

# Racial Literacy

## Teaching to Transform our Education System

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Stephen Lawrence Research Centre**

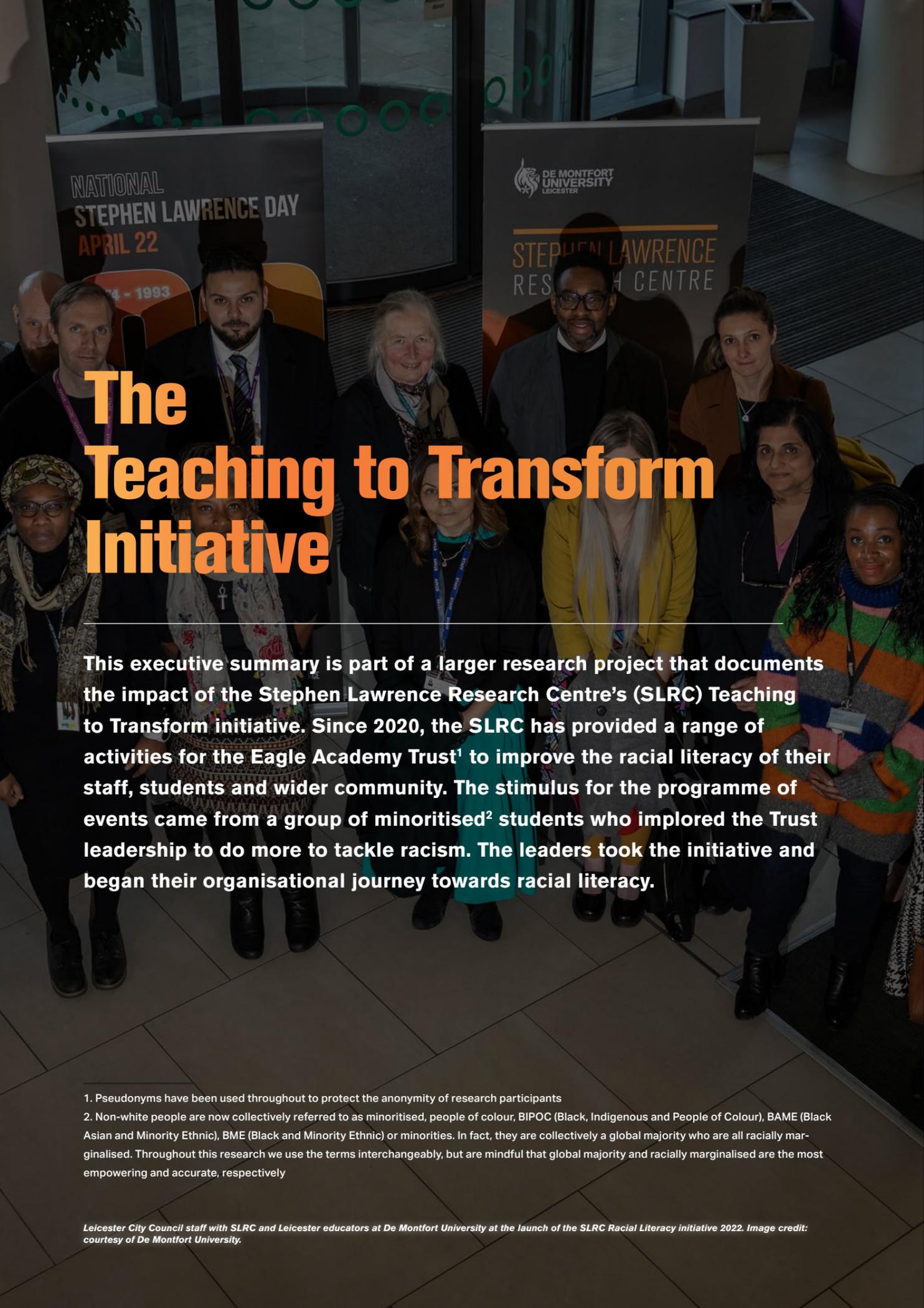
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# Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| The Teaching to Transform Initiative                             | 4  |
| The Importance of Racial Literacy in Our Schools                 | 5  |
| Racial Literacy and Transformative Education                     | 6  |
| Developing Racial Literacy Through Anti-Racist Educator Training | 8  |
| Safeguarding Racially Marginalised Children                      | 9  |
| Enhancing Student Voice  | 10 |
| Racial Literacy and Teacher Education                            | 12 |
| An Institutional Strategy to Embed Racial Literacy               | 15 |
| A National Strategy for Developing Racial Literacy in Education  | 16 |
| Recruiting, Promoting and Retaining Racially Marginalised Staff  | 18 |
| Protecting Racially Marginalised Staff                           | 18 |
| Decolonising the Curriculum                                      | 19 |
| Concluding Thoughts  | 20 |
| References   | 22 |



# The Teaching to Transform Initiative

**This executive summary is part of a larger research project that documents the impact of the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre’s (SLRC) Teaching to Transform initiative. Since 2020, the SLRC has provided a range of activities for the Eagle Academy Trust<sup>1</sup> to improve the racial literacy of their staff, students and wider community. The stimulus for the programme of events came from a group of minoritised<sup>2</sup> students who implored the Trust leadership to do more to tackle racism. The leaders took the initiative and began their organisational journey towards racial literacy.**

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the anonymity of research participants  
2. Non-white people are now collectively referred to as minoritised, people of colour, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic), BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) or minorities. In fact, they are collectively a global majority who are all racially marginalised. Throughout this research we use the terms interchangeably, but are mindful that global majority and racially marginalised are the most empowering and accurate, respectively

Leicester City Council staff with SLRC and Leicester educators at De Montfort University at the launch of the SLRC Racial Literacy initiative 2022. Image credit: courtesy of De Montfort University.

The activities organised by the SLRC included hosting events to commemorate National Stephen Lawrence Day (22 April), delivering assemblies, facilitating classroom takeovers, and arranging visits to the Stephen Lawrence Archives and Exhibition.

In 2020, they embarked upon the Anti-Racist Educator pathway, a continuing professional development (CPD) provision offered to teachers and leaders at the Eagle Trust. This education pathway was comprised of a series of eight sessions delivered over a two-year period. Two of the key outcomes were that the Trust began to decolonise its curriculum across multiple schools, and to diversify its leadership.

The evaluation adopted a qualitative research approach which involved interviewing six members of staff from the Eagle Trust. All interviewees had taken on leadership responsibilities relating to improving racial literacy within the Trust. Participants took part in semi-structured interviews on a voluntary basis. Each of them offered valuable insights that were facilitated through critical reflection and constructive dialogue with the researchers.

## The Importance of Racial Literacy in Our Schools

The Teaching to Transform evaluation supports the view that racial literacy is ‘an understanding of the powerful complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups’ (Skerrett, 2011; 314). Improving racial literacy within schools is an effective tool to challenge racism and to transform our education system.

**Schools are at the heart of our communities and children are our future, so embedding racial literacy among educators and young people is one of the most effective ways to combat racism in our society.**

Developing racial literacy is part of an ongoing journey towards understanding race, racism and anti-racism. Schools can embed racial literacy through regular interventions including Anti-Racist Educator training for teachers, and decolonising the curriculum to engage students with a broad range of knowledge and learning. Racial literacy and decolonising the curriculum can work together to challenge inherent and existing biases in our schools, with the aim to make an impact on societal change towards a more equitable and socially just world.

# Racial Literacy and Transformative Education



“**A PERSON WHO CLAIMS THAT THEY ARE ‘NOT RACIST’ IS TAKING AN INSUFFICIENT STANCE TO ENDING RACISM. IF AN INDIVIDUAL IS SERIOUS ABOUT DEFEATING RACISM, THEY NEED TO BE PRO-ACTIVELY ANTI-RACIST.**”

*'Listening Session' with Leicester educators, 2021. Photographer: Georgina Payne. Image credit: courtesy of the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre.*

The city of Leicester has a long history of anti-racist activity. It is one of the most diverse cities in the United Kingdom (UK) and is the current home of the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre based at De Montfort University. The term 'racial literacy' was coined by France Winddance Twine (2004; 2010) in her Leicester-based research on trans-racial families. Since then, the concept has stimulated a growing body of academic literature focused on understanding and combatting racism.

Racial literacy recognises that the ability to understand racism is a journey, not a destination. People have different levels of racial literacy and, like literacy, they can enhance it through learning (Grayson, 2019). Harrelson (2021) argues that cross-racial interactions can be important sites of learning, providing ideal opportunities to progress from racial naivety to racial literacy. A racially naïve person only acknowledges overt acts of racism. In contrast, a person with racial literacy recognises and challenges more pervasive, subtle forms of racism. Developing racial literacy equips individuals to decode, critique, and communicate more effectively about the impact of race in society.

**As part of an anti-racist scholarship, racial literacy recognises the need to challenge racism at an individual, institutional and structural level. This is not a passive stance; it requires speaking out and actively working towards equitable forms of justice and social transformation.**

The book *Teaching to Transgress* by the Black feminist thinker, bell hooks, is a prime motivational driver for the SLRC's Teaching to Transform initiative. hooks (1994) advocated for an engaged pedagogy, a teaching style that emphasises wellbeing; inspires critical awareness and engagement; centres student participation; and values the perspectives and lived experiences of racially marginalised learners. It thereby embraces multi-culturalism, anti-racism and student voice. The SLRC's Teaching to Transform initiative aligns with these values by seeking to embed them in teaching and learning practice.

## Developing Racial Literacy Through Anti-Racist Educator Training

The Anti-Racist Educator CPD pathway engaged educators with ideas, concepts and discussions about race, racism and anti-racism. Engaging in cross-racial interactions with academics who are experts in the study of race and racism, enabled participants to progress on their journey towards racial literacy. Some key learning they identified in this evaluation included:

- developing a language to discuss race
- improving their confidence to challenge racism
- recognising subtle racism (eg stereotyping, marginalisation and white privilege)
- valuing the lived experiences of minoritised students and staff
- developing a deeper understanding of individual, institutional and structural racism
- beginning to comprehend that race is a social construct.

With this growing awareness, they became committed to anti-racism and were keen to share their knowledge with colleagues, family and friends.

## Safeguarding Racially Marginalised Children

The safeguarding of racially marginalised children is frequently overlooked in schools. This can be closely tied to negative racial stereotyping and the adultification of black children within the school setting. One high-profile example of this was [the illegal strip search of a 15-year-old Black girl in school](#) after her teachers called the police (BBC News, 8 August 2022).

Within the Eagle Trust, the racial literacy of individual teachers equipped them to protect minoritised children in situations where other teachers were oblivious to the students' needs. The following strategies have emerged:

- Never ignore or minimise racism
- Encourage children to report racist incidents before they escalate
- Delve deeper into incidents with racial dynamics, even if there is no overt racism
- Ensure teachers dealing with racism have good racial literacy and recognise covert racism
- Take shared ownership of issues relating to racism
- Tackle racism with a balance of education and sanction.



Artwork displayed at SL30 Hopeful Futures exhibition at Leicester Gallery April, 2023. Image credit: courtesy of the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre.

# Enhancing Student Voice

This evaluation found that

**Student Ambassadors were the main channel for student voice when tackling issues relating to race and racism from a student perspective.**

Student Ambassadors led numerous activities to improve racial literacy within their school communities. This enhanced the Ambassadors' racial literacy, transferable skills, and confidence, as well as benefitting the school environment. This type of student-centred engaged pedagogy has a positive impact by creating active citizens for the future.

The research found that raising the profile of racial literacy had a liberating effect on children of colour who increasingly expressed their minoritised

identities and cultures by wearing, for example, their hijabs or afro styled hair. Improving racial literacy challenges hair discrimination and discrimination against children who wear hijabs and turbans as part of their faith.

As teachers developed their racial literacy, they began to openly discuss racism when it arose in the classroom, even if it meant diverting the lesson. They also began to learn from race-related incidents, rather than dismissing them to avoid discomfort.



SL30 Hopeful Futures Exhibition Launch at the Stephen Lawrence Gallery in Greenwich, June 2023. Image credit: courtesy of University of Greenwich.

## Racial Literacy and Teacher Education

A key outcome of this evaluation is that it is possible for the education sector in the UK to transform sustainably towards a socially just model of education provision by embedding racial literacy into:

- Initial Teacher Education and Training (ITE/T) for new teachers, and
- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for existing teachers.

The lack of diversity amongst teachers and leaders in British schools has a negative effect on minoritised children. Improving diversity among educators brings additional perspectives and insights to the education context. This adds value and improves education for children from all backgrounds.

**INCLUDING AN ANTI-RACIST PERSPECTIVE IN TEACHER EDUCATION CAN HELP ATTRACT AND RETAIN MINORITISED EDUCATORS WHILST EQUIPPING ALL EDUCATORS TO RECOGNISE AND CHALLENGE RACISM.**



## An Institutional Strategy to Embed Racial Literacy

Racial literacy must be embedded within our schools if we desire real and lasting change in achieving equity and social justice, not only in our schools but in society as a whole. This requires a strategy to engender a shared understanding of how racism shows up and is challenged in education settings.

The Eagle Trust's strategic approach to embedding racial literacy included:

- anti-racist educator training and activities to develop racial literacy in staff and students
- leading organisational change from the top
- cascading anti-racist educator training internally
- developing a race equity policy as a permanent fixture on the senior leadership's agenda
- appointing a race equity group comprised of a race equity lead, staff and students
- ensuring direct input from the race equity group to the race equity policy
- appointing Student Ambassadors as the main vehicle for student voice about racism
- committing resources to the development of racial literacy
- enhancing the logging and analysis of racist incidents
- committing to open, honest conversations about race
- extending the range of race-related enrichment activities
- decolonising the curriculum.

The Trust became committed to having conversations about race with local communities, and built constructive dialogue even when there was a backlash to this work.

# A National Strategy for Developing Racial Literacy in Education

**A national strategy is needed to develop racial literacy across the education system. This would encourage and support institutional strategies to tackle racial inequity.**

Providing anti-racist educator training for all educators could make this a reality and a coordinated approach could build upon existing initiatives including:

- The [SLRC's Anti-Racist Educator programme](#), which targets CPD for experienced educators
- [The Anti-Racism Framework for Initial Teacher Education and Training](#), which targets ITE/T for trainee teachers
- The National Education Union's (NEU) [Framework for Developing an Anti-Racist Approach](#).

Schools would benefit from regular internal and external reviews that are supportive rather than punitive.

A mechanism for internal reviews might be modelled on the [Race Equality Charter](#), which is a self-evaluation tool for higher education institutions. It is no coincidence that in 2023 De Montfort University – the home of SLRC – became the first UK university to achieve the coveted Silver Award.

[Ofsted](#) is the national inspectorate for upholding standards in education, which makes it ideally positioned to carry out external reviews. However, policies that challenge racism have fallen off its agenda in recent years and this creates scepticism about the current government's commitment to race equity. Nevertheless, Ofsted has a responsibility to ensure that children from the global majority are served by our education system. This can be achieved by inserting meaningful criteria into inspections to develop anti-racist policy and practice in schools.



SL30 Hopeful Futures Exhibition Launch at the Stephen Lawrence Gallery in Greenwich, June 2023. Image credit: courtesy of De Montfort University

**Ofsted regularly reviews safeguarding policies and practices, which ensures safeguarding is a high priority across the sector. Adopting a similar approach to the development of racial literacy in education, would attribute the same status to race equity.**

The Welsh government's [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#) reflects their commitment to ending racism in Wales. The plan compels schools to include histories and perspectives from the global majority in their curriculum and provides resources to help teachers to do that. Education resources suitable for the Welsh context could be used to decolonise the curriculum for the rest of the UK.

## Recruiting, Promoting and Retaining Racially Marginalised Staff

To improve racial literacy and race equity in schools we must draw our educators from a more diverse range of backgrounds. This is part of a process of decolonising the education system.

To change the monocultural demographics of their leadership the Trust began:

- anonymous shortlisting
- guaranteeing an interview for at least one minoritised applicant that met the person
- specification
- recruiting minoritised staff with the intention of promoting them to senior leadership.

Other proactive measures an organisation can take to improve the recruitment, promotion and retention of racially marginalised staff include:

- recruiting staff that demonstrate a commitment to challenging racism
- enabling staff to maintain external anti-racist networks that reduce isolation sharing anti-racist practice to support minoritised and anti-racist colleagues.

## Protecting Racially Marginalised Staff

Moving away from the simplistic belief that racists are bad people and good people are not racist, is the beginning of understanding racism (DiAngelo, 2018).

It is absolutely vital that staff tasked to deal with Human Resources issues, like investigations and mediation, have well-developed racial literacy. Otherwise, they are likely to be ineffective at identifying racism that is not overt or deliberate. Recognising subtle, covert racism is a critical component of racial literacy and can prevent racism from escalating.

Organisations can detect racism by analysing racial dynamics in statistics relating to:

- recruitment and retention
- staff progression
- disciplinaries
- grievances
- mediation
- race-related complaints.

If disproportionate numbers of minoritised staff are involved in disciplinaries and grievances, racial stereotyping and microaggressions may be at play. If staff become isolated and/or leave the organisation after raising issues about race, this might indicate that racism and racist incidents have not been dealt with adequately.

## Decolonising the Curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum is one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary education. It improves the educational experiences and outcomes of racially marginalised children and tackles racism at its root cause of miseducation. At the Eagle Trust, the activities to improve racial literacy fed into a process of decolonising the curriculum, which included:

- changing texts
- changing practices
- listening to feedback from minoritised children
- sharing resources
- extending black history month
- integrating black history month resources into the mainstream curriculum.

**RACIAL LITERACY  
IS AN ONGOING  
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## **Concluding Thoughts**

There is a tremendous amount of evidence about the negative impact race has on the educational opportunities and life chances of minoritised people in the UK. Most organisations do not take ownership of this issue.

With the support of SLRC, Eagle Academy Trust invested in a process of organisational self-reflection that developed racial literacy. In pursuit of social justice, they embarked on a journey to continually improve the understanding of race, racism and anti-racism within their school communities. This research has drawn on their organisational experience and a body of expertise about race, to highlight a range of strategies and practices that develop racial literacy among educators.

Racial literacy has the potential to transform our education system and improve the society we live in.

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Image credit: courtesy of De Montfort University.

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