

What Principals Can Do to Enhance Teacher Leadership Skills

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Abstract

South African secondary schools continue to face challenges of uneven teaching quality, declining learner engagement, and heavy administrative demands that limit principals' ability to focus on leadership. In this context, strengthening teacher leadership is a vital but underdeveloped strategy for sustaining improvement. This study aimed to examine how principals can enhance teacher leadership skills to support classroom practice and build collaborative professional cultures. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed across three public secondary schools in the Swartland area, Western Cape Province. Fifteen participants—including principals, deputy principals, heads of department, and teachers with varying levels of experience—took part in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Data were thematically coded and synthesised with illustrative quotations to generate conceptual and practical insights. Findings revealed that three interrelated practices, namely transformational, instructional, and distributive leadership, combine to enable teacher agency and strengthen teaching and learning. Participants described routines that foster psychologically safe climates, mentoring and micro-professional development that accelerate growth, and structures that distribute responsibility through committees and observation–feedback cycles. Where such leadership was present, learner engagement and classroom

consistency were sustained, but where it was absent, staff conflict and weak management undermined instruction.

The study contributes practically by offering a repertoire of low-cost but high-leverage leadership moves, including modelling clear norms, publishing delegation maps, and removing structural barriers to participation. Scholarly significance lies in demonstrating how the integration of transformational, instructional, and distributive leadership creates a framework for cultivating teacher leadership in resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: teacher leadership; principalship; distributed leadership; mentoring; professional development; psychological safety

Introduction

Across many South African secondary schools, teachers, particularly novice teachers, report few structured opportunities to lead. Principals, meanwhile, are burdened by administrative duties and compliance requirements that often crowd out the capacity-building work that sustains improvement. The cumulative effect is predictable and includes weakened classroom practice, uneven staff morale, and depressed learner performance (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2023:267). These challenges are amplified in resource-constrained contexts such as the Swartland region, where principals must simultaneously deliver on accountability requirements while maintaining focus on teaching and learning (Department of Basic Education, 2015). Although research shows that teacher leadership strengthens instructional quality and builds collaborative professional cultures (Harris & Jones, 2019), its development remains inconsistent in South African secondary schools. Principals often lack the time, tools, or frameworks to systematically nurture teacher leadership, leaving novice teachers in particular to struggle with survival rather than growth.

The article aims to explore how principals can deliberately enhance teacher leadership by identifying leadership moves that sustain teacher agency, improve classroom practice, and support learner achievement. It is guided by four key questions: How do teacher leadership skills contribute to teaching quality and learner performance? How can principals facilitate the development of teacher leadership skills to achieve desired outcomes? Which strategies work in practice for strengthening teacher leadership? And what are the implications of insufficient teacher leadership for school stakeholders? To address these questions, the article draws on a qualitative phenomenological study (Kalp, 2025) conducted in three secondary schools in the Swartland area. It elaborates on the literature, findings, and discussion to provide a tightly coupled, practice-oriented account of how principals grow teacher leadership through transformational, instructional, and distributive moves.

Method

The study (Kalp, 2025) employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore lived experiences of principals and teachers (Nieuwenhuis, 2019:81). Three public secondary schools in the Swartland area were purposively selected to capture variation in quintile status, learner demographics, and resource levels, thereby offering insight into both more constrained and better-resourced contexts. Schools were approached through formal letters to principals, and participation was granted following approval by the provincial education department.

Fifteen participants were sampled—see Tables 1 and 2 below. One principal per school participated in one-on-one interviews, and each school convened a focus group with a deputy principal and three teachers, including a head of department, a teacher with more than 10 years' experience ("More Experienced"), and a teacher with less than 10 years' experience ("Less Experienced"). This combination ensured that voices from different levels of responsibility and career stages were represented, providing a balanced view of leadership practices. Selection

was guided by principals' recommendations and staff willingness to participate, while care was taken to avoid over-representation of a single subject discipline.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants

Position	Male	Female	Percentage
Principal	2	1	20%
Deputy Principal	2	1	20%
Head of Department		3	20%
More experienced teacher		3	20%
Less experienced teacher	1	2	20%
Totals:	5	10	100%

Table 2. Years of service in the school

Years of service in the school	Frequency (n)	Percentage
More than 10 years	12	80%
10 years and less	3	20%
Totals:	15	100%

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and stored securely on password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. Transcripts were anonymised through the use of pseudonyms for both schools and participants. Data were analysed using manual thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was

conducted manually using Microsoft Excel. Columns were created for each research question and emerging theme, and specific words or phrases from the transcripts were identified and categorised under the relevant theme or sub-theme. This approach allowed the researcher to remain closely engaged with the data while ensuring a systematic link between the research questions and the coded material. Saturation was achieved when additional interviews and focus groups no longer yielded new categories or insights, suggesting adequacy of the sample size for the study's scope.

Ethics approvals and informed consent, and confidentiality protocols were observed (Van der Vyver, 2023:44-46). Participants were briefed about voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any stage, and the measures taken to ensure anonymity. Confidentiality was maintained by replacing names with pseudonyms in transcripts, reporting only role descriptors in quotations, and ensuring that school identities were masked. All digital recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected devices, with backups kept in encrypted folders, and will be securely deleted after the retention period specified by the ethics committee. Schools were described in broad terms as quintile 1–3 and quintile 4–5 schools rather than by name to protect institutional identity. In the South African context, quintile 1–3 schools are no-fee schools that serve mainly low-income communities with limited resources, while quintile 4–5 schools are fee-paying schools with relatively better resourcing and socio-economic conditions. This distinction allowed the study to account for variations in leadership practice across more resource-constrained and better-resourced environments. Together, these methodological choices ensured that the study generated credible, trustworthy, and contextually grounded insights into how principals enable teacher leadership.

Literature Review

What is Teacher Leadership, and Why Does it Matter?

Teacher leadership encompasses educator influence beyond the classroom, mobilising peers, mentoring, leading innovation, and shaping instructional improvement (Schott, van Roekel & Tummers, 2020:1). It is relational and practice-based. Teachers model effective pedagogy, share what works, and build collective responsibility for learner outcomes (Espinosa & González, 2023:2, 9). A robust teacher leadership culture correlates with improved learner motivation and performance, healthier school climates, and stronger organisational learning (Schott et al., 2020).

Three core dimensions recur across the literature (Harris et al., 2019:123–126), namely the willingness to lead, initiative and agency; the sharing and diffusion of effective practices; and pedagogical excellence within one's classroom. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Teachers who gain confidence as classroom experts are more likely to lead beyond their rooms, and teachers who are invited to lead, mentor, and present often sharpen their own practice. Scholars, however, debate whether teacher leadership can thrive without explicit structural support from principals (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), or whether it is primarily a matter of teacher agency and self-efficacy (Calvert, 2016). This tension between structural opportunity and individual initiative remains central to current debates.

The Principal–Teacher Leadership Nexus

Principals are “leaders of leaders” who signal what is valued and make it feasible for teachers to contribute (Li & Liu, 2020:663). The day-to-day conduct of principals, how they set expectations, give feedback, mediate conflict, and celebrate growth, either unlocks teacher leadership or leaves it dormant (Sebastian, Allensworth & Huang, 2016:75–76). Where principals cultivate trust and provide targeted opportunities, teachers step into leadership;

where favouritism, inconsistent follow-through, or punitive climates prevail, teachers retreat (Hayak, Avidov-Ungar & Bitton, 2024). Recent scholarship also points to an accountability paradox: while principals are mandated to build collaborative school cultures, they are simultaneously constrained by compliance tasks that displace developmental work (Bantwini et al., 2023). This raises the question of how principals can balance system demands with the nurturing of teacher agency.

Competing Leadership Frameworks

Transformational leadership emphasises vision, inspiration, and capacity-building. Leaders articulate a compelling vision, model values, build capacity, and motivate through inspiration, individualised consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Van der Bijl & Prinsloo, 2021:23–41). In schools, this translates into emotionally intelligent conduct, visible modelling, and sustained investment in people. Yet critics caution that transformational leadership can become rhetoric-heavy, privileging charismatic leadership while overlooking the distributed expertise within staff (Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

Instructional leadership focuses on learner achievement by supervising teaching, aligning resources, and providing developmental feedback (Van der Bijl & Kruger, 2021:342). The caution is overcentralisation; overreliance on the principal as the sole expert can stifle teacher initiative (Bush, 2013:56). Debates persist over whether instructional leadership is feasible in resource-stretched schools, where principals may not have the bandwidth to observe and coach consistently (Hallinger, 2011).

Distributive leadership views leadership as an organisational property spread across formal and informal roles (Klein et al., 2018:89–112). Done well, it creates structured opportunities such as committees, task teams, moderation processes, and coaching that embed teacher leadership in the routines of school life. Sceptics argue, however, that distribution

without accountability risks superficial delegation rather than meaningful empowerment (Spillane, 2006).

Integrating Leadership and Teacher Agency

Bryk (2010) conceptualises five organisational processes, namely professional capacity, learning climate, parent-community ties, instructional guidance, and leadership for change, that jointly drive improvement. Sebastian et al. (2016:75–76) map a direct reciprocal relationship between principal practice and teacher leadership skills operating through these processes. Teacher agency frameworks add nuance, highlighting that leadership growth depends not only on structures and routines but also on teachers' beliefs about their efficacy, their perceived autonomy, and the extent of professional trust in the school (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). Integrating these perspectives suggests that leadership “moves” must simultaneously target climate, capacity, and structures while cultivating teachers' sense of agency.

Conditions that Enable Teacher Leadership

Principals' emotionally intelligent behaviour—empathy, self-regulation, and wise conflict handling—signals safety and belonging (Lagunaso, 2024:3196). Teachers take initiative when the climate is predictable and respectful, with room to try and learn (Arora, Lim, Ledesma, Liu & Wheeler, 2024). Professional learning that is job-embedded, practice-based, and iterative outperforms one-off workshops (Schwartz & Riser-Kositsky, 2023), while mentoring grows leadership by pairing experienced teachers with novices around concrete instructional problems (Gul, Demir & Criswell, 2019). Clear decision rights, rotating roles, and scheduled collaboration bake leadership into the school's operating system (Klein et al., 2018). Recognition and feedback sustain momentum when specific, timely, and tied to standards (Cunningham & Grooms, 2018:121–123). Principals also expand teachers' bandwidth by

streamlining admin, protecting collaboration time, and aligning initiatives (Bantwini et al., 2023).

Risks, Constraints, and the Gap in Scholarship

In the absence of the above-mentioned conditions, the literature notes increased stress and attrition risks among early career teachers, uneven curriculum coverage, and depressed learner engagement (Schlebusch, 2020:76). Principals may also face additional demands such as marketing, compliance, and limited resources, that divert their attention from their core responsibility of instructional leadership (Department of Basic Education, 2015). What remains underexplored, however, is how principals in resource-constrained South African secondary schools practically weave together transformational, instructional, and distributive leadership in ways that activate teacher agency. This gap underscores the need for context-sensitive studies that move beyond abstract frameworks to identify concrete, low-cost leadership routines that principals can implement to grow teacher leadership sustainably.

Findings

The following principal imperatives emerged from the data as referenced in Figure 1 below.

Build Emotionally Intelligent, Psychologically Safe Climates

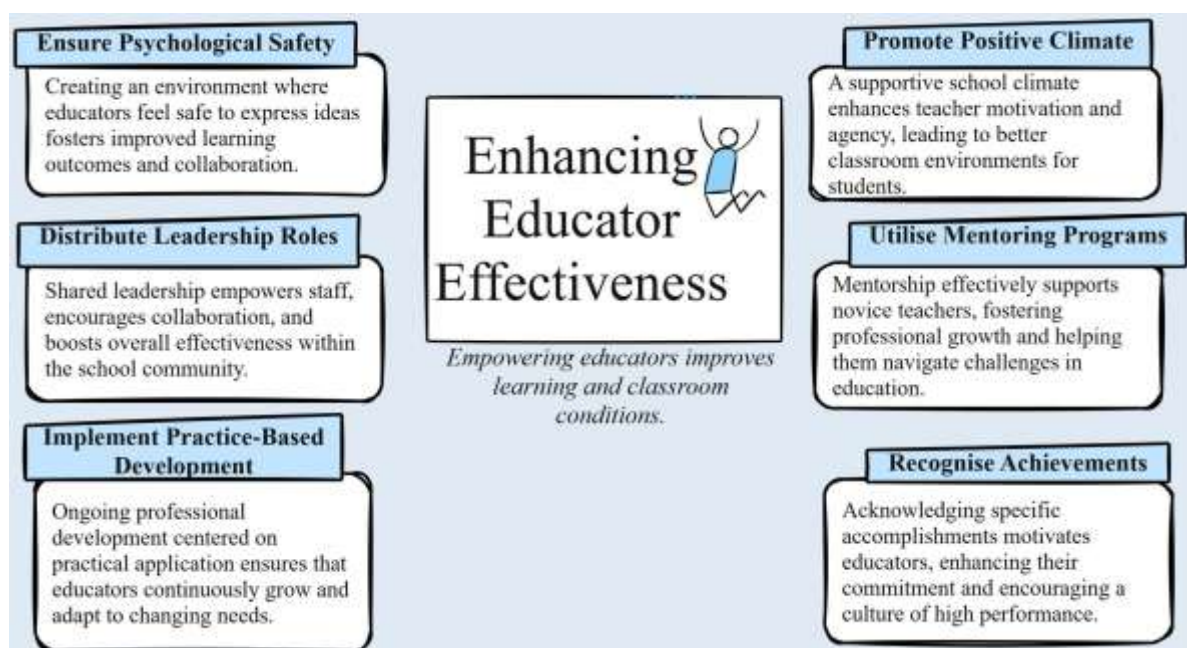
A less experienced teacher stressed the non-negotiables for learning: “If there is no consistency and if there is no psychological safety, the children do not perform well” (Less Experienced Teacher 3). Another participant captured the climate-setting power of the principal: “The principal sets the tone” (Less Experienced Teacher 2). Principals and deputies pointed to conflict clearing-routines and the need to name emotions: “We need to ‘clear the air’ after difficult moments so people can reengage” (Deputy Principal 2). An experienced teacher linked staff mood to learner engagement: “If you feel good in your class, feel positive, then this

positivity will naturally go to your learners” (More Experienced Teacher 2). Together, these voices underline a pathway from climate to teacher agency to classroom quality.

Distribute Leadership through Structures

Interviewees described leadership as a team sport. One principal made the systemic case: “If you have a strong teacher corps under you, the school will function better” (Principal 3). Distributive practices included rotating committee leads, cross functional task teams, and moderation structures that surface pedagogical practice. Heads of department emphasised that credibility matters: “You say you don’t know, you’re calling someone else... It doesn’t inspire confidence. Leaders must model preparedness and clarity” (Head of Department 1).

Figure 1: Summary of findings. Source: Researcher’s own.



Provide Targeted, Practice-Based Development and Mentoring

Deputies and heads of department described pairing novice teachers with experienced mentors and using micro-professional development, such as short, focused sessions in department meetings built around live demonstration and rehearsal. Teachers reported that observation

feedback cycles with concrete next steps accelerated their growth. One less-experienced teacher reflected, “If teachers are continuously working on themselves... we are teaching our learners that we are never perfect. We are lifelong learners” (Less Experienced Teacher 2).

Recognise Specifically and Coach for Growth

Recognition was not about generic praise; it was coupled to standards. A head of department suggested visible incentives for excellence: “Whether the principal walks into my classroom... to have an incentive for that” (Head of Department 1). Participants highlighted the power of formative feedback, private, precise and actionable, with public acknowledgement reserved for milestones.

Remove Structural Barriers

Participants noted that time poverty and friction costs erode teachers’ capacity to lead. Principals who streamlined forms, simplified duty rosters, or protected collaboration time gave teachers the bandwidth to participate in leadership tasks. Deputies spoke of running “clear-the-air” sessions and setting decision deadlines so committees could conclude their work and return to teaching.

Discussion

From Climate to Agency to Improvement

The findings corroborate the integrative model drawn from Bryk (2010) and Sebastian et al. (2016). Leaders’ emotionally intelligent conduct, transformational, and consistent routines create psychological safety; safety nurtures teacher agency; agency enables distributed problem solving on instructional priorities; and these cycles feed back into improved teaching and learner engagement. The centrality of “tone setting” by the principal (Less Experienced Teacher 2) aligns with the literature on principal effects mediated through climate and professional capacity (Sebastian et al., 2016:75–76).

Integrating Transformational, Instructional, and Distributive Leadership

The study showed that no single leadership style sufficed. Transformational leadership energises and humanises the work through modelling, vision, and emotional intelligence (Van der Bijl et al., 2021:31–32). Instructional leadership supplies direction and feedback (Van der Bijl & Kruger, 2021:342). Distributive leadership ensures that leadership is a habit embedded in structures, not a personality trait confined to the principal (Van der Bijl et al., 2021:33). Teacher leadership flourishes when these intertwine. For example, a head of department within a supportive climate (transformational) leads micro professional development (instructional), through a standing timetable with rotating roles (distributive).

Why Novice Teachers Need Explicit Scaffolding

Less experienced teachers consistently linked their willingness to lead to a sense of clarity, mentoring, and safety. Without these, they avoided risk, narrowed their teaching to compliance tasks, and disengaged from collaborative work. This is consistent with scholarship on induction, mentoring, and psychological safety (Arora et al., 2024). The implication is practical: principals should design predictable rhythms such as observation cycles, coaching loops, micro-professional development, and recognition moments, that accumulate into confidence and competence.

The Cost of Weak Teacher Leadership Skills

Where teacher leadership was weak, participants described lower learner engagement, inconsistent classroom management, and staff conflict that diverted energy from instruction. These patterns echo evidence on the relationship between weak accountability, uneven teacher competence, and poor learning (Schlebusch, 2020:76). In such environments, principals are often pulled into firefighting, including marketing, compliance, and ad hoc discipline, which further reduces time for coaching and development (Bantwini et al., 2023).

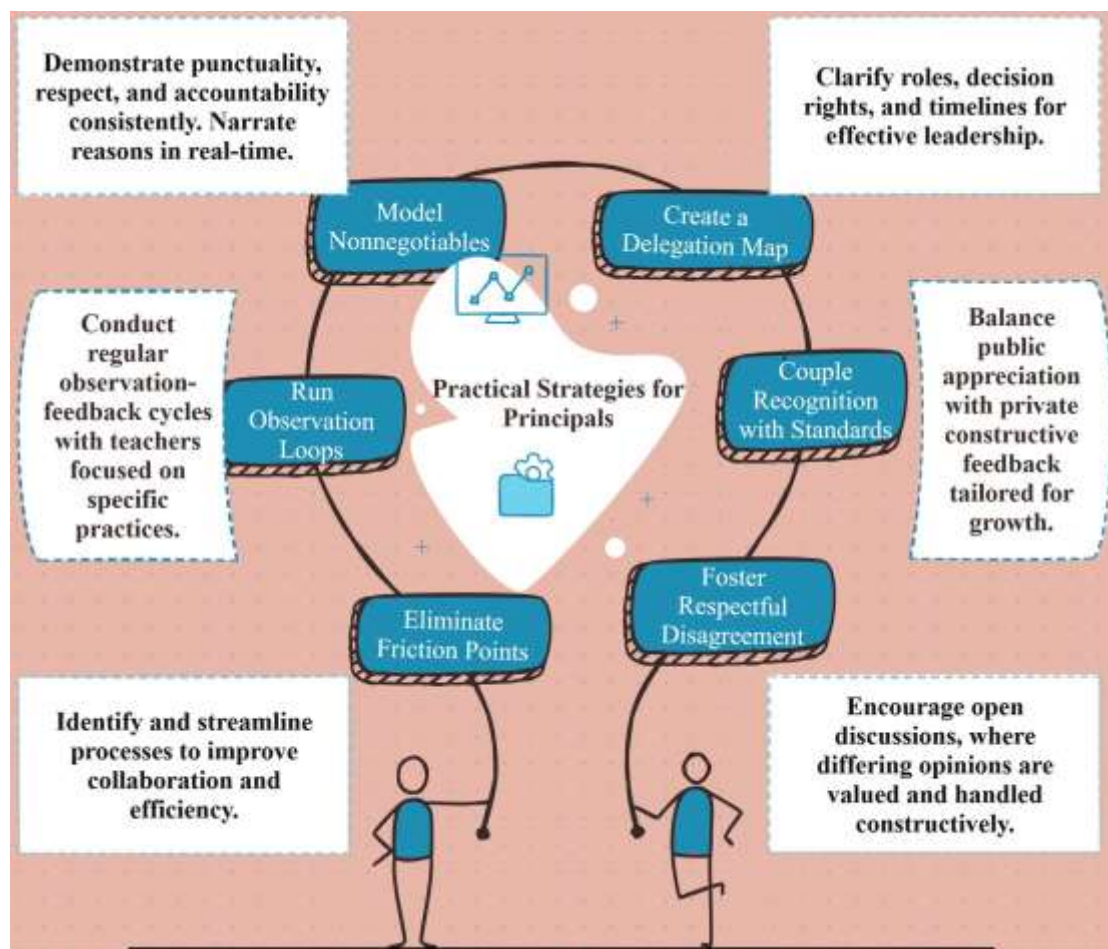
Equity and Context Sensitivity

The Swartland context has a mix of quintile profiles and resource constraints, amplifying the importance of low-cost, high-leverage leadership routines. Practices that cost time but little money such as mentoring, micro-professional development, targeted recognition, and streamlining admin emerged as the most feasible and impactful. This aligns with the aim of surfacing context specific strategies for secondary schools facing workload pressures (Kalp, 2025).

Practical Strategies for Principals

Figure 2 below was drawn with SketchWow software and presents a set of low-cost, high-discipline leadership moves emergent in the study.

Figure 2: Practical Strategies for Principals. Source: Researcher's own.



This set of low-cost, high-discipline leadership moves includes: Model three non-negotiables for adult conduct—punctuality, respectful disagreement, and follow-through—and narrate your reasoning in real time so the norms are learnable; publish a delegation map that clarifies decision rights, committee leads, and timelines, and review and update it each term; run observation-feedback coaching loops (6–8 weeks) with every teacher at least twice per term, focusing on one high-leverage practice at a time; couple recognition with standards by offering specific public appreciation alongside private, improvement-oriented feedback with concrete next steps; and remove one friction point per term (for example, streamline a form, reallocate duties, or protect an hour for collaboration).

Limitations and Strengths

The study was qualitative and conducted regionally in three secondary schools. The findings are interpretive and shaped by context and the researcher's positionality, despite strategies to enhance credibility and confirmability (Van der Vyver, 2023). External factors such as district policy, resourcing, and community dynamics could also have influenced feasibility.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several strengths. The qualitative phenomenological design enabled rich, context-specific insights into how principals cultivate teacher leadership through transformational, instructional, and distributive practices. Data from principals, deputies, heads of department and teachers provided varied perspectives and allowed triangulation across sources. The findings translate into practical strategies, including building psychological safety, structuring distributed leadership, and embedding targeted mentoring, which are especially relevant in resource-constrained school settings. These contributions strengthen the literature by consolidating evidence into practical, low-cost leadership moves grounded in lived experiences.

Conclusion

Teacher leadership does not grow from slogans alone, but from daily, disciplined leadership moves. Evidence from the study shows that principals who combine transformational tone-setting and emotional intelligence, instructional clarity and coaching, and distributive structures create the conditions for teachers to lead. Participants emphasise that the principal sets the overall climate and norms that steer daily conduct (Less Experienced Teacher 2). They add that, without steady routines and a secure, trusting environment, learner performance tends to decline (Less Experienced Teacher 3). They also note that when the teaching staff are strong and cohesive, the whole school operates more effectively (Principal 3). The through line from climate to agency to improved teaching and learning is clear. In resource-constrained settings, the most powerful tools are predictable behaviours and routines enacted over time, such as modelling three non-negotiables for teachers' conduct, namely punctuality, respectful disagreement, and follow-through. When principals, deputies, heads of department, and teachers share these practices, teacher leadership becomes the engine of sustained improvement.

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