
Reflecting on difference: an intervention at a public high school in post-apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

This paper describes an intervention conducted with a core group of teachers at an ex-model C high school in the Eastern Cape. The six teachers from various disciplines met weekly over a period of eighteen months with the researcher to discuss various aspects of diversity. One of the outcomes of these focus group meetings was that teachers began to reflect critically on how fixed, totalising forms of representation offer restricted understandings of people which may lead to discrimination and unfair practices.

Introduction

Recent research into school desegregation in previously single race public schools in South Africa describes the prevalence of assimilationist approaches (Naidoo, 1996; Carrim, 1998; Carrim and Soudien, 1999; Sekete, Shilubane and Moila, 2001; Chisholm, 2004). However there appears to be very little research on practical ways of changing dominant hegemonic views and of encouraging critical reflection on practices relating to diversity within schools.

This paper describes the construction, over a period of eighteen months, of a regular dialogic space in the form of focus group meetings for teachers of 'Melrose High School' to reflect on issues of difference in their school. Through discourse analysis of extracts of the eighth focus group, I provide evidence of these teachers reflecting critically on previous incidents in their school, which discursively fixed learners and teachers in gendered and/or racialised ways and replacing these with dominant constructions with more nuanced and textured versions.

Research into desegregation in South African schools

The effects of legislated deracialisation of schooling in South Africa since the demise of apartheid has been the topic of considerable research over the past decade. National studies conducted by the Human Rights Commission, Valley and Dalamba (1999), Sekete *et al.* (2001) and Chisholm (2004), as well as

private studies by Naidoo, (1996), Carrim and Soudien (1999) and Dolby (2000) highlight, among others, two major areas of concern. One is the predominance of assimilationist beliefs and practices in the majority of desegregated schools and the second is the evidence that learners most negatively affected by assimilationist practices, are often the 'migrated learners' (Sekete *et al.*, 2001) who may experience financial, social, emotional and linguistic displacement. This suggests a need for educators within these schools to initiate and maintain changes to promote equity and justice. However, change is difficult and without time and space, as well as the conviction of why it needs to happen, teachers are unlikely to place this kind of change as a priority.

Assimilationist approach

The assimilationist approach to multiculturalism reflects the view that those 'minority' groups joining the 'mainstream' or host school are the ones who need to assimilate and change. The host school usually implements strategies to encourage and assist 'minority' groups to fit into the existing culture and norms of the school. A deficit discourse is often used to describe the newcomers or 'foreign' students. This approach is often accompanied with a notion of 'colour-blindness'; all learners or students are assumed to be the same and an attempt is made to treat them so or to encourage them to all take on the norms of the dominant culture. Naidoo, speaking of schooling in South Africa (1996, p.13), argues that often, the 'foreign students' are given "powerful incentives to assimilate into the dominant culture as quickly as possible to have a chance of receiving meritocratic rewards". This suggests that in order to 'succeed', minority groups are required to conform to and adopt the dominant ways of being, of learning, of behaving and of becoming. The establishment (including staff, learners and parents) often have fixed views of who and what is valued in the school and those who fail to assimilate, (either by choice or circumstance) are often discursively constructed as deviant. These constructions can become naturalised and unquestioned and prevent more nuanced, layered ways of understanding.

Assimilationism, stereotypes and fixity

Stereotypical and fixed categories become lenses through which we experience people and practices and these limited ways of seeing the world then shape our language, our perception and our encounters between people. Existing categories and perceptions allow one to "see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing" (Bhabha, 1994, p.73). Stereotypical constructions enable fixity for they act as structures to

control what we perceive and how we react to them. The stereotype is “a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations” (Bhabha, 1994, p.75). If ‘new’ elements do not fit our existing views, we then tend to think of them as disruptive and needing to be moulded to fit existing categories. Therefore I am arguing that fixed, stereotypical constructions of gender, race and masculinity facilitate the tendencies towards assimilationist practices and disrupting these constructions might lead to new ways of thinking and doing.

My research focus

In light of the above, I designed an intervention to create a space for teachers in a previously ‘white’ ex-model C high school to begin to talk about differences in their school and to reflect more critically on dominant practices. Empirical evidence of case studies by Gillborn (1995) and Epstein (1993) suggest the important role critical reflection plays in promoting equitable practices in educational settings. Drawing on the importance of schools as social organisations and the need to “engage with forces that shape routine interactions inside schools” (Gillborn, 1995, p.99) as well as the important role that dialogue plays in reflective action, (Edwards and Brunton, 1993), I constructed a dialogic space in the school in which a group of teachers could examine and explore contentious issues of difference in their school and their own classrooms.

Methodology

In August 2003, I gained the necessary permission from the Department of Education and from the principal of my chosen school to begin my research. I addressed the whole staff and explained my interest in examining difference in their school and requested volunteers to join me in regular focus group meetings over a period of approximately eighteen months. I also requested that the teachers bring an issue relating to diversity (I explained it could be gender, race, class, abilities, ethnicity or language) that they would like to explore at the focus groups. Eight teachers from various disciplines and age groups volunteered. The table below provides more details:

Table 1

Pseudonym	Gender	Race
Sally	F	White
Jenny	F	White
Suzie	F	White
Zander	F	White
Alison	F	White
Emily	F	White
Brolox	M	White
Mr M	M	Black

The school site

Melrose High is an ex-model C school. It was established in January in 1940 as a school for 'white' pupils in a Dutch Reformed church hall. It relocated to its current building in 1945 in a previously 'white' suburb. The vast suburb, which I will call Melrose Acres, is home to some of the wealthiest residents of the city. Along one side of the suburb exists the 'Melrose Township'. It is a sprawling mass of squatter homes and temporary settlements and a few small brick homes. Over 25 000 people live in this township which is racked by unemployment, poverty and illness. People living in this township are in walking distance from Melrose High but few can afford the school fees and of those who can, very few are accepted into the school.

Currently Melrose High has about 1 000 pupils and a teaching staff of approximately 50. Of those 50, 45 are white. The racial demographics of the learners are approximately 40% black (includes so-called coloured and Indian) and 60% white (Afrikaans and English speaking).

Research methods

Teacher interviews

Firstly I conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the eight teachers to ascertain what issue they wanted to discuss, what changes they had and were making in their classrooms to accommodate the changing profile of their

learners and how often they reflected on their teaching and their practices. Next I set up regular meeting times for our focus groups where all eight teachers and myself would meet. Since teachers were committed in the afternoons with extra mural activities, it was nearly impossible to have a shared open space. Fortunately the principal came to the rescue by allowing those teachers to miss every Thursday assembly period in order to meet with me. This generous gesture facilitated regular and good attendance from the teachers.

Focus group meetings

In total the teachers and I held 14 focus group meetings between 4 September 2003 and 26 October 2004. During this period, three teachers left the group. The remaining five teachers and I continued to meet approximately twice a month until October 2004.

Below is a table that briefly summarises the seven focus group meetings held before focus group eight, which forms the focus of this entire paper.

Table 2

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Focus group One:</i> getting to know one another and setting up ground rules for participation. An introduction to a ‘diversity grid’ which I compiled to assist teachers in identifying the top and bottom achievers according to race, gender and class.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Focus group Two:</i> A discussion and feedback of the diversity grid (first conflict in group due to the difficulty in discussing issues of class).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Focus group Three:</i> Discussion of a reading by Fullan(1999). The identification of the school detention system as unfairly discriminating against black learners and as a possible focus for the group.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Focus group Four:</i> Feedback on participation in research thus far. Discussions on discomfort and difficulty of engaging in sensitive issues like race and class and culture. Criticism of Xhosa cultural evening.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Focus group Five:</i> Feedback on Gillborn (1995) reading. An examination of detention records-indication from some teachers that detention was not an issue and that latecomers were skewing the results.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Focus group Six:</i> Discussion of detention list without the latecomers.

- *Focus group Seven:* Feedback from me on paper I had presented about the group. Decision to interview learners who frequent detention and also with management to better understand DT system and to suggest possible methods to improve situation.
- A meeting with three representatives from management of the school (headmasters, deputy and teacher in charge of detention). This was an intense meeting and the teachers who had been very vocal on the matter of detention in the focus group were particularly silent in this meeting. The day after the meeting the deputy announced to the staff that they were not to be told what to do in their schools by outsiders and that they were to be ‘arrogant’ about their own ability to manage school affairs.
- *Focus group Eight:* Feedback about the meeting with management. The focus of this paper.

Journal writing, learner interviews and classroom observation

Teachers kept journals documenting readings, comments and reflections from the focus groups. I also conducted classroom observations of four teachers who requested it and observed various school functions such as the Valedictory service, the Oracy day and the Xhosa evening. Several learners were interviewed about their frequent attendance in detention.

Disrupting stereotypes: focus group 8 (12 December 2004)

In the discussion that follows, I describe three extracts from the eighth focus group session in which the participants interrogate and contest the constructed nature of categories affecting their learners and their own professional identities. This discussion leads them to articulating the ways in which essentialised differences are located in unequal power relations and to discussing the means by which they could contest this inequality. Sally, Emily, Suzie, Alison and Mr M were present at this meeting.

‘He’s no angel’: gender and race stereotypes

The first extract deals with a discussion about a black learner, ‘Zola’ who has been identified by the management of the school as a troublemaker and about whom a ‘form’ is being sent around. This form gets sent to each of his teachers who are asked to comment on his academic and social behaviour. If

the response is unanimously negative, the learner will be asked to leave the school. Sally, however, has found Zola to be a good student in her class and the white male teacher (called Butch in this extract) in charge of student behaviour, has questioned her several times on this. The reference to ‘giving dates’ is the discipline system which allows a teacher to give the learner three dates (three recorded violations). Once the learner has accumulated three dates the learner has to sit for the detention period on a Friday afternoon. This period lasts two to three hours and the learner has to repeatedly write out the school code of conduct.

Sally: *I taught Zola last year. A form was sent around by Butch and his thing was to get rid of this child because he’s such a problem and I couldn’t write a negative thing about him, because in my class he was fine. I’d given him two dates but that was way in the beginning of the year. He sat right under my nose, he got merits and Butch actually questioned me. He actually said, ‘Are you sure? Have you got the right person? Why does he behave like that in your class?’*

Suzie: *But Sally he is one who takes chances when he can. I can, believe, I mean he’s got some dates with me too and I’ve also given him merits.*

Sally: *Look he’s not an angel.*

Suzie: *No, but he can, he can. He’s not an aggressive sort of a person or anything but he can sometimes, so with the wrong people, with the people who have a different attitude towards him, he can. . .*

Sally: *But I actually objected to being questioned on it. This was how I’d found him in my class and they didn’t believe me.*

In this extract Sally is contesting the essentialised description of Zola as a problem. She insists, despite Butch’s frequent interrogation, that she “couldn’t write a negative thing about him”. Her repeated use of the word ‘actually’ signals her disbelief and annoyance at being questioned and, despite Butch’s insistent questioning of her judgement, she refuses to accept the essentialised identity of Zola. Sally is describing the fluid nature of difference; she indicates that the learner, Zola, is ‘fine’ and ‘has got merits’ in her class, despite being labeled as ‘such a problem’ with other teachers. Learners, as well as teachers, behave differently with different people and in different contexts and it is therefore simplistic to categorise anybody as being a problem without considering the influence of the ‘other person’ and of the specific conditions of the context. Sally’s refusal to go along with the popular notion of Zola’s problem status, has contested the institutionally accepted notion of this learner as being in need of further discipline. Sally’s contested categorising of Zola

highlights the role of the context in identity construction and of the fluid notion of differences and of identity. While agreeing that Zola is ‘no angel’ she rejects the essentialised version of him as being completely bad and in need of expulsion. Refusing to categorise Zola in binaries of good or bad, Sally is illustrating the concept of *differences within* (Burbules, 1997). Burbules explains that acknowledging differences within “provides latitude for understanding the ways in which difference is *enacted*; how people express differences, play with them, transgress them, cross borders between” (1997, p.107).

‘He's a complete monster’: gender, race and masculinity

The second extract focuses on Suzie who starts to question influences, other than race, that locate and position staff members in terms of status, power and popularity. She highlights the constructed and gendered categorising of certain sports and questions why sports such as rugby and boys' cricket have more status than karate and tennis. Her questioning raises the notion of both masculinities and of what Dolby (2001) refers to as constructed ‘spaces of whiteness’. Dolby argues that “sport occupies a central discursive place in [a] school’s identity” and often serves to “promote and solidify [a] school’s whiteness at both local and global levels” (2001, p.51).

Suzie: *I'm starting to wonder whether it's about just racial things that we should actually pick this up. I think from the top it's going through all over every hmm, from sport to, it's a dominance of who sits there and what is important and teachers whoever. What is important? Is it to be there and be a star on stage and the kids love it? Or is it Important what I'm doing in my job. So, I think it's a whole imbalance from, I don't know. . .*

Emily: *It's inconsistency!*

Suzie: *From the staff, I mean even the sports fields, like yesterday. . . tennis is, you've got five people in a team. What must I do, I can't make them up into a big mass of games. I mean nobody will ever watch a tennis match, because I mean it's not everyone's. . . Guys can play hockey can play all those sports but you can't just take a guy and say come play a tennis match. Something was made about the girls' cricket, which I don't know whose is going to play girls' cricket when they are 30 but when the first team won with the girls, nothing was mentioned. He said nothing, I mean that's just by the way you play tennis. And the kids see it; they're not stupid. So, I think it's a whole. . .*

Emily: *Culture.*

Suzie: *Ja. How things are just decided or the, the people that are making these decisions and all about the things, they, they like or just what's important and other people, other things just aren't important.*

In the following extract, Emily picks up on this focus on sport and of the gendered and racialised discourse surrounding this topic. She illustrates her discussion with a particular white male learner ('John X'), who despite his abhorrent behaviour at the school, is treated as a 'big hero' due to his sporting prowess. She explains further that this particular learner recently had called her a 'bitch' during class and yet nothing had been done about it (from management's side).

Emily: *It's very, I think it's a very big inconsistency and it's coming back to behaviour. I'm on a mission about behaviour at the moment because I'm really, it's a long time since I've seen such badly behaved kids and Ms X actually said something which was, I think was really true. For our school sport is important. The kids okay (pause). We focus on sport. Now we've got a first team player like John X who plays First team rugby who is a complete monster. He is absolutely, he looks terrible, he can't behave himself, he wanders around the school, I mean we're all pander to him because he plays in the first team. And we should say, if someone is on the first team level, their behaviour and their academics need to somehow reflect that they are worthy of being on the First team. You know, so it's so inconsistent because it's okay John is a big hero there but when he's at school. . . And you know nobody is sending around the sheet about him. Nothing is going to be done. I can tell you now. That child won't be expelled. We have to put up with him. Hmm, you know hmm really, I think that's where we have a big inconsistency.*

Sally: *We can voice our concerns but it's whether anything happens. But there are two incidents that Zander is concerned about one is, hmm, one was hmm, John called Emily a bitch as he walked out of the class. Nothing is going to be done about him but and John, Mrs Smith said, the other day in class what did she, what did "Oh, come now, John" and he said "uh uh, I can't at the moment". And nothings been said or done about that. And that's unacceptable that boys can talk to teachers like that.*

The irony and injustice that everyone panders to 'John X' because he plays first team rugby and that no form is being sent around about him as opposed to the previously mentioned Zola, who works well in some classes and yet is being targeted for expulsion, does not escape Emily. Despite John's obvious disrespect for female staff, he will continue to be treated as a hero and go unpunished. His whiteness, his gender and his masculinity construct him as 'untouchable'. Not only will he remain in the school, but also he will continue to be given hero status. Emily, Suzie and Sally, well-established female

teachers in the school, have to accept that they can voice their concerns but that nothing is likely to be done about it. Despite their whiteness, the gendered norms in the school position them, in certain contexts, as having less status and power than sporty white male learners have. Suzie's comment that it is 'more than just racial' and Emily's focus on gender and masculinities suggests their awareness, despite their inclination to essentialise John as a 'jock', that categories of race, gender and masculinity are mutually informing and should not be viewed as singular determinants. It is also clear to them that some categories are granted preference in particular circumstances and not in others, which highlights the shifting, contested nature of categories.

In the extract that follows, Mr M, the only male teacher present during focus group 8, sympathized with Suzie, Sally and Emily. He agreed with the obvious inconsistencies in the school and commented on the injustice of allowing John X to go unpunished while punishing latecomers (who were usually black and coloured learners). He told the group how he used his position as soccer coach to challenge what he perceived to be inconsistencies. This he felt he was able to do in certain spaces such as on the soccer field and in his classroom. While unable to challenge the whole system, he is able to exercise some agency in some places, under certain conditions and he uses these opportunities to contest and reconstruct inequitable practices.

Mr M: *You know, we don't have the channels with management where we can say, "listen", but I try to implement that where as far as my influence can stretch and that's my team, or my classroom or whatever. Now I've had First team players that've come and they thought they can just do what they want to and they ended up not playing. But I can see also where that attitude is coming from because if you're a First team here at Melrose High – you have certain privileges.*

Emily: *The untouchables.*

Mr M: *I look at 'Jason', I hear his name called out, detention, DT, DT, DT – he never came to trials at the beginning of this year. I said fine, you not gonna make my first team player. He was a First team Soccer player. He went to rugby. He was at the reserve there in the B-team rugby. I told the coach that he won't play in my team. And, I think you know our influences stretch so far so and let's use it there. And if ever or whenever the channel opens where we can voice our dissatisfaction with other things. John X is every week up in detention but he still plays and he's still at the school. When a child comes late three or four times and then we're asked to send a letter around for this child to leave the school or we tell these children "you are not welcome in this school. We don't want you in the school".*

Mr M gives an example of where he is able to exercise his power by refusing to allow Jason into the first soccer team of which he is coach. Jason, whose name is called out regularly for detention and who does not bother to attend 'trials' (team try-out) is refused an opportunity to play in the first team. He therefore goes to rugby and Mr M knows that he cannot influence the decision to exclude him from the rugby team as well. Mr M, as a 'black' man, despite being racially disempowered at times, is able to position himself powerfully on the sports field due to his location as coach of a recognised masculine sport. Even though soccer does not carry the prestige of rugby in this school, Mr M's maleness and position of coach of a 'masculine' sport allow him certain privileges denied to the female staff who coach more 'feminine' sports like tennis and karate. This illustrates the fluctuating character of difference and of the constantly shifting terrain of power in relation to difference. Certain categories are significant in certain contexts and less significant in others. When examining differences, Mr M is commenting on the influence of changing contexts and changing circumstances as well as questioning the constructed nature of these categories. Instead of passively accepting categories, he challenges the teachers to use their power where they can and to be alert to opportunities to challenge other discriminatory practices at the school in whatever capacities they can.

Coffee, cake and flowers: gender stereotypes

The third and final extract to be discussed in this paper describes the teachers engaging further with differences and actively challenging and 'playing' with gendered practices. Suzie tells the group about her experience when she went to see the principal the previous year about a problem with management. Instead of listening to her problem and dealing with it, he dismisses it and suggests that she go for coffee and cake in order to calm down.

Suzie: *I went into the office, it was about a year and a half ago. Obviously I said the wrong thing but it concerned somebody in management and somewhere something didn't work out. I was sent straight to the coffee shop and got a big piece of cake hmm, and told, "Now, listen, relax have coffee at Melrose Shopping Mall, I'm paying the bill". I came back I was very upset. It had to be stopped just right there and I went there, I came back because I actually just thought just go and think you haven't got, I mean just. . . When I came back I had a big thing of flowers. Simon, my husband laughed himself sick, he said, "this man doesn't know me because that's the last thing anybody would do to me". I want this thing sorted out or just tell or just listen to me or just chat to me. It's never been done.*

Alison: *It's called D _ E _ N _ I _ A _ L.*

Suzie: *Ja. I don't think I, because I think he's actually married to a woman that would accept, that's the way to treat her to do it and I think he thinks every woman.*

Mr M: *What did you get? Surely you got something there.*

Suzie: *I didn't. I didn't.*

Mr M: *It's the school budget. We cannot be spending on people outside the school.*

Suzie: *And I tell you, about I actually didn't have coffee or any cake, I bought myself a pair of shoes.*

Suzie's problem with some issue of management, which she hoped would be taken seriously by her principal and sorted out, was instead dismissed and diminished. Instead, she was told to go and relax and have some coffee and cake for which he would pay. When she returned she received a bunch of flowers. Instead of taking the time to listen to Suzie's problem and of dealing with it professionally, the principal draws on the stereotype of an hysterical woman and grants her permission to take 'time out' in order to 'calm down' and hopefully see things 'more reasonably'. When she returns he still does not engage with her and since she does not follow up on the issue, he probably believes that she has now come to reason and that the problem has gone away. This is a demeaningly patronising and gendered manner of dealing with a professional teacher.

Suzie indicates that she went to the shops and instead of having coffee, she bought herself a pair of shoes (which she paid for). When she returned, the principal had bought her a bunch of flowers. To this day she says that her problem has never been discussed and "has never been done". The male principal, having never mentioned the issue again, probably believes he has dealt with this in an appropriate manner. He probably believes that having had an opportunity to rethink the issue, Suzie would have come to the realisation herself, that she had possibly overreacted and that her issue was not all that serious. His gendered handling of Suzie's issue suggests that he views Suzie, not as multifaceted and complex, but predominantly as a woman who fits into his static, essentialised category of someone who can easily be appeased and bought with some coffee and flowers. Suzie's comment that her husband "laughed himself sick" and commented that buying flowers was the last thing anyone who knew her, should do, highlights Burbule's (1997) notion of recognising *differences within* set categories. While women share certain issues, it is foolish and reductionist to ignore differences within the category of women and apply set ideas of 'every woman', every white, every male. . . While the actual categorising of Suzie firstly as a woman rather than as a professional, is not criticised, it is encouraging that the teachers can see the

foolishness of stereotypical categorising. Furthermore, the teachers in this group are able to move beyond a moralistic discourse and ‘play’ with the stereotype. Suzie, while acknowledging that she was upset by the event, was able to exploit the time allocated to her to buy herself a pair of shoes. While rejecting the stereotype of a hysterical woman, she deliberately and defiantly takes up the stereotypical view of the ‘woman shopper’.

Conclusion

Given the tendency of educators to apply assimilationist thinking to issues of learner integration, I have suggested, as a possible strategy, the construction of a space where teachers can explore and engage in the effects of categorical and rigid thinking. If staff and management of a school continue to “affix the unfamiliar to something established” (Bhabha, 1994, p.73), they are likely to maintain existing views and practices and perpetuate the notion that ‘migrated’ learners are the ones who need to change. However, if educators are encouraged to see difference as dynamic and fluid rather than fixed, they might be more inclined to acknowledge the multiple influences of context and power on representations of difference and of the limits of reducing difference to single determinants such as race, gender or class. An example of this is given in the extract where Sally’s disrupts Butch’s fixed notion of Zola as a problem and provides a more nuanced and fluid representation of him. A second example of a fixed representation is provided with the description of John’s abhorrent behaviour to female staff, which is overlooked by some white male staff due to his prowess on the field. While John is represented as a ‘hero’ in the school, the group of teachers position him, in a rather essentialised way as a ‘jock’ who is a ‘complete monster’, ‘looks terrible’ and ‘can’t behave himself’. Even though the teachers in the group draw on not only on John’s masculinity but also on his race and gender, they too construct him in an essentialised way. Therefore despite including various aspects of one’s identity, it is still possible to essentialise and position people in binary constructions.

The final extract illustrates the principal’s stereotypical positioning of Suzie as an hysterical woman who needs to be given coffee and cake in order for her to calm down and reason properly. This essentialised notion of how to deal with women prevents the principal from providing sound leadership.

In this paper I have provided evidence of teachers discussing, challenging, contesting and playing with essentialised categories and described teachers identifying the effects of the articulation between categories of race, gender and masculinity on the learners, as well as on themselves. The discussion of the extracts also indicates that both learners and teachers can be subjected to

stereotypical constructions especially within contexts where there are unequal power relations. However, the construction of a dialogic space where teachers can interrogate existing representations creates opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on how viewing certain groups in fixed, static ways can impede a full understanding and create narrow, essentialised thinking. Thinking ‘out the box’ and understanding the fluid nature of difference might facilitate more equitable practices at ex-model C schools.

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