

## Friendship Perceptions of Syrian and Turkish Children Attending the Project of Support to Sport Education for Children

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine friendship perceptions of Syrian and Turkish children attending the Project of Support to Sport Education Project that aims to gather Syrian and Turkish children through sport and to encourage communication and understanding the tolerate the differences they may have. The research group consists 108 children aged between 5 and 17. The data were obtained through metaphor and pictures. The data were analyzed by content analysis and chi-square test. As a result it was seen that Turkish children had more negative attitudes than Syrian children did [ $\chi^2$  (sd = 1, n = 96) = 4.27, p < .05]. In addition, it was seen that the theme “spending time” included description of what children were doing with their Turkish / Syrian friends. The theme “description of feelings” included children’s feelings about their Turkish / Syrian friends. No significant difference was found between the themes [ $\chi^2$  (sd = 1, n = 88) = 2.09, p > .05].

**Keywords:** Friendship, Perception, Syrian, Child, Sport, Education

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## INTRODUCTION

Olympism is a philosophy that has been created by Coubertin to ensure the physical, mental, spiritual, social, and moral development of young people through sports education (Yıldırım, 2014). Olympism regards sports as a form of education in order to form the common ideals of globalization and aims to rise not only Olympians, but also people who know about Olympism (Atalay, 2004; Erdemli, 1993).

Olympic Education that has emerged under the Olympic Movement is based on the values of Olympism with the aim of presenting the sport to every human being without any discrimination. It has a goal that incorporates the fundamental values of Olympism such as living in harmony, organizing sports activities based on principles of sportsmanship and equal opportunity, and showing respect and tolerance while engaging in not only individual but also international relations for peace (International Olympic Committee, 2018; Müller, 2004).

Olympic Education is thought to help educators and coaches to ensure that children and athletes see the world and each other differently, understand and put in effort for success. (Binder, 2012). It is an interdisciplinary field aiming towards the multi-faceted development of human beings and it also provides the values we need by using sports and Olympics as a symbol. (Öztürk Kuter & Kuter, 2012). Currently, the ideology of Olympism is not static. In fact, it is adapted to the relevant historical, political, social, and cultural changes in society (Chatziefstathiou, 2012).

Recently, all around the world, heterogeneous societies have been increasing because of different reasons such as migrations, ethnic interactions, globalized intercultural relations. As a result of this, cultural concepts pose problems, which is unavoidable (DaCosta, Abreu & Miragaya, 2006). When people leave their country and move to another country With a totally different culture, they may experience challenges while trying to survive or adapt to differences. They may suffer from depression and other forms of emotional trauma, which can be worsened because of lack of employment, the absence of friendships and social networks and problems on speaking the language of the host country (Huffman & Hillyer, 2014). This mostly brings about conflict among groups from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Sport and recreation activities are proven effective in overcoming those negativities and securing reconciliations between communities. Especially in Europe, sport is seen as an ideal field of action to promote mutual respect in communities among policy-makers (Dorokhina, Hosta & van Sterkenburg, 2011).

These days, over three million Syrian refugees live with local people in many different regions in Turkey, which is an important example of political, social and cultural change all around the world. According to The Ministry of Interior Immigration Administration of Turkey (2019), more than 1,300,000 refugees are between 0 and 14 years of age. Unfortunately, not all of these children are able to enroll in schools and even if they can, adaptation to language and culture is one of the main problems that they suffer from (Battal, 2018; Cırıt Karaağac, 2018; Evran, Riedler & Eryaman, 2020; Kaysılı, 2013). Hence, when the formal education is not sufficient, the skills of adopting differences and culture through socialization, cohesion, making friendships can be acquired through sports.

Human beings bond through social networks like friendship circles (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996). The basic elements of friendship are socialization and sharing. It can be claimed that that the emergence of friendship which has the power to direct both the individual and the society dates back to birth. It is stated that to establish healthy social relationships and adapt to social life starts with childhood relationships and develops throughout adolescent relationships (Dinçer, 2008). In addition, peer relationships help children gain knowledge and skills in interpersonal relationships, help them develop skills to deal with challenges by supporting them in a collaborative and common environment and promote problem solution. (Beyazkürk, Anliak & Dinçer, 2007). In other words, sports promotes physical, mental, social and affective development in children, as well as helping them to develop self-confidence and gain insight towards accepting differences.

Currently, Turkish National Olympic Committee and Municipality of Gaziantep is running a project named The Project of Support to Sport Education for Children since 2016. They aim to gather Syrian and Turkish children so that they can do sport together, communicate and understand the cultural differences. The objectives of the project for children are to gain basic skills and techniques in Olympic sports including badminton, basketball, gymnastics, wrestling, judo, karate, taekwondo, and volleyball and to contribute to the physical and social development of children through sports. (Turkish Olympic Committee, 2019).

The aim of this study to uncover friendship perception of Syrian and Turkish children who have participated in this project by using drawings and metaphors.

## METHOD

### Research Model

Qualitative research method, which provides more in-depth information about psychological measure and social events (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz & Demirel, 2014, p. 234), was used in the research.

### Working Group

There were 200 Syrian and 250 Turkish children attending to the project between 2018 and 2019. The research group consisted of 108 children aged between 5 and 17 years who participated in the project. The Turkish participants were chosen randomly and the Syrian participants were chosen among those who could speak and write in Turkish. This selection was based on their school attendance in Turkey. Participation was on voluntary basis. However, all participants had parental consent. These children have been training at least one of the sports branches in the projects for a while. The demographic information of the children is given in Table 1.

**Table 1. The Demographic Information of the Participants**

Grade	Nation							
	Turkey				Syria			
	Girl		Boy		Girl		Boy	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Pre-school	-	-	2	4,9	-	-	1	2,9
Primary school	5	21,7	3	7,3	6	66,7	20	57,1
Middle school	17	73,9	32	78,0	3	33,3	12	34,3
High school	1	4,3	4	9,8	-	-	2	5,7

The ages at the grade levels are 5 years old at pre-school, 6-9 years old at primary school, 10-13 years at secondary school and 14-17 years old at high school.

**Table 2. Participation Period to the Project**

Period (month)	<i>n</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	79	0,25	36,0	4,7	6,3

29 out of 108 children did not specify the period. The children, on an average, have been participating in the project for an average of 4,37 months.

**Table 3. Syrian Children’s Residency Time in Turkey**

Residency (year)	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	40	1,0	8,0	5,3	1,9

The Syrian children, on an average, have been living in Turkey for 5,3 years. 4 out of 44 children did not specify their residence time.

### **Data Collection Tool and Procedures**

Before the data collection tool (a form) was developed, the literature related to the study (Ada, 2013; Akça, 2019; Bang, Wong & Jeffery 2014; Berber, 2019; Bland, 2018; Camcı-Erdoğan, 2013; Cerit, 2008; Çatakaya, 2019; Emerson & Mansvelt, 2014; Farrel, 2006; Fraser, 2000; Hartel & Savolainen, 2015; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008; Sadik, 2017; Yilmaz, Esenturk; Tekkursun Demir & Ilhan, 2017) was studied. The research tool was designed by the researchers of the study and an external researcher who studies in Sport Sciences and has research experience on metaphors. There were two sections on the research tool. The first section had some personal questions regarding the gender, grade degree, participation to the Project, and residence duration of Syrian children. In the second section, Syrian children were asked to complete the expression “My Turkish friend is like a ...because ....” and Turkish children were asked to complete the expression “My Syrian friend is like a ... because ....”. In addition, all these children were asked to draw a picture reflecting their thoughts about their Syrian/Turkish friends.

The data were collected in 2 days. The children were taken to a hall in groups of 20 and the process for each group was completed in 30 minutes. The researchers provided the pencils and crayons used by children to draw pictures. To get the participants' own thoughts clearly, no guiding phrase was used. The Syrian children who can read and write in Turkish were included in the study group.

### **Data Analysis**

Content analysis was made in order to come up with the concepts and relationships which would further explain the data. Content analysis requires in-depth analysis so as to provide the themes that were undetermined before. Thus, similar data are organized, interpreted and made understandable by the reader according to certain concepts and themes. At this stage, another researcher who is not involved in the research was consulted to examine whether themes reflect the data correctly (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The themes formed by the researchers conducting the study and the external researcher were compared and Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula was used to obtain the reliability of the results. The cited formula is given below.

$$Reliability = \frac{\text{Number of form reached an agreement}}{\text{Number of total form}} \times 100$$

When the compliance percentages were analyzed, it was seen that while the reliability ratio for metaphors was 81.38%, that of drawings gathered under the appropriate themes was 86.37%. Miles and Huberman (1994) say that when the reliability is greater than 70%, the data is considered reliable. It was seen that “friend (n = 1), fellow (n = 10), angel (n = 3) and human (n = 5)” metaphors were handled under different themes. As a result of the expert opinion and the second review by the researchers, “friend” metaphor was transferred from the “love” theme to the “neutral” theme, and “angel” metaphors from the “love” theme to the “sharing” theme. In addition, some examples of the metaphors and the drawings were presented in the findings section. 108 forms were examined and six forms containing the expressions that did not fit or reflect any ideas were eliminated. 102 of them included metaphors related to the research and 88 of those included drawings related to the research. Metaphors and drawings were examined and codes were determined according to the explanation of

each metaphor and drawings. The codes containing similar features were gathered to create themes. The percentage and frequency distribution of the themes were given in tables. Chi-square test was used to investigate the relationship between the themes and the variables in the study. In the findings section, personal information of the participants was encoded. For example, “P94BS12” code means that, participant 94 (P94) is a boy (B) from Syria (S) and he is twelve years old (12).

## FINDINGS

After elimination of the forms, 102 forms were evaluated. Turkish children filled 62 of them and Syrian children filled 40. The answers of the question “Do you like to spend time with your Turkish/Syrian friends?” have been given in Table 4 and 5.

**Table 4. Responses of Syrian Children about Enjoying Spending Time with Their Turkish Friends**

Do you like to spend time with your Turkish friends?	n	%
Yes	34	85,0
No	4	10,0
No comment	2	5,0

The majority of the Syrian children (85.0%) stated that they enjoyed spending time with their Turkish friends in sporting activities. According to this result, it can be said that Syrian children have a positive perception towards their Turkish friends.

**Table 5. Situation of Turkish Children about Enjoying Spending Time with Their Syrian Friends**

Do you like to spend time with your Syrian friends?	n	%
Yes	41	66,1
No	18	29,0
No comment	3	4,8

Turkish children had a lower likelihood of spending time with their Syrian friends than Syrians did. This may be the reflection of negative news, attitudes or racist discourse stated in Turkish media and social media.

Syrian and Turkish children used 44 metaphors in total to describe their friends. After the codes had been determined, the relevant themes were created. Those codes and themes are given in Table 6.

**Table 6. Metaphors and Themes**

Themes	Codes	n	%
Sharing	Brother (2), tree (2), friend (3), moon (1), mirror (1), cute (1), plant (1), flower (2), someone who I spend good time with (1), very nice (2), both friend and brother (1), human (1), good person (4), fellow (7), angel (3), book (1), someone who I want to be friend (1), someone who I love (1), helpful (1)	36	35,3
Love	Flower (7), warmhearted (2), fellow (7), someone who I love so much (1), cat (2), butterfly (1), angel (2), teacher (2)	24	23,5
Neutral	Human (5), Turkish (1), interpreter (1), friend (1), fellow (3), both good and bad (1), respectful (1), sometimes nice (1), flower (1)	15	14,7
Negative thoughts	Bad person (4), stingy (1), jackal (1), animal (1), rotter (1), target board (1), jerk (1), enemy (1), friend (1), dog (1), someone hitting everybody (2)	15	14,7
Empathy	Flower (1), faded flower (1), fellow (4)	6	5,9
No comment	-	6	5,9

Children used metaphors mostly in the “sharing” theme and the most frequently used metaphor was “fellow” (n=21). Some metaphors emerged in more than one theme because different children used them to communicate different messages. As an example, “fellow” was used to describe how they shared something with their friends like their brother or sister. On the other hand, the same metaphor used in “love” theme to explain that they loved their friends like a brother or sister.

**Table 7. The Themes of the Metaphors That Were Used by Syrian Children**

Theme	n	%
Share	18	45,0
Love	12	30,0
Neutral	3	7,5
Negative thoughts	4	10,0
No comment	3	7,5

Examples of the metaphors used by Syrian children:

“My Turkish friend is like both a friend and brother because he always supports me and tells me things that I don't know.” (P94BS12)

“My Turkish friend is like a flower because you're a beautiful friend; I love you very much. You're the best friend in the world.” (P92BS11)

“My Turkish friend is like a dog because he's acting weird.” (P81BS7)

“My Turkish friend is like a nice person sometimes because she blossoms while I am OK, but she shuts herself off like a flower during my bad times.” (P82GS11)

As seen in the Table 7, unlike Syrians, Turkish children displayed feelings of empathy towards friends from another nationality. Therefore, an “empathy” theme has been created for Turkish children’s metaphors. There is no doubt that Turkish children were aware of the war, which was the reason why Syrians started living in Turkey for a while. Hence, it is predictable that they can put themselves into their Syrian counterparts’ shoes.

**Table 8. The Themes of the Metaphors That Were Used By Turkish Children**

Theme	n	%
Share	18	29,0
Love	12	19,4
Neutral	12	19,4
Negative thoughts	11	17,7
Empathy	6	9,7
No comment	3	4,8

Examples of the metaphors used by Turkish children:

“My Syrian friends are like withered flowers because they feel so upset due to the war in their country. They're withered.” (P35GT14)

“My Syrian friend seems like an irresponsible person because he doesn't care about anything; he goes on his own way.” (P20BT13)

“My Syrian friend is like a human because they are human. So are we! The only difference is our cuisines. (K38KT10)

“My Syrian friend is like a flower because she amuses me. We play games and she shares her pain with me. She does not belittle me. She helps me and I like this.” (P1GT11)

“My Syrian friend is like a cat because she is very sweet and treats everyone very well. She is very well-behaved. All teachers like her; so do I. Also, she is so hard working.” (P3GT12)

Chi-square test was used to compare positive and negative/neutral metaphor themes. The metaphor themes are different in both groups. The chi-square analysis shows that the number of cells that are less than five is expected to exceed 20% of the total number of cells. It would not be correct to comment on the significance of the test, so themes needed to be rephrased as “positive” and “negative/neutral” themes.

**Table 9. Categorical Distribution of Metaphors (chi-square)**

	Category						$x^2$	p
	Positive		Negative/Neutral		Total			
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Turkish	36	61,0	23	39,0	59	100,0	4,27	.044
Syrian	30	81,1	7	18,9	37	100,0		

$p < .05$

When the categorical distribution of metaphors was examined, it was seen that Turkish children had more negative and neutral emotions than the Syrian ones [ $x^2$  (sd = 1, n = 96) = 4.27,  $p < .05$ ]. There was no significant difference according to gender.

In both groups, the drawings were gathered under the themes of “spending time” and “description of feelings” (Table 10). 14 children did not draw anything. Under the theme of “spending time”, it was seen that the children depicted the sports education or games they played with their friends and under the theme of “description of feelings”, they described their feelings and thoughts about others. On the other hand, seven Turkish children drew pictures that included violence and exclusion towards Syrians.

**Table 10. The Themes of the Drawings (chi-square)**

	Theme						$x^2$	p
	Spending time		Description of feelings		Total			
	n	%	n	%	n	%		
Turkish	18	29,0	40	64,5	58	100,0	2,09	.167
Syrian	13	32,5	17	42,5	30	100,0		

$p < .05$

It was seen that there was no significant difference between the drawings of Turkish and Syrian children [ $x^2$  (sd = 1, n = 88) = 2,09,  $p > .05$ ]. Besides, there was no significant difference in genders.

Some examples of drawings that belong to Syrian children:



Figure 1. K82KS11



Figure 2. K96ES11



Figure 3. K76KS11



Figure 4. K86KS9

Figure 1 shows a drawing of an 11-year-old Syrian girl who described her Turkish friend as “flying like a butterfly in good times and abandoning me in bad times”. In Figure 2, there is a heart above the Turkish flag and a sentence says, “I love my Turkish friend so much”. In Figure 3, we can see a child sharing his book/notebook with his friend. In Figure 4, a girl described her love to her friend drawing a lot of hearts as a sign of her love.

Some examples of drawings belonged to Turkish children:



Figure 5. K42KT12

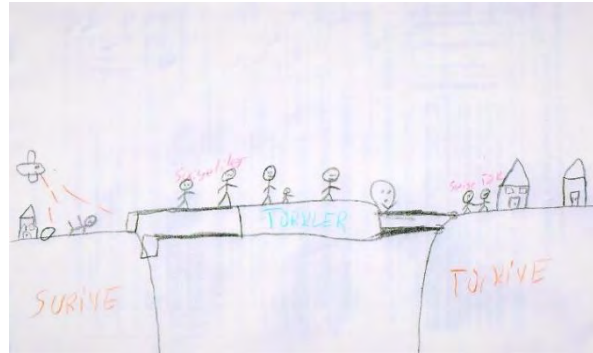


Figure 6. K52ET13

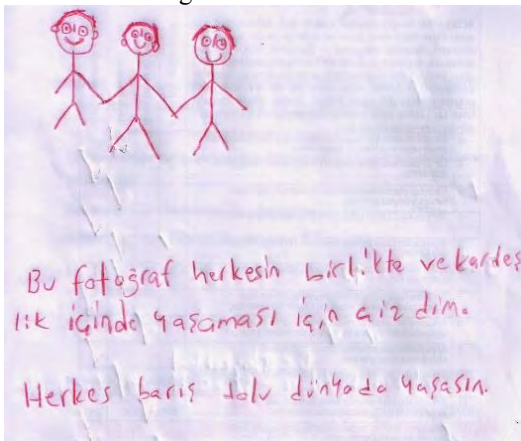


Figure 7. K62ET13



Figure 8. K31KT17



We see two children sharing something (no information about what it is) in Figure 5 and a note saying, “I help them when they need”. In Figure 6, Turkish people were pictured as a bridge that helped Syrian people to escape from the war to Turkey. In Figure 7, three children are standing side by side and holding hands. The explanation is “I drew this photo so that everyone can live together in peace. Let everyone live in a world that is full of peace”. A picture of a 17-year-old girl, who expressed her feelings about Syrian refugees (Figure 8), drew a girl crying in the rain alone and three children laughing her on a sunny day. The expression is “I cannot stand that they are alone and excluded because of prejudice even though they have done nothing”.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social cohesion (Forrest and Kearns, 2001), which is about reaching and continuing to ordinary level of daily life, is one of the main problems of local people and immigrants or refugees. In addition to social life for children, the educational environment also has similar difficulties. Kağnıcı (2017) states that Syrian refugee children cannot continue their education due to economic reasons, language problems, negative attitudes of school administrators and teachers, and negative attitudes of Turkish parents about their children being together with refugee children. Another reason for lack of formal education for refugee children is the issues of supply, cost, certification and access (Deane, 2016). However, people can come together and communicate easily through games in sports activities. Using this potential for the integration of groups with social adaptation difficulties can be an effective and valuable initiative. However, activities carried out to contribute to social cohesion should be well planned. No matter how well intentioned, bringing together conflicting groups from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds, a little wrong or incomplete planning can further increase intergroup tension. Therefore, it is necessary to define the social and cultural infrastructures of the groups, their possible expectations, needs or reservations in planning. Although it is easy for children to make friends through play, prejudices acquired from families or environment can inadvertently turn into brutality towards each other. Hence, the descriptions that children use when describing each other or their thoughts can help researchers to have some clues about whether they have prejudices and what should be done to prevent such negative attitudes.

According to the results of the project, 85% of the Syrian children liked spending time with Turkish children while that figure was 66.1% for Turkish children. It can be said that Syrian children have a little higher adaptation potentials and are better in establishing friendships than their Turkish counterparts. This can also be interpreted as Syrian kids’ need to bond with their new environment and therefore having a positive perspective towards adaptation. In fact, according to Harb (2017), social adaptation variables are defined as interpersonal interactions, sense of belonging, emotions, trust and collective action. However, one of the main problems that refugee children face in school is language (Akçalı, 2019; Buz, 2002; Kaya, 2019; Saklan, 2018). Nevertheless, sports activities can provide an opportunity to communicate and socialize more easily through play and to solve language problems for refugee children.

When the metaphors and drawings were examined, it was seen that both groups had mostly positive thoughts towards each other. In both groups, most metaphors were created under the themes “sharing” and “love”. Children described their friendships as sincere and trust-based relationship under the theme “sharing”. According to the theme “love”, they saw each other as brothers and sisters. This can be evaluated under the fact that sport develops positive social behaviors such as sharing, friendship, and tolerance. This finding is similar to the emphasis made in the study conducted by Çeviker, Mumcu, Şekeroğlu and Bayrak (2018). It says sports can be seen as a tool for disadvantaged groups such as refugees to gain a place in the society and to get in touch with other communities.

On the other hand, Turkish children had sympathy for their Syrian friends. This is the first step in developing tolerance towards identify with Syrian friends and their families who have had war and had a hard time. It is important to emphasize that because of the lack of empathy, combined with other

negative emotions, relations between groups can be easily harmed (Stephan, Ybarra & Morrison, 2009).

Under the “neutral” theme of metaphors, we can see some discourse such as “They are human beings like us, we have no difference, we have no superior side to each other”. This is an indication that some children see others just as a human without being affected by prejudices of language, religion, or race. Groups with cultural or ethnic differences sometimes conflict without effort to understand these differences and nevertheless coexist all over the world, especially in regions where minority groups live. According to Smith (2010), education can play a protective role against conflict. It can also contribute to social transformation. In this context, education programs conducted by both formal educational institutions and government, private or non-governmental organizations contribute to social cohesion. Children having neutral descriptions for their friends are aware of the differences but do not perceive them as significant, which reinforces the transformative aspect of education.

It is understood that the children often drew themselves side by side with their Syrian/Turkish friends and their human figures in the drawings are mostly smiling or happy. Therefore, it can be interpreted that they enjoyed spending time with each other. When this result is associated with social cohesion, it coincides with Özcan's (2009) finding that social support and interaction activities have an increasing effect on refugees' psycho-social adaptation.

While none of the Syrian children described negative feelings about Turks under the theme of “description of feelings”, it was seen that only seven Turkish children included descriptions of violence and exclusion for Syrians. The reason for this can be negative discourse in media against Syrians, especially towards marginalization (Çağlar & Özkır 2014, p. 488; Burkay, 2016; Öztürk, 2018; Battal, 2018; Doğan, 2018) and negative prejudices formed in the society. Göker and Keskin (2015) state that refugees are generally positioned as “economic burden” and “social problem” in media, and this division contributes to the marginalization in society. It is thought that it may have been settled in the children's subconscious as an idea. On the other hand, as it was stated by Tarman and Gurel (2016), children mostly learned about being a refugee by means of the social and digital media. They emphasize that while there is war and its consequences in the curriculum and textbooks of social studies in schools are inevitable, there is no information about migrants and refugees and the problems they face. Besides, studies show that teachers have insufficient or superficial knowledge about the concepts of migration and immigration (Gurel & Buyuksahin, 2020). Aydın, Gundogdu ve Akgul (2019) suggest that both Turkish and Syrian teachers need professional development and support to work with Syrian refugee children, and that training should include peace education and conflict resolution curricula. This recommendation applies to sports instructors as well as teachers since this kind of ignorance or lack of knowledge is one of the significant factors that provoke the conflicts between children who come together in schools or in any social environment. Another reason as stated in the study by Çakan, Mercan and Mercan Uzun (2018) may be unwanted behaviors observed in refugee children which can actually be interpreted as signs of trying to attract attention, imitating family members, and not communicating.

Although there is a limitation about having no data from the beginning of the project, children have mostly positive thoughts about their friends. It shows that the project has achieved one of its goals, which is to promote friendships. In addition, some research has shown that the adaptation process and anxiety levels of Syrian children alter positively as long as they take part in different educational programs, make friends and get chances to socialize (Altunay Yılmaz, 2018; Karabaş, 2018; Uğurlu, 2015). Accordingly, it can be said that another goal of the project which is to ensure recognition and integration has been achieved.

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