

Capacities of Early Childhood Education Professionals for the Prevention of Social Exclusion of Children

Dejana Bouillet, Vlatka Domović

Abstract—Both policymakers and researchers recognize that participating in early childhood education and care (ECEC) is useful for all children, especially for those who are exposed to the high risk of social exclusion. Social exclusion of children is understood as a multidimensional construct including economic, social, cultural, health, and other aspects of disadvantage and deprivation, which individually or combined can have an unfavorable effect on the current life and development of a child, as well as on the child's development and on disadvantaged life chances in adult life. ECEC institutions should be able to promote educational approaches that portray developmental, cultural, language, and other diversity amongst children. However, little is known about the ways in which Croatian ECEC institutions recognize and respect the diversity of children and their families and how they respond to their educational needs. That is why this paper is dedicated to the analysis of the capacities of ECEC professionals to respond to the demands of educational needs of this very diverse group of children and their families. The results obtained in the frame of the project "Models of response to educational needs of children at risk of social exclusion in ECEC institutions," funded by the Croatian Science Foundation, will be presented. The research methodology arises from explanations of educational processes and risks of social exclusion as a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. The preliminary results of the qualitative data analysis of educational practices regarding capacities to identify and appropriately respond to the requirements of children at risk of social exclusion will be presented. The data have been collected by interviewing educational staff in 10 Croatian ECEC institutions (n = 10). The questions in the interviews were related to various aspects of inclusive institutional policy, culture, and practices. According to the analysis, it is possible to conclude that Croatian ECEC professionals are still faced with great challenges in the process of implementation of inclusive policies, culture, and practices. There are several baselines of this conclusion. The interviewed educational professionals are not familiar enough with the whole complexity and diversity of needs of children at risk of social exclusion, and the ECEC institutions do not have enough resources to provide all interventions that these children and their families need.

Keywords—Children at risk of social exclusion, ECEC professionals, inclusive policies, culture and practices, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

EDUCATIONAL systems have a strong influence on perpetuating educational inequalities which are considered responsible for the inequality of opportunity in life and a diminished possibility of individuals to use different social,

economic and cultural goods [1]-[3]. Educational inequality can be defined as the structural, intentional or non-intentional obstacles, leading to unequal access to different segments of the system of education or to achieving different success within it. They are the consequence of a person's background, social conditions, and numerous other factors which undoubtedly lie beyond personal responsibility [4]. These obstacles can lead to two types of exclusion from education, if exclusion is understood as a multi-layered concept which implies physical exclusion from education of socially vulnerable individuals, but also exclusion from a meaningful educational process or insufficient connection with it [5]. Socio-economic features of the family, such as poverty, low level of education, migrant status and other, are considered to be the key factors determining educational inequality [6], [7]. For example, research has confirmed that children who grow up in poverty fall behind at all levels of education in relation to children who are economically adequately provided for. They are exposed to higher risk of diseases and untimely death, and the probability they will live in poor households in adulthood is twice as high [8].

Educational inequality is closely related to the concept of social exclusion, which can be prevented in early and preschool age. For this reason, public education policies emphasize the role of ECEC as a mechanism to prevent social exclusion of children (risk of social exclusion, RSE). A turn has been observed in the earlier predominant status of ECEC as a mechanism that ensures the participation of women in the labor market [9]. This turn occurred towards the end of the 20th century, and is associated with the activity of The European Commission Childcare Network, which connected ECEC to children's rights and emphasized the necessity to make ECEC available to all children, regardless of the labor status of their parents [10]. Since then and until today, numerous initiatives have been started, and recommendations and guidelines have been formulated, defining accessible and quality ECEC as the most efficient answer of society to educational inequality. The most recent ones can be found in the Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC [11], which emphasizes, among other, that ECEC should be based on the rights of the child and aimed at improving outcomes for children and breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. The recommendation builds on the proposal for key principles of a quality framework

Dejana Bouillet and Vlatka Domović are with the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Savska 77, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia (phone: +3851/6327-300; e-mail: dejana.bouillet@ufzg.hr, vlatka.domovic@ufzg.hr).

for ECEC [12] which emphasizes the importance of:

- access to ECEC – availability, affordability and respect for all families and their children;
- well-qualified staff – preschool teachers whose initial education and continuing professional development enable professional autonomy;
- curricula - enabling children to reach their full potential and encourage cooperation of all stakeholders;
- monitoring and evaluating – procedures that support continuing improvements in the practice and education policies which are in the best interest of the child; and,
- managing and financing – a clear picture and mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities in the ECEC system.

Observing the importance of ECEC in promoting the learning, well-being and development of all children opens the question of its inclusiveness, a paradigm promoting a culture of equality, social justice and participation in everyday practices of ECEC institutions [13]. Understood in this way, inclusion does not exhaust itself through the availability of education, but includes strategies, structures, and operational procedures which guarantee successful education for all children [14]. Despite knowledge about strategies which facilitate the inclusiveness of ECEC, there is still a gap between the theoretically assumed aspects of inclusion and everyday professional practices [15]. Besides, there is still relatively scarce evidence about the real possibilities of ECEC professionals in contributing to the prevention of educational inequality and social exclusion of children [16], [17]. Most investigations point to the relationship between inclusion in ECEC and the cognitive development of the child measured by standardized math and language tests [18]-[20], whereas longitudinal investigations measuring long-term effects of ECEC on the prevention of social exclusion do not provide unambiguous answers. Some studies confirm those effects [21], while others dispute them [22], [23].

The aim of this paper is to help understand the capacities of ECEC professionals to participate in the prevention of risks of social exclusion of children of early and preschool age on an example from Croatia.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

Social exclusion of children in the preschool years can be defined as a multidimensional construct including economic, social, cultural, health and other aspects of disadvantage and deprivation that can exert a negative influence on the development of a child, either individually or in combination [24]. Such disadvantage and deprivation can result from the characteristics of the child (their developmental and health status), their family (unfavorable characteristics of parents and/or child care) and the community (inadequate systems of support to the child and/or their parents, and their range on a continuum from low- to high-risk). It is a very complex and global social problem, whose solution should result in social inclusion [25], [26]. Social inclusion is a multifaceted concept, which has acquired different meanings over the years, and today represents an approach based on the human rights

concept, contributing to social justice and accepting and supporting differences among people [27]. Its ultimate aim is to eliminate social exclusion on the basis of social origin, race, ethnic belonging, religion, gender identity, abilities, health or any other feature [28].

Inclusive education is an important component of social inclusion, and refers to education providing mutual (cooperative) learning for all children in order to enable and empower their full participation in the learning and culture of a community, also providing adequate support in fulfilling their individual educational needs [29]. Since inclusive education looks at differences as a concept, instead of focusing on individual categories of difference [30], it assumes the environment is ready to adapt to the needs of all children, expects mutual cooperation and communication which contribute to the feeling of belonging and the immersion into education for every child. Differences are treated as strengths and resources, enabling the children to grow into persons sensitive to social injustice and who will accept differences as a natural feature of every society [27].

Such a definition of inclusive education leads to the conclusion that it is the consequence of value choices of a certain society, that it implies a high level of affordability and availability of education to all families and children, a domination of inclusive, just, and non-discriminatory culture, and cooperative and inclusive educational processes [14]. In a similar way, the index of inclusive culture of ECEC institutions includes: (a) increased participation of children and a reduction of their exclusion from culture, activities and local communities; (b) restructuring of cultures, policies and practices of ECEC in order to make them responsive to differences of children and communities; (c) equity in the assessment of all children, families and professionals; (d) treating differences among children as a resource supporting play, learning and participation, and not as a barrier that needs to be overcome; (e) recognizing quality ECEC in the local community as a fundamental right of the child; (f) continuous improvement of the system for the benefit of both professionals and children; (g) reducing barriers to play, learning and participation of all children; (h) overcoming a narrow focus on children who display difficulties in playing, learning and participation; (i) emphasizing the importance of developing community and values, as well as achievements; (j) encouraging mutual support and cooperation of the community and ECEC; (k) recognizing inclusive ECEC as an aspect of social inclusion; and (l) practicing inclusive values [31].

A decade has elapsed since consensus was reached on the importance and characteristics of inclusive education, and inclusive values were declaratively accepted. However, there are still numerous obstacles to the accessibility of ECEC, such as cultural segregation, discrimination, and the existence of differences in educational opportunities [32]. An important role is played by educational practices and the beliefs held by ECEC professionals, who are the holders of inclusive processes. Research results point to the conclusion that many ECEC professionals still practice a deficit model [15], focusing on 'correcting' children [33], and believe that regular ECEC

institutions cannot address the needs of children at RSE, especially if they are conditioned by developmental disabilities [34]. Thus, the implementation of inclusive education based on equal educational opportunities, social justice, participation and eliminating all forms of exclusion practices remains an (in)surmountable challenge [13]. Overcoming this challenge implies that ECEC professionals understand the concept of accepting differences, of cultural diversity, non-violent conflict resolution, and that they implement critical reflection with regard to children at RSE [35]. Such practices contribute to developing an inclusive culture in institutions, together with inclusive policies. In that respect, it is important for ECEC programs not to focus on the problems, but on the abilities, capacities and strengths of children and their families. According to the strength-based approach, it is children's abilities and strengths that represent the basis for change, and it is the role of ECEC professionals to recognize, evaluate and mobilize them [36]. The approach is based on values, beliefs and behavior which lead to shared power and reciprocity, instead of practicing superiority (e.g., of adults over children, of right values and behavior over wrong ones). Instead of focusing on the detected deficits, what is identified and addressed are social, personal, cultural and structural limitations for growth, learning and development of all children. The basic principles of this approach are respect, transparency, social justice, empowering, using different perspectives, and recognizing strengths as starting points for changes. Research has shown that ECEC professionals apply the principles of respect and social justice, whereas the use of other principles may vary [37]. A clearly conceptualized, interdisciplinary 'strength-based' approach can be a good platform for developing more inclusive educational practices in ECEC systems. In order to achieve that, an open dialogue is needed between ECEC professionals and parents, peers and children, based on principles of reciprocity. ECEC professionals should be involved and actively engaged in social change, they should be able to reflect critically on their own educational practices and on the prevailing educational practices in their institutions, and to create new educational knowledge and practices [38]. Such an approach supports quality educational practices reflecting a strong conviction that the task of ECEC professionals is to provide maximum support to every child, so that children can develop into strong, self-confident, caring, responsible and happy members of society. Such practices are based on beliefs that include teaching focused on the child, the need to develop a strong partnership with families and the community, and ECEC professionals as promoters of quality education and of education for all children [39]. Quality educational practices are most important in the education process itself, which requires the use of a flexible curriculum, addressing the needs of children of different abilities, life experience, cultures and learning styles, some of them being at RSE.

III. CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

In Croatia, ECEC is regulated by the Act on Preschool Education and the accompanying legislation (1997). It includes

education and care for children of early and preschool age. It is implemented through programs of education, healthcare, nutrition and social care for children from the age of six months until the start of primary school. ECEC represents the initial level of the education system and, with the exception of the program of pre-school (a program which is compulsory for children in the year previous to primary school), it is not compulsory for all children. It is divided into two educational cycles: (1) the nursery cycle (6 months to 3 years) and (2) kindergarten cycle (3 to 7 years).

The role of ECEC professionals is to plan, program and evaluate educational work and to support the development of every child, according to their abilities, while cooperating with peers, parents and the local community [40]. They hold and implement ECEC. The National Curriculum for ECEC (2015) puts the child at the center of the educational process and considers their personality which needs to be understood and respected. It is expected that ECEC should guarantee the realization of equal rights for all, as the educational approach is based on empathy, acceptance, and mutual support, but also on enabling children to understand their rights, commitments and responsibilities as well as the rights, commitments and responsibilities of others. Besides, the National Development Strategy until 2030 (2021) emphasizes as one of the priorities in the area of education policy the increased availability of a high-quality ECEC system for every child, for the purpose of ensuring the right to quality education from early childhood and quality standards and resources to support children at risk of social exclusion.

In Croatia, the ECEC system is significantly decentralized, and, for the most part, local governments are responsible for financing and providing services. This leads to a range of different forms of financing at local level, and research has shown that financial obstacles are one of the reasons why many children remain unenrolled [41]-[43]. Moreover, investment in programs and services for children of early and preschool age is lower than the EU average. In most member countries, public spending amounts to 2.3% of the GDP, while in Croatia it is 1.6% of the GDP [43]. Nevertheless, the sector of services for children in Croatia has been expanding, primarily in the ECEC area. However, the exact indicators of children of early and preschool age at RSE are non-existent, and scientifically verified answers of ECEC to their needs have not been developed. The current project supported by the Croatian Science Foundation Models of Response to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions is aimed at investigating obstacles, and possibilities (chances) which limit or support the availability of quality ECEC for children at RSE. This paper is part of that project.

IV. RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used with the aim of investigating and discovering the significance of life experiences or personal perceptions of members of a certain social group on the researched phenomenon [44]. The method was selected as the research attempted to provide insight into different perspectives of

ECEC professionals about RSE in children and the possibility of its prevention, based on the personal professional experience of the participants.

The research comprised 10 ECEC professionals employed in different public ECEC institutions in Croatia. They belonged to different professions (preschool teachers, educational experts, educational rehabilitators, speech therapists), and were active in teams involved in the education of children of early and preschool age. All participants were female and had completed a 5-year university study (ISCED level 7), having acquired competences in education sciences, and had professional experience with children at RSE. They were included in the sample by voluntary informed consent.

Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews which were led by the scientists included in the project Models of Response to Educational Needs of Children at Risk of Social Exclusion in ECEC Institutions. The interviews were conducted online, recorded, and transcribed afterwards. They took between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews were aimed at finding answers to questions such as the following ones:

- How do they experience inclusive education and RSE?
- What are their experiences with children at RSE and members of their families?
- What are the most mitigating and aggravating factors in the prevention of social exclusion of children?
- How do they personally contribute to the prevention of social exclusion of children in the institution they are employed?
- What is their estimate of success in the prevention of social exclusion of children?

The content of the interviews was processed and interpreted according to the following steps:

1. Reading the transcripts of the interviews: the authors of this paper read the transcripts independently several times in order to familiarize themselves with the data, and to identify the words and phrases that occurred repeatedly in the answers.
2. Independently classifying the identified words and phrases into more general topics in order to identify the participants' key messages and ideas.
3. Individual categorization of data into meaningful units according to the identified topics.
4. Coordinating the categories and their meaning among the researchers.

V. RESEARCH RESULTS

Four topics were derived by the analysis: (1) social justice; (2) inclusive curriculum; (3) children's strengths; and (4) empowering.

A. Social Justice

The topic refers to the beliefs of ECEC professionals that the ECEC system has to be available to all children and cherish equality and equal educational opportunities for all children. The analysis of the answers given by ECEC professionals has shown that they range on a continuum from the segregative approach to an inclusive one, and could be grouped into three

categories: (a) non-inclusive beliefs; (b) partly inclusive beliefs and (c) inclusive beliefs (Table I).

TABLE I
 CATEGORIES OF ANSWERS GIVEN BY ECEC PROFESSIONALS CONCERNING THE TOPIC OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Category	Example
Non-inclusive beliefs	"... how this inclusion, or process of inclusion in the group will affect a child developing regularly," "...not accepting differences starts from parents and their prejudices."
Partly inclusive beliefs	"... somehow it all revolves around acceptance, tolerance, that we are all the same..." "...developing sensitivity for children, empathy, tolerance." "... a higher level of respect for the child, where they (children) are treated as totally equal participants in the educational process."
Inclusive beliefs	"... a systematic process which primarily requires careful planning, implementation and monitoring, in order to achieve success in work with all the children."

B. Inclusive Curriculum

The topic refers to the maximum possible practical use of the environment, contents and resources with the purpose of encouraging the development and full participation of every child in ECEC. An analysis of the interviews has shown that ECEC professionals describe curricula whose features reflect segregative, integrative or inclusive practices (Table II).

TABLE II
 CATEGORIES OF ANSWERS GIVEN BY ECEC PROFESSIONALS CONCERNING THE TOPIC OF INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

Category	Example
Segregative practices	"... a person who knows his language should be provided for him" "... in all the groups they pray before lunch... this is imposed on the children who are not of catholic religion."
Integrative practices	"... those children can present some culture, their way of life, specific features of life in multilingual families." "... individualized curricula designed for work with children with specific characteristics."
Inclusive practices	"In our group, the values of personal and social development have taken first place, three years in a row now..." "... emphasis on every child, regardless of their chronological age, developmental abilities or the religious, national or economic specificities of their family."

C. Children's Strengths

The topic refers to ECEC professionals recognizing and focusing on the abilities, interests, possibilities and individual needs of every child, as opposed to labeling and categorizing children according to the risks of social exclusion. According to the analysis, the answers of the interviewed ECEC professionals can be classified within three headings: measuring and comparing children's abilities, adapting their approach to individual children or observing the personality and identity values of every child.

D. Empowering

This topic refers to providing appropriate forms of support to all ECEC shareholders, including children, family members and staff. Those are also the three main derived categories of this topic, with specific subcategories within them. In relation to empowering children, the answers of ECEC professionals emphasize giving individual support to children and treating

differences as a learning resource, while empowering family members refers to informing and educating parents/caregivers. Empowering staff involved in the education of children at RSE includes providing resources (e.g., specialist treatments, auxiliary staff, adequate staff-to-children ratio) and continuing professional development (e.g., peer learning, organized education and training).

TABLE III
CATEGORIES OF ANSWERS GIVEN BY ECEC PROFESSIONALS CONCERNING THE TOPIC OF CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS

Category	Example
Measuring and comparing children's abilities	"... we have different evaluation lists..." "... I use standardized tests of language skills and this is where I get clear information."
Adapting their approach to each individual child	"... by observing the educational process in the group, by monitoring their interests and recognizing their potentials." "... I try to redirect the activity in some way, i.e. offer something in addition... but so that we can still be all together."
Observing every child's personality and identity values	"... I let every child know that they are worthy as they are, that we respect what they like, that we value their wishes, needs, I monitor that, then I organize such activities, I try that every child in the group, - that we respect, we respect each other, and we are different." "... we have shown the children their plurilingualism as a value, not as a limitation."

TABLE IV
CATEGORIES OF ANSWERS GIVEN BY ECEC PROFESSIONALS CONCERNING THE TOPIC OF EMPOWERING

Category	Example
Empowering children	<i>Providing individual support to children</i> "...providing individual sessions with a speech therapist or psychologist... we do an activity and make a number of adjustments to it..."
	<i>Approaching differences as a learning resource</i>

Empowering family members	"...applying universal design, meaning a space which is encouraging for every child... through workshops where children experience differences, get to know a certain difference, or experience it personally, and then they will understand it and learn to accept it." <i>Informing</i>
	"... using notice boards or parents' corners, various articles..." <i>Educating</i>
	"We include parents in the program of teaching assistive communication...At parents' meetings we sensitize parents to accepting differences." <i>Providing resources</i>
Empowering staff	"...good cooperation with experts who work with children with difficulties in institutions other than kindergartens and who were open for cooperation and came to the kindergarten to show what they do in therapy with children." <i>Continuing professional development</i>
	"... meetings of all experts in kindergarten to exchange experiences." "... after I finished my study, I also attended several workshops on topics of multiculturalism, and education for diversity."

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper provides an analysis of the capabilities of Croatian ECEC professionals to participate in the prevention of RSE in children of early and preschool age. By means of IPA, four topics were derived from the collected data: social justice, inclusive curriculum, children's strengths, and empowering. Within the topics, categories were established including different aspects of inclusive education as the answer to RSE of children and the prevention of educational inequality (Fig. 1). The figure shows that the responses of ECEC professionals include issues of availability of ECEC to all children, the competences of staff for inclusive education and the inclusion of children at RSE, a curriculum aimed at accepting differences, learning and the development of every child, as well as available measures of support to children, families and staff.

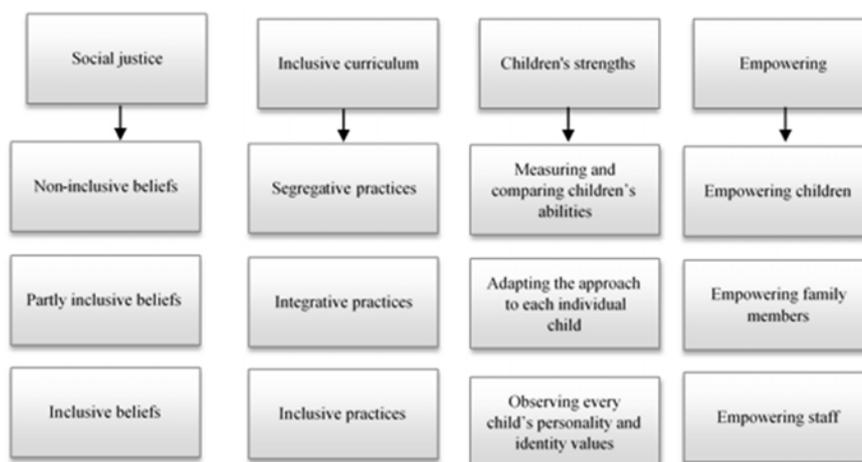


Fig. 1 Topics and categories derived by means of the IPA method

Overall, the analysis of the answers provided by ECEC professionals about how they understand and experience prevention of RSE in children of early and preschool age has pointed to significant differences among them. This is evident from the way they experience inclusive education, which they position dominantly in the deficit model, i.e., in the expectation

the child should adapt to the environment, or that it is necessary to ensure special/different conditions for different children. Besides, they mainly recognize developmental disabilities as RSE, whereas social risks (such as poverty, minority cultural identity) are recognized by the minority of participants in the research.

ECEC professionals who understand and promote an inclusive model of education are rare. Those professionals are aware of the need to respect the rights of all children and to build cultures, policies, and practices that respond to the differences of children and communities. They do not treat differences as obstacles, but as resources for learning and development of all children. The differences in the beliefs of ECEC professionals are reflected in their practices, whereby the prevailing focus is on the specific needs of individual children at RSE and on the development of individualized educational programs of work. Such programs are frequently not included in the core curriculum, but they lead to the exclusion of children from regular activities. At the same time, some ECEC professionals apply universal design, autonomously create curricula and actively contribute to developing social skills and inclusive values in children, thus empowering all children. Further, there are a few rare ECEC professionals who estimate the resources for inclusive education to be sufficient. The most frequent problem they face is the unfavorable staff-to-children ratio, the unavailability of professional support and inappropriate programs of professional development. Interestingly, they more frequently seek support from civil society organizations, and more rarely from public educational institutions.

The formal recognition of a right appears not to guarantee its application in practice. One of the reasons lies in the form or declaration of that right, and in the processes, procedures and resources necessary for its implementation. Another reason refers to the specific situations in which the potential beneficiaries of that right can find themselves in. Thus, the declaratively widely accepted social value of inclusive education in public policies has not taken root in the cultures and practices of many Croatian ECEC institutions, which makes the education of numerous children at RSE significantly more difficult. ECEC is still largely based on the deficit model, and its inclusiveness depends on the possibilities and will of the founders – either private persons or local community units. All this considerably weakens the capabilities of numerous ECEC professionals in contributing to the prevention of RSE in early and preschool age. In addition, demanding standards that many ECEC institutions cannot meet need to be mentioned, and they become an excuse for not including children at RSE in ECEC programs. The fact that the education, obligations and status of personal assistants in the ECEC system are not in any way legally defined is particularly problematic, and ECEC professionals consider assistants to be the foremost form of support for work with children at RSE. Besides, it has been established that ECEC professionals and the respective institutions working with children at RSE do not make enough use of professional services provided by public educational institutions (e.g., universities, the Education and Teacher Training Agency), but they are directed towards services provided by the civil sector, which are not available in many parts of Croatia.

The study has established that the majority of the interviewed ECEC professionals are not familiar enough with the whole complexity and diversity of needs of children at RSE and that

ECEC institutions do not have enough resources to provide quality and inclusive educational practices. This leads to perpetuating inequality, since in some ECEC institutions and in the relationship with some ECEC professionals' children at RSE have the chance to participate in inclusive education, whereas for others these possibilities are rather limited. The gap between policy recommendations that highly support inclusive education and obstacles still exists in Croatian ECEC.

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