

CHAPTER 6

Leadership in Irish Early Childhood Education and Care In Pursuit of Purpose and Possibilities

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Abstract

In recent years, the Irish government has introduced several mandatory leadership roles for early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. This chapter outlines the development, delineation, and [un]intended consequences of such positions and the potential to pursue leadership beyond the prescribed roles. It draws from my research, a social feminism exploration of ECEC leadership, which questioned how leadership is conceptualised and practised in Irish ECEC services. The research involved individual interviews with 50 Irish ECEC participants. The participants argued that leadership was introduced to the sector without discussion, research, or adequate training, and was more concerned with economics and standardisation than with ECEC stakeholders' welfare. This situation had created leadership confusion, and had marginalised practitioner knowledge and weakened their confidence in articulating their understanding of leadership and its purpose. Scholarship in the broader educational leadership field suggests that the purpose of leadership is seldom questioned and often remains ambiguous. While this chapter makes specific reference to the

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Irish context, the findings and research approach may be relevant for the wider ECEC community.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, leadership, non-leadership, pedagogy, inclusion, governance

Introduction

Internationally, the growing political and economic focus on early childhood education and care (ECEC) has led to numerous changes in ECEC policies and legislation, and increased accountability and financial constraints (European Commission, 2015; Heckman, 2017; OECD, 2015). These reforms have created responsibilities and challenges for leaders in ECEC settings, often far beyond their training and expertise (Gibbs et al., 2019). Leadership research for this sector is considered sparse, inadequately theorised, and difficult to locate (Nicholson et al., 2018). There have been calls (Douglass, 2019; Modise, 2019) to develop effective leadership training for ECEC staff. There is a paucity of leadership capacity in the sector (Nicholson et al., 2018), and the continued requests internationally to define the roles associated with ECEC leadership suggest leadership may be a confused and challenging activity in settings (Inoue & Kawakita, 2019; Klevering & McNae, 2018; Rodd, 2013; Sims et al., 2018).

In an Irish context, the government has created mandatory ECEC leadership roles, all introduced without discussion with ECEC stakeholders (practitioners, lecturers, and professional organisations), an absence of research, and inadequate training for management/leadership (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017). This chapter outlines the development, delineation, and [un]intentional consequences of mandatory leadership roles and discusses the possibilities for leadership beyond these positions. It draws from my research (Nolan, 2021) on a social feminism exploration of ECEC leadership (Eisenstein, 1979), which questioned how leadership is conceptualised and practised in Irish ECEC services. The study involved individual interviews with 50 Irish ECEC participants. While this chapter makes specific reference to the Irish context, the findings and research approach may have relevance for the wider ECEC community. The chapter commences with background information on Irish ECEC, a summary of leadership development in the sector, and an outline of the research design, and then discusses the effect of the prescribed roles on the participants' concep-

tualisation of leadership. Finally, it explores the purpose and possibilities of leadership beyond the prescribed positions.

Situating the Study

Currently, ECEC in Ireland includes programmes for preschool and after-school care. Programmes can be sessional, full days, specifically for children with special needs, and private or publicly funded. Pobal (2019) estimates that there are 206,301 children enrolled in early years and after-school services and 30,775 staff working in the sector; 87 per cent of staff work directly with children and 98 per cent of all ECEC staff are female.

The 2016 Preschool Regulations introduced a minimum requirement of level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) for ECEC practitioners, and 94 per cent are now qualified to this level (Pobal, 2019). In 2016, Ireland spent the second-lowest amount on education for three- to five-year-olds in the OECD, as a percentage of GDP (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2020).

The history of Irish ECEC is relatively new; until 1973, there was a limited requirement for ECEC, as there was a ban on Irish married women working. In 1991, the Childcare Act was introduced (DOH, 1991). However, it was not until 2006 that the word 'leadership' appeared in the policy document *Síolta, the Irish Early Childhood Quality Framework* (CECDE, 2006a).

Development of Irish ECEC Leadership

Síolta (CECDE, 2006a) was influenced by the New Zealand Early Education Model Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). However, *Síolta* excluded the idea of leadership as outlined in Te Whāriki. *Síolta* refers to leadership in the context of management: leaders must ensure 'effective' implementation of policies and procedures, and leaders must 'model what leaders do' (CECDE, 2006b, p. 5). Unfortunately, *Síolta* fails to explain what leaders do. The terms 'manager' and 'management,' not 'leadership,' are repeatedly used in policy documents (DES, 2016a). Nevertheless, without consulting the ECEC workforce (Neylon, 2012), a free preschool year for children (between two years and eight months and five years) was introduced for three hours, five days a week, over the 38-week school year (DCYA, 2010).

Similarly, a second free year was announced in 2015. This move was described as ‘ill-thought through and deceptive’. It did not recognise the real investment needs of the sector, and ‘the populist measure was easy to say but [came] without any rigorous thought on investment in an area in need of substantial reform’ (Hayes, see Hilliard, *Irish Times*, 15 October 2015). The free preschool year(s) requirements included introducing a room leader with a qualification of level 6 on the NFQ in each setting. A room leader was a prerequisite to receiving the government capitation for the free year(s) (Walsh, 2018).

In 2013, the government recommended developing leadership capacity in the sector (DCYA, 2013; DES, 2013), and by 2016 the Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) tool was introduced (DES, 2016b). Essentially, an EYEI inspector focuses on the processes and practices relating to the quality of management and leadership for learning (DES, 2018). However, the EYEI policy document states: ‘Management within the setting provides for a high-quality learning and development experience for children’ (DES, 2016b, p.26).

Similarly, a leadership role was created as part of the ECEC Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). This model was launched to support access to the free preschool year(s) for children with a disability (DCYA, 2016). The model was underpinned by Leadership for INClusion (LINC), a level 6 Special Purpose Award (Higher Education). However, within the LINC document (LINC, 2019), the person undertaking leadership for inclusion is referred to as an inclusion coordinator (INCO). The coordinator is supported by Better Start Access AIM specialists who offer ‘expert advice, mentoring, and support’ (DCYA, 2016, p. 1). In short, there are now four leadership roles identified for the sector: leadership for learning (DES), leadership for Inclusion (DCYA), room leader (DCYA), and leader/manager to oversee the administration of the universal free preschool scheme and government support for affordable childcare (Tusla, Pobal). This brief outline depicts an ECEC sector that at the commencement of my research (2015) was fragmented and ‘scattered ... complicated and difficult to navigate’ (European Commission, 2015, p. 60).

The precarious nature of the Irish ECEC workforce has been documented by the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) as a ‘profession living in poverty ... [where] low pay and a lack of basic entitlements predominate’, and where ‘84% are unable to cope with unexpected expenses, like replacing a washing machine. Just 11%

get paid maternity leave from work, even though 98% of educators are women' (SIPTU, 2019, p. 5). There is little leadership research, training, and support for the sector, and there have been calls to develop leadership (cf. DCYA, 2013; DES, 2013). For these reasons, I considered it an appropriate time to explore how leadership was conceptualised and practised in the settings and the supports for leadership. The aim of the research (Nolan, 2021) also included exploring the emancipatory potential of leadership 'to look at what could be' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 373) and how the 'could be' may offer the practitioners the means to address their working conditions.

Research Design

The research (interviews and analysis) supporting this chapter was conducted as part of a PhD thesis (Nolan, 2021). Fifty participants were selected using a purposeful sampling approach (Merriam, 1998). One of the key objectives of the study was to access a broad range of participants (maximum variation sample), looking for participants with specific experiences (critical case sample) and particular expertise in the sector (key informant sample) (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). The participants spanned the sector's layers: practitioners (practitioners, school owners, school managers) (18), representatives of professional organisations (10), lecturers (8), and government representatives (4) (4 government departments overseeing the sector). In this qualitative interview study (Creswell, 2013), the semi-structured interviews were conducted in the interviewees' place of work (except for two, conducted via phone) and lasted an average of 60–90 minutes. Interviewees were questioned on how they understood leadership and its purpose and practice, and the supports in place for leadership in the ECEC sector.

Questions included how to develop leadership in the sector, and how the potential leadership could hold to bring the diverse group of practitioners together to address their working conditions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, manually coded, and coded with the aid of a CAQDA software package—HyperRESEARCH. A socialist feminist perspective—Dual Systems Theory (Eisenstein, 1979)—guided the study and provided conceptual tools for the analysis. It was anticipated that examining the interlocking capitalist class structure and the 'hierarchical sexual structuring of society' (capitalist patriarchy), including the ideologies (the stereotypes, myths, and ideas which

define their roles) surrounding the practitioners and their engagement with leadership, would reveal the dynamic power systems/structures determining their situation and potential emancipation (Eisenstein 1979, p. 115). In contrast, it could be argued that this socialist feminist perspective is over 40 years old and outdated. However, the recent claims that the current ‘brutal economic realities of globalization’ make it impossible to ignore class and gender (Gordon, 2016, p. 234) and that the time is right for a favourable reconsideration of the socialist feminist perspective (Brenner, 2014; Fraser, 2016) supported the decision to use this approach.

Clarke and Braun’s (2013) understanding of thematic analysis also framed the research, and an adaptive approach took account of the existing theoretical framework and any new ideas that emerged. The analysis involved manual coding and using CAQDA software packages, HyperRESEARCH 3.75 and the updated version 4.0., to search across the data set ‘to find repeated patterns of meaning’ (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 85). After several cyclical and iterative analyses of stages of interpreting and making sense of the data, reporting, and displaying (Miles et al., 2014) themes found, six themes were identified. The themes related to leadership (better before), leadership in practice (managerialism), the problem(s) with leadership (gender, class, care), and (the focus of this chapter) the purpose of and the possibilities for ECEC leadership. There is always the possibility of causing harm and stress to the research participants. Consequently, this study adhered to the School of Education (Trinity College Dublin) and their research ethics guidelines (TCD, 2016). There were limitations with this research: the lack of a register of Irish ECEC employees limited the scope of this study and prevented the employment of a mixed-method research design. The difficulty of acquiring documentation on ECEC policy may have resulted in gaps in the policy analysis. Moreover, the most significant limitation was the absence of the parents’ and children’s voices.

Findings and Discussion: The Delineation of Leadership

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the various categories of participants (practitioners, lecturers, government, and professional organisations) presuppose innate homogeneity within each category. Nonetheless, there was such homogeneity, and this chapter describes

the majority conceptualisation of leadership within each group. Many of the participants in the study considered the assortment and confusing nature of leadership roles to be symptomatic of a fragmented sector. A network of 10+ government departments and their subsidiary organisations, each responsible for some aspect of the childcare sector, all follow different and often conflicting policy agendas (Urban et al., 2017) and leadership requirements. One of the practitioners in the study advised:

It is the government's understanding of leadership that is the problem. The education-focused inspections talk about leadership, but no one knows what they want—what is their understanding of leadership ... no one knows ... We need to know what it is before we can do it; we have no job description, no information, there is no actual connection between what the government is asking for and the information on the ground. (Practitioner D1: 3975,4175)

The Irish government's failure to delineate the 'key participants' roles and responsibilities' and to clarify 'what is actually expected of practitioners' (DES, 2016c, p.49) may have contributed to leadership confusion in the sector. Moreover, the non-government participants described the challenge of understanding and engaging with leadership in a sector excluded from the governments' discussion, job description, and objectives (the purpose) for the prescribed leadership roles. This situation may not be unique to Ireland or to ECEC, as the purpose of leadership is rarely questioned in the wider educational leadership field and remains ambiguous (Blackmore, 1999; Kempster et al., 2011).

The Irish government has a tradition of introducing policy (Neylon, 2012; Moloney, 2016), including changing the sector's name (Nolan, 2021), without any consultation with ECEC stakeholders. Urban et al. (2017) have described Irish ECEC as a 'highly fragmented sector with a multitude of actors following diverse practice and policy agendas, and pursuing often contradictory interests' (p. 10). One of the school owners explained:

We have an individualistic sector, every man (*sic*) for themselves; there is no connection between organisations, government departments, and the schools on the ground. Without connections and communication, leadership at any level cannot thrive. (School Owner D3: 836986,7249)

On the other hand, the government representatives had no difficulty describing the purpose of leadership.

Pedagogical Leadership, Leadership for Inclusion, and Governance

The government representatives described leadership roles as essential to ensure quality learning and affordable, accessible, and inclusive ECEC for parents and children. Pedagogical leadership was understood as a micro phenomenon and an approach to teaching and learning, and is reflected in the literature (Heikka et al., 2018). The absence of the term ‘pedagogical leadership’ from the remainder of the participants may be symptomatic of the confusion internationally (Fonsén & Soukainen, 2020), where the amalgamation of pedagogy and leadership requires further examination (Male & Palaiologou, 2015). The participants claimed that level 6 was not adequate training for leadership for inclusion (LINC). The one size fits all approach to inclusion neglects children’s individual needs and equality of participation (Oireachtas, 2017).

The government representatives claimed that leadership could and should be regulated, and they expressed confidence in leadership for governance; standardisation and accountability would result in transparent governance and a rise in ECEC quality (OECD, 2015). Government Representative A4 stated:

We are partisan; we have to be forced into doing anything we do, what is best practice—so we are looking at [leadership] inspections to ensure this ... Look, you could argue the sector is overregulated; you now have the education-focused inspection, but in all of this, nothing will happen if they are not held accountable for leadership. (Gov A4: 19560, 20005)

This view was at odds with many non-government participants who, in line with the literature, proposed that leadership involved autonomy and was context specific (Hujala, 2013). Government representatives conceptualised leadership as a role with a particular purpose to oversee pedagogy, coordinate inclusion, and manage governance, all of which were considered by the other participants to be more concerned with management and economics than with the child’s welfare:

At the end of the day, it's as simple as this, what we think, what we want, and do is not considered important and is definitely at odds with the government. They want quality inclusive childcare that is affordable and can be managed and controlled ... let's call it what it is—just more work for a manager, but we need a form of leadership that involves genuine relationships, collaboration, and working towards a shared goal ... the care and education of the child. (School Owner D4: 6039,6222)

[Un]intended Consequences of the Leadership Roles

Zhao (2018) refers to the unforeseen negative consequences of government policies as [un]intended consequences. In this vein, the participants described the side effects of the prescribed leadership roles. The side effects included a blurring of the distinction between 1) leadership and management and 2) leadership concerned with economics and leadership for the welfare and development of the child.

The [un]intended consequence of delineating leadership as a generic role or roles, the purpose of which was quality (learning and governance) assurance and value for money, had blurred the lines between management and leadership. One of the lecturers described how 'management is how leadership is now' (Lecturer B8: 26317,26440). Similarly, in the literature, Ozga (2000) explains how managerialism (a mode of governance embedded in the principles of market dynamics, accountability, and enhanced productivity (Lynch, 2014)), had become the 'official version of leadership' (p. 355). The participants perceived a disjuncture between value for money (what counts) and values (what matters)—primarily the care and welfare of the child:

Really, this leadership is just about getting people to do more work; it's more work for us, and really, it's management with a different name. It doesn't involve doing anything that makes the lives of the children and ourselves any better, it's all about getting more work out of us, and no extra pay, and there is nothing in it for the child either. (School Owner D: 8393,8961)

Moreover, the absence of a conversation on ECEC leadership's purpose had enabled the government's conceptualisation of leadership to over-see quality, affordable, and accessible childcare to infiltrate and domi-

nate the sector. The participants (lecturers and professional organisation representatives) proposed that a form of leadership underpinned by research, critical thinking, knowledge, and networking could identify and address the varied issues in ECEC, including the practitioners' working conditions. While the practitioners acknowledged the value of such interventions, they were unwilling to align with the current leadership roles:

Leadership in the sector is fantasy ... You know what it's like. It's all about parents and work. I don't know if anyone understands that babies and toddlers, but especially babies, depend on a caregiver for their safety and security; there is no 'meas' [respect/esteem in Irish] [for] training, paying or helping the early years practitioner to work with this age group and the little ones lose out—it's not right. It is worrying that all they talk about is affordable childcare; this is not what we are about and not what we want to be linked with. (Practitioner D4(a): 7604,7966)

An analysis of the interviews revealed the power relations governing the practitioners' relationship with leadership (Eisenstein, 1979, p. 115) and brought the practitioners' ideas, concerns, and vision to the fore. The government's prescribed leadership roles and their commodified understanding of care (affordable childcare) were incompatible with the practitioners' classed and gendered (Eisenstein, 1979—Dual System Theory) conceptualisation of care. Care (physical, social, and emotional) as a value position was considered necessary for the child and relationships, and essential in developing an active and collaborative process, with a shared language and purpose, underpinned by their experiences, everyday knowledge, and values. The lack of recognition and respect for 'care' as an axiom and fundamental mode of praxis in ECEC had marginalised practitioner knowledge. It had weakened their confidence in articulating and positioning care as central to the purpose of ECEC and ECEC leadership. Furthermore, they considered care to be the antidote to the neoliberal care[less] sector—the missing link in prioritising the child over affordable childcare and highlighting the importance of their work and working conditions:

Well, we are going to have to look at it all differently, new ways of doing things—the old ones haven't worked—new ways of looking at leadership and new ways of looking at care, we spend all our time looking at education, and we have lost care. Reconsidering care is the way, the only

way we are going to make sure that everybody is looked after, we feel good about our work, and I think it is the way to getting better recognition and respect. (Practitioner E1: 2061,2213)

As such, it was difficult to ascertain whether the practitioners' description of a collaborative process involved leadership, leadership was part of a set of collaborative and participatory tools, or there was a hesitancy in accepting leadership as a distinct phenomenon:

What is leadership? It's all talk, all this talk about it, it's just noise ... if you don't know what it means, then how can you do it or how can we even be talking about developing capacity in the area? (Professional organisational representative C2: 1075,1452)

Most of the participants agreed that leadership was a responsibility—a moral act built around the common good, involving purpose, values, care (Bøe & Hognestad, 2016), and beliefs of the organisation (Hujala, 2013)—and was central to the welfare of the next generation (Palestini, 2012; Sergiovanni, 1996; Wright, 2001). The non-government participants, in general, extended beyond the notion that leadership involves an individual or a process of influence over another (Avolio et al., 2004), past a task-oriented leadership and towards a relationship-oriented leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006). However, the participants considered a commitment to relationships and critical reflexivity, responsibility, networking, and new ways of looking at care as a prerequisite and a leadership requirement. These aspirations align with Moss and Urban's (2010) notion of experimental and democratic education, which promotes critical thinking, care, social justice, collaboration, and a 'willingness to ... try out new ways of doing things' as 'more of the same is no longer an option' (p. 1). This causes us to ask whether the participants' ideas are generic and applicable to education, advocacy, and social justice and, if so, whether perhaps leadership may not be a distinct phenomenon. Similarly, the practitioners' request for an interactive, democratic, and active process to unite people together with 'a common interest' (Järvillehto, 1996, as cited in Nivala, 1998, p. 53), to develop a shared language and identify what needs to be done currently—a purpose—are congruent with the notion of collaborative communities (Adler & Heckscher, 2018), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and participatory communication (Freire, 1996).

Simultaneously, the lecturers proposed that leadership required what Blackmore et al. (2014) describe as a set of thinking tools and conceptualised leadership as a tool to promote critical reflexivity. This process involved evaluating policy and the capacity to call power relations and hegemonic dimensions into question (Brookfield, 2009). Does it follow that leadership understood as a thinking and sense-making tool could be an occasional, context- or situation-specific dynamic rather than a perpetual state in the relationship? Such a perspective might pose questions about when 'leadership is needed or helpful and not' (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 15). Nevertheless, the practitioners' idea of active questioning and analysing advances critical reflection into action and may align with leadership as a purposeful activity (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2008).

Kempster et al. (2011) have argued that purpose is central to leadership, and they cite Vaill's (1983) understanding of 'purposing as a continual flow of actions that generate the effect of inducing clarity, consensus, and commitment' (p. 29). Could it be argued that the practitioners' understanding of identifying and acting on a shared purpose is ultimately a collaborative sense-making activity? Or could this be, by any other name, leadership? This understanding could begin to align the participants' (practitioners, lecturers, and professional organisation representatives) conceptualisations of leadership and move past the government's prescribed leadership roles—to oversee pedagogy, coordinate inclusion, and manage governance—to a process that brings people together to collaborate, identify, and make sense of their situation, a process of critical 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1996, p. 36). It would seem there were more questions than answers at the end of the research (Nolan, 2021).

Conclusion

The research (Nolan, 2021) explored how leadership was conceptualised and practised, the support in place for leadership, and the potential leadership could hold in drawing together Irish ECEC practitioners to address their working conditions. A socialist feminist perspective informed this research, and 50 ECEC stakeholders were interviewed in a qualitative interview study. The non-government participants found it challenging to articulate the purpose of ECEC leadership in a sector where there were multiple understandings of leadership emanating

from a network of disjointed government departments and organisations. The government representatives described the prescribed leadership roles (pedagogy, inclusion, governance, room leader) as the purpose of ECEC leadership. The remaining non-government participants advised that these roles were primarily concerned with management. This group suggested that managerialism had become the new leadership and that the purpose of ECEC and leadership had become blurred in this neoliberal climate.

The participants proposed that a form of leadership—underpinned by research, critical thinking, knowledge, and networking—could identify and address the varied issues in ECEC, including the practitioners' working conditions. However, the practitioners' classed and gendered conceptualisation of care was the focus of their discussion. They considered 'care' to be an axiom and fundamental mode of praxis in ECEC, necessary for the child and relationships and essential to an active collaborative process with the shared goal of prioritising the child over affordable childcare, highlighting the importance of their work and working conditions. As such, it was difficult to ascertain whether the practitioners' description of a collaborative process involved leadership or whether it had the potential to align with the other participants' understanding of leadership.

The following recommendations may begin the process of answering these questions. I recommend, along with other ECEC researchers (Moss, 2014; Urban & Swadener, 2016), that the ECEC sector and governments (including the Irish government) need to engage in a discussion/debate and establish what we mean by childhood, education, and care, including the 'purpose, goals, and values' of ECEC (Urban et al. 2017, p. 54). This discussion needs to establish what defines and bounds ECEC and (Goffin & Washington, 2019) ECEC leadership as a field of practice. Kempster et al. (2011) have advised that without a discourse of 'leadership as purpose' there is a general tendency for the purpose to become overly preoccupied with economics.

I recommend that a feminist perspective should be central to a discussion on 'leadership as purpose'. Feminist researchers have had a key influence on leadership in higher education, secondary, and primary school institutions (Blackmore, 2010a; 2010b). Yet, feminist research and perspectives appear limited in ECEC literature (Davis et al., 2015). Thus, it seems appropriate to engage with feminist proposals, including Dual Systems Theory (capitalist patriarchy) (Eisenstein, 1979) for

researching ECEC leadership. Bruneau (2018) has described capitalism and patriarchy as one struggle, and Fraser (2016) asks, might a new form of socialist feminism succeed in breaking up the mainstream movement's love affair with marketisation? Democratising care has been considered a fruitful avenue for developing socialist-feminist politics ... and the fight against austerity in the 21st century (Brenner, 2014). Correspondingly, Martin et al. (2017) advise that class is a neglected subject in educational leadership research and suggests that class may significantly impact leadership practice and understanding. These insights speak to the potential of a social feminism perspective to underpin and address the limited nature of feminist theory in leadership research (Nicholson et al., 2018).

This study was open to the notion of non-leadership (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012), not as an act of rebellion nor a signal to end leadership, but as a means to challenge and broaden the analysis and interpretation of the interviews. More recently, 1) Endres and Weibler (2020) have described the relevance of non-leadership phenomena for understanding leadership in contemporary organisations more comprehensively, and 2) the OECD (2021) has called on the Irish government to develop dedicated leadership training, a more explicit definition, adequate numeration, and support systems for leadership. These may help mitigate work-related stress, including too much administrative work, and support leaders in balancing their functions. As such, it could be argued that the time is right for all ECEC stakeholders (researchers, practitioners, lecturers, professional organisations, and government representatives) to discuss and reimagine new ways of looking at [non] leadership, as more of the same is not an option.

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