

No Child Misunderstood: Enhancing Early Childhood Teachers' Multicultural Responsiveness to the Social Competence of Diverse Children

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Abstract As a result of rapid demographic changes in our society, more children from diverse racial/cultural backgrounds join our early childhood classrooms. The majority of early childhood teachers, on the other hand, are middle-class and of European-decent. This paper provides early childhood teachers with both theoretical and practical understandings about multicultural responsiveness, in order to understand and promote social competence of young children from diverse backgrounds. To accomplish this end, readers will be guided to consider actual classroom based examples and questions throughout the paper. First, the concept of social competence will be revisited from sociocultural perspectives. Next, we discuss advocacy for social competence of diverse children through the main themes of multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. Finally, we recommend several strategies to support teachers' professional growth and development for multicultural responsiveness.

Keywords Multicultural responsiveness · Social competence · Teacher education

Prologue

John is one of the 18 jolly kids in your kindergarten classroom. He turned six years old this month. He gets along well with other children and the teacher. He typically is a good listener, takes directions well, and works hard to complete any task he is told to do. He is also very good at noticing others' non-verbal cues during group activity.

However, when challenged, John quickly backs down in order to avoid conflicts and easily follows others' directions. He becomes disappointed and refuses to make eye contact with you when you try to talk to him. Also, when he is rejected by his peers he often hovers around them without words. The other children seem to have begun to identify John as 'slightly different'.

Imagine you are the kindergarten teacher in this scenario. What is your impression of John's social competence? How do you interpret his behaviors? Do you think he is compliant or too passive? Do you think he is cooperative or he lacks self confidence? Why do you think he refuses to make eye-contact with you? How would you evaluate John's level of social competence, and how would you intervene to support his social competence development? In short, how could you better understand John and make good instructional decisions based on your understandings? This is not an uncommon scenario in early childhood classrooms today, and thus these questions are fairly typical for many early childhood teachers. The purpose of this paper is to revisit the importance of cultural considerations in understanding and promoting culturally diverse young children's social competence, and further propose ideas for enhancing early childhood teachers' multicultural responsiveness to the social competence of diverse children so that no child will be adversely misunderstood.

Social Competence from Sociocultural Perspective

Social Competence in Early Childhood

Social competence has long been emphasized as an important set of abilities which begin to develop in early

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childhood years as well as a marker of development and adjustment. As Zins et al. (2004) found, a growing body of empirical research supports the strong impact of early social and emotional development on later success including school readiness, academic achievement, and better lifelong relationships. Social competence is generally defined as “the ability of young children to successfully and appropriately select and carry out their interpersonal goals” (Guralnick 1990, p. 4), and socially competent young children are described as “those who engage in satisfying interactions and activities with adults and peers” (Katz and McClellan 1997, p. 1). In other words, ‘effectiveness’ is a central aspect of social competence (Rubin et al. 1998). Recently, widespread interest in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory contributed to the recognition about and an emphasis on the sociocultural aspects of children’s social competence (Kantor et al. 1993; Rose-Krasnor 1997). Researchers inspired by sociocultural perspectives claim that the child learns what is important in his/her culture by participating in the cultural events and using the tools of the society. These researchers also posit that human development can only be understood in light of one’s cultural backgrounds (Rogoff et al. 1995; Rogoff 2003). From this stance, even Erikson’s classic theory of initiative development during the toddler years as a foundation for later social success may not be universally valued or applicable. Hence, sociocultural perspectives contributed to a more inclusive lens for understanding child development.

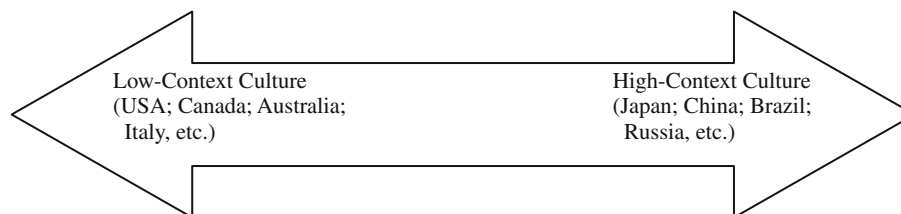
Social Competence Prism

Among many attempts to analyze the complicated concept of social competence, the ‘Prism Model of social competence’ presented by Rose-Krasnor (1997) is a helpful framework to reexamine the complex nature of social competence. According to this prism, social competence is divided into three sub levels: the theoretical level, the index level, and the skills level. From the theoretical level, social competence is viewed as the effectiveness of one’s interactions, consistent with many researchers’ definitions as the fundamental aspect of social competence (Guralnick 1990; Katz and McClellan 1997; Kemple 2004; Kostelnik 2002). Such theoretical understandings, however, seem simplistic because the interpretation of effectiveness depends on time, place, and the individuals involved in that interaction. The next index level takes into account those elements. Further, because the interaction could not occur in isolation and effectiveness is determined through the transactions with other people, it is divided into two domains: *self* and *others*. The *self* domain reflects effectiveness from the individual’s perspective, and an individual’s own needs take priority, such as success in

meeting personal goals and feelings of self efficacy. The *others* domain reflects effectiveness from interpersonal connectedness. Priority is given to the perspectives of others including good relationships with peers or adults, achievement of appropriate group status, and fulfillment of society’s expectations. Moreover, both the *self* and *others* domains of social competence are segmented with different slices representing multiple social contexts. Researchers also support this situation specific and context dependent nature of social competence, such that socially competent behavior is expected to vary by context (Kostelnik et al. 2002). The last skills level represents specific abilities, skills, goals, and values that provide the motivation for competent social behaviors. Some skills and values in the skills level may be relevant across contexts, but certain skills are more valued in some contexts than in others. Culture may be the most significant and distinctive determinant of merit because and individual’s definition of and expectations for socially competent and valued behaviors are deeply influenced by his/her cultural background. This important consideration—that certain aspects of social competence are culturally sensitive—is a fundamental tenet of sociocultural perspectives (Rogoff 2003).

Cross-Cultural Comparison Studies

Since Hall (1976) initially proposed the concepts of high-context and low-context cultures, there have been burgeoning discussions concerning cultural differences in a wide range of human behaviors, including the area of social competence. High-context cultures refer to those who rely more on the contextual circumstances (i.e., non-verbal gestures) rather than the explicit expressions (i.e., verbal articulations), whereas low-context cultures refer to those who rely more on the explicit expressions rather than the contextual circumstances. When several researchers investigated the socialization goals and values of preschool teachers, children’s developmental variation of social competence, and the types of behavioral problems experienced by preschoolers in several different countries, they discovered both universal findings and culture specific finding across countries (Chen et al. 2004; Killen et al. 2000; Kistner et al. 1993; LaFreniere et al. 2002; Mendez et al. 2002; Mpofu et al. 2004; Tudge et al. 1999). For instance, in high-context cultures such as Japan, China, Russia, and Brazil, social identity and group interests were more valued. On the other hand, in low-context cultures such as United States, Canada, Australia, and Italy, individual identity and personal interests were more valued. In promoting social competence, compliance and respectfulness were emphasized more in high-context cultures, but assertiveness and leadership were emphasized more in

Table 1 Continuum of high-context and low-context cultures

Individual identity and personal interest is more valued.	Social identity and group interest is more valued.
Assertiveness and leadership is more emphasized.	Compliance and respectfulness is more emphasized.
Encouraged to use more verbal expression.	Encouraged to use more subtle cues.
Withdrawn behaviors are more negatively associated with peer rejection.	Withdrawn behaviors are more appreciated than aggressive behaviors.

low-context cultures. Children in high-context cultures were encouraged to use more subtle cues, but children in low-context cultures were encouraged to use more verbal expressions. Different evaluations of aggression and withdrawn behaviors were also found among countries. High-context cultures usually appreciated withdrawn behaviors rather than aggressive behaviors, and shyness-sensitivity was negatively associated only in low-context cultures. As an example, socially anxious and withdrawn behavior is often associated with peer popularity in high-context cultures, but in the low-context cultures it is usually associated with peer rejection. Table 1 describes the prototypical characteristics of socialization goals and values, children's development of social competence, and social behavior problems in the continuum of high-context and low-context cultures. These findings are essential in providing important information for early childhood teachers. While the processes underlying competent behavior were similar across cultures, the specific behaviors associated with social competence reflected cultural differences.

Becoming a Multiculturally Responsive Teacher

Multicultural Responsiveness

As definitions and expectations of children's appropriate social competence are culturally influenced, conflicts are likely when teachers and children come from different cultural backgrounds (Irvine 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to think about how to instruct children in a multicultural classroom if different behaviors are perceived as socially competent in diverse cultural contexts. Multiculturally responsive teaching is often considered as a pedagogical paradigm that enables teachers to utilize children's cultural strengths in his/her curriculum and instruction (Gay 2000;

Ladson-Billings 1992). Furthermore, teachers who are multiculturally responsive consider appropriateness and effectiveness not only for academic instruction but also for supporting social development (Ladson-Billings 1992).

Developing multicultural responsiveness includes acquiring knowledge, respect, and ability to interact effectively with people of varying ethnic or racial backgrounds, and further recognizing unfair treatment toward them (Kostelnik et al. 2002). Indeed, as "cultures prescribe what may be shared and how much, in what ways individuals may touch each other, what may and may not be said" (Katz and McClellan 1997, p. 53), lack of such multicultural responsiveness may lead to significant misunderstandings resulting in ineffective support for the development of social competence (Kemple 2004). Although the majority of current studies on children's social competence are derived from American and Western cultures, it is important to consider children's different social interaction patterns across cultures (Rubin et al. 1998). Research suggests that if individuals are appropriately encouraged to examine their feelings and attitudes, remain open to new information, and have opportunities to become familiar with a variety of people, they can build a strong foundation for multicultural responsiveness (Kostelnik et al. 2002). Further, if early childhood teachers continue to view differences as valuable opportunities to teach respect and advocate for more inclusive perspectives of children's social learning and growth, they can provide appropriate support and care each child may need.

Sue and Sue (2003) presented a model with three themes that can be used as an overarching framework to enhance teachers' multicultural responsiveness: multicultural awareness; multicultural knowledge; and multicultural skills. In order to become a culturally effective and responsive teacher, one must (a) be aware of his/her own biases and

assumptions about human behavior; (b) acquire knowledge of the particular group of children with whom they are working; and (c) be able to use culturally appropriate strategies in working with children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Each theme will be further discussed in the following sections.

Theme 1: Multicultural Awareness

Key to developing multicultural responsiveness is an understanding of the complexity of such work as a life-long process by engaging in self-reflection. A major component of this initial stage includes awareness of and sensitivity to cultural differences including self-recognition as a cultural being (Nieto and Bode 2008). Sue and Sue (2003) described the multiculturally responsive professional as “one who is actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth.” (pp. 18–19). Individual reflection on the beliefs, assumptions, and biases one has for his/her own cultural group and other cultural groups is a valuable starting point. Such self-reflection may be difficult, however, particularly for teachers who are mostly members of the mainstream culture. Typically people of the mainstream culture live within their own culture without recognizing that they indeed have a culture. Teachers often believe that teaching is culturally neutral and universal without acknowledging the personal backgrounds they bring into teaching practices. Nonetheless, understanding one’s own cultural identity and how this identity shapes perspectives of teaching and learning in a diverse society is a very helpful and rewarding activity for teachers. As Ladson-Billings (2006) recommends, teachers need structured opportunities to take a close look at their cultural beliefs systems and recognize themselves as cultural beings. Encouraging teachers to write an autobiography as a self-assessment has been extensively utilized for this purpose (Miller and Fuller 2006; Schmidt 1998). The recognition of one’s self as a cultural being as well as an understanding that one’s reaction to children’s behaviors are culturally situated is indeed essential for teachers to realize when working in diverse classrooms.

Teachers need awareness of the culturally sensitive features in addition to the universal features of children’s social competence development. Think about the following statements and consider your reactions including how much you agree or disagree with each.

- I think that verbal expressiveness is a prerequisite for socially competent behavior regardless of a child’s culture.
- I think that the value of obedience and assertiveness does not differ by culture.

- I think that socially withdrawn and shy behaviors negatively influence peer relationships regardless of culture.
- I think that all children should be given the same guidance and teaching for development of their social competencies.
- I think that the characteristics of effective interaction do not vary by culture.
- I think that all cultures place equal emphasis on independence.
- I think that the manner of achieving social competence is universal.
- I think that a child who is perceived to be socially competent in one cultural group will be the same in any other cultural group.
- I think that socialization goals and values are identical in families from all cultural groups.

In order to reconsider the statements above, again imagine yourself as John’s teacher in the beginning scenario. Before making any evaluation on John’s level of social competence, what kind of questions did you have? Did you reflect on your personal beliefs and assumptions about kindergarten children’s social competence? If so, how did these beliefs and assumptions impact your perceptions? Did you question or consider John’s cultural background and that of his family? These are a few examples of questions multiculturally aware teachers consider—knowing that the definitions and expectations of socially competent and valued behaviors are deeply influenced by individual cultural backgrounds including language, religion, and socio-economic-status—among others. Such seemingly small things that might not catch one’s attention are indeed crucial and part of the fundamental step for promoting diverse children’s social competence. In short, multiculturally aware teachers make a purposeful effort to reflect upon themselves as cultural beings and are willing to appreciate the different perspectives.

Theme 2: Multicultural Knowledge

Multicultural knowledge includes the values, worldview, and social norms of both one’s own and other cultures (Sue and Sue 2003). Although some of multicultural knowledge can be naturally obtained as a result of becoming self aware, this typically requires more intensive efforts. Multiculturally responsive teachers should possess both general and specific knowledge and information about the particular group with whom they are working. This is most effectively accomplished through investigative efforts extending the teacher’s knowledge about cultures and includes a commitment to advocating for more inclusive perspectives about diverse children’s development by

taking such knowledge and information into consideration. Ethnographic observations (Lenski et al. 2005), story gathering (Kidd et al. 2004; Sanchez 1999), and cross-analysis of autobiographies (Miller and Fuller 2006; Schmidt 1998) are a few methods that have been reported as successful tools for teachers within the literature.

For instance, if you want to better understand John and his family, first identify and understand his cultural background which was excluded from the original scenario. As John's teacher, consider credible descriptions of the traditional characteristics of, for example, Asian children and families. Generally, in terms of educational characteristics, the majority of Asian families have very high expectations of children's school performance, and they prefer to show a certain level of conformity and avoid conflictive circumstances. Again, in general, Asians are traditionally taught not to look into others' eyes, especially if the other person is older. Social identity among peers or family members is more valued than individual identity. In addition, you might initiate a conversation with John and his family in order to gather stories regarding their social values, norms, and/or taboos to consider against your own, not to evaluate but to understand the differences in perspectives.

The development of a consciousness of difference is essential at this point as well (Sheets 2005). Previously in John's case, you might have believed John to be deficient because he is 'slightly different'. He doesn't speak up for himself and refuses to make eye contact while the other European-descent peers behave more typically and appropriately from your perspectives. However, with a consciousness of difference you could also consider the possibility that John is viewed as very socially competent among his siblings, family members, or similar cultural groups because he complies and shows respect to elders. This scenario and the multiple interpretations of the event demonstrate why John's teacher needs an understanding of his/her own cultural lens as well as sufficient multicultural knowledge about the diverse children in the classroom. The same interactive behaviors could be interpreted totally differently depending on the depth and accuracy of a teachers' multicultural knowledge.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that although individuals within a culture vary, there are useful generalizations to aid teachers' understandings. The information of high-context and low-context cultural continuum described in Table 1 can be helpful in this regards. As mentioned previously, it is as precarious to over-generalize the cultural characteristics as to ignore the cultural differences. Each individual is unique and different, and his/her characteristics and needs cannot be always understood as group characteristics. Although this may seem frustrating for teachers, it is also exciting and ripe with opportunities for classroom learning. Thus, the best way for the teacher

to know about an individual child like John is to actively seek involvement with that child's family in order to acquire accurate information and expand his/her multicultural knowledge.

Theme 3: Multicultural Skills

Individuals in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant, and sensitive intervention strategies and skills are considered multiculturally responsive professionals (Sue and Sue 2003). Teachers who are multiculturally skillful emphasize both cultural and academic success (Ladson-Billings 1992). They consistently question traditional assumptions and monitor their own behaviors when interacting with a culturally incongruent group of children. There are several strategies for teachers—some which can be implemented immediately and others which can be developed with experience and ongoing reflection.

Creating and maintaining a safe and caring environment is one important thing for multiculturally responsive teachers (Gutierrez-Gomez 2002). Caring teachers reflect the notion that "caring is a foundational pillar of effective teaching and learning... the lack of it produces inequities in educational opportunities and achievement outcomes for ethnically different students" (Gay 2000, p. 62). Multiculturally responsive teachers also learn with and from their diverse students. They understand the connection between social competence and cultural identity, and because they understand the complexity of both, they create classroom communities where diverse children also respect and support one another. Differences are intentionally discussed and valued, and cultural conflicts are viewed as opportunities for learning (Nieto and Bode 2008; Sheets 2005). In short, genuine caring goes a long way in a classroom where a teacher is developing multicultural responsiveness.

Holding high expectations of all children is a vague and somewhat contentious notion, but it is also very crucial that multiculturally responsive teachers understand what this phrase means and consider how it can be infused in their classrooms (Corbett et al. 2002). Basically, teachers who work with diverse children must be specific about their expectations as well as willing to scaffold children toward those expectations using assessments both of and for learning (Wiggins and McTighe 2005). Assessments that are clear to children and their families in order to engage them as part of school activities and learning are useful tools for reaching those expectations (Sheets 2005). In many cases, however, the assessment instrument itself maybe inadequate to effectively evaluate skills across cultural groups, and therefore, modification of the instrument may be necessary. Moreover, appropriate selection of assessment instruments must be considered along with

anecdotal information and explanations for why children display certain types of behaviors, particularly with respect to cultural and linguistic differences. Finally, careful interpretation to guide instruction and scaffold child development is more appropriate and constructive rather than to use such assessment data to defend or perpetuate deficit perspectives of diverse children and their cultures. In John's case, did you try to be specific about your expectations regarding eye-contact or speaking-up? What other kinds of evidence (e.g., anecdotal records, social skills assessment scores, peer nominations, etc.) do you have that can demonstrate bigger picture of John's social competence? How would you prioritize your instructional goals for John's social success in your classroom? Multiculturally responsive teachers strive to keep their expectations clear yet high, see learning and assessment as intimately connected, and carefully analyze the usefulness and impact of assessment on and for learning (Sheets 2005).

Another important skill for teachers is the ability to apply the 'skilled dialogue' which embraces respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness when interacting with children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Barrera and Corso 2002). Within skilled dialogue, respect is about recognizing differences; reciprocity is about acknowledging that each person is an equal contributor in all relationships; and responsiveness is about allowing others to shape your assumptions. In short, based on respect and reciprocity, becoming responsive is about—maybe to one's surprise—willing to not know the exact answer or solution to any given situation. Returning to our scenario of John, as John's teacher how might you establish respect and reciprocity with him and his family? How could you invite John's family to be more involved and share their expertise without giving them too much pressure? It is worthwhile to organize a teacher-parent conference differently so that John's family can contribute their knowledge or ideas of John's school adjustment and social development. You might also initiate the conversation by saying "I wonder if ..." or "I would like to know about ..." instead of saying "I'm sure ..." or "I know ...". These ideas, as well as other similar ones, may not necessarily address all your dilemmas right away. However, your frustration and the tension between the two parties will gradually be reduced, and your confidence about becoming a multiculturally responsive teacher will be increased.

Putting the Pieces Together

In the above sections, we have proposed three themes of becoming a multiculturally responsive teacher (Sue and

Sue 2003). Several other scholars (Villegas and Lucas 2002; Weinstein et al. 2004) also proposed ideas for culturally responsive classroom management. We adapted them here to apply to teachers who aim to promote young children's social competence in a multiculturally responsive way. First, though repeated often, we emphasize the need to recognize your own ethnocentrism and biases. Teachers' multicultural responsiveness is built upon on-going, critical self reflection of one's own beliefs, biases, and assumptions. Early childhood teachers need to reflect on and examine their taken-for-granted beliefs on implied values with respect to social competence in order to become culturally responsive. Second, acquire knowledge of diverse children's cultural backgrounds. Teachers must actively try to acquire knowledge of children's cultural backgrounds, including: values which impact social competence, the necessary skills to survive, social taboos, and learning styles. Third, commit to build caring classroom climate. Simply put, children will not learn from teachers if they do not believe that those teachers care for them. Such intimate caring relationships and warm rapport always precede any other virtues when we teach children who come from different backgrounds.

Fourth, use multiculturally responsive pedagogy. Given the prior recommendations, the use of multiculturally responsive pedagogy is an on-going process where cultural diversity becomes a lens through which we view our teaching. Irvine (2003) describes this process as 'teaching with a cultural eye'. Moreover, teachers need to consider 'mutual accommodation' and the development of intersecting cultural identities (Nieto and Bode 2008). It is not easy to decide when to accommodate children's cultural backgrounds in our teaching, and when to support the development of more mainstream skills and values (Delpit 1988; Sheets 2005). Although it is necessary for children to acculturate some new sociocultural values and skills under certain conditions in order to gain cultural capital, their heritages must not be abandoned in the process. Importantly, children's overall growth and development is better supported when they are not pressured to disregard their cultural identity and pride for their cultures is not devalued. Teachers' acceptance of and building on children's culture is no less crucial than equipping them with necessary social skills valued in the mainstream culture. This is particularly relevant with young children's development of social competence, and both are necessary for multiculturally responsive pedagogy.

Finally, understand the broader social, economic, and political context of the educational system. It is important for teachers to realize that educational practices cannot be totally removed from the power structures of the larger society in which we reside and consequently teach and learn (Nieto and Bode 2008). Teachers must understand how differences including culture, race, social class,

gender, language background, and sexual orientation are evaluated in our society and within particular communities as well as how schools are reinforcing the values our society prefers. Although such understandings may not directly be addressed in their early childhood classrooms, teachers need to be aware of the broader contexts influencing current educational issues and be willing to advocate for more inclusive perspectives regarding the young children they teach.

Epilogue

Let us return to John's scenario one last time and answer those questions again while thinking about how Sue and Sue's (2003) model can guide your thoughts and actions. Do you think he is compliant or too passive? While it may be true that John is more compliant than most of his other peers, it is important to understand the underlying reason for such behavior considering his cultural contexts. You may be concerned that he appears to lack self-confidence, but this behavior might be better understood as John's effort to cooperate with peers. Similarly, why do you think he refuses to make eye-contact with you? Is he indeed refusing? Ask yourself first, why does this behavior bother you [multicultural awareness]. You may interpret John's action (not looking into your eyes) as a defiant behavior. However, understanding the underlying reason for the behavior considering his cultural values untangles the confusion and your misinterpretation of his action as defiant. Once you do some investigation of John's background by talking to his family and reading on your own, you may be surprised to know that the way of showing respect could sometimes be exactly the opposite—not looking into other's eyes, in John's case [multicultural knowledge].

Returning to the concept of social competence, another question you may have as John's teacher is how to support his social competence development. A useful approach is to observe John interacting in various situations and with varying groups of peers to identify and better understand his strengths, and use those strengths as a springboard for communication with John as well as his parents. Also remind yourself that given his age, John might be going through extensive cognitive and social/emotional transitions. Make sure you are not deprecating his family's cultural beliefs or values and be patient with him. Additionally, use multiculturally responsive dialogue skills in your interaction. For example, knowing that John has a stronger value of social identity than individual identity, you may prefer to say "Your parents should be very proud of you." instead of saying "You should be very proud of yourself." as a form of social reinforcement that better

suits John's and his families' cultural contexts [multicultural skills].

Social competence is indeed an important part of young children's development. Therefore, understanding and promoting diverse young children's social competence should be considered within the broader framework of multicultural responsiveness. Since definitions and expectations may vary according to children's cultural backgrounds, early childhood teachers need to be aware of the differences children bring into classrooms in order to be multiculturally responsive. Despite the common understanding about teaching as representative of teachers' identity by teaching what they are and what they believe, its impact has been often overlooked in early childhood classrooms. Nonetheless, given the growing diversity of our young population, enhancing multicultural responsiveness for teachers who work with culturally diverse young children is crucial in order to ensure that no child is misunderstood and all children receive the best care and teaching that we can provide.

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