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## **Siblings and buddies: Providing expert advice about starting school**

Sue Dockett, Bob Perry

This paper investigates the role of child experts (siblings and buddies) in young children's transition to school. Drawing on two recent studies that sought the perspectives of children, educators and family members about effective supports at this time, we explore the roles of other children in the processes and practices of transition. This exploration is informed by sociocultural theories which position transitions as collectively produced and shared with significant others.

Keywords: siblings; buddies; transition to school

### **Introduction**

The transition to school is identified as both a social (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008) and cultural process (Doucet and Tudge, 2007). As children start school, they enter a particular social grouping – the class group, which is often based on age. In Australia, as in many other parts of the world, they make the transition to school as part of a cohort, with most children starting school on the same day. As members of the school community, children engage in a range of complex social interactions with peers, other children and adults. These interactions provide the basis from which children adapt to school, but also the basis from which they appropriate, reinvent and reproduce the culture of school (Bruner, 1986).

While research attention has focused on the role of social interactions between children and teachers (Baker, 2006; Jerome, Hamre, and Pianta, 2009; O'Connor and McCartney, 2007), as well as peers (Barblett et al. 2011; Ladd and Kochenderfer, 1996;

Peters, 2003), there has been considerably less attention to relationships with children who are already experienced members of school communities, or to the roles of these experts in promoting young children's participation in school (Dennison, 2000; Dockett and Perry, 2005). This is despite recognition that social participation between more and less experienced members of these communities is at the heart of engagement with, and the construction of identities within, those communities (Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 2012).

### **Buddies**

Children who have experienced successful transitions to primary school, and from primary to secondary school, have identified older siblings and buddies as potential resources, able to provide advice and guidance as well as support, about the new setting and changed expectations (Dockett and Perry, 2005; Evangelou et al., 2008; Margetts, 2009). While there is limited published research relating to the role of buddies, reports of peer mentoring and peer support identify roles for older peers in promoting children's adjustment to school (Dennison, 2000; McElearney et al. 2008), positive feelings about school (King et al. 2002; Valeski and Stipek, 2001), and reducing bullying at school (Cross et al. 2009).

While research evidence is limited, much support for buddy programmes is drawn from the experience of educators, who report positive outcomes over many years of implementing such programmes. This "practitioner wisdom" was behind the recognition of buddy programmes as a "promising practice" in a recent evaluation of transition to school programmes in Victoria, Australia. In this instance, promising practices were described as approaches drawn from the experiences of practitioners, but not necessarily "'validated' through systematic research and evaluation" (Astbury, 2009, 31-32).

Generally, buddy programmes involve engaging older, more experienced school students with younger, less experienced students. They have the dual purpose of supporting children as they start school by providing personal connections, and promoting leadership and mentoring skills among the older children (Bush, 2003; Dockett and Perry, 2005). There is considerable variation across programmes in terms of the ages of buddies involved, the nature of the buddy programme and the training provided for older students as they prepare to become buddies (Dockett and Perry, 2005; Smith et al. 2010). For example, some older students apply to become buddies, and participate in some training, often recalling their own starting school experiences and the things that helped them, as well as exploring appropriate communication strategies to use in interactions with buddies (Dockett and Perry, 2005). In some schools, time for regular interactions between buddies is scheduled in the timetable; in other schools, interactions occur largely in the playground. Despite the variation, there is some evidence that supportive interaction between buddies promotes both academic outcomes (King et al., 2002) and general health and wellbeing at school (Stewart, 2004).

## **Siblings**

Sibling relationships are often the longest and most enduring in our lives (Pike, Kretschmer, and Dunn, 2009). Siblings spend a great deal of time together in relationships characterised by stability, intimacy and emotional intensity (Mendelson, Aboud, and Lanthier, 1994). While these interactions would seem to provide many opportunities for siblings to influence one another's development and well-being, particularly around the transition to school, little research has explored this potential.

The limited research that does address sibling interactions at the time of the transition to school reflects two predominant models of sibling effects. The first model reports higher levels of school readiness among children in small size families – that is, with fewer siblings (Al-Hussan and Lansford, 2009). This is explained by the resource dilution model, which argues that more siblings in a family means greater competition for limited family resources (Downey, 2001). Such competition relates not only to financial resources, but also to the time, energy and attention parents can devote to each child within a family. This approach argues that siblings, particularly many siblings, can have a deleterious effect on children’s development and well-being. Further, it assumes that siblings themselves are poor providers of resources for their other siblings (Downey and Condrón, 2004).

An alternative model regards siblings as potential resources, particularly for the development of social and interpersonal skills. In this model, interactions with siblings provide a safe place for academic learning (Gregory, 2001), as well as learning about interpersonal skills and relationships, which can then be transferred to relationships outside the family (Brody, 1998; Kitzmann, Cohen, and Lockwood, 2002). This model does not presuppose that all sibling interactions are positive. Rather, it argues that both positive and negative interactions can be beneficial. For example, managing conflict with siblings, and the resolution of such conflict, is reported to help children negotiate conflict in other relationships (Downey and Condrón, 2004).

One of the few investigations of sibling influences as children start school reported interactions within a Puerto Rican family (Volk, 1999), where older siblings, much more than the parents, played active roles in preparing and supporting their younger brother as he started school. As experienced school students, they engaged in a range of teaching interactions, effectively bridging home-school differences by using a

combination of strategies that reflected the cultural environments of the home and the school. Volk (1999, 29) argued that “the siblings appeared to function as cultural and linguistic mediators for Nelson [the kindergartener]” and, as a result he “experienced both the content and the strategies valued in school within a familiar home context. This preparation for school occurred without the constant evaluation that he experienced at school, in interactions in which he often played an active role”.

This study draws attention to the role of siblings in many cultures, where they complement the roles of parents in care-giving, as well as the education, of siblings (Weisner, 1989). This is particularly the case in resource poor communities (Bernard van Leer, 2013), where parents have heavy work responsibilities and may not have attended school themselves.

The potential interplay of the resource dilution model and the resource model is illustrated in families with children with special education needs. On the one hand, siblings of children with special needs may feel that they miss out as attention, energy, time and resources are directed towards the sibling with special needs. On the other hand, as children with special needs attend school, siblings can provide a great deal of support in a context where parents are absent. In some instances, there appear to be major advantages for all concerned when siblings provide support at school. In other instances, siblings report losing their own personal peer networks when they take on a caring role for siblings at school (Strohm, 2002).

### **Interactions with more expert others**

Sociocultural theories posit that development and learning are embedded within social and cultural contexts. In their interactions with more competent members of their social or cultural group, children engage in culturally appropriate patterns of thinking and

communication. It is through these interactions that “participants adjust among themselves (with varying, complementary, or even conflicting roles) to stretch their common understandings” (Rogoff, 2003, 285). This is the basis of guided participation (Rogoff, 2003), where interactions serve to bridge different perspectives and build mutual understandings, and as interactions are structured to support shared experiences. Guided participation is not a one-way process of instruction. Rather, it reflects mutual engagement as both experienced and less experienced participants contribute to, and gain from, the interaction.

As more experienced members of a culture, siblings and buddies have the potential to engage with younger children in ways that promote the co-construction of knowledge and understanding. This can be particularly relevant when siblings and buddies are already school students and have experience managing the different worlds of home and school. Older siblings and buddies can act as mediators or brokers (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1989), as they help those about to start school by introducing them “to new languages and ways of interacting in familiar contexts, blending familiar and new” (Volk, 1999, 10). From this perspective, participation in shared experiences with siblings and buddies can constitute a priming event (Corsaro and Molinari, 2008).

Priming events are described as those that prepare children for the sociocultural context of school (Corsaro, Molinari, and Rosier, 2002). They could include discussions about what school will be like and practicing school processes, such as raising hands, asking and responding to questions, addressing adults in particular ways, trying out school uniforms or eating out of a lunchbox. Priming events can occur implicitly as well as explicitly in interactions within families, friends, prior-to-school settings and communities. Priming events provide opportunities for children to become familiar with

the cultural routines of school. Participation in these routines signifies children's belonging to the community of school and helps them "attend prospectively to the ongoing and anticipated changes in their lives" (Corsaro and Molinari 2008, 252). Through priming events, siblings and buddies, who already know and participate in the cultural routines of school, can share their expertise with those about to start school. However, it is not only those who are about to start school who benefit from these interactions. The mutual interactions between those who are experienced school students and those making the transition to school offer opportunities for participants to construct new understandings and ways of being. For example, experienced school students can come to regard themselves as mentors, supporters or leaders within the school and their interactions with less experienced students may provoke new ways of thinking about school, or generate calls for cultural change at school (Dockett and Perry, 2005).

Despite the potential for siblings and buddies, as more experienced school students, to provide substantial input into the experiences of those making the transition to school, little research has investigated this potential. This paper draws on two recent studies that identified effective supports at this time, from the perspectives children and educators (Perry and Dockett, 2011), and family members (Dockett et al., 2011), to explore the roles of other children in the processes and practices of transition. While neither project aimed specifically to consider the roles of buddies or siblings, each contributed to understanding the influences they may have on transition to school.

### **Project 1: Voices of children**

This project investigated the ways in which primary school children could be involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of transition to school programmes.

Throughout the project, four schools and ten prior-to-school services from the Illawarra Transition to School Network worked together to plan, implement and document transition to school programmes. Integral to these processes was the involvement of children from across the schools and prior-to-school services. Each educational setting trialled a range of ways in which to involve children and evaluated, with the children concerned, how these might be incorporated into ongoing transition programmes. At the conclusion of the project, children were invited to present the outcomes of the project in their setting to a forum of other participants. After several months, follow-up discussions were held at each of the settings to establish what changes had been made to transition programmes as a result of the project (Perry and Dockett, 2011).

In each setting, teachers engaged with the children to determine how the project was to be implemented and what data were to be shared as a result of the project. Data generated included books made by children at school to describe what school was like for them and what new children needed to know; DVDs and PowerPoint presentations of what a particular school looked like and what happened at that school; drawings from preschool children about what they expected school to be like; letters from preschool children seeking specific information about school; and reflections from older children about their own transition to school and ways this could have been improved.

A great deal of visual data was generated in this project as children drew, photographed and video recorded their sense of school and being, or becoming, a school student. Many of the preschool children drew themselves at school, sometimes including their siblings in drawings and other times referring to opportunities to play with them, or see them, at school. Figures 1 and 2 were generated in response to the question, *What do you think school will be like?*

Insert Figure 1 about here

Insert Figure 2 about here

Insert Figure 3 about here

Figure 3 was generated in response to the question, *What are you looking forward to at school?* In each instance, the teacher scribed the captions.

The major themes mentioned by preschoolers referred to friends, rules at school and work to be done at school – notably maths, doing letters and homework. While reference to siblings was not a major theme, it was a consistent presence across the preschool sites, with approximately 10% of the comments from preschool children referring to siblings. We note that no aspect of the project focused specifically on siblings. Rather, many activities related to the physical environment and expectations of school. Despite this, children in all but one of the preschool settings mentioned the importance of siblings as they thought about starting school.

Many of the children had siblings at school, and because of this, could describe the school uniform and some of the activities, routines and rules of school. In one preschool group, the visiting teacher was asked the question *Is my sister allowed to play with me?* In another preschool, discussion of drinking from bubblers (water fountains) was led by a group of children with comments such as, *My sisters and brothers have bubblers*, and *When we pick him up, I've had a drink*. After taking a group of first-year-of-school students to visit a preschool, one of the school teachers commented *Quite a*

*few children [at the preschool] had brothers and sisters at our school and were very keen to tell us about them. They had been to our school many times.*

Overwhelmingly, the preschool children's mention of siblings at school was positive. There was an expectation that having siblings at school would be helpful and that there would be opportunities to play with them at school. However, some children indicated that their siblings had not been particularly helpful in sharing their knowledge about school (Figure 4).

Insert Figure 4 about here

Participants in each of the school settings included children who had recently started school and their buddies. The nature of the involvement varied, but included opportunities to reflect on their own transition experiences, suggest improvements and indicate their views about what children needed to know in order to make an effective transition to school.

Across each of the school sites, children referred often to their roles in supporting buddies, but rarely in supporting siblings. Of the few references to siblings, one child described her pleasure at participating in a school visit to the preschool she had attended, because *I got to play with my sister*. In another school, school students spent some time in the first-year-of-school classroom with their siblings. While most reported this as a positive experience, one child commented *Now I'm going back to baby stuff because my little sister is here*.

Students from each of the schools recalled their own experiences of transition. Several children who had recently started school made the following comments.

*The Year 6 children were very big and I was a little scared*

*I found it difficult to line up*

*I wanted to know how to get to know people*

*I wanted to know about the work that I would do*

Children's reflections informed discussions about buddy programmes and resulted in a number of recommendations for change. In some schools, children from all grades participated in these discussions; in other schools only children who had recently been buddies (first-year-of-school and older children) were included. Discussions in one school focused on ways to improve the buddy programme, particularly as there were increasing numbers of children starting school and not enough children in Year 6 to act as buddies. One suggested improvement from the buddies was that:

Each Kinder class could have a buddy group of 6 to 10 Year 6 students – an even mixture of boys and girls. This group would meet the children at orientation and work with them throughout the year.

In an evaluation of the project, a group of Year 5 children (10-11-year-olds) and their kindergarten buddies (5-year-olds) at one school discussed the role of buddies. Important elements included older children helping the new children to navigate school rules – *We had to tell them they couldn't go past the blue bin. It's a bin where little kids can't go past because big kids play rough games; find their way around the school – Find the classrooms and the toilets; and helping around in the playground and in classrooms.* Older buddies described the importance of *Looking out for the younger buddies, Showing them the right things to do*, and on occasions when the new children were doing something that was not permitted, *Find[ing] something else to do*. Some of the older buddies were adamant that the younger children were not to be treated like babies, with one commenting that he had learned that *Little kids just sometimes aren't pests like a little brother*.

In this same school, one of the changes to the buddy programme was to involve Year 4 children (9-10 year olds) as buddies for the children starting school, rather than the older Year 6 children. The rationale from the children was that Year 6 children *were too big, they might not fit in the room*. Instead, Year 4 children *were just the right size* and the classroom was able to accommodate both groups of buddies more readily.

In this project, both siblings and buddies featured as important participants in the transition to school. Preschool children considering the prospect of starting school mentioned siblings and the opportunities they thought school would afford for interactions with them. The role of siblings sharing their expertise about school was mentioned, and a considerable number of the preschoolers indicated that they already knew about school, because their siblings had shared information. In contrast, children already attending school mentioned siblings infrequently. Rather, they referred to buddies and their interactions both as, and with, buddies. In these discussions, there was consensus that buddies were helpful and supportive as they shared their knowledge and expertise, and that being a buddy was a positive opportunity to help younger children become familiar with the experiences and expectations of school.

The lack of reference to buddies from the preschool groups could be explained by lack of experience with buddies. With much of the data generated before these children had participated in the full transition programme, it may be that they had not yet encountered the buddy programmes. It is notable that once these children started school, they also adopted the discourse of buddies, rather than siblings. Perhaps school is a place where pedagogical relationships are promoted by teachers, rather than sibling relationships that may be perceived as primarily caretaking.

## **Project 2: Transition to school for children from families with complex support needs**

The second project investigated the transition to school of children whose families had complex support needs, that is families who were experiencing “multiple problems, which may be problems for the parents, for the children, or for the whole family” (Katz, Spooner, and valentine, 2007, 33). In this project, 44 family members, predominantly mothers, from families with complex support needs met with researchers for up to two years to discuss what was happening for their family as children started school (Dockett et al., 2011). Siblings were present in 38 of these families, and were described as influencing the transition to school in a number of ways. We draw on excerpts from three case studies from this project to illustrate the range of influences.

### *Case 1*

Julie was a single mother with three adult sons, a 6-year-old son (Jacob) and Maddy who started school during the project. Julie suffered from depression and though she received substantial support from her case worker and from her friend, as well as her older sons, she reported intense feelings of loneliness. Throughout the project, Julie was concerned that Maddy was not ready for school. Partly, her concern related to Jacob’s recent transition to school and his apparent lack of friends at school.

*I don’t want Maddy to be alone when she goes to school. Jacob said that she won’t be alone because he’ll take care of her...*

*Her and Jacob are making plans for next year. That they’re going to meet ... and Jacob is going to play with Maddy.*

In this case, Jacob plans to adopt the role of friend and playmate for Maddy when she starts school. This strategy seems to serve the dual purpose of providing support for Maddy and ensuring that he has someone to play with at school. Hence, there is a sense of mutual benefit for the siblings.

### *Case 2*

Sandra and Tony’s youngest child, Henry, has Down syndrome. Despite some significant speech and physical challenges, he attended the local primary school. When he started school, his older sister Angela moved to the same school, where she commenced Year 4. Sandra indicated that Angela *wants to be at school with him. She’s excited about having him at school and she’ll keep an eye on him at school. If she doesn’t have anyone to play with at times, she’ll go across and visit Henry and see how he is going...*

Having the two children attend the same school was regarded as beneficial for all. However, Angela's role at school required some consideration, with Sandra noting that

*I think she thought her role there was to look after Henry so I explained to her that she's not there to look after Henry ... she felt she was moving schools so she could look after Henry.*

Henry's teacher at school generally appreciated Angela's attention to her brother, but also noted some concerns.

*I think she sort of likes the notoriety of being the sister of the special boy... everyone knows her because her brother is Henry and that might be a way for her to have broken into the school... I suggested that she start [at this] school last year so she could be a person in her own right before Henry came... to start, as herself... She's expected to look after Henry on the bus and she does it when she feels like it... sometimes she's asked to do things that are beyond her maturity.*

The teacher's strategy for managing these issues was to *separate [them]. I don't want her to sit with him for lunch. She can play with him all she likes at home. I don't let other brothers and sisters sit together because it stops the kindergarten children forming their own friendships.*

At the same time as Henry started school, his sister Angela changed schools to be with him. While Sandra indicated that this was Angela's preference, there were indications that there was also a sense of duty involved, as Angela felt some responsibility to care for Henry. The role of carer at school was also described by the teacher as contributing to Angela's place in the new school. In other words, there was mutual benefit for the siblings: Henry received support and Angela established her place in the school community. However, Angela's support was seen, by the teacher at least, to come at some cost, with the sense that Angela had not had time to establish herself at school *in her own right* and was expected to manage things beyond what might usually be expected of a 9-year-old. The teacher's strategy of separating siblings matches advice provided to parents and teachers of children with special needs (Strohm, 2002), to promote the independence and achievement of siblings.

### *Case 3*

Barbara is a single mother of 7 children aged between 2 and 25 years. The family had recently moved to a regional area, but knew no one in the new community and had no access to support. The second youngest child, Terry, aged 5, started school during the project. Two older children, John (aged 7) and Harriet (aged 6) had started school the previous year. They had been placed in different classes and had had quite different experiences, with John seeming to adjust to school more positively than Harriet. A few months before he was to start school, Terry had been

diagnosed with oppositional defiance disorder, possibly with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). His behaviour was described as violent and aggressive, and Barbara indicated that she did not know how to manage this. As a result of Terry's behaviour, Barbara felt unable to go out, and did not participate in school activities.

As the start of the school year approached, Barbara described what was happening for John and Harriet.

*... they're a little nervous. They do come back and try to remind him of the rules of school. Like, some of the things that Terry will do at home, they go 'You know you can't do that at school'. And we are a little apprehensive because he does like to push the boundaries ... so they're a little nervous about how he's going to be there. John is a very bright, great student. He prides himself on that and I think he is a bit concerned that he's related to Terry. He's concerned about that most of the time. He's not that fond of his brother sometimes...*

This excerpt provides a reminder that sibling relationships can be challenging as well as supportive. Despite the challenges associated with Terry's behaviour, both John and Harriet interacted with him and reminded him of what was expected at school. Their informal teaching strategies were similar to those reported by Volk (1999), as they seem to be attempting to bridge the worlds of home and school. However, John particularly, seemed to be worried about the impact of reputation at school (MacLure et al., 2012).

## **Discussion**

These excerpts indicate a range of roles for siblings; friend, playmate, carer and teacher. In many instances siblings provided, and received, support. The same reciprocity was reported in buddy relationships – not only did they provide support, but they also gained from the experience of being buddies. In general, both siblings and buddies acted as resources to help children navigate and negotiate the transition to school.

Both buddies and siblings engaged with children starting school in ways that promoted culturally appropriate ways of thinking and communicating at, and about, school. The activities in the *Voices of children* project were replete with opportunities to use the language of school and to communicate in ways that were expected at school.

These included engaging in discussions with teachers, writing letters to ask about school, preparing presentations and DVDs of what happened at school, and drawing what school might be like. These activities served as priming events, both through the information that was communicated about school and in the ways in which this was communicated. On both levels, these activities promoted the co-construction of knowledge about school and the expectations of school, helping children become familiar with the cultural routines of school.

At the same time, these activities helped to bridge the worlds of preschool and school and to share the expertise of those who already identified as school students. In several instances, children who had siblings at school were also eager to share their expertise about school, indicating that it was derived, at least in part, from experiences with siblings.

The actions of siblings reported in the excerpts from the second project also acted to build a bridge between home and school. Jacob's offer of friendship at school continued the interactions he and Maddy experienced at home. In a new environment, drawing on an established relationship was regarded as a support for Maddy and as a protection against loneliness. Angela was very prepared to support Henry as he started school, also providing a bridge between home and school. In this instance, Angela was a main link between home and school, as Henry had limited ability to communicate verbally. While there were mutual benefits for Henry and Angela, there were also concerns that their interactions promoted inter-dependence, rather than independence. The teacher's practice of separating siblings at school can be seen as a strategy to promote independence. However, it also has the potential to reduce the supports for children starting school.

Despite their reported nervousness at Terry's imminent transition to school, John and Harriet provided a clear example of bridging home and school contexts in their explicit reference to elements of Terry's behaviour that would not be acceptable at school. They acted as "cultural and linguistic brokers" (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1989, 70), as they introduced Terry to the expectations of school and to appropriate ways of interacting at school. Their use of strategies which included prompting, informing and teasing reflected several of the strategies identified by Volk (1999), as siblings guided their younger brother towards the expectations of school. These too served as priming events, helping to prepare Terry for school.

Even with the help provided, John was reportedly nervous about Terry starting school and about the potential impact of Terry's reputation. Children's reputations affect their social interactions (Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003), as well as their interactions with teachers (Jerome et al., 2009). John seemed aware of the power of reputation, particularly the potentially negative effects associated with being known as the brother of a 'problem' child.

Angela's interactions also indicated awareness of the importance of reputation. In the view of Henry's teacher, Angela relied on her reputation as the *sister of the special boy* to find her own niche in the new school. With her knowledge of Henry and the need to communicate with and probably for him at times, Angela was able to demonstrate expertise that, in the teacher's words, accorded her *notoriety*. Her mother's perspective was that this expertise enabled Angela to *keep an eye on him at school*. In different ways, these children remind us that sibling relationships can be intense and emotionally charged – both positively and negatively.

Overall, both buddies and siblings were regarded as resources for children starting school. In particular, none of the data indicated that buddies at school were

anything but a resource. The interaction between more experienced students and those starting school was regarded as being mutually beneficial. Buddy relationships seemed to encompass social and academic elements, combining care for buddies with informal instruction about school and school expectations.

The sibling interactions suggested greater complexity, possibly because the families involved identified as having complex support needs. Siblings, such as Jacob and Angela, provided great support for their younger siblings, fulfilling the role of resources. While John and Harriet also supported their brother Terry, the challenges around Terry's behaviour also hinted at the resource dilution model. Terry's behaviour meant that much of Barbara's time and energy was spent supporting him – rather than the other children. In addition, where Barbara may have had both time and energy, her uses of these were restricted by Terry's behaviour. As a consequence, she did not engage in school-related activities or go out often. This meant that the children did not see her at school and did not engage in community events that may have supported their development and learning.

## **Conclusion**

Across these projects, siblings and buddies provided companionship, support, advice and guidance for children starting school. Their expertise helped to provide a bridge between the works of home, or preschool and school, and their actions established their roles as brokers between the different contexts. In general, the presence of siblings and buddies generated positive feelings about school, and a sense of greater enjoyment and engagement. Older school students who took on the roles of buddies expected to demonstrate leadership and to gain skills and understanding from their interactions as buddies.

There is evidence that older siblings and buddies provided much practical support and advice for children starting school. While siblings and buddies have been involved in transition processes and programmes in many ways, the expertise of these groups remains under-valued and under-researched. There is great potential to work with older children in generating a positive and supportive transition to school environment and great potential to research these areas.

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