

Teacher turnover in Malawi's Ministry of Education: Realities and challenges

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The teaching profession is no longer a concern of academicians but the public in general who yearn for positive results. Internationally, the profession is continuously beset by several serious problems. One of the most serious problems in the teaching profession is teacher turnover. Governments are finding it difficult to retain teachers in schools. In Malawi, this problem is profound and overwhelming, even by Sub-Saharan standards. The paper heavily relies on secondary data derived from general trends and observations of several research findings as well as government publications, newspapers and several academic papers. The paper argues that main cause of this problem in Malawi can be attributed to general poor working conditions. The paper further argues that retention measures derived by the Malawi government may take time to bear fruits and it is unlikely that they can seriously affect teachers positively because they do not address the basic immediate needs of the teachers.

Teacher turnover, motivation, stress, Malawi, recruitment

INTRODUCTION

Globally, more than any other profession, the teaching profession has recently gone through rigorous deliberation and analysis (VSO, 2000). In most cases, the profession itself as well as the education policy that guides it has been a highly emotive issue in public discussions. In the past, the profession was the concern of bureaucrats and policy makers but now it is under the full glare of the public eye. One of the concerns in the profession is high turnover among the teachers. Fitzenz (1987, p.167-168) defined employee turnover as the movement of employees into and out of organisations while Grobler *et al* (2002, p. 609) simply referred to it as "the movement of employees out of the organisation". There are numerous reports of high teacher turnover in several developed countries such as United States (Herbert and Ramsay, 2003; Guin, 2004); United Kingdom (*BBC Online* 18 January 2001); Scotland (Finlayson, 2003); and Portugal (Jesus and Conboy 2001). But in developing countries the problem is comparatively serious. Reports in countries such as South Africa (Xaba, 2003), Zambia, Papua New Guinea and Malawi (VSO, 2002) indicated that the problem had almost reached a catastrophic stage.

The problem in Malawi is profound and overwhelming, even by Sub-Saharan standards, and the former Education Minister, Yusufu Mwawa likened the problem in education "to a patient on a resuscitation bed in a hospital" (*Nation Online*, 19th October 2004). For example, the primary school sector needed over 9,000 new teachers every year but the six teacher training colleges produced 4,000 per year (there are 4,000 students in first year and another 4,000 in the second year making a total of 8,000) (Kadzamira, 2003). Out of a total of 43,832 trained primary school teachers in the Ministry of Education, during the period of January to June 2005, 2,189 teachers

left or moved to a non-teaching post for various reasons (GoM 2005, p. 43). Similarly during the same period, out of the Ministry's 2,253 trained secondary school teachers, 1,121 left the Ministry or moved to a non-teaching post (GoM 2005, p.80). The largest number of 360 secondary school teachers who left was attributed to resignation while only 64 were due to retirement (GoM 2005, p.80). Ministry of Education in Malawi is the largest Ministry in the Malawi Government with more than 70 per cent of the total civil servants.

Grappling with an ever-increasing student and pupil enrollment, plummeting examination results, shortage of resources and above all the high teacher turnover, the education system is in serious problems. Despite all these problems in the education sector, hope for the future of education still remains with one essential human resource: the teachers themselves. As the Volunteers Service Organisation [VSO] (2002, p.4) report correctly asserts, "when policy-makers discuss dilemmas of pedagogy, education management and financing, material and school infrastructures, what they are really asking themselves is: **how can we help teachers to do their job effectively?**" (emphasis added). Accordingly, the cause of teacher turnover is the subject of discussion in this paper- with special focus on the case of Malawi's Ministry of Education.

Taking into consideration the complexity of factors that influence turnover, the paper *inter alia* analyses the concept of turnover based on relevant literature; from such an analysis the causes of turnover are identified and discussed. The identified general causes form the premise and guiding principles in the discussion of the causes of turnover in Malawi. In view of this, the first part does not necessarily discuss the Malawian scenario but focuses on the theoretical aspects as well as the international perspective. The second part concentrates on the causes of turnover among teachers in Malawi. Overall, the paper heavily relies on secondary data derived from general trends and observations of several research findings as well as government publications, newspapers and several academic papers.

CONCEPT OF TURNOVER

According to Fitz-enz (1987, p. 167-168) transfers and promotions are not considered part of turnover because they do not involve movement across the membership boundary of an organisation. Fitz-enz (1987, p.167-168) explained that there were voluntary and involuntary turnover whereby resignations were examples of voluntary turnover and dismissals, layoffs, retirements, and deaths were involuntary. Under normal business conditions voluntary turnover was greater than involuntary. Grobler *et al* (2002, p. 609-10) added that there was functional and dysfunctional turnover. They argued that functional turnover was necessary in an organisation because among other things it brought in new employees who might have good ideas on how to improve organisational productivity. On the other hand, "excessive turnover creates an unstable workforce and increases human resources costs and organisational ineffectiveness" and this was referred to as dysfunctional turnover (Grobler *et al* 2002, p. 609-10).

Related to the argument raised by Gobler *et al* (2002) on functional turnover, Fitz-enz (1987, p. 168) further explained that zero turnover was not desirable in an organisation because employees who had stayed in the organisation for many years generally had higher salaries. Assuming the organisation grew at a normal rate and all employees remained, "most employees would soon be at or near the top of their pay ranges and total salary expense would be very high" (Fitz-enz 1987, p. 168). The concept of staff turnover is highly linked to several HRM functions such as motivation, commitment and morale, selection, recruitment, induction and others. If there is high turnover, it is an indication that there may be problems in other HRM related functions in the organisation.

CAUSES OR FACTORS AFFECTING TEACHER TURNOVER IN DEVELOPING AND DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Within the teaching profession there are several factors that cause turnover. Xaba (2003, p.287) concluded that the causes of teacher turnover can be attributed to organisational factors. He further asserted that these could be categorised into “commitment to the organisation, long-term prospects, and job satisfaction” (Xaba 2003, p. 287). Further analysis was also made by Herbert and Ramsay (2003). Although the findings by Herbert and Ramsay (2003) related to teacher turnover in Texas in United States they accurately tallied with findings in several other countries inside and outside Africa. Herbert and Ramsay (2003, p.2) while acknowledging the fact that “decisions about whether to enter and remain in teaching are ultimately personal ...according to individuals’ needs and circumstances”, they attributed turnover among teachers to several factors such as salaries and incentives, working conditions, induction and professional development, and assignments. Some of the causal factors cited by Shaw (1999) were similar to those also raised by Herbert and Ramsay (2003). Shaw (1999,p.3) added that factors such as recruitment and selection practices, the work itself, compensation, career opportunities and the work environment contributed to turnover. All these factors can be briefly explained.

Salaries, Incentives and General Working Conditions

Poor salary is probably one of the most common causes of high teacher turnover (VSO 2002). Beardwell and Holden (2001, p. 514) explained that the salary of a particular job reflected “beliefs about the worth of jobs... based on scope, level of responsibility, skill requirements, objectionableness of duties, commercial worth and strategic relevance”. Taking into consideration that the status of the teaching profession had been waning as discussed below, the salary, incentives as well as working conditions had followed suit.

By citing a National Survey of Teachers, Herbert and Ramsay (2004, p3) specified that, among those dissatisfied with teaching, 61 per cent cited poor salaries, 32 per cent poor administrative support, and 24 per cent student discipline problems. It was also argued that schools that gave their teachers higher salaries, adequate administrative support, and experienced fewer cases of student discipline the teaching staff were less likely to leave.

Loss of Status of Teachers

Obanya (1995) claimed that the prestige previously bestowed on an African teacher had eroded in society hence insisted that “to restore good quality education, the **prestige of the teacher must be increased**” (emphasis added). The VSO (2002, p. 1) report also indicates that the teaching profession was declining in status. Due to this decline, “the teaching profession in developing countries is characterised by high attrition rates, constant turnover, lack of confidence and varying levels of professional commitment”. Originally (from 1940s to 1970s), “Teachers were seen as bringers of progress, modernity and development and were rewarded and respected accordingly” but it is no longer the case (VSO 2002,p.1).

Indiscreet Reforms and Loss of Motivation

Related to the above-mentioned fact, Day (2002, p.679) argued that contemporary reforms in education had a negative impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of teachers. He explained that internationally, contemporary reform in education tended to ignore the role of the teachers. Day (2002, p.679) further mentioned that *inter alia* reform had the following effects on the teachers: (a) they challenged teachers’ existing practices, resulting in periods of at least temporary destabilisation; (b) they resulted in an increased work load for teachers; and (c) they did not always pay attention to teachers’ identities – arguably central to motivation efficacy, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness. More importantly, according to Day, current

reforms had removed the quest for teacher's innovation so that the teacher's job was more of a mechanical exercise with greater emphasis on examinations and the teachers just "teach to the test".

Stress

Williams and Robertson (1990) in their publication titled *Warning - Teaching is Hazardous to your Health* convincingly argued that the teaching profession was losing staff in crisis proportions because of heightened stress and the potential stress factors considered include: meeting deadlines, workload, limited time, continuous change (current), records of achievement and organisational restructuring (potential). These findings were supported by Sutton and Wheatley (2003) in their work titled *Teachers' Emotions and Teaching*. Finlayson (2003) mentioned that in the teaching profession in Scotland, stress was the major cause of ill health, teacher turnover, absenteeism and other related problems which cost the government about 43 million pounds a year (Finlayson 2003). Among other things, the cause of stress among teachers was attributed to the workload, change, conflict at work and pupil discipline. Probably the words by Ruskin (in Finlayson 2003, p.1) are more appropriate to remedy the problem of stress among teachers. Ruskin stated that, "In order that people may be happy in their work, these three things are needed: they must be fit for it; they must not do too much of it; and they must have a sense of success in it."

Jesus and Conboy (2001, p. 131) also argued that, "in spite of the fundamental importance attributed to teacher motivation, it is a common research finding that teachers present lower levels of motivation and higher levels of stress than other professional groups". They continued by giving the example of Portugal where due to stress problem, less than 50 per cent of those in the teaching profession showed interest of remaining in it.

Recruitment and Selection Practices

By comparing the contemporary teachers with those in the past, Obanya (1995) hinted at the importance of recruiting those of the right calibre as well as setting appropriate training programs. He mentioned that:

...it was not just anybody who could be a teacher in the past. There was some selectivity, based on ability and socially desirable personal characteristics. Whether in traditional societies or in the colonial educational system, the education of the teacher was a rigorous affair. Teacher evaluation was not a once-and-for-all affair, as the wider society (or the inspectorate system) monitored teacher on-the-job development (Obanya, 1995, p. 7).

Obanya (1995) attributed the current poor recruitment and selection practices in the education system as contributing to high turnover and other problems because wrong people were employed in the first place.

Herbert and Ramsay (2004, p.4) pointed out that most teachers were given classes or subjects of which they hadn't been trained to handle. This fact was supported by the findings of a VSO (2002) report based on three developing countries. The report stated that due to shortage of teachers, they were compelled to teach subjects of which they were not competent. This could have an impact on the teachers because they might feel incompetent, hence think of changing their careers. Livingston (2003, p. 194) claimed that among other things "underdevelopment and under utilisation of a workforce" were the major causes of turnover.

Unfair Measures of Performance

Another problem is the unique characteristic of the learning process. It is to a large extent an abstract process. Megginson *et al* (1993, p.79) pointed out "it can't be seen or observed to be

taking place. Often, an individual might not even be aware that he or she has learnt". Examinations, as an instrument to measure the extent of learning, do not guarantee accurateness because certain behaviours acquired through the learning process are very elusive hence can't be easily measured. This entails that a teacher's performance is benchmarked against unrealistic and unfair indicators.

CAUSES OF TEACHER TURNOVER AND THEIR CORRESPONDING CHALLENGES IN MALAWI

Most of the causes of teacher turnover in Malawi can be attributed to poor working conditions and their related factors as discussed in detail below:

Poor Housing and School Infrastructure

Davenport (1999, p.198) admitted that although research showed that strategies for retaining employees were related to financial rewards such as salary levels and increases, health care benefits, and retirement savings plans, he argued that the best way to bind employees was to make their jobs more "fulfilling and enriching". It was generally agreed that the immediate working conditions could greatly enhance and enrich an employee's job. The Malawian teachers were subjected to very poor physical working conditions as explained below.

After the introduction of free primary school education in 1994, enrolment increased and there was not appropriate infrastructure to accommodate all the pupils. Candidates for the Malawi School Certificate of Education increased from 7,000 in the early 1990s to 45,416 in 1999. This increase did not match with teacher capability hence "...over-stretched the human resource available" (*News from Africa*, February 2003). In some schools, classrooms were too small to accommodate the large number of pupils and as reported by *Africanews* (July 1996), "packed like sardines in one classroom, as many as 90 pupils faced one teacher, yet the recommended ratio is 1:45".

In the primary school sector, by June 2005, the average learner: educator ratio was 106: 1 and 34 per cent of the infrastructure was temporary or incomplete and only five per cent had electricity (GoM 2005, p.5, 37, 40). One teacher in Malawi was asked by the VSO researchers concerning turnover and their discussion was as follows (VSO, 2002, p. 28):

Question: Why do teachers around you leave the profession?

Answer: Poor accommodation. The toilets are not O.K, they are made of grass and mud. In the rainy season they fall down.

The same VSO report gave a stark view of teachers' housing and school infrastructure by observing that:

Most schools had basic infrastructure only, many were dilapidated and neglected. Typically, classrooms were old, dusty and equipped with at most a chalkboard and a limited number of desks and chairs. Often they did not have glass in the windows, and were vulnerable to prevailing weather conditions: leaky in the rainy season, stifling during hot summer months, freezing in winter. Teachers' housing mirrored this pattern, with teachers frequently inhabiting dwellings that suffered from poor maintenance and infrastructure and lacked electricity, running water, good sanitation and cooking facilities. (VSO, 2002,p. 20)

The negative impact of poor housing cannot be underestimated. Lansley (1979, p.71) rightly argued that "Housing conditions have a majority influence on the health, attitudes, opportunities

and quality of life of individual and communities ...” Though not largely supported by studies, it can be deduced that the teachers’ motivation, quality of work and commitment can also be largely influenced by their housing conditions. The latest records show that 10,884 of primary school teacher’s houses are categorised as permanent while 5,583 are temporary (GoM 2005, p.37).

Salaries

Among other points, Schuler and Jackson (1996, p. 614) stated that in assessing how effectively an organisation administers its compensation program, the following major purposes of total compensation had to be kept in mind: (a) attracting potentially qualified employees, (b) motivating employees, and (c) retaining qualified employees. The compensation program in the education sector of Malawi did not seem to be fulfilling these conditions.

Salaries of teachers in Malawi have been extremely low and irregular even by Sub-Saharan standards (Fozzard and Simwaka, 2002; Chirwa *et al.* 2000, p.47). In March 1994, teachers went on strike for pay increments and only a small per centage increment was implemented (Chirwa *et al.* 2000, p.47). The starting salary for a trained primary school teacher in 2002 was only Malawi Kwacha (MK)1,042¹ per month, a secondary school teacher holding a four year university degree got MK2,280 (Fozzard and Simwaka, 2002, p. 12). In 2005, starting salary for a University trained secondary school teacher was MK21,000.00 per month. A primary school teacher received from MK 6,000 to MK8,000 per month. According to VSO report (2002, p. 26), to live in Malawi, MK14,000 per month was the “minimum required for basic living not including travel or entertainment”. One Malawian teacher commented “...our salaries are so low we can’t even have chairs in our house” (VSO 2002,p. 36).

The unmotivated and uncommitted teacher can have serious negative consequences on the learning process of the pupils. The critical factor is that the future of the children is at stake. The teacher contributes much to the educational advancement or regression of the pupils and the remark by Livingston vividly captured this point:

Most parents are aware that teachers’ expectations about individual children become self-fulfilling prophecies: if a teacher believes a child is slow, the child will come to believe that, too, and will indeed learn slowly. The lucky child who strikes a teacher as bright also picks up on that expectation and will rise to fulfil it. This finding has been confirmed so many times, and in such varied settings, that it’s no longer even debated. (Livingston, 2003, p. 174)

Government secondary schools in Malawi do not have enough teachers as most of them have left to join the private sector or picked up other jobs. The loss of secondary school teachers can be attributed to the lack of incentives in the sector. A very serious development was that the number of unqualified staff had been steadily increasing in Malawian secondary schools from 315 in 1995-96 to 2,956 in 1998-99 (Ministry of Education, 2001). As of 2003, there were 4,968 teachers in secondary schools and of these only 1,628 were qualified, yet the country needed at least 12,000 secondary school teachers (*News from Africa*, February 2003). This entailed that there was a deficit of more than 10,000 qualified secondary school teachers. By June 2005, there were 8,975 secondary school teachers of whom only 2,523 were qualified (GoM 2005, p.55).

High Death Rate due to Illness but no Medical Scheme

Another problem that contributes to high turnover in Malawi is the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. In a study carried out by Harries *et al* (2002, p.35) in order to ascertain the extent of AIDS on teachers and health workers it was revealed that among teachers TB was the cause of 27 per cent

¹ 1USD = MK120 as of 15th December 2005.

of deaths, chronic illness 49 per cent and acute illness 25 per cent - all these were linked to HIV/AIDS.

By January 2004, the Teachers Union of Malawi (TUM) indicated that the number of deaths, for secondary and primary school teachers, had arisen to an alarming 1,200 (*Malawi Press Review*, January 2004). The former Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Education, Simeon Hau, stated at a press conference on 18th July 2005 that “most of the teachers are dying due to HIV/AIDS and other related diseases” (*The Daily Times*, 8 November 2005). From 1999 to 2005, “the ministry’s payroll indicated 6,071 teachers deleted due to deaths linked to HIV and AIDS” and it was also reported that “there is six per cent attrition rate in the education sector alone” (*The Daily Times*, 8 November 2005). In the period from January 2005 to June 2005, there were 903 reported deaths among secondary and primary school teachers of whom most were attributed to the HIV/AIDS (GoM 2005). In a study carried out by the Government on 323 teachers in 11 schools to ascertain causative factors for teacher absenteeism, it was found out that in a single term (three-month period), ‘illness of self’ has been the leading cause of absence (GoM, 2001a, p. 8). In this same study, it was revealed that in these 11 schools and in a single term, the economic cost of absenteeism was at MK 72,046 (GoM, 2001a, p. 8). This was great loss of scarce resources, assuming it was the same scenario throughout the country. Above all, the cost did not include what the pupils themselves may have missed in class.

What the study did not focus on was the work-stress and burnout effect on absenteeism and illness. Stress is often overlooked by human resource practitioners and top management hence its effect is rarely measured (Briner, 1999). According to Armstrong (1991, p.136) stress among employees may, among other things, be caused by: (a) the work itself-over pressurised, (b) actual or perceived failure, (c) role in the organisation - ambiguity in what is expected of the individual, (d) poor relationships within the organisation, (e) lack of information as well as (f) little effective consultation and (g) feelings about the job or career. It is very possible that some illnesses mentioned above are reinforced by teachers’ stress, taking into consideration the difficult conditions in which they work. Cloete (1997, p. 205) suggested that in order to curb stress problems, “provision will thus have to be made for supervisors to listen to the difficulties and stresses of their subordinates and to offer advice i.e. counselling”. Unfortunately such provisions are not available in the education sector. By referring to 30 international studies, Vinassa (2003, p. 20) argued that:

...organizations worldwide which provide Employee Assistance Programmes to their staff earn a return of between three and seven times the amount they invest in terms of increased motivation and productivity and reduced absenteeism, accidents and **staff turnover** (emphasis added).

Despite all the problems of HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, there is no special medical care for public servants (including public school teachers) in Malawi (GoM, 2001, p. 19-20). Teachers are forced to seek medical assistance in the substandard public hospitals, clinics and health centres within their locality and when they need special treatment, they have to pay from their wages. It came out during the government study (GoM 2001, p.19-20) that teachers demanded that “the Ministry of Education should create a medical scheme for its officers so that they are assured of assistance upon falling ill”. Taking into consideration that such a scheme has not been established yet, teachers feel that they are not being cared for; as a result several of them have just left the teaching profession or joined the private sector where medical schemes are available.

Frequent Changes in the Syllabus and Education System

Due to lack of adequate resources, the government has often opened up to the donor community to assist in the development of education in the country. About 30 per cent of recurrent budget and between 70-80 per cent of development budget in Malawi was donor funded (Nielsen, 2001,

p.415). This led to a situation where by the Ministry of Education has been prone to excessive external influence and changes. Each donor had in most cases demanded certain changes in the education system or structure before dispensing their aid.

Unfortunately, with the emergence of decentralisation, these changes were not always well coordinated. This has serious negative implications on the teachers who are not adequately briefed and the top management is frequently grappling with highly conflicting changes that defy the principles of management of change. Ultimately the basic human resource functions are neglected by top management and attention is directed towards problems emanating from the established changes. As Plattner (2004, p. 20) rightly put it, "For employees, change can be confusing and distressing". Frequent and uncoordinated changes can even be more confusing to staff as is the case in the Ministry of Education. Armstrong (1992) in McKenna and Beech (1995, p.59) asserted that for successful change to occur "the provision of solid and comprehensive information on the need for change in an excellent beginning...". Taking into consideration that changes in the Ministry of Education were made without adequate information there was no guarantee of success.

Commenting on frequent curriculum changes in Malawi, the Education and Methods Adviser explained that, "As for curriculum changes, it doesn't necessarily motivate the teachers- actually it demotivates the teacher because the changes are forced on them without training or guiding them" (VSO 2002, p. 39).

Lack of Administrative Support System

Due to limited resources, the government has been cutting expenditure in educational administration and management, leading to reduction of the administration department within the Ministry of Education. Expenditure in the administration department of education had been reduced from 14.4 per cent in the 1991/92 budgetary year to 6.3 per cent in 2001/02 (Fozzard and Simwaka, 2002, p. 61). Taking into consideration that the government has been building more schools and employing more teachers, the reduction in the administration entails that there are serious problems in human resources functions within the organisation. Teachers therefore are expected to work hard yet those who can ably handle their welfare are not adequately available.

By reducing the administrative component, the government rationale is to empower the school head teachers so that they can ably handle all the relevant teachers' welfare. Research however has revealed that the relationship between teachers and school heads is not desirable because the school heads have not been given the appropriate training. The VSO (2002, p. 29) research discussion below gives a glimpse of the role of the school heads in teachers' management:

Question: What is the role of the head teacher in motivation?

Answer: He demotivates. He gives no guidance or encouragement... There is no respect for the head.

Poor Recruitment and Training Programs

Owing to increased enrolment in Malawi, the government recruited thousands of teachers who had had no training and these teachers had raised a lot of problems in the system (GoM 2001b). Furthermore, because of the shortage of teachers, there were no interviews conducted for teacher recruitment in Malawi's Ministry of Education. If an individual applied to a teachers' training college and undertook the training program successfully, he or she was sent straight to a teaching post without necessarily being interviewed. This implied that issues that could have been clarified during interviews were neglected and in the long run caused a lot of problems for the new recruits. Mengel (2001) cited the Harvard University study that found that "nearly 80% of turnover is due to hiring mistakes".

English (2001) aptly linked ineffective recruitment with turnover by pointing out how they might affect each other negatively if not appropriately done:

Turnover takes a heavy toll on an organisation: it takes about a year, on average, to get rid of poor hires. The higher in the organisation they are, the more damage they do. Between hiring and firing (if, indeed, the employee is ever let go), that person is on the payroll and in the organisation. But you can bet that a lot of management time is being taken up with problems associated with that person. (English, 2001, p.28)

Armstrong (1998, p.65) asserts that good recruitment and selection procedures “do produce people that are likely to succeed and stay with the company.”

Retention Strategies Established by the Government

In order to curb the problem of teacher turnover, the Government has introduced some measures and such as: (a) decentralised education management so as to monitor teachers effectively; (b) introduced distance learning for unqualified teachers; (c) increased budget allocation to the education sector; (d) encouraged programs that strengthen the link between teachers and communities around them; (e) pressed for more NGO as well as donor community involvement in the provision of teaching facilities and teacher development (GoM, 2001b).

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse critically these retention strategies but it is quite obvious that these measures may take time to bear fruits and it is unlikely that they can seriously affect teachers positively because they do not address the basic immediate needs of the teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper shows that the problem of teacher turnover is not confined to Malawi but it is a global problem. The case of Malawi, however, is so serious and shrouded by several interrelated factors. The critical factor to high teachers' turnover is poor working conditions hence a successful intervention has to address this problem. Taking into consideration that the problem is deep and severe, only drastic measures are appropriate in some cases.

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