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THE USE OF PICTURE BOOKS IN DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSES

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Abstract : *This study explores the use of picture books in developing students' critical thinking skills using a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in teachers' perceptions and practices. The findings indicate that teachers recognize the benefits of picture books in enhancing critical thinking, appreciate their cultural relevance, and acknowledge their ability to engage students' interest. Teachers implement various strategies, such as narrative analysis, theme integration, stimulating predictive skills, connecting stories to real-life experiences, enhancing visual literacy, encouraging creativity, and promoting collaboration. However, despite this awareness, limitations in professional training hinder the optimal implementation of picture books in classroom practice. Therefore, the study recommends the systematic integration of picture books into lesson planning to stimulate discussion and analytical thinking, as well as the provision of continuous professional development to equip teachers with practical strategies for maximizing the use of picture books in fostering students' critical thinking skills.*

Keywords : *Picture Book, Critical Thinking Skills, Early Childhood.*

Abstrak : *Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi penggunaan buku bergambar untuk mengembangkan keterampilan berpikir kritis siswa dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui desain studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengidentifikasi pola dalam persepsi dan praktik guru. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa guru menyadari manfaat buku bergambar dalam meningkatkan berpikir kritis, menghargai relevansi budaya serta kemampuannya untuk menarik minat belajar siswa. Guru menerapkan strategi seperti menganalisis narasi, mengintegrasikan tema, merangsang kemampuan prediksi, menghubungkan cerita dengan pengalaman nyata, meningkatkan literasi visual, mendorong kreativitas, dan mempromosikan kolaborasi. Meskipun telah memahami manfaatnya, masih terdapat keterbatasan dalam pelatihan profesional yang berdampak pada belum optimalnya implementasi di kelas. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini merekomendasikan integrasi buku bergambar secara sistematis ke dalam rencana pembelajaran untuk merangsang diskusi dan berpikir analitis, serta penyediaan pelatihan yang berkelanjutan guna membekali guru dengan strategi praktis dalam memaksimalkan penggunaan buku bergambar dalam mengembangkan keterampilan berpikir kritis siswa.*

Kata Kunci : *Buku Bergambar; Keterampilan Berpikir Kritis; Anak Usia Dini.*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) prepares children from birth for school and lays a crucial foundation for their future success (Y. Li, 2025). This stage of education is critical because it shapes not only academic skills but also social, emotional, and cognitive development, which are essential for lifelong learning. During this period, children are expected to acquire information and skills both inside and outside the classroom with ease, which requires a stimulating, supportive, and positive learning environment (Karim et al., 2025; L. Li et al., 2024). In this context, teachers play a key role in guiding children through structured and unstructured learning experiences, inspiring curiosity, and motivating active engagement (Hasanah, 2024; Ubaidillah & Baharun, 2023). At the same time, children are encouraged to explore, practice, and refine various competencies, including problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking (Qushwa & Baharun, 2024). Research indicates that classrooms rich in visual stimuli, such as images and illustrations, can significantly enhance children's interest, attention, and curiosity, which are fundamental for the development of critical thinking skills. Such enriched learning environments provide multiple opportunities for children to interact with learning materials, ask questions, and engage in reflective thinking (Mukaffan et al., 2023).

Critical thinking skills in early childhood enable children to explore ideas, reflect on experiences, and develop initial working theories that help them make sense of the natural, social, physical, and material worlds around them (Alvarado-Bravo et al., 2024; Kwangmuang et al., 2021). These skills form the foundation for more advanced cognitive processes later in life, including analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and creativity. One effective medium for supporting the development of these skills is picture books. Picture books combine engaging visual and verbal narratives, providing children with opportunities to interpret images, connect them with textual content, and analyze storylines critically. These books foster visual literacy, creativity, social interaction, and analytical skills (Kwangmuang et al., 2021; Rohimah et al., 2024). In addition, the constructivist theory of learning emphasizes the importance of curiosity and active knowledge construction, suggesting that when children interact with picture books, they become active learners who can question, explore, and reflect on ideas, thereby cultivating their critical thinking abilities. The combination of text and imagery in picture books provides a multisensory learning experience that can deepen comprehension, stimulate imagination, and support the development of reasoning skills at an early age.

Globally, picture books have been recognized as a powerful tool for helping children understand concepts and connect learning to real-life experiences. For instance, in Taiwan, picture books are extensively used to teach environmental concepts, helping children develop critical thinking skills related to protecting and preserving the environment (Hsiung, 2023). Through these activities, children not only acquire knowledge but also practice problem-solving, decision-making, and reflective thinking in practical contexts.

However, in some African countries, the use of picture books remains limited. Challenges include inadequate resources, lack of libraries, limited access to high-quality materials, and parents' lack of awareness regarding the pedagogical importance of picture books (Basri et al., 2024; Sabran et al., 2023). These limitations reduce opportunities for children to engage with rich visual and textual content, thereby hindering the development of critical thinking skills during the formative early years of education.

In Tanzania, although the government has increased the distribution of books, including picture books, their use in fostering children's critical thinking skills remains minimal. Many books are available in schools, yet they are rarely utilized effectively due to insufficient library facilities, limited access, and lack of teacher training on how to implement them as instructional tools (Badr et al., 2024). This situation highlights a clear research gap: while resources exist, there is limited understanding and practical application of picture books to strengthen critical thinking skills in early childhood classrooms. Investigating this gap is essential to identify effective strategies for integrating picture books into teaching practices and to understand how teachers' perceptions and practices influence children's cognitive development.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on teachers' understanding and practical implementation of picture books as a learning medium capable of stimulating critical thinking from an early age. Unlike previous studies that primarily examine the benefits of picture books for children, this study emphasizes how teachers interpret, apply, and integrate picture books into daily learning activities. By doing so, it provides new insights into early childhood education pedagogy, highlighting the practical and instructional strategies that support critical thinking development in young learners. This study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between available learning resources and their effective use in classroom practice, offering recommendations for teacher training and curriculum design.

Based on this background, the study has two main objectives. First, it aims to **explore** teachers' understanding of the use of picture books in developing critical thinking skills among children in early childhood classrooms. Second, it seeks to analyze teachers' practical use of picture books in fostering critical thinking during classroom activities, providing insight into strategies, challenges, and effective practices that can enhance cognitive development and learning outcomes for young children.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative design with a case study approach to deeply explore how picture books are used to develop critical thinking skills in early childhood classes. The case study approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of a bounded system within its real-life context, namely classroom practices involving the use of picture books in early childhood education settings (Miles et al., 2014). Through this

approach, the study not only describes how picture books are utilized in teaching but also analyzes how teachers interpret, adapt, and implement these materials to foster critical thinking, thereby providing a comprehensive and contextual understanding of instructional strategies and classroom dynamics.

The research was conducted in selected pre-primary schools in Dodoma Urban District, Dodoma Region, Tanzania, which served as the bounded case of this study. The site was chosen due to the availability of learning resources, including picture books, and the active implementation of early childhood learning practices. The study participants consisted of pre-primary school teachers who were directly involved in classroom instruction and had experience in using picture books. Participants were selected using criterion purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and their engagement in picture book-based learning activities. This ensured that the selected informants were able to provide in-depth and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

Data collection was carried out through multiple sources to capture the complexity of the case. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perceptions, experiences, and instructional strategies in using picture books to develop critical thinking skills. Each interview lasted approximately 35–50 minutes and was guided by semi-structured interview protocols aligned with the research objectives. In addition, classroom observations were conducted to document actual teaching practices, focusing on learning interactions, student engagement, and the integration of picture books during instructional activities. Documentation analysis was also employed, including lesson plans, student work, and visual records of classroom practices. The use of multiple data sources enabled a holistic understanding of the case.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis framework involving iterative and systematic procedures. The process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. This was followed by generating initial codes to identify meaningful units related to teachers' understanding and instructional practices. The codes were then organized into broader themes representing patterns across the data. Themes were reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, the findings were presented through an analytical narrative supported by empirical evidence from the data.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Formal permission was obtained from relevant authorities, including educational institutions and local administrators. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and coded data. All data collection activities were conducted with minimal disruption to the natural classroom environment. With this methodological framework, the study provides an in-depth and contextualized understanding of how picture books are used within a specific educational setting to support the development of critical thinking skills in early childhood classrooms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Teachers' Understanding of the Use of Picture Books in Enhancing Critical Thinking Skills

This section presents the empirical findings related to teachers' understanding of the use of picture books in enhancing critical thinking skills in early childhood education. The data were obtained through in-depth interviews and supported by classroom observations, focusing on how teachers conceptualize, interpret, and apply picture books within the learning process. The findings are organized into several key themes that emerged from the field data, including benefit awareness, instructional strategies, training gaps, perceptions of age appropriateness, and cultural relevance. These themes reflect the variations in teachers' perspectives and experiences in utilizing picture books as a pedagogical tool to support the development of critical thinking skills among young learners.

Table 1: Teachers' Understanding of Picture Books

Theme	Description	Field Evidence
Benefit Awareness	Enhances comprehension, vocabulary, and narrative skills	Teacher interviews, classroom observation
Instructional Strategies	Guided discussion, shared reading, open-ended questions, dramatic play	Teacher interviews
Training Gaps	Limited formal training and curriculum emphasis	Teacher interviews
Age Appropriateness	Varying opinions on suitable age groups	Teacher interviews
Cultural Relevance	Use of culturally relevant books	Teacher interviews

Table 1 shows five key aspects of teachers' understanding regarding the use of picture books to improve critical thinking skills in early childhood. This indicates that teachers' understanding is not limited to conceptual knowledge but is also reflected in how they design and implement classroom learning. The data shows that this understanding emerges in various forms, ranging from awareness of benefits and learning strategies to contextual considerations such as age and culture. The research results show that; *First*, regarding awareness of benefits, teachers understand that picture books can improve comprehension, enrich vocabulary, and develop children's narrative skills. Through interaction with images and text, children are trained to connect information, analyze story content, and construct deeper meaning. *Second*, regarding learning strategies, teachers use various approaches such as guided discussions, shared reading, open-ended questions, and role-playing activities. These strategies demonstrate that picture books are used not only as a reading medium but also as a tool to encourage active interaction and in-depth thinking in children. *Third*, regarding training gaps, it was

found that there are still limitations in formal training for teachers regarding the use of picture books to develop critical thinking. This has resulted in variations in classroom implementation, with some teachers still using conventional learning approaches. *Fourth*, regarding age-appropriateness, teachers differed in their views regarding the most effective age group for using picture books. Some teachers believed that early childhood learning was more suited to play, while others believed that older children were better able to critically analyze book content. *Fifth*, regarding cultural relevance, teachers emphasized the importance of using picture books that were appropriate to children's cultural backgrounds. This aimed to increase engagement, strengthen self-identity, and encourage critical discussions about diversity and social values.

Thus, the data in the table indicates that teachers' understanding of the use of picture books is multidimensional and integrated into their teaching practices. This understanding not only emerged as a concept but was also reflected in teachers' concrete actions in selecting strategies, materials, and approaches that support the development of critical thinking skills in early childhood.

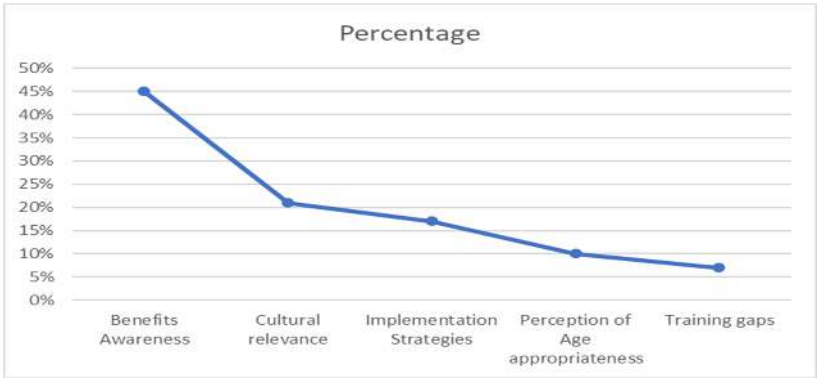


Figure 1: Teachers' Understanding of The Use of Picture Books in Enhancing Critical Thinking

Based on the data and visualization in Figure 1, the research findings indicate that teachers' understanding of the use of picture books to improve critical thinking skills in early childhood is realized through several key aspects: awareness of benefits, learning strategies, training gaps, perceptions of age-appropriateness, and cultural relevance. Each aspect reflects how teachers interpret and implement picture books in classroom learning practices.

Awareness of benefits is evident in teachers' understanding that picture books can improve comprehension skills, enrich vocabulary, and help children connect text and images meaningfully. Meanwhile, learning strategies are reflected in the use of various approaches such as guided discussions, open-ended questions, and interactive activities that encourage active child engagement. Regarding the training gap aspect, limited professional training was found to impact teachers' consistency in optimally integrating picture books into learning.

Furthermore, perceptions of age-appropriateness indicate varying teacher views regarding the most effective age group for using picture books, which has implications for different learning approaches. Cultural relevance is evident in teachers' efforts to select materials appropriate to children's backgrounds, thereby increasing engagement and encouraging more contextual critical discussions. Thus, these five aspects are interrelated and form an integrated pedagogical practice in the use of picture books in the classroom. This demonstrates that picture books function not only as a learning medium but also as a means of building interactive, contextual learning experiences that support the development of critical thinking skills in early childhood.

2. The Use of Picture Books in Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Early Childhood Classes

This section outlines the research findings on how picture books are used directly in learning to develop critical thinking skills in early childhood. Findings are derived from classroom learning practices that demonstrate various forms of picture book use by teachers in real-life situations. Data presentation focuses on the activities and interaction patterns that emerge during the learning process, such as student engagement, how teachers facilitate discussions, and children's responses to the material presented.

The research findings are then organized into several key aspects that develop during the learning process, including engagement and motivation to learn, visual literacy development, story analysis skills, integration of learning themes, predictive skills, connections to everyday experiences, creativity development, and interaction and collaboration among students. All of these aspects illustrate the dynamics of using picture books as part of learning activities that encourage children to think more actively and reflectively.

Table 2. Use of Picture Books to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

Aspect	Description	Field Evidence
Engagement & Motivation	Capturing attention, promoting curiosity	Classroom observation
Visual Literacy	Interpreting images and symbols	Teacher interviews
Story Analysis	Plot, character, and event analysis	Teacher interviews
Integration of Themes	Moral, social, and ethical lessons	Classroom observation
Predictive Skills	Encouraging outcome prediction	Classroom observation
Real-Life Connection	Linking stories to children’s experiences	Teacher interviews
Creativity	Creating alternative endings or stories	Teacher interviews
Peer Interaction	Collaborative learning and discussion	Classroom observation

Table 2 shows eight main ways picture books are used to develop critical thinking skills in early childhood. This indicates that picture books serve not only as a medium for delivering material but also as a means of encouraging various cognitive, social, and creative activities in learning. The data shows that these practices emerge in various learning situations, from individual interactions to group work in the classroom. The reserch results show that the use of picture books in developing critical thinking skill in early childhood classes, such as; *First*, in terms of engagement and motivation, picture books are used to capture children's attention and increase their participation in the learning process. Children become more active because they are attracted to the visuals and stories presented, thus fostering curiosity and a desire to ask questions. *Second*, in terms of visual literacy, children are trained to understand, interpret, and communicate meaning through images and symbols. This ability helps children develop critical thinking as they learn to connect visual information to a broader context. *Third*, in terms of story analysis, teachers utilize picture books to encourage children to understand the plot, characters, and events in the story. This process allows children to develop their ability to analyze and evaluate information more deeply. *Fourth*, in terms of integrating learning themes, picture books are used to convey various values and concepts such as friendship, courage, and problem-solving. This helps children understand social and moral issues and encourages critical reflection on the situations faced by the characters in the story. *Fifth*, in terms of developing predictive skills, children are trained to predict the storyline based on visual and textual clues. This activity encourages children to think ahead, consider possibilities, and justify their predictions. *Sixth*, in terms of relating to real-life experiences, picture books help children connect stories to everyday life. This strengthens their understanding and fosters reflective skills in seeing the relationship between learning and reality. *Seventh*, in terms of developing creativity, children are encouraged to develop their imagination through activities such as creating new stories or creating illustrations based on books they read. This process enriches their thinking and allows for the emergence of alternative ideas. *Eighth*, in terms of interaction and collaboration, the use of picture books encourages group discussions, sharing opinions, and cooperation among students. This interaction not only improves social skills but also strengthens critical thinking skills through the exchange of ideas and perspectives.

Thus, the data in the table shows that the use of picture books is integrated into various learning activities. Each aspect complements the others and forms an active, collaborative, and reflective learning process, thus supporting the development of critical thinking skills in early childhood as a whole.

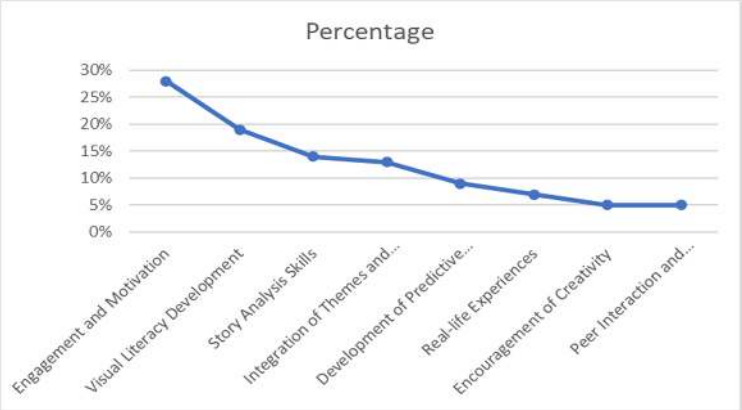


Figure 2: The Use of Picture Books in Developing Critical Thinking Skills in Early Childhood Classes

Based on the data and visualization in Figure 2, research findings indicate that the use of picture books in learning contributes to the development of critical thinking skills in early childhood through several key aspects: engagement and motivation, visual literacy, story analysis, theme integration, predictive skills, connections to real-life experiences, creativity, and interaction and collaboration. All of these aspects emerge simultaneously in learning practices and form a pattern of active and contextual picture book use.

Engagement and motivation are evident in children's more active responses during learning, where picture books capture attention and stimulate curiosity. This creates a learning environment that allows children to be more confident in asking questions and exploring ideas. At the same time, visual literacy develops through children's ability to understand and interpret images as part of the process of constructing meaning.

This study found that teachers' understanding of the use of picture books to develop critical thinking skills varied (Adeoye et al., 2025). Teachers had varying levels of awareness regarding the benefits of picture books, cultural relevance, implementation strategies, perceptions of age-appropriateness, and availability of training (Nadya et al., 2023; Tsauri, 2022). Teachers with a deep understanding were able to design more interactive learning activities and stimulate children's critical thinking.

The data showed that teachers who mastered the concepts and strategies for using picture books could facilitate learning that encouraged children to actively ask questions, analyze information, and connect stories to their experiences. In contrast, teachers with limited understanding tended to use picture books passively, merely as entertainment or reading material (Aditia & Széll, 2025). This emphasizes the importance of teacher understanding as a key factor in the success of picture book-based learning.

This finding aligns with constructivism theory, which states that effective learning occurs when teachers act as facilitators who guide children in actively constructing knowledge. Furthermore, social learning theory (Chahine et al., 2020) supports the role of teachers as interaction models who influence children's critical thinking skills through observation, imitation, and active participation. What is unique about this finding is the focus on teacher understanding, not simply the influence of picture books on children. This study emphasizes that the effectiveness of picture books is highly dependent on teacher preparedness and strategies, a perspective that has been understudied previously.

These results emphasize the importance of comprehensive teacher training, including questioning strategies, connecting stories to children's experiences, and structuring discussion and analysis activities. This way, teachers can utilize picture books not only for literacy but also to optimally develop critical thinking skills. Teachers' understanding of the use of picture books can influence the quality of early childhood education, particularly in developing critical, analytical, and creative thinking skills. This is relevant for education that emphasizes visual literacy and 21st-century skills. Limitations of these findings lie in the variation in classroom contexts and teacher experience. Not all teachers have equal access to picture book training or resources. This factor may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further research is needed to examine the effects of teacher understanding across broader and more diverse contexts.

The second finding indicates that the use of picture books directly increases children's engagement in learning activities (Mohd Yusoff & Mohd Hamzah, 2023; Schittko et al., 2026). Children become more active, participating in discussions, predicting storylines, connecting stories to their own experiences, and developing creativity and collaborative skills(de Beer et al., 2023; Souza & Debs, 2024). Picture books provide a rich context for critical thinking and reflection, so children not only understand the story but also learn to analyze, evaluate, and make decisions.

These results emphasize that picture books act as a medium that encourages children to think more deeply. Reading, discussion, prediction, and associations with real-life experiences naturally facilitate children's critical thinking skills(Susilawati et al., 2023). Children's active participation demonstrates that effective learning occurs when children are given opportunities to explore, analyze, and interact with material meaningfully. These findings support constructivism and experiential learning theory (Morris, 2020), where children construct understanding through direct experience and active engagement. Social learning theory also appears relevant, as interactions with peers and teachers strengthen critical thinking skills through discussion, collaboration, and shared reflection.

The evidence that picture books not only improve literacy but also simultaneously develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and collaboration (Luo et al., 2022; van Lunteren, 2024). This approach combines cognitive, social, and emotional aspects in one simple yet

effective learning medium. These findings emphasize the need for learning strategies that actively involve picture books. Teachers can use open-ended questions, predictive activities, group discussions, and connections to children's experiences to encourage critical thinking. They also highlight the importance of providing picture books that are culturally relevant and age-appropriate.

Picture books can be an effective tool for developing 21st-century skills in early childhood, such as critical, creative, and collaborative thinking(Dallacqua et al., 2023). This medium can be applied across a variety of formal and non-formal educational contexts to enrich children's learning experiences. Limitations of these findings include the relatively short observation period and focus on a specific classroom. The effectiveness of picture book use may vary across age groups or cultures, so further research is needed to assess its long-term impact and adaptability across educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the use of picture books in early childhood education fosters a comprehensive learning transformation that integrates teacher understanding, active student engagement, and the development of critical thinking skills. This transformation extends beyond the mere presentation of stories, as it reconstructs learning experiences through systematic and interactive processes where children actively analyze, question, and relate narrative content to personal experiences. Several findings indicate that the effectiveness of this approach is influenced by teachers' knowledge of implementation strategies, awareness of cultural relevance, and ability to facilitate discussions that challenge students' thinking. Under these conditions, children's critical thinking, creativity, analytical skills, and collaborative reasoning develop in a structured and meaningful manner.

This research also proposes a conceptual framework that connects early literacy, 21st-century skills, and critical thinking development through the use of picture books. The implementation of narrative-based learning demonstrates that knowledge and cognitive skills are not merely transmitted but actively constructed through interactive and reflective practices. This approach provides opportunities for children to make predictions, explore multiple perspectives, and engage in collaborative discussions, thereby supporting both cognitive and social development. The resulting framework offers both theoretical and practical contributions, particularly for early childhood educators, in designing learning experiences that are contextual, stimulating, and tailored to children's developmental needs.

Further research employing longitudinal and mixed-method approaches is recommended to evaluate the sustained impact of picture book-based learning on children's critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning skills. This study provides initial evidence that integrating narrative-based pedagogy with active facilitation is a key strategy in developing innovative and holistic early childhood education practices.

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