1

INTRODUCTION

Transforming behaviour in the classroom: a solution-focused guide for new teachers

This chapter will give you the opportunity to:

- explore some general aspects of behaviour management
- introduce the concept of solution-focused approaches to behaviour
- emphasize the importance of making connections between theory and practice

I would like to introduce you to Owen. He is 15, with a short crewcut, bright blue eyes, a lean and compact build and a reputation for fighting. School incident reports say he is aggressive and has anger problems. He has been in trouble with the police, and he has been all the way through the school's behaviour policy. Recently he has been told that he will be permanently excluded if he doesn't stop fighting and start behaving, but it does not seem to have any effect.

In turn I had been told about the problems, and about the school's suggestion that he needs an anger management course. I had been shown the pile of incident slips recording his failings, but when I met him I put all this to one side, because I am interested in finding out about something else.

I wanted to hear about his plans for his future, about his best hopes for school.

Me: 'Owen, what's your best hope for school? You've got the rest of this year to go and I'm wondering about what's your best hope?'

Owen: 'Well ... not get kicked out.'

Does that surprise you? He'd been told often enough that if he didn't behave himself, he would be excluded, but he hadn't made any effort to change.

Me: 'So what might happen instead?'

Owen: Stay in school.'

Me: 'So what might change a bit, for you to be sure that you stay in school?'

Owen: 'Stop fighting I suppose.'

Me: 'Suppose you did that, how would that be good for you?'

Owen: 'Well, I want to join the Army when I leave school, and I need a good report. I've been in trouble with fighting and if I get into trouble with the police again, the Army won't take me.'

So that's Owen's goal, and his plan for how to get there. It's given us the focus for our work together. Now I'd like to know more about his successes.

Me: 'Thanks for telling me about that, we'll come back to it later. I'd like to ask you about something else. What's your best thing, what do you like doing best?'

He says it's sport of all kinds. I ask him to tell me about it, he says he's good at rugby, and I ask him what it is about him that makes him successful. In conversation he says he's fit and fast, he can stand back to see the pattern of play and react quickly when he needs to. He says he does the same when he's boxing. We talk about his strengths of being both strategic and explosive in sport, and knowing when to do what.

Me: 'Let's go back to the reason that we're meeting today, about your staying in school. Tell me about a time when you could have had a fight ... everything was going that way ... and you didn't. You chose to be strategic rather than explosive.'

He thinks about it, and then he tells me about such a time, in detail. He says his friend accidently damaged something in his home which made him very angry. He said he felt like hitting his friend but instead he just walked back to school with his friend following along behind, and he ignored his friend for the rest of the day.

Me: 'So you're a person who can get near to having a fight, get angry, everything was going that way ... and you can just walk away from it. Is that right?'

Owen: 'Yes.'

Me: 'How come you could do that?'

Owen: 'I thought if I hit him, something else would get broken and then my mum would be mad at me again, so I just walked straight out and back to school.'

Me: 'So if someone asked me about you, like 'what do you know about Owen?', I could tell them 'he's a person who can get angry about something and just walk away'. Is that right?'

Owen: 'Well, it was then.'

Me: 'Yes, that's what I mean, then.'

We talked more about the strengths and resources he showed at the time of this response and about his hopes for the future. In closing the meeting I offered him a task, to notice things going well, wherever they might be happening, and told him I'd meet him in a week to ask him about what he'd noticed. Over the next weeks Owen told me about his success in school and outside in making choices about his behaviour, and we agreed to close our work after five weekly meetings.

What happened next? I checked out Owen's progress when I was in the school later in the year. Owen never had another fight in school since we met for the first time, he completed his exams and stayed out of trouble. After he left, he applied to join the Army as a recruit and was accepted.

What had changed Owen's behaviour, and brought his hopes to reality? Owen had made the vital change himself, with no punishments or rewards, no advice and no guidance in the course of the brief work we did together. In place of external control and exercise of authority that had gone before, we had set up an inquiry, with Owen placed to be the agent in his own change and subsequent success. School systems were unchanged, the work was carried out solely by Owen and myself and school management had to do no more than respond positively to his improvement.

This is a practical illustration of solution-support in a real and critical situation, the solution-focused approach to changing behaviour in schools. It is the subject of this book.

Learning about behaviour

This book is for you, as a beginning teacher. I have written it to provide you with a quiet space for thinking about behaviour, an opportunity to stand

back from the action, to reflect on what behaviour is, what can be done about it and why we do what we do, as teachers. I am offering you a fresh perspective and a new approach to changing behaviour in schools, for you to build into your professional practice in a way that makes sense to you, at this creative time in your career. As a working teacher, you need something highly practical that works 'out of the box', that is simple and you can make use of immediately. Solution-support is an approach rooted in practice rather than in theory. The approach was developed by looking carefully for what worked in solving complex behaviour problems, a product of practice-based evidence.

I trained as a teacher in 1994. Before I started my Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) I had worked with people with complex behaviour difficulties for 15 years. Other people on my course also brought a great deal of similar experiences. A group of us signed up for an optional special educational needs course, expecting to learn something new, to take with us into our classrooms. We were disappointed that, while learning difficulties were covered, there was no mention of behaviour. In my practice schools and as a beginning teacher, I simply had to do my best, based on my experience and on what I could find to read. It was clear that the use of praise, reward and punishment was the unchallenged approach to behaviour management in schools, and as a teacher I had to follow schools' behaviour policies in the best way I could.

Since those days it seems that nothing much has changed. In 2010, the then *Times Educational Supplement*'s behaviour expert, now the current government's new behaviour tsar for the minister of education, advised new teachers that, while most students in a class will comply and behave, 'the few pupils who are kicking off need to be detained, punished, talked to and isolated' (Bennett, 2010). In 2013, the UK government's guidance on improving initial teacher training for behaviour neatly summed up the status quo. It said that trainees must know about generic behaviour management, its systems and techniques, to manage behaviour confidently and with authority. How these systems and techniques were to be used was entirely up to the individual teacher. It emphasized that trainees should be taught to move around the room and look students in the eye, to stamp their authoritative presence on the class. It went down the well-trodden path of reward and punishment, authority and control, the exercise of discipline, by teachers, on students. In the last two lines of the reiteration of traditional wisdom, in a short section on theoretical knowledge, was a glimpse of another world. It stated that trainees should know about scientific research and developments, and how these could be applied to understanding, managing and changing behaviour (DfE, 2012). This book may help you to take up this invitation for change.

Over the last two decades a great deal of research and development on behaviour has taken place, but being largely in fields other than education, it has not been made much use of by those who control and regulate schools and schooling or by teachers in classrooms. Still working in the old way, students continue to be rewarded, controlled and punished, and some, like Owen with his unwanted behaviour, still struggle to make a success of school.

As a teacher in mainstream and special schools and a pupil referral unit, and later as a behaviour support teacher, I had first-hand evidence of the limitations of reward and punishment in changing students' behaviour, and in preventing their marginalization. I was looking for an alternative, and with the combination of good luck and persistence I found what I was looking for – a product of research and development and of a type not envisaged by the established behaviour experts.

From problems to solutions

Twenty years before I started looking, others were investigating a new approach to the problems that people encountered, and it turned out to be just what I was hoping for. In 2000, I attended a compulsory training day for my service on the solution-focused approach to behaviour, delivered in a rural village hall. I did not know of it before and what I heard and saw there struck a chord with me.

In everyday life, having hopes and dreams and achievable plans to make them come true, being optimistic and active is a natural orientation for many people, and is at the heart of solution-support. Bringing this kind of thinking as a structured approach to behaviour in school meant more than an adjustment to the conventional approach to behaviour; it was a paradigm shift in its true sense and it was to lead me to somewhere new.

I applied for a four-day training course, found external funding and set off down a new path.

Returning to work after the training, with the course notes in my hand, I took the solution-focused approach into my work. Keeping the focus on students' resources, success and hopefulness and staying strictly within the boundaries of the approach produced greatly improved outcomes. To put it simply, students' behaviour changed predictably and often quickly. It centred my practice on my skills as a teacher, rather than stretching me to try to be a universal expert on other peoples' behaviour. I began to feel confident that, with this approach, I could make a difference.

I trained other teachers, and a few of us began meeting regularly to reflect on our work, to share successes and stresses, and to plan developments.

As a way of teaching for behaviour change, we became progressively more confident that solution-support addresses the complex and varied needs of students as they meet and overcome difficulties.

REFLECTION

The story at the opening of this chapter is about my work with a student experiencing difficulty in school. This story and others that appear throughout the book are practice-based evidence which gives an insight into a specific practice and the possibility of a form of generalization from one context and one practitioner to another. Simons et al. (2003) call this 'situated generalization', distinguishing it from the type of broad generalization that is commonly understood to relate to evidence-based practice.

Stories of practice should not be pushed aside as mere anecdotes because of their subjectivity, but treated as valuable material in an area notoriously difficult to research. This is particularly important to us as teachers, who share our experiences of practice as stories, and we draw meanings from it. As a form of research it is no less valuable than positivist scientific research, with its controlled trials and large sample sizes.

I hope these stories will resonate with your experience of teaching, and bring you closer to understanding the solutions-focused approach to changing behaviour. Read them reflectively, and look out for what catches your curiosity – an important principle in solution-focused work. Draw out your own meanings as you meet the students in the stories. In the final chapter you will find a simple description of the structure for you to take away with you into your classroom.

Standing in the classroom, feeling calm

There is a great deal of advice and guidance available on how to manage behaviour, and the experts agree on the most important strategies. Established writers acknowledge the importance of the teacher having a positive outlook, and the effect this has on students' behaviour and on their own health and happiness (Rogers, 2011). The solution-focused approach is briefly mentioned in some books (Roffey, 2011) as a tool used in problem-focused behaviour management, but the differences in approach and outcomes of problem-focused and solution-focused teaching are rarely discussed. Many books are packed with quick, easy and effective techniques for teachers to use. Somehow you have to sort out what is right for you in your context. Which approach and strategies match up with your view of yourself as a beginning teacher, with multiple roles to fulfil inside and outside the classroom?

This book will help you to answer this question to the benefit of your practice and your students. As a teacher, you are expected to be a trusted leader with good working relationships with students, to provide help and support when it is needed. As a classroom manager, with systems and procedures you make the classroom run smoothly. As a problem-solver, and in the way you deal with successes and setbacks, you provide an ethical model for students to follow. As a curriculum manager, you make pedagogical choices to match your teaching with the learning task. The way you approach all these aspects of your work, the questions you raise about your practice and the answers you come up with affect the behaviour of students.

REFLECTION

- What do you mean by classroom management?
- What do you mean by behaviour? What do you believe you should do about it?

Good teaching for good behaviour

Thinking about our own beliefs and their importance can give us an insight into the beliefs and values that other people hold about behaviour, and how they perceive these should be handled. This is worthwhile because it affects our own development as teachers interested in behaviour and making decisions about our own practice. For example Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector of Schools in England, said recently in talking about behaviour that 'It's not rocket science' (*Guardian*, 2014), and he sketched a picture of what should be done about it, stating that head teachers are too soft on unruly pupils and that schools should deal with unruliness by coming down hard on the perpetrators. What can you say about the values and beliefs that underpin these comments? Does this mindset match your own?

When I started teaching I had to assume that I knew enough to get by as far as behaviour was concerned. I started as a secondary science teacher and just had to get on with teaching my subject and managing behaviour as best I could. When I started teaching, as a supply teacher, behaviour was an issue from my first minutes in class. The students did not know me, they just saw me as one in a long line of passing faces – supply teachers here for the week and gone on Friday. I was trying to get thirty 13-year-old students to answer the register and they had a well-developed routine for having fun with temporary teachers. What were my beliefs and values when it came to

dealing with their behaviour? What was I going to do about behaviour and discipline and building a relationship with these students who were promptly answering the register in other people's names every morning?

Standing at the front

Standing at the front of the class, keeping your breathing steady and looking out on the eager faces looking back at you; what do you know about the students, even before you get to talk to them? You can think whatever you want, and it might be this: most students in the room are having a good time, and are happy enough getting on with learning and growing up. They know what it takes to be a school student and are doing their best to match up to it. Most of the time you will get on well with them, their learning and the behaviour that supports learning seamlessly integrated.

There may be one or two students who disrupt the smooth running of your classroom, but you know they are doing their best too, it is just that sometimes things happen to push them off-course. Think about your own mindset. Do you believe that they are all trying to get it right and some make mistakes? Or do you believe that some are doing their best and some their worst? Does it matter what you believe to be true? It turns out that it does matter, and it makes a big difference to outcomes.

Low-level disruption has a negative effect on learning and it drains the energy of teachers, simultaneously trying to deal with it and teach to a high level. Ofsted (2014) described low-level disruptive behaviour as chatting, calling out, being slow to start, showing a lack of respect and not bringing the right equipment. In primary schools 33–50 per cent of teachers said calling out, disturbing other children and fidgeting with equipment were the main types of disruptive behaviour. In secondary schools 25–33 per cent of teachers reported not getting on with the work, not having the correct equipment and using mobile phones as the main issues. Of the teachers surveyed, 33 per cent reported that they had received no training in managing the behaviour of disruptive students. There is no comment on the type and extent of training received by the remaining 66 per cent.

Most of the issues reported by Ofsted (2014) relate to the management of the classroom. When a teacher develops clear classroom procedures reduced to a few simple rules, it opens the pathway to good classroom management. The issues of respect and relationships are different, in that they cannot be determined by rules; they are affected by the style of leadership the teacher adopts, springing from their beliefs and values. Most students are reassured by the predictability and sense of belonging they associate

with a well-managed classroom, and some may need to be reminded of the rules from time to time. A very small number need something more, and push the boundaries more strongly. What do you do for these few? Do they need more control and regulation or something different?

Where do you start?

Even before you enter your classroom you will have a lot of things in mind that you have to do, including maintaining a productive atmosphere and preventing disruption. You have to make a plan. Where is the best place to start?

Marzano et al. (2003) confirmed the commonly held view that successful teaching stands on a foundation of good classroom management. Four principal factors emerged as particularly significant in preventing disruption in class:

1. The mental set of the teacher
2. Disciplinary interventions
3. Teacher–student relationships
4. Rules and procedures

In view of its relative importance, it makes sense to start with the factor of mental set. A teacher's values and beliefs form the building blocks of their practice and have a major effect in producing good classroom behaviour.

Behaviour management – a forced choice or an informed decision?

Consider the following questions:

What beliefs and values held by a teacher prevent disruptive behaviour?

What are your own beliefs and values?

Do you believe that you should exercise authority and use your superior position to control students?

Is it important to you to empathize with students struggling towards understanding?

Do you believe that you should always look on the bright side of life?

Do you believe that being a pessimist is best because then you are never disappointed?

As a teacher it is your values and beliefs that go towards constructing your mental sets and power your practice. Your mental set establishes your default response to a particular type of problem, for example a behaviour problem. It enables you to react automatically to events, and saves you from having to make a thought-out decision. It is thinking habit. How do you decide what to do?

As a beginning teacher, you have to decide what approach you are going to take to the behaviour of students in your classroom. It is not a totally free choice because there will be outside factors to consider, such as the school's organizational approach and behaviour policy, but within these constraints you are free to act professionally. You will have your own more or less well-developed beliefs about behaviour, what it is and how you should approach it, built up over time through your own personal experience. These beliefs go to form your personal mental set on behaviour, but is your general experience the best basis of your professional practice in your role as a teacher? To make a rational choice about whether to rethink your mental set, you need good information on what are the likely outcomes of taking different approaches to classroom behaviour.

What do you think happens if the teacher is too hard or too soft, or just right? The approach a teacher takes to behaviour is largely down to personal choice at the start and becomes strengthened over time as mental sets, or habits, become more established. The approach a whole school takes is similarly largely rooted in habit. Although there is a great deal of information available about the various educational and social effects of rigid control on the one hand or an over lax approach on the other, a school's organizational habits may be sufficiently embedded to resist argument and change. This may also be true of the individual teacher's habits of mind.

In place of balanced individual and organizational judgement, there is a long-running public contest between committed professionals, arguing from their set positions. Those with the traditional control-and-authority mindset may claim that children are spoilt by those with an empathize-and-nurture mindset, but where is the evidence to support the claim and to justify any change of mind, and of mindset, if necessary?

Mental sets for better or for worse

An advantage conferred by having a mental set is that it can make solving a particular type of problem easy and fast. The disadvantage is that if a problem gets assigned to the wrong set, this can interfere with the process of problem-solving to the extent of making the same wrong solution

reoccur, or even make the solution impossible to find. People commonly react to problems of a particular type in a particular way, without determining if it is the best approach or even if it will work at all. It is clear that mental sets are more than neutral problem-solving tools, because the nature of the set, as well as its existence, is significant.

Dweck's book *Mindset* (2006) has helped to bring the concept of mental set or mindset, to public attention. From her research, she concluded that people have either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset and can be taught to shift from one to the other. Mindsets exist in the mind as virtual objects, they are the product of imagination, and in the same way you can change your mind, you can change your mindset.

A teacher with a fixed mindset sees behaviour problems as barriers and students as having limited resources and in need of external discipline and external motivation to change. A teacher with a growth mindset sees the same problems as challenges, where change is possible rather than fixed barriers; students are seen as having innate self-motivated potential for learning and growth. Both teacher and student can change their mindset, and students will model their beliefs and their related behaviour on those of their teacher.

Students with the growth mindset respond to difficulties by increasing their effort to overcome them, and enjoy the experience of the challenge rather than giving up or avoiding them as a student with a fixed mindset would do. What sort of mindset do we hope your students will develop?

Up until now the decision as to whether to go for compliance by controlling students with a rod of iron, external discipline and authority or take the different approach of quiet empathy and trust in students' self-motivation to improve has been made purely on the basis of existing mindset or habit. At first sight, we expect students to have a growth mindset to be able to respond to our action as teachers with a fixed mindset if we take the traditional authoritarian approach to behaviour, a paradox that this book will explore.

Teaching for success

The exclusion of students is carried out as part of a strategic behaviour management process. It was estimated in 1998 in the UK that about 100,000 students had fixed-term exclusions and 13,000 were permanently excluded (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). The most recent figures available are for 2011/12, when about 300,000 fixed-term exclusions were reported, internal unofficial and informal exclusions not included. More than 5,000 students were reported as being permanently excluded

annually in recent years. More precisely fixed-term exclusions were 324,110 in 2010/11 and 304,370 in 2011/12; permanent exclusions were 5,080 in 2010/11 and 5,170 in 2011/12 (DfE, 2013).

In the face of these huge numbers, the educational justification for exclusion is very unclear. It does not meet the accepted behaviourist quality criterion of consistent and immediate punishment of students if the intended purpose is to change behaviour, and the learning outcomes of exclusion of all types are commonly not assessed. It does remove a student from their peer group and, theoretically, this deprivation could cause a change in attitude of the student, but then so could a weekend or a school holiday on the same grounds. Many schools have turned to internal exclusion, which is equally hard to justify in educational terms.

Exclusion is also a bureaucratic, procedural matter, as repeated fixed-term exclusions are usually a prerequisite for justifying permanent exclusion, except in the most serious cases. Permanent exclusion is often justified on the grounds that a student is adversely affecting the learning of others. Permanent exclusion of a demanding student may well solve a problem for a school and be in line with their behaviour policy, but there are losses as well as gains. Many students permanently excluded from school experience serious difficulties in their later lives (Powis et al., 1998). There is also a financial penalty, as excluded students are significantly over-represented in prison: in 2015, a place in a young offender's institution in the UK costs about £65,000 a year. Exclusion might seem to solve one problem but it leads to others, merely shifting responsibility for managing behaviour from one agency to another.

Defining behaviour

In education, 'behaviour' usually means bad behaviour, as in 'His learning is OK, it's his behaviour that lets him down'. Behaviour management has come to mean the application of strategies designed to make students learn that the consequence of their bad behaviour is punishment, and that by changing their behaviour they can avoid the unpleasant punishment. In this sense, punishment is seen as the means of teaching good behaviour.

Punishment is a psychological concept, arising from operant conditioning theory, and imported into education in the twentieth century. The role of punishment in bringing about behaviour change might be clearly understood by psychologists, but it is largely misunderstood by educators. The psychological definition of punishment is 'action taken after a behaviour event', which decreases the likelihood of the behaviour occurring again.

To apply punishment effectively, the behaviour must be described precisely in order to make a causal link between the punishment and the behaviour. Without knowing exactly what the existing behaviour is, it is impossible to assess the effect of punishment on it. Psychology is an experimental science, it is not teaching.

Moving to the educational context, punishment might help in clarifying for students what they should *not* do, because it is designed to be unpleasant, but it does not lead to them *learning* what they should be doing instead. In any case, a behaviour change resulting from punishment is temporary, and the original unwanted behaviour often reappears when the punishment ends.

In the last century B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) developed the concept of behaviour modification in experimental animals, conditioning them with rewards and punishments. He warned that in humans, the short-term behavioural gains resulting from punishment needed to be balanced against the potential long-term adverse consequences, for example aggression and antisocial behaviour.

Today in schools behaviour modification is alive and well, a psychological theory driving educational practice. But *teaching* for behaviour, the pedagogical approach to changing behaviour, is less evident. My work and research, over many years, has been concerned with the use of pedagogy, rather than experimental psychological means, to achieve educational ends, with students making changes in their behaviour as they do in building success in maths or music, by learning something new. I have changed and developed my own practice in using a pedagogical approach to behaviour change, and here I am offering it to you, in the hope that you will do the same.

Evidence from practice

> 'If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.'
>
> Henry David Thoreau (1995 [1854])

Practice-based evidence is at the heart of this book. Evidence comes in different forms that are not directly comparable, and have different strengths and purposes, for example qualitative and quantitative evidence, or evidence from cases or from randomized controlled trials. In this book you will read stories of practice; these are not intended to be analysed as objective evidence, but rather to give you an insight into the solution-focused approach to changing behaviour in action. The constant factors in these stories, to bear in mind as you read them, are:

- students experienced the problem-focused approach before my first meeting with them
- the structure of the solution-focused inquiry was consistent (this point is explained in detail in Chapter 10)
- the solution-support was provided by myself, in every case
- the work did not require any other changes – students taking part in solution-support work were subject to whole school policies as usual; teachers and family members where not required to undertake any specific actions as a part of the work.

My hope is that the examples provided throughout each chapter will resonate with your growing experience and bring you closer to the solution-focused way of working. Read them reflectively, drawing out your own meanings as you relate what you read to your own experiences.

You can make practical use of this evidence as it stands, and get on with practicing solution-support. As your experiences build up, you can make the theoretical connections that you need to bring meaning to what you are doing. As you practice you will become more confident that you can solve a problem without talking about it. Working from practice towards theory is one way of developing confidence in the usefulness of solution-focused thinking and support, when you are facing complex problems of your own or those of students and other people. The theory will contribute to the further development of your practice as you reflect on your experiences of teaching in general and teaching behaviour in particular.

Making connections between practice and theory in education

I have travelled a long way as a teacher, from my first days in a special school to the pages of this book. I made a start by looking into educational research and evidence-based educational practice related to behaviour, studying for a Master's degree in education and an Advanced Diploma in Special Educational Needs, followed by my PhD research.

As a trained natural scientist, I was moving into a different world of subjectivities, and a key influence was my PhD supervisor, Professor Ivor Goodson. Over a lifetime in education, he has been thinking deeply and writing about pedagogy, its apparent rigidity and the possibilities for change. He is unequivocal about the connection between a school student as a person with agency and their learning, saying:

> Only if the teacher gives the child access to 'action knowledge' can learning take place. An alternative pedagogy would seek to offer the child such an opportunity whilst transmission pedagogy pre-empts it.

> Placing the individual pupil in such a central position in defining the approach to knowledge, there is not only a psychological rationale (which some traditionalists concede) but a logical rationale too. All subject matter begins with an original attempt to solve problems and it is this unitary process of knowledge creation that should be the focus of pedagogy, not the transmission of its differentiated products. (Goodson, 2013)

Goodson et al. (2010) examined the relationship between stories that represent people's learning and their action in the world, confirming the view that interior conversations are at the heart of a teacher's map of learning and understanding of their place in the world, and supporting my use of stories in this book as being useful to you.

Your own interior conversations, drawing your beliefs and values together with your practice, will help you to locate yourself in the world of teaching. I would ask you to bear in mind one question throughout, when you are reading the stories of my practice, and checking out the theoretical linkages I make: 'Does this ring true? This, after all, is the question that lies at the heart of all judgement of evidence and of the truth in the stories we tell.

All the stories in this book are accounts of real events, fictionalized to preserve anonymity where necessary. In any case where identification has been agreed to, I make a note of this in the introduction to the story.

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