Convention on the Rights To the Child (1989).

The World Conference on Education for All held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and the subsequent Conference in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 reinforced the commitment of the international community to recognize education as a fundamental right of every person without distinction based on individual characteristics.

The 2008 UNESCO International Conference, hosted by Geneva, aimed to expand the spectrum of beneficiaries of education to include a wider variety of learner profiles, while promoting respect for diversity and the elimination of discrimination in all its forms.

Sustained efforts by many countries in the subsequent period aimed at adjusting educational policies and practices to reflect the principles of inclusive education, adapted to the specific context of each nation.

In the context of these developments, the need to reassess and reconfigure traditional, segregated educational systems has often been articulated from a human rights perspective, emphasizing that the transformation of conventional schools is the most effective method of ensuring access to education for all students, including those with disabilities.

2. Inclusion and Integration – conceptual delimitation

In the educational context, the school fulfills the essential function of preparing individuals capable of adapting and contributing effectively to the society of which they are a part. Education is the mechanism by which the understanding and adoption of social, cultural and moral norms of the community is facilitated.

From a sociological perspective, education is perceived as an interactive process of communication, involving both individual development and social influences, highlighting how individuals receive and interpret social messages in a context of variable dynamics of social influences.

Moral education, seen as a process of cultivating morality, plays a pivotal role in the formation of the conscience and moral behavior of individuals, contributing to shaping the moral profile and promoting responsible social conduct.

The terms „integration” and „inclusion” describe the processes by which the education of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is recalibrated from a segregated setting to the general education system. Although often used interchangeably, these terms reflect significant differences in approach and practice.

The concept of „inclusion” has been adopted internationally as an ideal that goes beyond simple „integration”, marking a paradigmatic change in the approach to education for students with CES. According to UNESCO (1994), inclusion represents a process of restructuring and reforming

the educational system as a whole, with the aim of ensuring universal access to the educational and social opportunities offered by the school. This process is not only limited to the participation of students in educational activities, but also involves a commitment on the part of educational institutions to adopt a more open and inclusive approach.

On the other hand, integration refers to the process by which students with special needs are absorbed into the traditional education system, assuming specific adaptations, support services and adjusted teaching methods to facilitate this process. Integrated education aims to counter the perception of special schools as segregated environments by promoting a more integrative view of education.

Inclusion, on the other hand, is defined as a holistic process that benefits all students, not just those with SEN, involving an active and conscious participation in the educational process. It aims not only to integrate students with special needs, but also to transform the education system into one that responds to the diversity of needs of all students, thus promoting education as a universal right.

According to UNESCO (1994) and other relevant sources, inclusive education aims to meet the learning needs of all children, young people and adults, with particular emphasis on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and social exclusion. This approach implies a continuous commitment on the part of teachers to discover values and inspiration in each student, promoting the idea that inclusive education is not limited to a set of pedagogical strategies, but represents a comprehensive philosophy that must be embraced at the level of the entire educational system.

Inclusive education is thus seen not only as an ethical imperative, but also as an effective strategy to ensure equal opportunities and promote a more equitable and inclusive society. In this sense, educational inclusion becomes an indicator of social progress and commitment to universal humanitarian values, reflecting the aspiration to a world where every individual has the opportunity to learn and develop in a respectful and stimulating environment.

3. Integrated education in Romania

Over time, our country has moved from an integrated education system to an inclusive one, which is a good thing.

In Romania, the legal norms regarding the individual rights of people with disabilities are currently in line with the legislation of the European Union. Guaranteeing adequate social integration for individuals with disabilities is a fundamental aspect in respecting, promoting and fully exercising their rights. As a result, supporting the rights of people with disabilities and ensuring their inclusion in society are priorities of contemporary societies and European Union institutions (Crețu, 1999).

The integration requests and requirements assume the following (Crețu, 2006):

(1) Like any other child or adult in the community, a disabled person must live in his own family, with his parents or in a house that is personally sheltered, employed like any other adult in a regular enterprise or his own business;

(2) If he is a citizen with full rights and has the right to a future, the disabled person must lead a normal life, that is, be involved in everyday life where other fellow citizens are, participating in age-specific activities.

(3) Services for people with disabilities are integrated into the community and form a unique complex, accessible to all citizens, depending on the special needs of each person. The results achieved in education, complex therapy, recovery and rehabilitation services remain incomplete and unfulfilled when people with disabilities do not benefit from the same opportunities as the rest of the citizens in the essential areas of everyday life. These areas include the family sphere, education, professional career, self-management skills, financial and personal security, participation in social and political communities, expression of religious beliefs, intimate and affective relationships, access to public services, freedom of mobility and general style of daily life (United Nations, 1982).

In conclusion, integration implies the presence in the community and society of the person with disabilities as a citizen with full rights, his visibility, but also a support for adaptation to the institutions, the community, the society in which he integrates.

Although the term is often used as an equivalent of „social inclusion”, the notions are not synonymous; integration rather emphasizes the idea of acceptance of the individual by society and the interdependence between members of society.

Governments, disabled people, civil society, disability associations and foundations, EU bodies have outlined their vision of social inclusion. The right of the disabled person to be non-discriminated must be complemented by the right to benefit from measures designed to ensure his independence, integration and participation in community life.

The new vision defines social inclusion as non-discrimination plus positive action. The implementation of the new vision will benefit not only people with disabilities, but also society as a whole. In internationally adopted documents, education, training for a profession and employment are the first key elements for employment. The school has a special mission to change attitudes towards people with disabilities, to understand their specific problems, to engage the noble forces of society in supporting legislative measures and community efforts to combat prejudice and stigmatization.

The inclusive school represents a superior paradigm in terms of respect for human rights compared to the integration of children with disabilities in the school system. The process of implementing inclusive education in the education system involves institutional restructuring, capitalizing on human and informational resources, as well as creating a support network to promote inclusion and prevent exclusion in education.

In a detailed survey on the social integration of Romanians with disabilities, Ionescu (2012) described 5 factors necessary for successful social integration:

- (1) accessible and correct information;
- (2) participation or involvement in the system of social relations;
- (3) specific legislation that addresses the challenges of people with disabilities;
- (4) government involvement through national protection policies;
- (5) a coherent educational framework that does not exclude children or adults from educational or work environments.

4. The physical and mental characteristics of the child with SEN

The most common classification of students with SEN is based on the nature of the impairment. In this sense, we will refer to sensory and physical deficiencies, language, communication and relationship disorders (autism), mental deficiency.

Sensory impairments refer to disorders that affect the functioning of the main analyzers, having a significant impact both on the individual's mental processes and on the way he perceives the environment.

Physical impairments represent the disturbances that affect the motor, neurological and psychomotor behaviors of the individual, having a real impact on the self-image and the relationship with the environment or with other people. They are often associated with cognitive disorders.

Language disorders refer to difficulties regarding the reception, understanding, elaboration and performance of the communication function, written or oral, due to organic, functional or psychological or educational conditions, which act on the language, in full development process of the child.

Communication and relationship disorders - autism - appears in childhood, it is characterized by a state of alienation/withdrawal; lack of social response; disinterest in others; communication difficulties; the impossibility of developing a normal attachment style and the existence of bizarre ways of responding to environmental stimuli.

Mental retardation – designates a category of disorders characterized by below-average intellect, intellect functioning at a reduced level, and deficits in adaptive behavior. They appear during childhood, until adulthood.

There are numerous classifications of mental retardation according to different criteria and areas of specialist interest. In the current paper we will refer to the clinical-psychometric classification, according to the WHO:

- borderline intellect – IQ 68-85; mental age 10-12 years;
- mild mental deficiency – IQ 52-67; mental age 7-10 years;
- moderate mental deficiency - IQ 36-51; mental age 3-7 years;
- severe mental deficiency – IQ 21-35; mental age 3 years;
- profound mental deficiency – IQ > 20, mental age 0-2 years;

On average, 85%-90% of the above groups represent the categories of people with borderline intellect or those with a mild mental deficiency and, as a rule, have no visible physical impairment. In the absence of obvious physical abnormalities, it will be difficult to distinguish between impaired and healthy individuals. This aspect can go unnoticed during the preschool period, even more so when the family pays special attention to the child's education.

As adults, they can find a job and a place in society, maximizing their potential. They are not identified as intellectually disabled. They are closer to „normal” people developmentally than to those from special needs groups, especially in the psychomotor domain.

Through quality education and varied experiences, many of these individuals manage to maximize their potential, becoming active and self-reliant members who achieve financial success by using the skills they have developed.

5. The role of the professional development of teaching staff in the integration process

There are a variety of factors that contribute essentially to facilitating the integration of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) within general education institutions. These factors include elements external to the school environment, such as family and community, which can have a positive or negative impact on the inclusion process. In addition, the internal educational environment plays a decisive role, with teachers representing a key element in promoting or obstructing inclusion. Thus, the continuous professional development of teachers is recognized as fundamental for the achievement of effective inclusive education (Fishman et al., 2003).

According to studies by Friend et al. (2010), teacher training is a central pillar and contributes significantly to ensuring sustainable inclusive education. This is due to the constant evolution of the field of special education and the increasing integration of students with SEN into mainstream schools, which amplifies the need and responsibility for educational success. Showers and colleagues (1987) define „professional development” as a process aimed at enriching knowledge and skills, supporting the adoption and integration of new educational practices. There is an accumulation of evidence that points to the importance of initial and ongoing teacher training in effective inclusive education.

In the last two decades, research focused on the relationship between teachers' attitudes and the need for their professional development has highlighted that negative attitudes can be a major obstacle in promoting inclusive educational cultures. These attitudes are frequently associated with a lack of knowledge and training.

Vital components of professional development include ongoing supervision and monitoring, essential for building teachers' confidence in their own teaching skills and supporting their long-term development. Educational supervision aims to achieve high quality education by focusing on fundamental processes and methodologies for effective teaching and learning (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). Teacher supervision facilitates professional development through collaborative discussions, essential for improving inclusive practices.

The availability of specialized human resources, such as physiotherapists, speech therapists, psychologists and other specialists, is another crucial element in professional development. Access to these resources not only supports teachers, but also facilitates student progress, thus contributing to the success of the inclusion process. The studies carried out by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2010) demonstrated that the involvement of these specialized human resources can have a positive impact on the results of students with SEN, underlining the importance of accessibility to specialized support within schools.

Another critical determinant of the success of inclusive education is the ability of teachers to access both physical and human resources at the level of classrooms and the entire educational institution. The literature review by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) highlighted that teachers perceive a reduction in difficulty in implementing inclusive lesson plans when they have easy access to appropriate resources.

Thus, the continuous professional development of teachers is imperative for improving the quality of inclusive education. The direct interaction between teachers and students with SEN emphasizes the need for them to be well trained, equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to adequately respond to the diverse needs of students. It is found that promoting the change towards a more effective inclusive education does not only involve the training of teaching staff

and auxiliary staff, but requires an integrated approach aimed at the entire organizational system of educational institutions.

In this context, the relationship between school and family, as well as the level of involvement of parents in the educational process of their children, become fundamental aspects in the successful achievement of inclusion. Active involvement of parents and effective collaboration between school and family can amplify the benefits of inclusive education, ensuring an optimal learning environment for all students.

In conclusion, the professional development of teachers is an essential component in the success equation of inclusive education. By supporting and continuously improving teachers' skills, as well as facilitating access to appropriate resources, a significant contribution can be made to creating an educational environment that values diversity and promotes equal opportunities for all students.

6. Research methodology

6.1. Objection

The objectives established in this study are the following:

The exploration and analysis of teachers' beliefs and attitudes related to the process of integrating students into the general educational system in Romania, with a particular focus on identifying variations between teachers based on the geographic context of their professional activity, i.e. rural versus urban environment.

Examining and comparing the perceptions of teachers, distinguishing themselves by rural or urban professional environment, in relation to their degree of optimism.

Analysis of the relationships between the previously mentioned variables and their impact on the process of educational integration.

Detecting the barriers that stand in the way of the effective application of current and future public policies related to integrated education.

6.2. Research hypotheses

It is assumed that there are significant differences between teachers, based on the geographical context of the profession (rural versus urban), regarding the process of integrating students into mainstream education in Romania.

It was assumed that there would be marked differences in the levels of optimism among teachers, differentiated by their professional environment, be it rural or urban.

A positive correlation was assumed between the level of teachers' optimism and their favorable attitudes towards the integration of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), suggesting that a higher degree of optimism will have a beneficial impact on the attitudes of the staff involved in the research.

6.3. The batch of participants

This study was carried out on a sample of 60 teachers, aged between 25 and 45 years.

From the beginning, it was considered to constitute two samples based on the geographical environment in which they operate: rural/urban for statistical processing.

Each participant could access the link that contained the address of the website that I created for building the battery of tests intended for research, on the google forms platform, and the way of communication with the respondents was through the Internet, recording the answers through self-registration.

6.4. Research tools

The questionnaire „Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes about the Integration of Children with SEN” - own tool - is a tool developed specifically to obtain relevant information about the beliefs and attitudes of teachers in relation to the process of integrating children with special educational needs within the educational system. The questionnaire contains 30 items selected based on the information obtained from the specialized literature studied.

„Optimism Assessment Questionnaire” (OPT) - is an instrument that consists of 48 items used to assess the explanatory style (optimistic versus pessimistic). It can be used in personality diagnosis, educational, clinical and health psychology.

Questionnaire „Beliefs and Attitudes of Teachers about the Integration of Children with SEN” - own instrument

7. Data processing and interpretation

Hypothesis 1: It is assumed that there are significant differences between teachers, based on the geographical context of the profession (rural versus urban), regarding the process of integrating students into mainstream education in Romania.

After applying the test, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality coefficient indicates a significance threshold higher than $p=0.05$ in both samples, thus resulting in normal distributions: N- rural presents Sig. = 0.200, and N - urban - 0.063.

Calculating the normality of the scores results in a parametric distribution. Thus, we chose to apply the T-Test for two independent samples (parametric method).

Table 1. T-test for two independent samples, under hypothesis 1

		Levenes Test for Equality of Variances				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig(2-tailed)	Mean difeference	Std Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Attitudes - SEN	Equal variances assumed	1.761	.190	-27.984	58	.000	-49.467	1.768	-53.005	-45.928
	Equa variances not assumed			-27.984	56.709	.000	-49.467	1.768	-53.007	-45.927

After analyzing the results of the Levene test (Table 3.6), which indicates the homogeneity of variances, we note that the F value is 1.761 at a significance threshold of $p = 0.190$. Since the p-value is statistically significant, we can confirm the hypothesis.

Therefore, the results of the statistical analyzes indicate that teachers from rural schools obtained lower scores in terms of the level of positive attitudes towards the integration of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream education in Romania, compared to their colleagues who operates in the urban environment.

The detailed analysis of the items indicates that the teachers included in this study show support for the integration of children with specific learning difficulties and disabilities in regular classrooms. They also emphasize the benefits that inclusion brings to both these and other typically developing children. However, they seem to be more cautious about certain types of disabilities, such as mental retardation, autism spectrum and genetic syndromes.

Hypothesis 2: It was assumed that there will be marked differences in the levels of optimism between teachers, differentiated by their professional environment, whether rural or urban.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality coefficient indicates a significance threshold greater than $p=0.05$ for both samples. This means that the distributions in both samples (N-rural and N-urban) are considered normal. For the N-rural sample, the value of Sig. is 0.200, and for the N-urban sample it is 0.142.

Calculating the normality of the scores results in a parametric distribution. Thus, we chose to apply the T-Test for two independent samples (parametric method).

Table 2. Two independent samples T-test under Hypothesis 2

		Levenes Test for Equality of Variances					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig(2- tailed)	Mean diference	Std Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Optimism	Equal variances assumed	.802	.374	-20.494	58	.000	-26.000	1.308	-29.418	-24.182
	Equa variances not assumed			-20.494	55.7311	.000	-26.000	1.308	-29420	-24.180

Analyzing the results of the Levene Test (Table 3.9), which shows us the homogeneity of the variances. $F=.802$ at a significance threshold of $p=.374$. As p is statistically significant, it follows that the hypothesis is confirmed.

Therefore, the responses of the statistical analyzes indicate that rural school teachers scored lower on optimism than their urban colleagues.

In simple terms, an optimist is a person who has positive expectations and believes that good things will happen, while a pessimist is more likely to focus on the negative and have pessimistic expectations. The results of this research indicate that teachers from urban areas show a higher level of optimism compared to those from rural areas. This difference can be influenced by economic factors and the lack of adequate facilities in the countryside.

Teachers' conviction that they can influence students' academic performance through learning, collaboration with parents and students, and confidence in their abilities to overcome difficulties and face failures with resilience and perseverance are essential factors in the process of integrating students with special educational needs. This optimistic attitude and confidence in one's own ability to make a positive difference can significantly contribute to the successful integration of these students into the general school environment.

Hypothesis 3: A positive correlation is assumed between the level of optimism of teaching staff and their favorable attitudes towards the integration of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), suggesting that a higher degree of optimism will have a beneficial impact on the attitudes of the staff involved in research.

Table 3. Correlation between Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes about the Integration of Children with SEN and Optimism

		<i>Attitudes - Optimism</i>		
		<i>SEN</i>		
<i>Spearman's rho</i>	<i>Attitudes - SEN</i>	<i>Correlation Coefficient</i>	1.000	.752**
		<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>	.	.000
		<i>N</i>	60	60
	<i>Optimism</i>	<i>Correlation Coefficient</i>	.752**	1.000
		<i>Sig (2-tailed)</i>	.000	.
		<i>N</i>	60	60

According to Table 3.12, we note that the significance threshold is $p < 0.01$ (0.000), and the Spearman correlation coefficient is 0.752. This indicates a significant correlation between the analyzed variables. More specifically, there is a positive and significant association between Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes about Integrating Children with CES and Teachers' Optimism. In other words, in general, the more favorable attitudes and beliefs teachers exhibit to the integration of children with SEN, the more inclined they are to have a higher level of optimism.

Therefore, the hypothesis according to which there is a positive correlation between the Beliefs and Attitudes of Teachers about the Integration of Children with CES and Optimism, is confirmed.

On average, teachers' cognitive ratings, emotional ratings, and optimism about inclusion were found to be in the mid-range of the scales, indicating room for growth. Optimism beliefs were higher for initial teachers ($M = 3.69$) than for in-service teachers ($M = 3.13$). Special education teachers had more positive views about inclusion than regular education teachers ($d = 0.41$). Training and interventions related to improved cognitive appraisal ($d = 0.63$), emotional appraisal ($d = 0.63$) and optimism towards inclusive practices ($d = 0.93$). The training was particularly

effective in encouraging reflection of beliefs and ultimately facilitating change in beliefs when teachers gained practical experience in inclusive classrooms.

Differentiating between the various components of teachers' belief systems highlighted that these components do not develop in a synchronized manner. Teachers' point in their teaching career (initial versus continuing teachers) explains differences in teachers' optimism beliefs, while teacher type (special educator versus regular teacher) explains variation in cognitive evaluations of inclusive education. Investigating teachers' belief systems in this more differentiated way seems promising for understanding how and why teachers think about educational reform, such as inclusive education, in a certain way.

These findings imply that, rather than hoping for a natural development, teacher belief formation can be supported by specific teacher training that provides opportunities to gain experience with inclusive practices. We encourage future work examining these teachers' belief systems in relation to other reform efforts.

The teachers' answers regarding the last section of the Questionnaire "Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes about the Integration of Children with CES" indicate their beliefs regarding the factors that could constitute barriers in the implementation of Inclusive Education: Specialized training in special education; Reluctance of the teacher; Curriculum; School Unit infrastructures; Parents' attitudes; Incomplete funding; Legislative framework; Special and general collaboration of teachers; Large number of children in the class; Failure to provide adequate special education staff.

The analysis of teachers' answers regarding the obstacles that prevent the implementation of Inclusive Education from the perspective of beliefs were organized as follows: In the top of teachers' beliefs, the lack of specialized training programs represents the most challenging factor under this aspect (56 answers), followed by the large number of students (52 answers) and inadequate staff.

As the results indicated, respondents express confidence that students with disabilities will experience benefits in their development and social interactions, including social relationships and the development of social skills. On the other hand, participants seem to believe that the school performance of students with disabilities will not benefit from inclusion.

However, also in this case, the participants do not expect a significant improvement in the academic performance of typically developing students.

Conclusions

We set out to outline the current situation in Romania, regarding inclusive education. Thus, the aim was to highlight the differences between teachers depending on the environment in which they carry out their activity: rural/urban.

The teachers who took part in the study appear to support the inclusion of children with specific learning difficulties and educational needs in mainstream classrooms, while pointing to the benefits of inclusion for them and for typically developing children. However, they seem more cautious for certain types of disabilities, such as mental retardation, autism spectrum and genetic syndromes. According to the findings, urban teachers are seen to have more positive, supportive and tolerant attitudes towards the inclusion of students with special educational needs compared to their rural colleagues. This suggests a significant difference in the perception and treatment of the

inclusion of these students in mainstream education, depending on the geographical context of the schools.

Another variable that is examined in relation to teachers' perception of inclusive education is whether they have a disabled person in their family environment. This variable can be analyzed to gain a better understanding of the influence of personal experience on teachers' perspectives and attitudes in the context of inclusion. Studies have shown that teachers who have been exposed to people with disabilities (friend or family member) are more open to inclusion, while other studies report no influence of previous exposure to disability. Finally, as it appears from the results, the lack of qualified educational staff, overcrowding of children in classrooms and inadequate staff are the main barriers to the implementation of inclusive education in Romania, according to teachers' beliefs.

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