

## Entering the Occupational Category of ‘Farmer’: New Pathways through Professional Agricultural Education in Ireland

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**Abstract:** The abolition of milk quota in Ireland in 2015 has been associated with an increase in milk production; accompanied by a demand for highly trained personnel supported by relevant educational training. With the emergence of agricultural education courses in Ireland like the Professional Diploma in Dairy Farm Management (PDDFM), we aimed to understand potential career trajectories in the liberalised dairy farming sector through analysis of the narratives of graduates and prospective employers. We sought to analyse how educational opportunities oriented towards farm management careers correspond to how the occupational identities of participating students are currently taking shape in the post-quota era based on a literature that emphasises the longitudinal nature of farm succession processes, a dominant family farming discourse that values ownership, the occupational identity of ‘farmer’, and the continuing need at farm level for manual and professional work. Results confirm that agricultural education is perceived and experienced as offering new pathways for young farmers to enter the occupational category of ‘farmer’, manoeuvring around the constraints of non-inheritance. The students reaffirmed a growing evolution of the farming occupational identity which leans towards a business-minded identity. The short-term goal to pursue a career as a professional dairy farm manager but the desire to own land someday reflects the long withstanding tradition of farm/land ownership, signalling that discontinuation of the traditional family farming model is not imminent and that different career pathways into farming must be investigated in light of increasing individual farm size and few opportunities to obtain land through purchase.

**Key words:** Agricultural education, dairy farm managers, career trajectories, farm inheritance

### Introduction

Since 2013, there has been considerable growth in employment in the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sector rising from 99,000 people in 2013 to nearly 107,000 in 2016 (CSO, 2017). The post-quota era of dairy farming in Ireland is expected to create an estimated 15,000 additional jobs, ranging from jobs at farm level to jobs in manufacturing and distribution sectors of the dairy processing industry (Teagasc, 2015). Recognising this impending demand, Teagasc, Ireland’s Agriculture and Food Authority commenced in 2012 an accredited educational programme in dairy farm management, referred to as the Professional Diploma in Dairy Farm Management (PDDFM). The aim of the programme was to prepare dairy farmers of the future to have the skills and knowledge necessary to exploit production opportunities in a post-quota environment. The course prospectus identifies the programme as targeted at ‘ambitious dairy farmers who want to develop their skills to run successful dairy herds,’ whether that be to manage their own family farm, become employed commercial farm managers or become involved in share milking opportunities (Teagasc, 2016, p11). Emphasis in the programme’s prospectus is placed on job opportunities and identifies the key roles of a farm manager as managing farm physical, financial and personnel resources, decision-making

and action-taking within the farm business, and displaying motivation, leadership, delegation and communication.

This study analysed the narratives of PDDFM graduates and prospective employers aiming to better understand potential career trajectories in the newly liberalised Irish dairy farming sector in Ireland. The narratives of young individuals pursuing specific purpose educational opportunities are of particular interest. We explored the following types of research questions: Is there evidence to suggest that occupational farming identities are evolving among students of specific purpose dairy management courses? Are students of these programs following the traditional route of patrilineal succession or are they seeking different paths? Are younger farmers themselves willing to be managers or workers on farms or is their ultimate aim to own a farm? For students who are non-successors to farms, what are the obstacles and what are their strategies for entering into the occupational identity of farmer? In this second section of this paper, a description of the context of our study is presented, paying particular attention to labour on farms in Ireland and the EU. A theoretical framework of concepts related to family farming, patrilineal succession, identity and masculinity is presented. Following a description of the methodology employed for our study, the analysis is presented and implications for policy outlined.

### ***Family farming and occupational identity***

The Irish dairy sector is characterized by the seasonal grass-based system with relatively small enterprises that rely heavily on family labour (Boyle *et al.*, 2002); with reports from the FADN (2013) noting 88% of labour on dairy farms comprised of family labour. However, as herd sizes increase, there are associated increases in both part-time and full-time hired labourers (O'Donovan *et al.*, 2008). It is clear from statistical data that family farming frames how labour is performed on Irish farms. The abundant social science literature on family farming points to traditions of inheritance and has a growing focus on the theme of occupational identity and agriculture. In Irish farming family culture, the farm has traditionally been handed down to the eldest son or the son who demonstrates the most interest in farming (Cassidy and McGrath 2014). Future successors typically lack ownership rights on the farm until late-in-the-life-course inheritance, which can curtail their inclusion in decision-making on the farm. Macken-Walsh and Byrne (2015) found that while younger farmers are very interested in remaining within the Irish family farming model working closely with their elders, they favour having an influence on the farm and require financial independence to establish livelihoods and families of their own. However, the feasibility of a farm sustaining the needs of two main farm operators and their families can be problematic.

There is evidence to suggest that the tradition of patrilineal succession in farming is starting to evolve. Farmers and successors continue to attach esteem to keeping the farm in the family name while alternatives to late-in-the-life-course succession are emerging as new strategies for including future successors in the farm earlier. For young successors, remaining simply a labourer until the older male head of household decides to completely retire is becoming less acceptable. Elders are responding to the threat of younger farmers' withdrawal from the family farm by engaging in Joint Farming Ventures (JFVs) with future successors (Macken-Walsh and Byrne, 2015). There is evidence in the literature that young farm managers (under the age of 35) have more formal education than older generations (CSO, 2012) and that new arrangements, such as JFVs, can positively affect farm sustainability and resilience (Macken-Walsh and Byrne, 2015).

For non-successors in Ireland, non-availability of land is a constraint with less than 1% of agricultural land sold annually on the open market (Hennessy, 2006). Aside from

JFVs, gaining employment in agriculture is another route to entering farming. The context of dairy quota liberalisation is understood as catalysing opportunities for higher status positions such as farm management roles. The literature discusses how over the past twenty years there has been a gradual transition in farming occupational identities. Highly masculinised (Whatmore, 1991; Brandth, 1995; Liepins, 2000; Ni Laoire, 2002) and characterised by manual outdoor labour, physical strength, land-ownership, control of property, and the authoritativeness (Martin, 1997), these characteristics have been regarded as a paradigmatic example of male hegemonic identity (Connell, 2000). However, the literature is indicating farmer identity evolution over the past two decades to a more business-like masculinity (Ni Laoire, 2002; Cush and Macken-Walsh, 2016).

The concept of entering the occupational identity of ‘farmer’ and inheritance of the family farm often go hand-in-hand in Ireland. Ownership of land and successfully passing it on to the next generation was a means of survival in the post-famine era. Cassidy (2017) noted the significance the farm has in place attachment of Irish farming youth and sustained interest in preserving the family farm. The longer the farm has been in the family the more likely the successors will feel a commitment to preserve it (Bjørkhaug and Wiborg, 2010). For younger farmers and female farmers in particular, groups that typically do not own farms, education is identified in several studies (Byrne *et al.*, 2014; Macken-Walsh and Byrne, 2015; Cush and Macken-Walsh, 2016) as a route to acquire status in the farming family and community and gain access to the occupational category of ‘farmer’.

### **Context and methodology**

The post-quota era of dairy farming in Ireland is expected to create an estimated 15,000 additional jobs. While a number of these will be associated with manufacturing and distribution sectors of the dairy processing industry (Teagasc, 2015), a portion will represent work positions on farms, either at semi-skilled, skilled or managerial level. This increase in on-farm jobs is catalysed by the increase in farm and cow herd sizes. Recognising this impending demand, Teagasc, commenced in 2012 an educational programme referred to as the Professional Diploma in Dairy Farm Management (PDDFM). The aim of the programme was to equip dairy farmers of the future with the skills and knowledge necessary to exploit production opportunities in the post-quota environment. Teagasc (Ireland’s Agriculture and Food Development Authority) views formal agricultural education and training as the ‘priority investment for a successful, competitive and sustainable Irish dairy farming sector,’ (Teagasc, 2016, p.5). The contextual reference point for Teagasc’s development of the PDDFM is increasing herd sizes in the post-quota era and greater opportunities for farm manager positions. However, the prospectus also highlights that ‘bigger is not necessarily better’ and that efficient small-scale farming can be profitable. This caters to prospective students who come from smaller sized dairy farms with intentions of returning to the home farm. The course programme emphasises on-the-job opportunities and identifies the key roles of a farm manager as managing the physical, financial and personnel resources on farm, decision-making and action-taking within the farm business, and implementing motivation, leadership, delegation and communication. The course targets and largely attracts young and ambitious students who want to develop their skills to run successful dairy herds, whether that be to manage their own family farm, become employed as commercial farm managers or become involved in share milking opportunities. The PDDFM is unique because unlike other professional agricultural education courses, students complete nearly two years of professional work experience on approved commercial dairy farms. Students complete four modules: dairy technology; dairy farm management; growing your dairy business; and professional work experience. The host farms are carefully selected by PDDFM coordinators

to ensure the farms are implementing the recommended practices taught throughout the course. Farmers are typically eager to have trained students working on their farms and are required to pay them at least minimum wage. Students usually spend time on two host farms.

Based on a preparatory review (undertaken for this study) of the sociological literature pertaining to career entry pathways to agriculture and farming occupational identities, we chose the PDDFM as an appropriate empirical focus. Our principal research question was to analyse how new educational opportunities such as the PDDFM, oriented to farm management careers in the post-quota era rather than the manual labour jobs of the past, correspond to how the occupational identities of participating students are currently taking shape in the post-quota era. Observant of industry discourses that support the emergence of professionalised careers in commercial dairy farming, we sought to analyse evidence of these new identities in the narratives of students participating in the PDDFM. Our theoretical framework was based on the longitudinal nature of farm succession processes (often from early childhood), a dominant family farming discourse that values farm ownership in the family name, lingering tendencies towards males hegemonic identities supporting the value of manual labour, and the continuing pragmatic need at farm level for manual as well as professional work.

A qualitative approach was chosen to investigate the past experiences and future expectations of students of the PDDFM through an in-depth interviewing method. The Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was employed, as a methodology that has been used to study farmer behaviour (Inhetveen, 1990) and is an established approach in Irish sociological research of agriculture (Macken-Walsh, 2009; McDonald *et al.*, 2014; Cush and Macken-Walsh, 2016; McAloon *et al.*, 2017). Following Wengraf (2011), the interviews were conducted using a two-phased process involving an initial ‘single question to induce narrative’ (SQUIN) where the interviewee tells their story, uninterrupted by the interviewer, which leads to a second session where the interviewer may ask for more information on topics introduced by the interviewee in the first session. The interviews were audio recorded then transcribed into a written script after which they were analysed.

PFDDM student interviewees were selected from the 2015 class in their final semester. All students were between the ages of 19 and 25 approximately and were all male. The students were asked to write one-paged responses to the prompt question, “Can you please write the story of how you came to be a student here and what you think you will do now and in the future?” Their responses were analysed. Four students, two from each category (potential successors and non-successors), were selected and agreed to be interviewed; they were male and in their early twenties.

Additionally, BNIM interviews were conducted with a number of related personnel; these interviews were classified as ‘key informants’ and were selected with the assistance of the PDDFM co-ordinator and Teagasc dairy advisors. We decided to interview people that would have relevant narratives to the contents of the narratives provided by the PDDFM students which could help contextualise the research findings. The key informants included (i) two current hired farm managers (not related to the farm owner); (ii) a farm owner who employs hired farm managers (not related to him); (iii) a farm manager who is related to the farm owner; (iv) a farm owner who is related to his farm manager; (v) a farm owner who inherited his own farm and intends to pass it on to one of his children; and (vi) a farm owner who is the parent of a PDDFM student who will be inheriting the farm.

The data were evaluated using thematic analysis, a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Holloway and Todres, 2003), defined as ‘a tool for identifying,

analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The transcripts were read and coded to interpret the data. Codes helped to index the data, providing a way to store and retrieve the data easily. These codes included, but were not limited to, early interest in farming, roles of family members on-farm, becoming more credible with education, feeling appreciated/unappreciated on farm, on being the successor/non-successor, being business-minded, views on employment, intergenerational dynamic in regard to the farm, connection to the land, gaining trust of the older generation, wanting the ‘good life’ balance, having a passion for agriculture, etc.

These codes provided a basis for a subsequent level of coding which allowed the researcher to summarize the data through themes by identifying patterns (Punch, 2005). While initial coding helped to identify basic themes arising from the data, the following level of coding highlighted and interconnected those using theoretical codes. The themes corroborated or challenged pre-existing theory from the literature.

## Results

Characteristics of the 2015 cohort of PDDFM students, collated from the one-page essays written by the fifteen students, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics determined from the essay exercise of the fifteen PDDFM students.

	Successors (4 students)	Non- Successors (7 students)	Undecided successors* (4 students)
From a farming background	4	4	4
From a dairy background	3	3	3
Will be looking for employment as a manager after graduation	1	7	3
Wishes to own a farm in the future	4	6	2
Is interested in share farming, renting, or leasing	0	2	1

\*These students were from family farms but they did not know if they would be the chosen successor or not at the point of the study.

From the interviews with the case-study students, three major themes emerged and which were analysed in the context of the existing literature. The first theme involved entering the occupational identity of ‘farmer.’ With this, came the issue of patrilineal succession and protracted boyhood. Successors of farmers are more likely than not to inherit the farm later in the life course, which can curtail their decision-making discretion on the farm; however, the climate is changing with new opportunities for young farmers. For non-successors, availability of land is an issue with few opportunities to enter into farming. For both successors and non-successors, education may be a way for farmers to acquire status and enter into the occupational category of ‘farmer’. The second theme involved the transition in occupational identities of farmers. The traditional male farming identity has been based on physical strength although some studies have pointed to emerging managerial identities. Finally, the third theme was the strong influence of family members and the inter-generational aspect to farming in Ireland and the significant pride and esteem associated with farm ownership of the family farm and keeping it in the family name. The students also attach esteem to the social and cultural aspects of farming; they’re not just economically driven. While there were students seeking employment as farm managers, the ultimate goal of owning their own land and animals was apparent throughout.

### ***Entering the occupational identity of ‘farmer’ and patrilineal succession***

While the natural progression with ‘the family farm’ is for a chosen successor to eventually take over and run the farm, the timing of actual inheritance and transfer of responsibility and ownership is less clear. Typically the successor is identified but their responsibilities on farm may remain practically static as time progresses. As dairying in Ireland is primarily defined by family farming, clear boundaries and future plans relating to employers that might be seen in an industrial business model are often neglected, as family members are not seen as actual employees. Thus, job responsibilities and expectations may not be well-defined for a son who is in line to inherit the farm. With increased attendance in agricultural higher education and the younger generation having, on average, more education than previous generations, these young people may be using education as a bartering chip to gain responsibility and to be taken more seriously on farm. For example, one non-successor student recalled the perception his father had of him prior to entering the PDDFM, which was dismissive towards his son’s opinions because of his age,

*“As soon as I started in college he started asking my opinion on things.”*

The idea of education as a bartering chip was also witnessed in the generation before the PDDFM students. In an interview with one of the PDDFM host farmers and successor himself, he described being an only child and, contrary to the more common situation of protracted boyhood and later-in-the-life-course inheritance, he described an alternative situation. Starting farming with his father at sixteen and taking agricultural courses by twenty he was then given the opportunity to make managerial decisions on farm. At twenty-six, they entered an official partnership and at that point his father stepped away from most of the management decisions and let the son take over.

An issue that faces small farms in Ireland, which make up the majority of dairy farms, is that typically they cannot support two families. Consequently, spouses are left to work off-farm to help support the families or there are various strategies, such as JFVs, that families can use to enable more than one person to farm. However, finances or personal situations may not allow for these goals to be realised. As a result, delayed inheritance is not uncommon on these small holdings which can disrupt the career progression of young farmers wishing to enter farming as a profession.

The desire to enter the occupational identity of ‘farmer’ even when there was no farm to inherit was omnipresent in the non-successor category. A key informant, who was a farm manager by profession and non-successor himself, remarked on his upbringing around farming and his mother trying to persuade him not to pursue a career as a farm manager (which his father had chosen as a career). The same key informant later remarked on the influence of his upbringing around dairy farming and his agricultural education in motivating him to enter the occupation of farm manager.

One farm owner key informant in his early forties, who employed farm managers and who was a previous non-successor himself described his position of finding a way into dairying through the use of agricultural education. He was the youngest of six children and was told at a young age that only two children would be selected to continue farming. He was sent to boarding school to ‘get the farming notions out of [his] head’ (to discourage him from wanting to enter farming as a career), he excelled in school and got his choice college placements. Rather than pursuing a university degree, he attended agricultural college and finished a three-year farm apprenticeship program. Despite his own non-inheritance, he persevered and, with the help of his parents and brothers, was able to purchase his own farm. Another non-successor key informant who became a farm owner of several dairy farms

explained his moment of realisation that his position of non-inheritance would exclude him from owning a farm. Having attended a host farm during his agricultural education, and witnessing the way in which the farmer had not inherited a farm either but had managed to make it work. He realised,

*“...that we didn’t have to own the land. I suppose that’s what made me really see that this was achievable.”*

The issue of small farms not being able to support two families was evident especially in the interviewees that had farming backgrounds but fell into the non-successor category. The struggle of non-inheritance but having a passion for farming was expressed by one of these students,

*“...the farm at home would be quite small; it would be about 20 hectares. So it wouldn’t have been feasible for two of us to be at home and it was probably a bit small for a dairy unit...”*

Even with the tradition of late in the life course inheritance, there appears to be some evidence suggesting that while actual inheritance may still be delayed, an unofficial transfer of power on the farm may be beginning to shift in favour of the younger generation. We see this with an increasing prevalence of youth seeking higher education in agriculture and returning to the home farm with new ideas and perhaps earning them more influence on the decision making processes on the farm and thus an improvement in autonomy in regard to the future of the farm.

### ***Transitions in occupational identities***

Students of the PDDFM represented a diversity of individuals, including those aspiring towards careers as dairy farm managers and future successors and non-successors who wished to acquire farms. Given the orientation of the PDDFM course in providing students with the latest dairy research, cutting edge technology, and access to top industry and research professionals, it was not surprising that we encountered interviewees who had an appreciation of managerial information and techniques and identified with managerial dairy farming identities. Many of the narratives indicated that the students did not associate the course with hands-on skills, but did largely associate it with business-oriented skills and strategies witnessed while on placement farms. One of the successor students noted the marked difference in the approach to farming between one of his host farms and his home farm. He recognised how the top dairy farms measured a wide range of aspects of the farms, with particular emphasis on the farm costs. The same student later remarked about the skills that one of his host farmers taught him,

*“...he showed me how to be profit-focused, he challenged me, got [me] into discussion groups and things like that...keeping me aware of events that were coming up and events that I should be going to whether it would be here in Moorepark [agricultural research centre]...”*

The distinction between the unfocused and/or dated management style of the ‘home farms’ and the approach taken by contemporary dairy farmers that interviewees encountered on host farms was noted on several occasions. One key informant commented,

*“...the grandparents’ farm... was different compared to the job my father was doing. He [father] was managing like 200 cows and maybe they had 30 cows there or something, and a kind of a tie up style cow barn thing, you know, just completely in the stone age compared to where my father was working and compared to where I had been.”*

While Irish dairy farming in the post-quota era provides opportunity for farms to expand, expansion is a departure from the traditional Irish family farm, where all the labour required to run the farm comes from the immediate family unit. The host farms for the PDDFM students are generally larger farms, which in many cases have been recently expanded. Farmers in such a scenario are very often focused on their farming business and on profitability. Expansion and managerial farming identity are closely associated in the narratives. For example, one student from the successor category described his family's plan for when he finished the course and returned home.

*"I will be hoping to go home where we have dairy cows on the uncle's farm which we're in partnership with but we're hoping to set up a second milking parlour on the home farm."*

The modern identity not only is business-minded but also places more of an emphasis on a reasonable work-life balance. Some of the interviewees remarked on someday retiring, which, historically, was not something talked about or put into practice in the traditional sense of dairy farmers. This emergent mind-set was evident in both the students and the key informants' narratives. One of the non-successor students remarked,

*"I suppose a long term goal it would be nice to return home to farm fulltime but not to be struggling. That would be my aim, my main aim, to be comfortable financially."*

Several key informants, in the midst of their careers as dairy farmers, expressed similar viewpoints on wanting to have the opportunity to travel and enjoy the company of their spouses as they get older and to not be working into their seventies like the generations before them.

### ***The family farm***

Despite the trend of herd sizes increasing and thus perhaps a gradual departure from the style of farming that defines Irish dairy farming, there are still strong undertones in the narratives on the importance of the family in farming, the desire to run one's own farm and to one day own their own land and cows. Additionally, with Ireland's troubled history regarding land ownership, keeping the farm (and its land) in the family is still of significant importance to many farmers. For example, one non-successor student described his ambitions with consideration to JFVs,

*"The short term, I probably will stay in managerial for a couple of years...I think to own your own farm is going to cost an awful lot now but probably definitely, I could see myself leasing a farm. That's the main idea at the moment, is to start, a year lease, maybe start off leasing it first and eventually hopefully buy it and put myself on death row all my life but...It's kind of the, the plan. It's either that or get someone else I know that has the same interests and go on a share somewhere, on a bigger farm or something...I definitely see myself either owning or leasing my own."*

While the tradition of the oldest child or designated successor taking on the family farm is less rigid than it once was, even still in younger generations there is a strong tie to the home farm and not wanting to give that up. One of the successor key informants had since expanded to a second unit and described his hopes for the future and his young children. With two children and two farm units, he wanted them to be able to have a sustainable livelihood out of a unit each. While he was unattached to the purchased second unit, he expressed his desire for the home unit to stay in the family.

*“This is home and I suppose it’s always been home and there’s history tied to this place more so than the other place, no, I could not sell home, I could sell outside places. What I would have inherited I couldn’t see selling.”*

In some cases, in order to keep the farm means modifying how the farm is being run and in the case of one of the successor students, converting the farm which had been a beef unit over to dairy was a way that they could continue to run the farm and thus provide a livelihood for the next generation. The student recalls his father’s support and enthusiasm for the idea,

*“...he [father] would have been very positive when I decided to get into dairy. He would have been very proactive about it, saying, ‘If this is what you want to do we will want to be serious about it’.”*

It is not surprising to see a strong connection to the home farm, especially in the older generation. One key informant farmer who had inherited his family farm made a remark about how he would never want to move away from the farm,

*“My father died here, I can’t see, it is a change in lifestyle, I don’t know anything else...when I’m off, I can be up here and forget about everything.”*

The students and key informants interviewed also attached esteem to the social and cultural aspects of farming; they are not just economically driven. A non-successor key informant in his thirties and farm manager by profession explained why he enjoyed working at the farm,

*“Money doesn’t motivate me hugely. Obviously it’s nice to have it but it is not a major motivating factor. I suppose I like the person more than, I like (boss), I like his wife, I suppose I like the way he was approaching the whole thing and it was another step up in responsibility for me.”*

Being stewards of the land, one’s own boss, and being a member of a tight-knit farming community were reoccurring social and cultural aspects of farming throughout the narratives. It is clear for those who are non-successors, the desire to enter (or remain in) that community along with the students and key informants in the successor category. Farming is a unique profession where there is often an intergenerational dynamic not found in other occupations and there is also a certain esteem held to ownership of the family farm and maintaining that ownership over time.

## **Conclusion**

The identity of the traditional family farm in Ireland may be evolving in the post-quota era. With increased opportunity for farms to grow in size, there is an increased interest amongst educated agricultural youth to pursue expansions and larger farming endeavours. The particular population interviewed here represent a portion of young farmers today, some who are in line to inherit farms and some who are not. They have a common passion for their field, are motivated and optimistic about their futures and are excited about the future of the Irish dairy industry. While these graduates share an interest in expansions and profitable farms, they also hold closely to the roots of the family farm structure and still hold owning the farm and carrying on farming in the family name an important pillar to their future.

The results from these narratives have potential implication on future policy makers in that they have helped to corroborate recent literature indicating a shift in the occupational identities of farmers. This was a group of highly motivated young people entering into a

profession with a volatile market and potential up-hill battle for non-successors. While they still hold on to many of the fundamental values of traditional farmers, they put emphasis on wanting the ‘good-life balance,’ indicating they want more reasonable working hours and long term plans than what they saw farmers of previous generations doing. However, in alignment with traditional values, they still attach pride and esteem to ownership of farms, family farms in particular. While the students who are planned successors to their family farms, have indicated their interest in going home to the family farm, equipped with the knowledge they gained from the PDDFM, the non-successor students appear to be ready to take on managerial positions for the moment. Despite the difficult path to farm ownership for non-successors, they seem to still have the long-term goal of owning and running their own farm someday.

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