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#### Author Contribution Statement

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Conceptualization, literature review, methodology, data collection, data analysis, and writing

#### Abstract

Family involvement is one of the significant components of qualified early childhood education. Despite the acknowledged significance, it is undervalued in the teacher education curriculum worldwide. The present study aimed to investigate the early childhood teacher educators' ( $N=8$ ) and pre-service teachers' ( $N=10$ ) views regarding family involvement in Türkiye and the United States. An interview protocol was used to learn the views of teacher educators, and an open-ended survey form was used to investigate it in terms of the pre-service teachers. As a result, interview and survey findings complemented each other in terms of the deficiencies in teacher education regarding the family involvement, and suggestions were provided from both groups of participants to improve it such as providing opportunities to observe the family involvement process and using documentation to create a bridge between home and school. It was highlighted to integrate family involvement into the curriculum and support pre-service teachers regarding theoretical knowledge and practical experience regarding the family involvement.

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**Research Article****The Ignored Side of Early Childhood Teacher Education in Türkiye and the United States: Teacher Educators' and Pre-service Teachers' Views on Family Involvement\***Nur ALAÇAM<sup>1</sup> **Abstract**

Family involvement is one of the significant components of qualified early childhood education. Despite the acknowledged significance, it is undervalued in the teacher education curriculum worldwide. The present study aimed to investigate the early childhood teacher educators' ( $N=8$ ) and pre-service teachers' ( $N=10$ ) views regarding family involvement in Türkiye and the United States. An interview protocol was used to learn the views of teacher educators, and an open-ended survey form was used to investigate it in terms of the pre-service teachers. As a result, interview and survey findings complemented each other in terms of the deficiencies in teacher education regarding the family involvement, and suggestions were provided from both groups of participants to improve it such as providing opportunities to observe the family involvement process and using documentation to create a bridge between home and school. It was highlighted to integrate family involvement into the curriculum and support pre-service teachers regarding theoretical knowledge and practical experience regarding the family involvement.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education, teacher education, family involvement

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Strong relationship with families is an important component of developmentally appropriate practices and many influential curriculums in early childhood education (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009) because children spend most of their time at home and families are the main teachers and nurturers of young children in early childhood years (DiNatale, 2002). In particular, home and school are the two important settings which provide the context for children's learning, and the reciprocal relationship between these systems affects their well-being and behaviour (Sameroff, 2010). To provide the connection between these systems, it is important to provide the family involvement in their children's education (Kluczniok & Roßbach, 2014). The significance of family involvement is well documented in the literature by referring to the ecological theory. According to this theory, settings and interactions around children affect their development (Bronfenbrenner's, 1977). As supporting this, a significant number of research studies showed that family involvement in children's education contributes to children's academic achievement and cognitive, social, and emotional development (Castro et al., 2015). Moreover, it contributes to family well-being and teacher-family relations because it enables involved families to have better understanding about children's learning (DiNatale, 2002; Zengin & Ataş-Akdemir, 2020).

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Family involvement has benefits for each stakeholder of the education process, and it is viewed as the part of the educational quality (Kluczniok & Roßbach, 2014). Therefore, early childhood teachers need to be supported with knowledge and skills to work with families (Brown et al., 2014). Although there is an increased attention on supporting preservice teachers in terms of this side (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Epstein, 2018; Sewell, 2012), there is still less focus on this topic in teacher education in the international contexts (De Bruine et al., 2014; Prieto, 2018; Winship et al., 2021). Therefore, it needs further attention to prepare pre-service teachers for productive relationships with families (Henderson et al., 2007). To this end, it is crucial to investigate the strengths and needs of current teacher education in terms of this side by actively integrating pre-service teachers as being the main recipients of the process. Moreover, qualified teacher educators' views regarding family involvement are important to provide helpful insights as being one of the crucial stakeholders (Goodwin et al., 2014). The investigation of family involvement in the views of both pre-service teachers and teacher educators can present valid implications to enrich the curriculum. In this respect, it was aimed to contribute to the literature by comparatively investigating the views of teacher educators and pre-service teachers related to family involvement in Türkiye and the United States. The investigation of the family involvement in teacher education was provided under the next subtitle, and findings presented differences with respect to the settings. Therefore, the participant countries which give importance to family involvement in their curriculum were selected to investigate this focus in two different cultural settings.

### **1.1. Teacher Education on Family Involvement**

The teacher is one of the most important components of the family involvement process and plays a crucial role for involving families in children's education (Nathans & Brown, 2022). In particular, their relationship-building skills are foundational to encourage successful family involvement (Parks, 2018), which were also found to be dependent on their knowledge regarding it (O'Connor et al., 2018). To provide such essential knowledge to teachers, teacher education is acknowledged as an important process. However, there is little focus on this in teacher education curriculum in different countries (De Bruine et al., 2014; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Evans, 2013; Gomila et al., 2018). This lack of education might cause negative attitudes for teachers when they enter into profession (Nathans & Brown, 2022). To illustrate, Willemse et al. (2017) examined preservice teachers' understanding, attitudes, and experiences regarding family involvement from Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States. Although teacher candidates approved of the significance of family involvement, they felt mildly prepared to practice it. Similarly, pre-service teachers had misconceptions and not enough experience in working with families in another study (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). As a result, they were found not to feel prepared to communicate with families (Denessen et al., 2009) and also not satisfied with the education they received (Unal & Unal, 2014).

There are disconnections between what is hoped and delivered about family involvement in practice (Brown et al., 2014; Evans, 2013). However, it is important to know how to prepare preservice teachers for effective family involvement process (Mancenido & Pello, 2020). To this end, the related literature highlights the necessity of education and training to improve teachers' skills and confidence in working with families (Murphy et al., 2021), and it is highlighted to give a special place to family involvement in teacher education curriculum (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004). For instance, it is suggested to review programs to make sure about teacher candidates' adequate preparation for family involvement (Sewell, 2012), and comprehensive programs are suggested that include both theoretical and practical knowledge in content (Nathans & Brown, 2022; O'Connor et al., 2018; Sewell, 2012). To develop these programmes, more research studies are also recommended about how changes can be made in teacher education and how teacher educators can support it in teacher education in a meaningful way. Yet, there is little knowledge on teacher candidates'

preparation on family collaboration and how teacher educators' perceptions of family school collaboration affect the preparation of the candidates. In fact, training is depended on tendencies of teacher educators (De Bruine et al., 2014), and it is suggested that early childhood teacher educators should take more active role in the research in addition to the teacher candidates for curriculum improvement (Willemse et al., 2017). To response to the need in the literature, in the current study, it was aimed to address both barriers and suggestions on family involvement in early childhood teacher education by comparatively investigating the views of teacher educators and teacher candidates as being crucial stakeholders of the teacher education process. Initially, the views of teacher educators from Türkiye and the United States were explored, and then pre-service teachers were included from Türkiye in the follow up of the study. Education policies at the federal or local levels in the United States give importance to family involvement in early childhood education (Hilado, et al., 2013). Teacher candidates are expected to show their professionalism for working with families to be able to obtain the certification and prepared for it (NAEYC, 2010). Similarly, family involvement is expected to be practiced by teachers according to the centralised early childhood education curriculum in Türkiye. There is a specifically prepared guideline for the teachers on family involvement and the curriculum (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2013). Therefore, it is expected from teacher candidates to plan family involvement activities in their practice teaching plans. There is also an elective course on family involvement in the current early childhood teacher education curriculum to prepare them to the process. Both United States and Türkiye were purposively selected owing to giving importance to family involvement in their curriculum in two different cultural settings. To illustrate the differences, Türkiye has both traditional and modern child rearing styles. Although it seems to support modernization with economic, social, cultural, and educational values, it also seems to slow down due to the religious, historical, and cultural values (Ahioglu-Lindberg, 2012). On the other hand, early childhood education in the United States gives importance to emotional independence, self-reliance, autonomy, and self-esteem (Friedlmeier et al., 2011). Overall, this study will provide a valuable contribution to the literature by comparatively investigating the teacher educators' and pre-service teachers' views on family involvement in early childhood teacher education in the international contexts and offering solutions for better preparing pre-service teachers to work with families, which is one of the prerequisites for qualified early childhood education.

## 2. METHOD

This research was designed as basic qualitative research to investigate the views of early childhood teacher educators and pre-service teachers about family involvement in early childhood teacher education process. To this end, "What are the teacher educators' and pre-service teachers' views regarding family involvement in teacher education?" guided the research process. With this focus, the following sub questions were investigated; "What are the barriers concerning preparation of pre-service teachers for family involvement?" and "What are the suggestions to improve family involvement in teacher education?".

### 2.1. Participants

The study participants included eight early childhood teacher educators from a public university in an urban city in the north region of Türkiye ( $N=4$ ) and on the west coast of the United States ( $N=4$ ). In selection of universities, convenience sampling was employed, and those were selected because of the researcher's affiliation with them during the time of the data collection. Participant teacher educators held graduate degrees in early childhood education or psychology with teaching experience ranging from 12 years to 30 years. Among them, three were male and five of them were female. Then, 10 senior pre-service early childhood teachers in the same university in Türkiye participated in the second part of the study. Among them, two were male, and they were between 21 and 25 years old. They were senior students in the field and just completed their courses and practice teaching at the

time of the data collection. To explain, there is not a centralized curriculum in the United States, and teacher candidates need certification to be appointed as teachers. On the other hand, earning undergraduate degree is sufficient to become a teacher in Türkiye. Therefore, pre-service teachers, who had just completed their courses and practice teaching, were purposefully selected from Türkiye to get implications about the effectiveness of the centralized teacher education curriculum to prepare them in terms of family involvement prior to appointment as a teacher.

As being suitable to nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2015), it was aimed to understand the focused phenomenon, family involvement in teacher education, in the views of teacher educators and pre-service teachers in detail rather than generalisation of the findings. Therefore, saturation of findings was considered while deciding the sufficiency of the sampling (Patton, 2015).

## 2.2. Instrumentation

Using more than one data collection method is suggested in the literature to provide validity of the research studies (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Data were collected with interviews and open-ended surveys in this study for triangulation. Initially, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to collect the research data. Based on the findings of the interviews related to teacher education, an open-ended survey form was also developed to investigate the similar points in the views of teacher candidates. For internal validity of the interview protocol and open-ended survey form, two experts in Early Childhood Education field in Türkiye and the United States reviewed the questions. Moreover, a pilot study was also conducted with two teacher educators and two pre-service teachers. According to the findings, only minor revisions (e.g., language adaptations) were conducted on some questions for clarification, and interviews questions and survey forms were finalized for the data collection.

In the interview protocol, a total of 10 questions were organized into two parts including demographic information and teacher educators' views on family involvement in early childhood teacher education. While preparing the semi-structured interview protocol, the literature related to family involvement in teacher education was reviewed (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Brown et al., 2014; Nathans & Brown, 2022; O'Connor et al., 2018). For instance, "How can you define family involvement in early childhood education?", "What are the barriers concerning pre-service teachers' preparation for family involvement in your context?", and "What are your suggestions regarding preparation of pre-service teachers for family involvement?". Moreover, the open-ended survey also consisted of parallel eight open-ended questions for the pre-service teachers. To illustrate, "How can you assess teacher education process in terms of preparation for family involvement?"; "What do you suggest about family involvement in teacher education process in your context?".

## 2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Before the study, ethical approval was received from the ethical board of the participant university. The study purpose was explained to the participants while inviting them in emails, and data were collected after they agreed to participate. Data collection began in the United States and continued in Türkiye. Initially, individual interviews were conducted with teacher educators face to face and lasted about 25 minutes. After completing the interviews, open-ended survey questions were developed and implemented to pre-service teachers in Türkiye. Participants were selected randomly from the volunteer senior pre-service teachers. Survey forms were emailed to them and collected online.

Collected data were analysed with thematic analysis. Firstly, interviews were transcribed in the conducted language, and then codes, categories, and themes were extracted from the interview and survey data after reading those several times (Patton, 2015). For reliability, another researcher from the early childhood education field participated in coding process and independently coded the interviews and survey responses. The percentage of agreement was calculated as 92%, which indicates an acceptable percentage (Miles et al., 2014). In order to protect participants' identities, pseudonyms

were used, such as T1 and T4 for teacher educators in Türkiye and U1 and U2 for the ones in the United States. Moreover, pseudonyms like P5 and P9 were also used for pre-service teachers.

### 3. FINDINGS

Findings were presented under two themes as barriers and suggestions on family involvement in early childhood teacher education and explained below under these subtitles. These were also summarized in the Table 1 and 2.

**Table 1. Teacher educators' views on family involvement**

Themes	Codes
Barriers	Lack of theoretical knowledge Lack of practical experience
Suggestions	Professional development and communication skills Integrating a practical course in teacher education Understanding families and learning about their expectations Treating families as a partner and including actively Preparing for family educations Offering alternatives for participation Benefiting from documentation

#### 3.1. Barriers

According to teacher educators and pre-service teachers, family involvement refers to the integration of school and home to support child learning and bridge the disconnection between these settings. Therefore, all the participants agreed upon the requirement of family involvement in early childhood education. On the other hand, at the same time, they identified several barriers regarding preparation of pre-service teachers for the family involvement process. To explain, most of the teacher educators emphasised the lack of practical experience as the main barrier of the family involvement process ( $N=6$ ). It was stated that “Teacher candidates do not have opportunity to practice their knowledge when they enter into profession” (T3, T4). As a result, “Not all teachers are encouraging and comfortable with family involvement after graduation of the university” (U2). Regarding this issue, U4 emphasised that “It necessitates time, money, and effort to supervise practicums, but it is not enough”. Likewise, pre-service teachers also confirmed the statements of the teacher educators. They ( $N=10$ ) explained that they do not have opportunity to observe or practice family involvement activities during their practice teaching experience or during their courses. They mentioned they are only writing it as a required part of their plans but not having opportunity to practice them. For example, P4 stated that “Although we know what we need to do, I have concerns how I can practice it with families”. Similarly, P6 also highlighted that “It is only theoretical knowledge for us”. As a result, they do not feel sufficient about it.

Teacher educators' and pre-service teachers' comments indicate to the lack of not only practical experience but also insufficiency of theoretical knowledge about it. For instance, lack of communication skills in teacher education curriculum was highlighted by teacher educators. In relation to this, T2 explained that “Communication with families is an important topic to focus on, which is ignored in our teacher education”. U1 also emphasised the lack of integration of practical tips and suggestions as a part of the theoretical content. As a probable reflection of this, most of the pre-service teachers ( $N=7$ ) mentioned the difficulty of designing activities by considering children's or families' individual differences. To illustrate, they stated that “It is difficult to design parent involvement activities according to children's different developmental levels in the class” (P8). P5 expressed her deficiency of knowledge by pointing out that “It is hard to consider family involvement

for each activity type”, and P7 also explained “I have difficulty in designing child-centred family involvement activities”. Furthermore, P9 mentioned “It might be hard to plan activities by considering different education level and socioeconomic status of families”. In addition to these, half of the teacher candidates also pointed out the difficulty of designing different types of creative family involvement activities and their lack of support about this. For instance, one of them expressed her concern by stating that “Since I do not have experience or do not have opportunity to observe family involvement activities, I have difficulty in developing different kinds of activities” (P4). All these indicate to the deficiencies of theoretical education and also significance of practical experiences to support pre-service teachers’ theoretical knowledge.

**Table 2. Pre-service teachers’ views on family involvement**

Categories	Corresponding codes
Barriers	Lack of practical experience Designing different types of family involvement activities
Suggestions	Increasing practical experience Implementing activities under the guidance of a mentor teacher Observing family involvement activity process Learning practical strategies with activity examples to integrate families Getting detailed feedback on planned family involvement activities

### 3.2. Suggestions

To improve the pre-service teachers’ preparation regarding family involvement, both teacher educators and pre-service teachers offered several suggestions that complement each other at most of the points. To begin, most of the teacher educators highlighted the importance of understanding families and learning about their expectations for family involvement, and they highlighted the necessity of preparing teacher candidates with communication skills to achieve these ( $N=6$ ). They explained that “It is necessary to understand the challenges of families and support them, not to compensate them” (U2). To this end, it is suggested to “consider cultural differences” (U4). To justify, T2 emphasized that “If families feel that they are understood, they will be more willing to participate in the process.” Therefore, “It is important to enable their willingness rather than making it compulsory” (T4). Moreover, T3 explained that “Understanding families will enable teachers to have appropriate expectations from them”. In relation to these, most of the teacher educators also highlighted that it is important to treat them as a partner and integrate families actively into the process by benefiting from their support. For instance, “It is suggested to design activities which include children and families together” (T1). “They can include in field trips or join in classroom activities” (T3). “They can make cookies at home for a school event if they do not have time to be in class” (U2). “Rather than only mother and father, other family members (sibling or grandparent) might also be included” (T3). However, “It is important to know and understand families to be able to integrate them into these processes actively. It is also necessary to determine the activities together” (T4). Therefore, it is important to offer different alternatives for families ( $N=3$ ) such as using technology to communicate or organizing home visits. To this end, it is necessary to introduce pre-service teachers with different types of involvement types and skills. Thus, a majority of the teacher educators suggested teacher professional development and improving their communication skills ( $N=6$ ). Moreover, most of them also suggested integrating a practical course into the teacher education. For instance, U3 stated that “Teachers should spend more time in classroom, supervised by a master teacher”.

Furthermore, teacher educators also suggested parent educations and informing families about the necessity of involvement, and they highlighted the significance of preparing teacher candidates for

such activities ( $N=4$ ). It was stated that “It is important to explain why family involvement is important” (T4) and “how their involvement will help their children” (U2). “After creating consciousness on the significance of family involvement, family involvement activities should be planned” (T2). In relation to this, one of them highlighted the significance of documentation to show children’s learning to families and getting their support on the process by stating that “visualization of child learning with documentation can enable families to reflect upon child learning”. Therefore, it is important to integrate family involvement into teacher education curriculum rather than only family involvement specific courses to be able to enrich the process, which was highlighted by most of the teacher educators.

Similar to teacher educators, all the teacher candidates ( $N=10$ ) also suggested increasing practice teaching experience and having the opportunity to practice their planned family-involved activities. It was expressed that “Extended amount of practice teaching experience will enable to practice different types of family involvement activities” (P3). Therefore, practice teaching experience was viewed as “helpful to explore strengths and work on insufficient skills in family involvement process” (P7). In relation to these, half of the teacher candidates ( $N=5$ ) also suggested implementing activities under the guidance of a mentor teacher and getting support from them. For instance, P1 stated that “Constructive feedbacks from mentor teachers on the practices will contribute to the practices”. Some pointed out getting detailed feedback on their planned family involvement activities before the practice. It was viewed as helpful to plan activities according to the guidance of a mentor teacher (P9). For instance, P5 stated that “Getting feedback improves my motivation to enhance my plan and practices.” Furthermore, four of the teacher candidates advised observing family involvement activity process. To illustrate, P4 highlighted that “It will be beneficial to observe family involvement activity process to learn about the teacher practices as a guide”. P6 also justified that “Observation is necessary to get tips about planning and managing the process before the practice”. In addition to these, some of the teacher candidates also suggested to learn different strategies with activity examples in their courses to integrate families into education. Getting ideas for developing activities was viewed as helpful (P9).

#### 4. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Teacher educators’ and pre-service teachers’ views complemented each other related to the insufficiency of teacher education to provide practical experience regarding family involvement in this study. As a probable result of this, it was found in different studies in the literature that pre-service teachers do not feel prepared to implement family involvement or communicate with families (De Bruine et al., 2014; Unal & Unal, 2014; Willemse et al., 2017). To compensate this deficiency, it is suggested to integrate practical experiences regarding family involvement into the teacher education curriculum (Murphy et al., 2021; O’Connor et al., 2018). For instance, it is advised to provide opportunities for them to plan and implement different kinds of family involvement activities during their practice teaching. Field experience can support their preparation in the process, and observation opportunities and mentoring might also be helpful as suggested by pre-service teachers. However, mentoring and support for self-study are missed points to improve teacher education (Dinkelman et al., 2006) even though observations of parents and children can support them in parent-child relationships (O’Connor et al., 2018).

Moreover, teacher educators also confirmed the comments of pre-service teachers that the current curriculum is not sufficient in terms of providing adequate theoretical knowledge regarding family involvement. One of the reasons is that one-semester courses on family involvement in teacher education curriculum do not sufficiently prepare teacher candidates because there is limited content on family involvement in the restricted time of the offered course (Alaçam & Olgan, 2017; De Bruine et



al., 2014). For instance, communication skills are ignored as a part of the curriculum as mentioned by the teacher educators. In fact, teacher communication skills are important to focus in teacher education curriculum since good home-school communication is crucial for good home-school relationships and encouraging successful family involvement (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Parks, 2018). In contrast, there are also research findings in the literature which approved the effectiveness of preservice education on pre-service teachers' attitudes and feelings of preparation (Brown et al., 2014). In these studies, it was supported that integrating family involvement into various courses in teacher education curriculum contributes to knowledge gains and positive attitudes of pre-service teachers (Brown et al., 2014; Unal & Unal, 2014). Therefore, it is suggested that family involvement be integrated into the curriculum rather than only one course on family involvement, as also offered by the teacher educators of the present study. They should be given an extended amount of time to internalize ideas rather than introducing them with family involvement or practical experience only in later grades (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; De Bruine et al., 2014).

Furthermore, teacher educators' suggestions highlighted the significance of understanding families to enable their involvement. Understanding family dynamics and respecting family traditions are important for early childhood professionals to improve family involvement (Knopf & Swick, 2008). Otherwise, it might create challenges in the process. For instance, different goals and agendas between families and teachers were viewed as barriers to family involvement in the model of Hornby and Lafaele (2011). Parents' educational expectations can also have an impact on their involvement (Gao & Lio, 2023). To illustrate, economically disadvantaged families have low expectations about their children's academic achievement, and they have also difficulty in involving in activities (Wang et al., 2016). Because of these reasons, it is necessary to encourage family involvement by considering different characteristics of families (Christian, 2006). To this end, it is important to create this consciousness and provide skills to pre-service teachers to work with different types of families during the teacher education curriculum. For instance, simulations might be beneficial to support them with the necessary competencies to enable family engagement (Prieto, 2018), or offering authentic experiences with families can also contribute to their positive beliefs about families (Winship et al., 2021).

Finally, as mentioned by one of the teacher educators, documentation might be one of the important tools for creating a bridge between home and school. It can enable to share children's learning with extended family members (Reynolds & Duff, 2016) and also enable child, teacher, family and community to reflect on the practice (McKenna, 2005). Therefore, it is suggested to create consciousness about this on pre-service teachers and also integrate family involvement into the curriculum in different courses with practical experiences to contribute to pre-service teachers' knowledge and experience regarding different types family involvement activities.

#### **4.1. Conclusions and Limitations**

To conclude, despite the cultural differences between different countries, it is accepted as a universal fact that family involvement is a crucial topic in early childhood education. The findings confirm that family involvement is an important but ignored issue to focus in early childhood teacher education in international contexts. Both teacher educators and pre-service teachers' views confirmed and complemented each other that teacher education cannot provide sufficient knowledge and experience for the pre-service teachers, and it was agreed upon the importance of enriching the curriculum in terms of both theoretical and practical knowledge and skills. To this end, implications were provided based upon educators' and pre-service teachers' experiences and it was highlighted to integrate family involvement into the teacher education curriculum rather than only giving in a course. However, although teacher educators were included from two different countries in the first part of

this study, pre-service teachers could be included from Türkiye in the follow up. Therefore, generalisation of findings is limited to these participant settings. In future research studies, research data could be collected from different settings to strengthen the theory in this field by obtaining detailed information in similar situations. Moreover, in-service teachers can also be integrated into the study by collecting detailed demographic information.

#### *Ethics Committee Decision*

*This research was carried out with the permission of Ondokuz Mayıs University Publication Ethics Board with the session numbered 2023/1224 dated 27.01.2023.*

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