

# Parent Engagement and the Teaching Profession: A Policy Framework

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## Abstract

Despite the well-documented evidence on the importance of parent engagement for academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social inclusion, as well as interest among policymakers to tap into the benefits of parent engagement at the system level, there is still a widespread lack of support for teachers to be able to engage effectively with parents and families. Prior research shows that teacher education programs and professional development initiatives infrequently include parent engagement. With the goal to improve teacher readiness for parent engagement, I propose an integrated parent engagement policy framework. This framework will include three mandatory components: (a) parent engagement policy for educators; (b) inclusion of parent engagement components in teacher education programs; and (c) requirements for parent engagement competencies in teacher certification standards. Such a framework will ensure teacher readiness for parent engagement by transforming a current “patchy” policy landscape and will support teachers throughout their careers to democratically engage with parents.

Key Words: parent engagement, teacher education programs, families, educational policy framework, educator certification standards

## Introduction

Parent engagement in children's education has attracted the interest of sociologists of education, policymakers, and teachers for the last several decades (Epstein, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998). Parent engagement represents a range of activities in which parents and guardians participate at home (e.g., talking about school, arranging extracurricular activities and tutoring, creating learning opportunities at home) and in school (e.g., volunteering, fundraising, attending school events; Goodall, 2018, 2022). It also includes attempts by educators to encourage such activities to improve students' learning (Edwards, 2016). Parent engagement should be distinguished from parental involvement, which mainly focuses on school-centric activities (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Researchers have conclusively showed that parents and families play a crucial role in the academic achievement and social well-being of children (Boonk et al., 2018; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2012). Subsequently, policymakers became eager to increase school-based parental involvement to improve schools' academic outcomes (Leithwood & McElheron-Hopkins, 2004; Mapp, 2012), while shifting significant responsibilities for students' educational success from the state to parents (Nawrotzki, 2012). At the same time, the rise of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) created new expectations for parents not just to provide material and emotional support to their children, but also structure children's free time around organized extracurricular activities, keep regular communication with teachers, and advocate on their children's behalf to ensure their smooth navigation of the school system and successful transition to postsecondary opportunities (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011). Increased social inequality and stalled social mobility over the last 40 years (Piketty, 2014) and reliance on families, especially mothers, to provide the safety net in neoliberal contexts (Calarco, 2024), made parents more anxious about the economic and social futures of their children (Weis et al., 2014) and led to growing investment of family time and money in supporting children's education and learning (Bassok et al., 2016; Kobakhidze et al., 2023).

Teachers, whose job has traditionally centered on working with children on school premises, were now entrusted with engaging parents so that "good schools become even better" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). In various countries and regions, legal requirements to establish school councils which include parent members (Chicago Public Schools, n.d.; Government of Ontario, 2000; National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017) and to work with parents from poverty-affected backgrounds (Every

Student Succeeds Act, 2015) helped to redefine the job of teachers and school leaders, who now have to communicate and collaborate with parents more than ever before. There is a growing body of research showing that working with parents is a challenging component of teachers' work (Stelmach et al., 2021) and highlighting the need to ensure teacher readiness for parent engagement (Antony-Newman, 2023; Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Mancenido & Pello, 2020). Teachers often report lack of support in their work with parents ranging from minimal or absent emphasis on parent engagement during the initial teacher education to insufficient attention as part of professional development (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Mutton et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Available initiatives represent a haphazard combination of infrequent parent engagement workshops, occasional focus on parent engagement in teacher education programs, and reference to parent engagement policy documents in jurisdictions where such policies exist (Antony-Newman, 2024).

Due to the patchy nature of the current parent engagement policy context, there is an urgent need to develop a comprehensive parent engagement policy framework that would guide the work of teachers across their career span and help them pursue democratic family-school collaborations in which parents and teachers work together to improve the educational experiences of students. In this article, I propose the integrated parent engagement policy framework for each jurisdiction that would include the following three mandatory elements: (a) parent engagement policy for educators; (b) inclusion of parent engagement components in teacher education programs; and (c) requirements for parent engagement competencies in teacher certification standards. Such a framework will ensure teacher readiness and continuous support for parent engagement from the initial teacher education stage to everyday work in schools. In the subsequent three sections, I will provide examples of existing policy initiatives in all three domains and what still needs to be done to have an integrated parent engagement framework at the policy level.

## **Parent Engagement Policies: Guide for Action**

While educational policymakers first began tapping into the power of parent engagement in the 1960s as part of U.S. President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty when the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) introduced additional funding for parental involvement in schools located in poverty-affected neighbourhoods (Mapp, 2012), parent engagement became one of the key areas for the education policy community in

late 1990s–early 2000s. As mentioned earlier, this period was characterized by the rise of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) wherein parents, especially from the middle class, began to spend more time and money on their children’s education and extracurriculars (Bassok et al., 2016; Kalil et al., 2023). At the same time, the neoliberal turn to accountability in education as a way of governance and redesigning education further in line with the needs of the labor market (Ambrosio, 2013; Connell, 2013; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020) led to increased reliance on market-based competition and choice (Apple, 2004). Parents were now seen not just as providers of material and emotional support for their children, but active participants in children’s education (Feinberg & Lubenski, 2008; Golden et al., 2021) and contributors to school improvement through governance and school-centric activities (Antony-Newman, 2023; Lawson, 2003).

Unsurprisingly, parent engagement policies appeared first in English-speaking countries, which were and still are at the forefront of neoliberal reforms in society and education (Ambrosio, 2013; Connell, 2013; Lauder & Mayhew, 2020). Subsequently, increased levels of social inequality made it necessary for parents and families to be more actively involved in their children’s education to avoid downward social mobility (Weis et al., 2014). In this cultural and policy context, several jurisdictions introduced legislation that made school councils mandatory and brought parents into the governance of K–12 education, for example, *Education Act, Ontario regulation 612/00: School councils and parent involvement committees* (Government of Ontario, 2000) or *The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006* (National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017). As a result of such legislation, parent engagement became institutionalized, which was further supported by the development of dedicated parent engagement policies at the national or state/provincial level (Government of Australia, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Scottish Government, 2018). Such frameworks were instrumental in conceptualizing parent engagement at the policy level, creating the discourse of benefits of engaging parents in education and providing examples and guidance on practical implementation of parent engagement initiatives. Afterwards, parent engagement policies were developed at two levels: (a) national/subnational, and (b) school board/district level, with the higher-level policies “trickling down” (Ginsberg & Wimpelberg, 1987) to the level below.

### **National/Subnational Level**

While most English-speaking countries’ education systems are federal in nature (Australia, Canada, U.S.) or comprise several distinct education

systems (U.K.), their respective first level of parent engagement policies have been created and adopted at the subnational level. The main issue is that policies at this level were created in some jurisdictions but not in others. In the U.K., Scotland stands out in its policy emphasis on parent engagement and involvement (Education Scotland, 2022; National Parenting Forum of Scotland, 2017; Scottish Government, 2018), with a national parent engagement policy also developed in Wales (Welsh Government, 2016) but not in England, which accounts for 84% of the U.K. population. Several, but not all, Australian states developed comprehensive parent engagement policies, for example, Queensland (Queensland Government, 2020) and South Australia (Government of South Australia, 2022). Out of 13 Canadian provinces and territories, currently only Manitoba and Ontario have parent engagement policies at the provincial level (Government of Manitoba, 2005; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). In the U.S., the State Consortium Birth–Grade 12 Family Engagement Frameworks initiative resulted in 13 states developing parent engagement policies in 2017–20 (NAFSCE, n.d.), including very comprehensive policies in Connecticut (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018), Michigan (Michigan Department of Education, 2020), Mississippi (Mississippi Department of Education, 2020), and Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2018).

### **School Board/District Level**

At the middle level, parent engagement policies cover all public schools in a particular district, board, or local council and refer to the first-level parent engagement policy that exists at the national or subnational level (Education Scotland, 2022; Government of Australia, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). One of the few current examples that offer such comprehensive policy coverage is in Scotland, where all 32 local councils are responsible for developing an annual parental involvement and engagement (PIE) strategy and report to the central government regularly (Scottish Government, 2022). PIE strategies vary in scope and range from documents that list brief agenda items to more comprehensive policy documents that introduce key terms, provide examples of parent engagement and involvement initiatives, and include a bibliography of academic and policy sources (Inverclyde Council, 2022). In the U.S. context, only local education agencies (school districts, county offices of education, direct-funded charter schools) that receive additional federal funding under Title I in areas of high poverty are required by law to have parent and family engagement policies (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Mapp, 2012).

As a result, mid-level parent engagement policies are unequally distributed across the country. Nevertheless, there are successful initiatives that encourage second-level parent engagement policy coverage in selected U.S. states. For example, in 2007, Ohio developed a model policy for school boards, districts, and schools to help develop local policies (Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, 2024b). The state of California requires all districts to develop a policy on parent rights and responsibilities (California School Boards Association, 2006). In Ontario, Canada, there is no mandatory requirement for all school boards to develop parent engagement policies, but the provincial *Parents in Partnership* policy has been around since 2010 and influenced some school boards to develop or significantly update their parent engagement policies. For example, the Toronto District School Board parent engagement policy adopts the language of partnership between parents and schools prominent in the provincial framework policy and cites the document itself (Toronto District School Board, 2022).

Individual schools normally rely on middle-level policies developed at the school board/district level to guide their parent engagement activities. Private schools are not governed by a school board/district or any local authority yet have more of an incentive to develop their own parent engagement policies, especially in the context where they charge fees and would like to communicate to parents that their opinion matters for the school that relies on their financial contributions (Beatrice Tate School, 2012; Holy Spirit Bray Park, n.d.).

Parent engagement policies play an important first step in shaping the discourse that parents matter, their interests should be centered, and school-family partnerships should be democratic (Baquedano-López et al., 2013). Policies that exist now vary on how comprehensive they are in providing educators with concepts, tools, and resources to engage with parents and families. As for the content and message, current policies can be placed along a continuum between their school-centric and family-centric focus, and problem-based and asset-oriented nature (Crozier & Davies, 2007). Crucially, making sure that each jurisdiction has a parent engagement policy at both levels helps to locate parent engagement at the center of teachers' work rather than on the margins.

Policy documents produced at national/subnational, school board/district, or even individual school level "tell" educators to "do" parent engagement, but it is the role of school leadership and teachers to enact these policies (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Pushor & Amendt, 2018). The enactment of parent engagement policies is shaped by the interplay between teacher beliefs and practices related to engaging parents on the one hand

and social and cultural context of schools on the other. To ensure that all educators are ready to engage with parents in their schools, initial teacher education and professional development are crucial (Antony-Newman, 2023, 2024).

## **Teacher Education: Preparing Teachers to Engage With Parents**

Prior research shows that engaging with parents is an important area of teachers' work, but they often do not receive sufficient preparation or support throughout their careers (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Mutton et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Teacher education programs are tasked with multiple goals that need to be reached to prepare teacher candidates to be ready to start their careers in the classroom. Making sure newly qualified teachers are ready to engage with parents and families is seen as an important goal, but prior research highlighted two important barriers: crowded curriculum and narrow conceptualization of parent engagement (Antony-Newman, 2024).

The biggest obstacle is a very packed teacher education curriculum, where matters related to school curriculum and classroom instruction take up most of the time (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Lehmann, 2018; Patte, 2011). The opportunities for parent engagement content to be included in teacher education programs depends on the length of such programs, which varies dramatically between nine-month programs in the U.K. (University of Glasgow, n.d.) and two-year programs in many Canadian provinces (University of Toronto, n.d.) to four-year programs in the U.S. (AACTE, 2022). The goal of adding parent engagement content, either as stand-alone courses or specific topics added to general courses, cannot be confined to university-based teacher education only. Fast-growing alternative pathways to the teaching profession offer a range of fast-track routes (e.g., Teach for America), wherein teacher candidates spend as little as five weeks in class before their field experience (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2022). It is extremely unlikely that such programs will have space in their classroom curriculum for parent engagement content, although the practicum experience can and should provide affordances for teacher candidates to get ready for parent engagement when they enter their own classrooms after graduation.

Another barrier for adequate teacher preparation for parent engagement lies in the narrow understanding of parent engagement. All too often teacher educators view parent engagement mainly through a school-centric lens (Lawson, 2003), where engaging with parents means only sending home report cards, informing about school events, and sometimes providing suggestions on extending classroom learning at home (Jones, 2020;

Mehlig & Shumow, 2013; Willemse et al., 2016). In such cases, student teachers only learn about parent involvement in school (Goodall, 2018) rather than a holistic parent engagement that does justice to parental funds of knowledge (Colina Neri et al., 2021).

Currently, parent engagement content in education programs is rarely offered in a systematic fashion. Although some jurisdictions highlight parent engagement as key components of teacher education programs (Government of Ontario, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2021), dedicated parent engagement courses are rarely mandatory, and their presence relies mainly on the initiative of individual faculty members (Antony-Newman, 2024). The Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan is an exemplary case in point. It offers at least four courses focused on parent engagement in their undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs: *Engaging Parents in Teaching and Learning*, *Parent Engagement in the Early Years*, *Re/Presenting Families in Schools*, and *Trends and Issues in Curriculum Research and Development: Practicum in Parent and Family Engagement*. All of these courses have been developed and taught throughout the years by Professor Debbie Pushor (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.b). Only the *Parent Engagement in the Early Years* course in the *Early Childhood Education* certificate program is mandatory (University of Saskatchewan, n.d.a). The other three courses are offered as electives and are instructor-dependent.

In the Australian context, Saltmarsh et al. (2015) looked at four domains where teacher education programs can introduce parent engagement content: (a) general foundational units that specifically refer to parents/families; (b) stand-alone units in special interest areas; (c) stand-alone units (families, partnerships, professional communications), and (d) practicum. Only two universities offered parent engagement in all four domains, although 12 had stand-alone units devoted explicitly to addressing parent engagement, and four universities featured parent engagement in practicum (Saltmarsh et al., 2015).

An interesting example of blurring the lines between stand-alone units and practicum experience is the course *Professional and Family Partnerships* developed at the York College of Pennsylvania in the U.S., which is mandatory for all of their early elementary and special education preservice teachers. As part of the college–family partnership model, future teachers combine this university-based course with working with families who attend regular programming at a local nonprofit organization that serves the families of children with special needs (Sutton et al., 2020). Crucially, this field component of the teacher education program also brings benefits for



participating families who receive access to enrichment activities centered around their own concerns of parenting children with special needs.

Although parent engagement content can be added as a cross-curricular theme and does not have to be offered exclusively in stand-alone courses (Antony-Newman, 2023), a significant body of literature highlights insufficient teacher readiness for parent engagement at the start of their careers (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Mutton et al., 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Another important area for teachers' readiness for parent engagement is teachers' professional learning that happens throughout their career (Campbell et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2024). A big role here is played by teacher standards.

## **Teacher Standards: What All Teachers Should Know About Parent Engagement**

Teacher standards were introduced in the 1980s–90s to codify “what teachers should be able to do and what they should know” (Sachs, 2003, p. 177), ensure consistency of teaching, and facilitate improvement and professional learning (Campbell et al., 2017). Teacher standards are embedded in teacher education programs, guide practice, and represent a “framework for the preparation, professional growth, supervision, and evaluation of all teachers” (Alberta Education, 2023, p. 1). To achieve systematic and sustained parent engagement (Pushor, 2024), teacher standards have to include the components related to teacher readiness for parent engagement. What do we know about existing teacher standards internationally?

Antony-Newman (2023) found that most Canadian provinces and territories have teacher standards that name parents as partners in the education of their children. While some jurisdictions mention parents in passing (Government of New Brunswick, n.d.; Ontario College of Teachers, 2016; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2017) others have explicit focus on establishing relationships and communicating with parents and families (B.C. Teachers' Council, 2019; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018; Government of Nunavut, 2017). British Columbia and Quebec went further than other provinces and have developed separate standards and competencies for parent engagement (B.C. Teachers' Council, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2021). *Professional Standards for B.C. Educators* is a concise document, but having a separate standard for parent engagement out of nine standards is still an important step forward in sending a message that engaging with parents and families is one of the core areas for teachers (B.C. Teachers Council, 2019). *Reference Framework for Professional Competencies for Teachers*, developed in

Quebec both to inform initial teacher education programs in the province and support continuous professional development, has a dedicated competency that requires teachers to be able to “cooperate with the family and education partners in the community” (Ministry of Education, 2021, p. 70).

In the U.S., the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) analyzed licensure requirements for educators in all 50 states and 6 U.S. territories against the four areas of parent engagement readiness: collaboration and partnership, communication, culture and diversity, and relationships and trust (NAFSCE, 2020). They found that only 30% of U.S. states and territories explicitly address these areas in their licensure requirements, less than half of jurisdictions require relevant parent engagement administrator training, and less than 50% emphasize the need for teachers to establish relationships and trust with families (NAFSCE, 2020). In other words, 17 states and territories have a comprehensive focus on parent engagement in teacher standards, seven jurisdictions do not mention parents and families at all, while the majority focus on some of the four key areas but not on others (NAFSCE, 2020).

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, developed at the federal level (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022), include clear focus on parent and family engagement in *Standard 7: Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers, and the community* and briefly mention parents/families in *Standard 3: Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning* and *Standard 5: Assess, provide feedback, and report on student learning*. All Australian states and territories follow these standards for their local teacher certification purposes.

Teacher standards in New Zealand include the commitment to families and whānau (extended family in Maori culture including three or four generations) as one of the four key commitments that guide teachers in New Zealand, alongside commitment to society, the teaching profession, and learners (Education Council, 2017). Teachers are expected to engage families in their children’s learning and show respect to families’ heritage, language, identity, and culture. *Standard for Full Registration* in Scotland briefly mentions parents and families as partners alongside colleagues, the wider school community, and partner agencies by establishing “opportunities for parents/carers to participate in decisions about their child’s learning” (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021, p. 9). *Teachers’ Standards* in England document (Department for Education, 2021, p. 1) mentions parents only twice when requiring teachers to “communicate effectively with parents with regard to pupils’ achievements and well-being” (p. 1) as part of working with parents in the “best interests of their pupils.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this article was to advocate for the introduction of the integrated parent engagement policy framework at the levels of school, teacher education, and teacher standards. Currently, there is no perfect example of a jurisdiction which has a comprehensive parent engagement policy to guide teachers' work in schools, a policy mandate for all teacher education programs to include the parent engagement component, and teacher standards that include parent engagement as a key requirement for practicing teachers. For example, most Australian states have parent engagement policies (Government of South Australia, 2022; Queensland Government, 2020) and teacher standards feature parents (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022), but teacher education lacks consistency in parent engagement focus (Saltmarsh et al., 2015). Scotland has a range of well-developed parent engagement policies on the national and local levels (Education Scotland, 2022; National Parenting Forum of Scotland, 2017; Scottish Government, 2018), but teacher education programs and teacher standards mention parent engagement only in passing (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021). Some U.S. jurisdictions have parent engagement policies in place (e.g., Connecticut State Department of Education, 2018; Michigan Department of Education, 2020; Mississippi Department of Education, 2020) and highlight parent engagement in teacher standards (NAFSCE, 2020), but do not offer consistency in teacher education, especially with the proliferation of fast-track alternative routes to teaching (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2022).

In the absence of an integrated parent engagement policy framework, several organizations developed a range of initiatives to support teachers in parent engagement activities. In the U.S. context, the Statewide Family Engagement Centers Program at the U.S. Department of Education provides “financial support to organizations that provide technical assistance and training to State educational agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) in the implementation and enhancement of systemic and effective family engagement policies, programs, and activities” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 1). Many of the funded activities implemented at state level provide parent engagement training and support for educators. NAFSCE is currently working on developing its Family Engagement Preservice Educator Preparation Initiative and has been funding projects across several U.S. states since 2022 that are aimed at fostering innovative approaches to parent engagement in teacher education (NAFSCE, n.d.). They also developed a set of eight core competencies for family engagement

professionals in four domains—(a) reflect, (b) connect, (c) collaborate for learning, and (d) lead alongside families—that is becoming influential in the U.S. context and can serve as an example for other countries (NAFSCE, 2022).

Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at the Ohio State University aims to “support the development and academic achievement of children by providing tools and trainings to Ohio families and schools for building effective family–school partnerships” (Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, 2024a, para. 1). Among many activities of the Center, they established a network of partnership schools and provide professional development for family engagement at 96 Ohio schools alongside free online seminars.

Parents International, an independent research, advocacy, and training organization headquartered in the Netherlands but involved in projects related to parent and family engagement throughout the European Union member states also contributes to building teachers readiness for parent engagements. Their resource pack *Empower Educators: Teacher Training Materials to Engage Families with a Migrant Background* (Parents International, 2023) is aimed specifically at teachers who work with immigrant and refugee students who face unique barriers to parent involvement and engagement (Antony-Newman, 2019).

At a more local level, Glasgow Life Family Learning Team in Scotland is funded by the Glasgow City Council “to help close the ‘poverty related attainment gap’ by building school and nursery staff capacity to develop and deliver a sustainable family learning offer in their establishments” (Glasgow Life Family Learning Team, n.d., para. 2). Working in the early years and primary settings, the organization

offers resources, training, and coaching activities that will enable schools and nurseries to develop effective parental engagement strategies, improve the range and quality of their family learning programmes, increase parental learning and volunteering opportunities, and develop strong partnerships that support quality and sustainability. (Glasgow Life Family Learning Team, n.d., para. 4)

The team follows the governmental mandate to support teachers in fostering family learning work in local schools and communities (Education Scotland, 2017, 2018).

Crucially, no matter how successful such initiatives are, they cannot compensate for the lack of a comprehensive policy framework that would guide teachers’ parent engagement work from the initial teacher education experiences to their ongoing everyday work in school in all jurisdictions.

Current initiatives are only capable of adding elements to the existing patchwork of policies both in geographical and in substantial terms. As a result, to effectively support teachers in engaging parents and families, an integrated parent engagement framework is urgently needed in all jurisdictions. It should include three interrelated components, where no single component can be missing if we are to ensure the sustainability of the entire framework: (a) parent engagement policy for educators; (b) inclusion of parent engagement components in teacher education programs; and (c) requirements for parent engagement competencies in teacher certification standards.

A key element of the proposed framework is its ethos of social justice, inclusion, and belonging that shape the vision of parent and family engagement in education and learning. The positive effects of the integrated parent engagement policy framework will only be realized if, at the level of societal discourse and dominant beliefs in education systems, parents are viewed from the asset-based perspective and the practice of democratic family–school collaborations allows parents and teachers to “walk alongside” each other (Pushor, 2015). Policies send powerful messages about what needs to be done, but it is down to policy actors to make ongoing decisions on how policies will be enacted (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016). An integrated parent engagement policy framework is an important step in ensuring democratic family–school collaborations, but it is up to educators and families to make it a lived reality (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Goodall, 2022; Pushor, 2015).

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