

Designing a Qualitative Model of School Principals' Performance with a Meritocracy Approach

Jafar Khodamoradi¹, Rasoul Davoudi^{2*}, Mahboubeh Shokrollahi³

¹ Ph.D. Student, Department of Educational Administration, Zanjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zanjan, Iran

² Associate Professor, Department of Educational Administration, Zanjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Zanjan, Iran

³ Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Administration, Farhangian University, P.O. Box 14665-889, Tehran, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: ra.davoudi@iau.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to design a qualitative model of school principals' performance in the Department of Education of Karaj County based on a meritocracy approach. The research method was qualitative and based on grounded theory. The participants included organizational and academic experts related to the research topic, who were selected through purposive sampling. A total of 15 participants were interviewed until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. The findings indicated that the qualitative model of school principals' performance in the Department of Education of Karaj County with a meritocracy approach consists of six dimensions: talent attraction and retention, sufficient job-related information, support for the meritocracy process, awareness and analysis of international educational systems, knowledge management, and facilitation of organizational learning. In addition, 20 components were identified, including creating a platform for knowledge production, improving the psychological climate and organizational atmosphere, increasing efficiency, optimizing processes, better resource management, achieving improved student outcomes, enhancing the learning environment, improving educational quality, increasing educational equity, enhancing the effectiveness and productivity of the educational system, reducing costs, moving toward strategic goals, viewing the school as a learning organization, preventing rent-seeking, promoting meritocracy, developing a culture of citizenship and social responsibility, strengthening trust in the educational system, fostering creativity and innovation, and increasing staff commitment. Overall, 168 indicators were extracted and categorized within the paradigmatic model of the research in the form of causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

Keywords: school principals' performance, qualitative performance model, meritocracy approach

1. Introduction

Organizations are fundamentally dependent on human resources because people give them identity and carry out their activities. Within this framework, management is

one of the most decisive factors in achieving organizational goals. In educational organizations, the role of management is especially important because school leaders influence not only administrative processes but also teaching quality, staff motivation, school climate, and student outcomes. A

large body of research has shown that school leadership is among the most important school-level influences on student learning and school improvement, second only to classroom instruction in many contexts (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004). Successful school leaders shape school direction, build productive cultures, support teachers, and respond to contextual demands in ways that improve school performance over time (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008). For this reason, the issue of competent and capable school management has become increasingly significant. A school principal is no longer expected to serve merely as an operational administrator. Rather, the principal is expected to function as an instructional leader, a planner, a talent developer, a facilitator of organizational learning, and an agent of change. In rapidly changing educational environments, school leaders must address diverse student needs, evolving expectations of families and communities, technological developments, and the growing complexity of organizational decision-making. Studies on school improvement indicate that collaborative, distributed, and context-responsive leadership strengthens schools' academic capacity, improves school climate, increases organizational commitment, and can indirectly improve student achievement (Bush, 2021; Galdames-Calderón et al., 2023; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Lochmiller et al., 2024). At the same time, modern organizations increasingly regard meritocracy as a key principle in the selection, appointment, development, and evaluation of managers. A meritocratic approach assumes that leadership positions should be assigned based on relevant knowledge, capabilities, and demonstrated competence rather than informal influence, routine seniority, or nonprofessional criteria. In the educational field, this issue is particularly important because leadership quality has direct consequences for educational justice, organizational trust, equality of opportunity, and school effectiveness (Napoletano, 2024). Thus, examining school management through a meritocratic lens is not only a managerial concern but also a normative and institutional one (Napoletano, 2024).

One of the most practical ways to operationalize meritocracy is through competency-based management. Competency frameworks identify the knowledge, skills, personal characteristics, and behaviors required for effective performance in a role and connect these requirements to broader organizational goals. In human resource management, competency models are widely used for recruitment, selection, training, promotion, succession planning, and performance appraisal. Well-designed competency models help organizations move from vague judgments about suitability to clearer, evidence-informed standards and align leadership selection and evaluation with strategic and organizational needs (Campion et al., 2011). In the context of school leadership, such models can clarify what constitutes competent management and provide a more rational basis for evaluating whether principals possess the capacities needed to lead schools effectively (Campion et al., 2011). In addition, contemporary leadership competence extends beyond technical or administrative skills. Educational leaders are increasingly expected to support knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, and organizational learning within schools. Since schools are knowledge-intensive institutions, principals must be able to foster environments in which teachers collaborate, learn continuously, and translate professional knowledge into better practice. Research on the relationship between knowledge management and leadership shows that leadership is central to knowledge creation, acquisition, integration, and utilization, especially in turbulent and changing environments (Imran et al., 2018; Pellegrini et al., 2020). This makes knowledge management and organizational learning essential dimensions of school leaders' competent performance rather than optional additions to it (Imran et al., 2018; Pellegrini et al., 2020). The importance of competent school leadership is also evident in its effects on teachers and the internal functioning of schools. Principals help shape working conditions, trust, morale, professional commitment, teacher efficacy, and retention. Recent research has shown that school leadership is a major predictor of teacher retention, particularly in challenging and high-poverty contexts, because leadership behaviors influence whether teachers feel supported, recognized, and able to work effectively (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Lochmiller et al., 2024; Nguyen et

al., 2024; Nguyen, 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2023). Likewise, broad syntheses of the literature indicate that principals affect not only student achievement and attendance, but also teacher satisfaction, turnover, and the general quality of school conditions (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Grissom et al., 2021; Lochmiller et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2023). Teacher leadership, distributed leadership, and positive school climate have also been linked to stronger professional communities and more effective schools (Galdames-Calderón et al., 2023; Gningue et al., 2022; Hulpia et al., 2009).

Despite the recognized value of merit-based leadership, many educational systems still face instability in appointments, insufficiently valid criteria for selecting principals, and weak systems for evaluating managerial performance. Under such conditions, school leadership may become inconsistent, reactive, and unable to address long-term educational challenges effectively. Therefore, identifying the dimensions and components of competent school leadership is both theoretically and practically necessary. A qualitative model grounded in the experiences of knowledgeable participants can help clarify the causal conditions, contextual factors, strategies, and consequences associated with merit-based managerial performance. Accordingly, the present study seeks to design a qualitative model of school principals' performance in the Department of Education of Karaj County based on a meritocracy approach.

2. Methods and Materials

The present study was applied in terms of purpose and was conducted using a qualitative grounded theory approach in terms of data collection. The participants included organizational and academic experts, senior managers of the Department of Education, faculty members in the field of educational sciences with a specialization in educational administration at higher education institutions, and other relevant specialists. Using the snowball sampling method, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 experts until theoretical saturation was reached, and the participants were examined through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a method that may also involve a form of random selection. In this study, the interviews continued until it was felt that the responses provided were similar to the previous ones and no new findings were

being added to the data; that is, theoretical saturation had been achieved. In this research, in-depth interviewing was used as the main data collection tool. The required data were mainly collected through semi-structured interviews. Before the interviews began, a summary of the research proposal, the results of the literature review, along with the research objectives and questions, was sent to the interviewees via email in order to provide them with an initial understanding and preparation for the interview. At the beginning of each interview session, a brief explanation was also provided regarding the work that had already been done. Then, the interview questions were raised and the interview process was carried out. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the necessary measures were taken based on the specific criteria of qualitative research, including credibility and confirmability. To enhance credibility, participant review methods were used. In this procedure, the typed transcripts of the first five interviews, together with the initial coding derived from those interviews, were returned to the experts who had been interviewed so that they could express their views regarding the interpretations and inferences the interviewer had drawn from their interviews. In cases of inconsistency or the need for revision in the typed interview materials, the necessary corrections were made so that the analysis would accurately reflect what the experts had intended.

3. Findings and Results

In the qualitative phase of the study, the main focus was the exploration and identification of the factors affecting the qualitative model of school principals' performance in the Department of Education of Karaj County with a meritocracy approach as the core concept. To achieve this aim, the components (criteria) and indicators were extracted through open and axial coding of the data obtained from the content analysis of in-depth exploratory interviews with key experts, followed by refinement of the conceptual codes. For open and axial coding, in the first stage, the data from each interview were examined at the sentence and phrase level, and conceptual codes were extracted from the interview transcripts. In the next stage, through refinement and reduction, these components and indicators were organized into broader dimensions (factors) and continuously reviewed and labeled. To ensure the proper organization of each category and subcategory, the interview transcripts were re-examined and the indicators were repeatedly reviewed until logical saturation was

achieved for the categories and subcategories. Open and axial coding were stopped when a meaningful classification was reached after several rounds of reviewing the interview transcripts. Overall, the qualitative data analysis yielded 223 initial conceptual codes. After reviewing these codes and removing repetitive items, 156 duplicated codes were eliminated. Finally, axial coding was performed on the

remaining 168 codes. The results of selective coding are presented in Table 1. At this stage, 68 final codes were classified into the main categories of the paradigmatic model, including the phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences.

Table 1

Results of selective coding

No.	Axial Codes	Selective Coding Category
1	Global experiences	Phenomenon
2	Learning organization benchmarking	Phenomenon
3	Information technology skills	Phenomenon
4	Mastery of regulations	Phenomenon
5	Ability to create social participation	Phenomenon
6	Establishing educational justice	Phenomenon
7	Learning-oriented management	Phenomenon
8	Emotional and social competencies	Phenomenon
9	Cognitive and intellectual competencies	Phenomenon
10	Innovation and problem-solving competencies	Phenomenon
11	Cultural competencies in the organization	Phenomenon
12	Human resource management competencies	Phenomenon
13	Managerial competencies	Phenomenon
14	Leadership competencies	Phenomenon
15	Cultural and social factors	Causal conditions
16	Comparative studies	Causal conditions
17	Structure for learning	Causal conditions
18	Educational management information systems	Causal conditions
19	Public opinion and civil institutions	Causal conditions
20	Gender equality	Causal conditions
21	Professional development opportunities	Causal conditions
22	Transparency of appointment and promotion processes	Causal conditions
23	Identification of competency needs	Causal conditions
24	Professional development	Causal conditions
25	Performance evaluation and feedback	Causal conditions
26	Organizational commitment	Causal conditions
27	Development of a global perspective and international learning	Contextual conditions
28	Teachers' professional associations	Contextual conditions
29	School ranking	Contextual conditions
30	Development of a culture of responsibility	Contextual conditions
31	Creation of a management information system	Contextual conditions

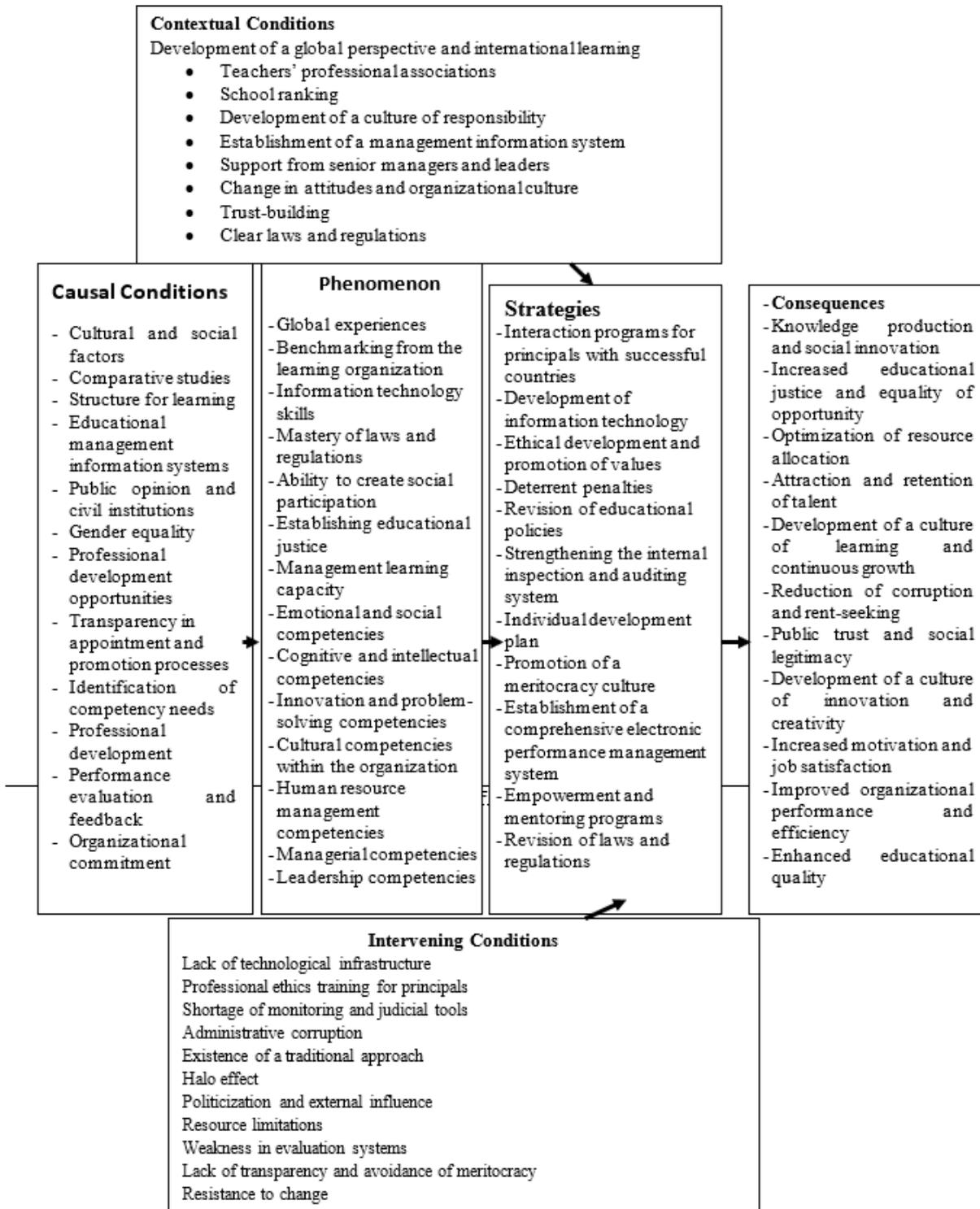
32	Support from senior managers and leaders	Contextual conditions
33	Change in attitudes and organizational culture	Contextual conditions
34	Trust building	Contextual conditions
35	Clear laws and regulations	Contextual conditions
36	Lack of technological infrastructure	Intervening conditions
37	Professional ethics training for principals	Intervening conditions
38	Shortage of monitoring and judicial tools	Intervening conditions
39	Administrative corruption	Intervening conditions
40	Existence of a traditional approach	Intervening conditions
41	Halo effect	Intervening conditions
42	Politicization and external interference	Intervening conditions
43	Resource limitations	Intervening conditions
44	Weakness in evaluation systems	Intervening conditions
45	Lack of transparency and avoidance of meritocracy	Intervening conditions
46	Resistance to change	Intervening conditions
47	Knowledge production and social innovation	Consequences
48	Increased educational justice and equal opportunities	Consequences
49	Optimization of resource allocation	Consequences
50	Attraction and retention of talents	Consequences
51	Development of a culture of learning and continuous growth	Consequences
52	Reduction of corruption and rent-seeking	Consequences
53	Public trust and social legitimacy	Consequences
54	Development of a culture of innovation and creativity	Consequences
55	Increased motivation and job satisfaction	Consequences
56	Improved organizational performance and efficiency	Consequences
57	Increased educational quality	Consequences
58	Principal exchange programs with successful countries	Strategies
59	Development of information technology	Strategies
60	Ethical development and promotion of values	Strategies
61	Deterrent punishments	Strategies
62	Revision of educational policies	Strategies
63	Strengthening the internal inspection and auditing system	Strategies
64	Individual development plan	Strategies
65	Promotion of a meritocracy culture	Strategies
66	Establishment of a comprehensive electronic performance management system	Strategies
67	Empowerment and mentoring programs	Strategies
68	Revision of laws and regulations	Strategies

Based on these results, the qualitative paradigmatic model of school principals' performance in the Department

of Education of Karaj County with a meritocracy approach was developed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Paradigmatic model of the qualitative performance model of school principals in the Department of Education with a meritocracy approach



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study showed that the qualitative model of school principals' performance in the Department of Education of Karaj County, based on a meritocracy approach, can be explained through six major dimensions: the phenomenon, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. This structure is conceptually consistent with contemporary literature on educational leadership, which emphasizes that school principals are not merely administrative agents, but key actors in shaping school quality, teacher effectiveness, school climate, and student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Research has shown that effective school leadership is one of the most important school-related factors influencing educational improvement, second only to classroom instruction in its effect on student learning (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004). In addition, principals influence student achievement, teacher satisfaction, staff retention, and the overall condition of schools through their role in instructional support, organizational culture, and personnel management (Grissom et al., 2021; Lochmiller et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2021; Robinson et al., 2008). In this study, the core phenomenon included competencies such as leadership competencies, managerial competencies, human resource management competencies, cognitive and intellectual competencies, emotional and social competencies, innovation and problem-solving competencies, cultural competencies, learning-oriented management, mastery of regulations, and the ability to establish educational justice and social participation. These findings are aligned with the broader scholarship on successful school leadership, which argues that school leaders must combine professional knowledge, relational ability, strategic thinking, and adaptability to context (Bush, 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). Effective leadership in schools is not limited to technical efficiency; rather, it requires the capacity to create direction, support professional learning, and build collaborative conditions that improve school performance

over time (Bush, 2021; Galdames-Calderón et al., 2023; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hulpia et al., 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004).

Another important result of this study was the role of causal and contextual conditions, including transparency in appointment and promotion, competency needs assessment, professional development, performance evaluation and feedback, organizational commitment, trust-building, support from senior leaders, and clear laws and regulations. These findings suggest that meritocracy is not merely an individual attribute of principals, but a system-level process that depends on institutional supports and credible governance mechanisms. This interpretation is consistent with the literature on competency modeling, which shows that competency frameworks are most effective when they are directly linked to organizational strategy, human resource processes, and evaluation systems (Campion et al., 2011). In other words, merit-based school leadership requires clear standards, valid selection criteria, and structured performance management systems (Campion et al., 2011; Napoletano, 2024). The findings related to intervening conditions are also significant. Factors such as lack of technological infrastructure, shortage of monitoring tools, administrative corruption, politicization, resource limitations, weak evaluation systems, lack of transparency, avoidance of meritocracy, and resistance to change indicate that weak managerial performance is often rooted not only in individual limitations, but also in structural and cultural barriers. This issue is supported by studies showing that leadership effectiveness depends heavily on organizational conditions, including school climate, organizational learning, participative structures, and supportive leadership practices (Galdames-Calderón et al., 2023; Gningue et al., 2022; Hulpia et al., 2009; Imran et al., 2018; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Yada & Savolainen, 2023). Research also indicates that principals influence teacher retention and school stability by building trust, supporting teachers, encouraging autonomy and professional voice, and creating positive work environments, especially in challenging contexts (Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Lochmiller et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2021; Yada & Savolainen, 2023).

Finally, the consequences identified in this study—such as knowledge production, social innovation, increased

educational justice, better resource allocation, talent attraction and retention, reduced corruption, public trust, stronger organizational performance, and improved educational quality—demonstrate the potential value of a meritocracy-based model for school leadership. These outcomes are also compatible with research on knowledge management, organizational learning, and educational leadership, which highlights the importance of leadership in enabling innovation, collaboration, knowledge utilization, and continuous improvement in complex environments (Bush, 2021; Gningue et al., 2022; Imran et al., 2018; Pellegrini et al., 2020). Overall, the findings suggest that improving school principals' performance through merit-based criteria can contribute not only to better management, but also to more effective, equitable, and trustworthy educational governance. Therefore, it is recommended that educational authorities redesign principal selection and evaluation systems based on explicit competency frameworks, expand professional development programs, strengthen transparent monitoring and feedback mechanisms, and promote supportive organizational conditions that sustain learning, accountability, and professional commitment (Campion et al., 2011; Dahlkamp et al., 2017; Gningue et al., 2022; Napoletano, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Yada & Savolainen, 2023).

Authors' Contributions

Jafar Khodamoradi: Conceptualization, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing – original draft.

Rasoul Davoudi: Supervision, methodology, validation, writing – review & editing.

Mahboubeh Shokrollahi: Conceptualization, validation, writing – review & editing.

Declaration

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only to assist with language editing, translation, and improvement of the manuscript's readability. All conceptualization, study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and final approval of the manuscript were performed by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the content.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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