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IMPLEMENTING 21ST-CENTURY SKILLS IN AN INCLUSIVE ENGLISH TEACHING CLASSROOM

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Abstract

English Teaching (ET) must establish an inclusive classroom atmosphere in the ever-changing educational landscape to meet the diverse needs of its students and provide them with essential 21st-century skills. This qualitative paper explores the integration of inclusive educational practices with the development of 4Cs in learning skills, which are communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, in an English Teaching classroom. Some concepts, such as the roles of digital literacy in skill integration, effective teaching strategies for skill integration, and principles of inclusive teaching and learning, are also addressed. The researchers explained that creating an inclusive English Teaching classroom requires teachers to use their professional expertise to be empathetic and understanding school leaders, to respect diversity, to hold themselves to high standards, to cultivate supportive peer cultures, to interact with the community, and to incorporate communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration into the curriculum which will be favorable with the support of integrating 21st-century skills into education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, English Teaching, Role of Digital Literacy, 21st-century skills, 4Cs in Learning Skills.

Introduction

Over the past few decades and into the 21st century, English Teaching (ET) has become increasingly significant in both native and non-native English-speaking countries, following globalization, the transformation of human activities, and internationalization trends (Chehimi & Alameddine, 2022). This is because English is widely

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accepted across many countries and used for education, business, and other purposes. Education is often referred to as society's equalizer (Singh et al., 2020) because it has the potential to foster intellectual and personal growth. For perfect equality to be feasible, education should encompass a diverse range of learners, with learners with special educational needs among the most targeted groups. Seeking pedagogical support for learners with special educational needs has become a burning topic of discussion among contemporary educational theorists and practitioners. A series of interrelated topical issues, spanning pedagogical practice, school administration, and academic debate, accompanies the implementation of an inclusive approach to education. At this point, exploring inclusive practices is inevitable to discover effective strategies and approaches for implementing them successfully in an inclusive classroom setting. Therefore, inclusive education must be implemented to achieve an equal educational system. An educational strategy known as inclusive education supports settings where each student can study and feel valued as a member of the broader society (Moriña, 2017). It aims to make education accessible to all citizens, including those with disabilities (Khasanah & Salim, 2018).

Inclusive Education

Dwivedi (2021) explains that the term 'Inclusion' has been widely accepted as a common idiom within today's education system. The growing number of persons excluded from meaningful participation in their communities' social, economic, political, and cultural life is one of the challenges the world faces today. Such a community is neither efficient nor safe. Inclusion services learners with disabilities in their neighborhood schools, including necessary support services and supplementary aids for children and teachers. It means meeting the needs of children with disabilities for free and quality public education in the least restrictive and most effective environment. Inclusion aims to prepare learners to participate as full and contributing members of society. Inclusion is not an experiment to be tested but a value to be followed. Education is the right of all children, whether they are disabled or not, as they are future citizens of the country.

Western Interpretation of Inclusive Education

Western countries were often perceived as holding liberal views on inclusive education, as they believed in the value of equity and social justice for students who could not fully benefit from segregated or integrated education. According to Rawal (2002;3), the vital reason for the Westerners' change in attitudes toward educational options for students with special needs is explained:

> The urgency of action to achieve basic education is based on the view that, as we enter the 21st Century, denying anyone's right to education

is fundamentally unacceptable. This urgency has become imperative due to the impact of globalisation and communications at the interface between society, economy, and technology.

This line of thinking reflects that all children, regardless of their disabilities, should be given equal opportunities to learn together with their peers in the same schools/classrooms as Cheung and Hui (2007: 68) mentioned, "demanding that mainstream schools and associated systems must meet the needs of a diverse range of students and provide a differentiated and appropriate education for them." However, many inclusive education scholars, including Cheung and Hui (2007), and Farrell and Ainscow (2002), doubted the possibility of implementation of proper inclusive education. They acknowledged that the major impediments to inclusive education stemmed from different interpretations of inclusive education, educational inequity, and unsustainable education systems.

Challenged Categories in Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education means that all learners in a school, regardless of any weaknesses, are fully integrated into the school community. They are included in the feelings of belonging among other learners. In the present scenario, our country is trying to achieve five categories of inclusion.

a. Inclusion of the Physically Disabled
b. Inclusion of Hearing Impaired
c. Inclusion of Visually Impaired
d. Inclusion of Mentally Challenged
e. Inclusion of Learning Disabled

How All Students Benefit from Inclusion

In an online educational portal named Changing perspectives (2024) suggested that inclusive education benefits all students, not just those receiving special education services. The studies had shown that inclusive classrooms:

1. **Improve Academic Success:** A study conducted by Indiana University and published in the Journal of Special Education in 2022 found that high schools implementing inclusive classrooms have higher grades and are better prepared for secondary education and future jobs. Additionally, a 2016 study by Alana and ABT associates shows that inclusive classrooms support academic excellence for all students.
2. **Increase Confidence:** Inclusive classrooms have benefits that go beyond academic achievement. They help students build self-confidence and improve their interactions with peers. Instead of viewing differences negatively, inclusive

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classrooms celebrate diversity and promote acceptance of differences. They also provide all students with a better understanding of disabilities and differences.

3. **Develop a Sense of Community:** Inclusive classrooms promote social and emotional development among students. By encouraging group activities and collaborative projects, students learn to communicate effectively and work together. This approach also helps them develop respect for each other's differences. Creating a culture of acceptance and understanding fosters a sense of safety, and students can comfortably express themselves and share their thoughts and ideas.
4. **Provide Support and Access for All Students:** In an inclusive classroom, teachers use a flexible teaching approach rather than a standardized one. They aim to create an environment where every student receives the support they need to succeed academically and develop the knowledge and skills required for success after graduation, regardless of their background or abilities.

21st Century Skills

According to Ledward and Hirata (2011), 21st-century skills blend content knowledge, specific skills, expertise, and literacies necessary to succeed in work and life. Ledward and Hirata point out that these skills go beyond technological literacy, encompassing proficiency in critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork.

Ultimately, these skills allow people to thrive in the new economy since they help people

a. access, synthesize, and communicate information,
b. work collaboratively across differences to solve complex problems, and
c. create new knowledge through the innovative use of multiple technologies.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2007b) maintains that while today's schools reflect the influence of industrial and information-age models, the modern 21st-century school must bring rigorous content and real-world relevance together by focusing on cognitive skills and those in the affective and aesthetic domains. To help schools achieve such challenging goals, the Partnership (2007a) has created a framework for 21st-century learning, which consists of core subjects (English, Reading, Language Arts, World Languages, Arts, Mathematics, Economics, Science, Geography, History, and Government and Civics) as well as interdisciplinary themes (global awareness, financial, economic, business, entrepreneurial literacy, civil literacy, health literacy, and environmental literacy). These subjects and themes center on three core skills: life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, and information, media, and technology skills.

Several conceptual models have been created to structure the analysis of 21st-century skills. One of those models is the one proposed by the North Central Regional Educational

Laboratory and the Metiri Group (Lemke, 2002). Lemke (2003) explains that this model provides a framework to define what students need to thrive in today's digital age. The framework identifies four general skills through four dimensions: digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. The first dimension involves using digital technology and communication tools to create, manage, and evaluate information to function in a knowledge society. Inventive thinking affects people's cognitive abilities to apply information technologies in complex, sustained situations and to understand the consequences. The third dimension includes the ability to communicate orally or in writing using a wide range of media and technology. Finally, high productivity encompasses the ability to prioritise, plan, and manage high-quality products and results. See the table below.

Table. 1: The Dimensions of 21st Century Learning

Digital Age Literacy **Basic, Scientific, and** **Technological Literacy** **Visual and Information Literacy** **Cultural Literacy and Global Awareness**	**Inventive Thinking** **Adaptability** **Managing Complexity** **and Self-Direction** **Curiosity, Creativity, and Risk-Taking** **Higher-Order Thinking and** **Sound Reasoning**
Effective Communication **Teaming, Collaboration, and** **Interpersonal Skills** **Person, Social, and Civic Responsibility** **Interactive Communication**	**High Productivity** Prioritizing, Planning and Managing for Results Effective Use of Real-World Tools Ability to Produce Relevant, High-Quality Products

The Importance of 21st Century Skills

While the bar used to be high school graduation, today's students face a bar for college, career, and real-world success. Let us take a look at why 21st-century skills matter.

a. Higher education and business leaders cite soft skills as the most critical driver of success in higher-level courses and the workplace.
b. In today's world, our schools prepare students for **jobs that might not yet exist.** Career readiness means equipping students with a nuanced set of skills to prepare them for the unknown.
c. **Social media** has changed human interaction and created new challenges in navigating social situations.
d. The **age of the Internet** has dramatically increased access to knowledge. Students need to learn how to process and analyze large amounts of information.

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e. Content knowledge from core subjects can only go so far; students must be taught how to apply facts and ideas to **complex problems.**

The 4Cs in Learning Skills

According to the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (2011a), the 4Cs are the 21st-century learning and innovation skills that students should master in their classrooms to be prepared for life after high school. The 4Cs consist of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. They are also portable skills that individuals can transfer from one assignment to another and from one job to another. Based on some current studies, the National Education Association (2015) concluded that the 4Cs need to be fully integrated into learning and teaching to produce citizens and employees adequately prepared for the 21st century.

a. **Communication:** should be encouraged to communicate their thoughts concisely and clearly. Communication skills can be improved through debates, group discussions, and presentations. TE classes are widely recognized as among the best settings for improving students' communication skills, as language is a primary means of communication, and the primary goal of teaching and learning a language is to enable learners to communicate effectively. The advent of CLT in the 1970s and its subsequent prevalence in language teaching and learning were responses to the need to achieve this objective (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, EFL teachers should be able to integrate communication skills with language skills instruction.
b. **Collaboration:** Encourage cooperation by assigning group tasks and engaging in cooperative activities. Students' social skills are enhanced, and they get ready for collaborative settings in the real world. Collaboration is the act of working together to achieve a shared objective. It is an increasingly crucial educational outcome because organizations and businesses have shifted to team-based work environments (Dede, 2009). Unlike most works of the 20th century, which emphasized individual capacity, those of the 21st century often require teamwork. Collaboration skills are needed to build strong teamwork and unite participants' skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, & Lounsbury, 2023).
c. **Critical Thinking:** Critical thinking involves critiquing, assessing, and formulating information/ideas to develop well-structured arguments. It requires asking questions for clear answers, researching, and using facts to support claims. A critically written essay does not just present an unconfirmed result but engages in deep research and reasoning for meaningful output. Some key concepts of critical thinking in essay writing are: it ensures that an essay presents a clear, well-reasoned and structured argument; it is based on reliable sources and convincing

facts rather than mere say or weak points; critical thinkers challenge uncleared results instead of accepting them the way they are, a critical essay does not focus on one-sided results but interrogates various means before concluding; critical thinkers dismiss wrong ideas; critical thinkers painstakingly assess all facts before drawing up a tangible result; critical thinkers are free from biased judgment and; critical thinkers revise their works for better outputs and results. Critical thinking enhances communication skills by helping individuals organize their thoughts coherently, articulate ideas clearly, and engage in meaningful discussions grounded in sound reasoning and evidence. The promotion of critical thinking in English learning will concern all teachers, and with consistent practice, the expected results will be achieved.

d. **Creativity:** Foster creativity by allowing students to explore and express their ideas in various formats. Projects, creative writing assignments, and multimedia can help students develop their creative abilities. Although creativity is often associated with innovative thinking, the two are distinct. Creativity is the product, process, or interaction that generates new ideas, thoughts, and objects. In contrast, creative thinking refers to the cognitive skills that enable a person to generate original ideas, thoughts, and objects. Sternberg (2001) defined it as a cluster of skills necessary to produce ideas that are both original and valuable. Cropley (2001) suggested creativity is associated with novelty, effectiveness, and ethics.

Integration of Skills in English Teaching in an Inclusive 21st-Century Classroom

It refers to the deliberate and systematic combination of language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, and digital literacy. Rather than teaching skills in isolation, integrated instruction mirrors real-life language use, where multiple skills are employed simultaneously to achieve meaning and purpose. In an inclusive English teaching classroom, skill integration ensures that all learners, including students with disabilities, learning difficulties, or diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, actively participate in meaningful learning experiences.

Rationale for Skill Integration in Inclusive English Classrooms

The integration of skills is essential in inclusive classrooms for several reasons:

i. **Authentic Language Use:** Real-world communication requires the simultaneous use of multiple language skills. For example, students may read a text, discuss it orally, listen to peers, and write reflections.

ii. **Support for Diverse Learners:** Inclusive classrooms contain learners with different strengths. While some students excel in speaking, others may perform better in writing or listening. Skill integration allows multiple entry points for learning.

iii. **Promotion of Equity and Participation:** Integrated activities reduce reliance on a single mode of learning, thereby supporting learners with special educational needs and different learning styles.
iv. **Alignment with 21st-Century Education Goals:** Modern education emphasizes transferable skills that prepare learners for lifelong learning, employment, and social participation.

Integration of Language Skills and 21st-Century Skills

Listening and Critical Thinking: Listening activities such as audio recordings, debates, interviews, and podcasts promote active listening and analytical skills. In inclusive classrooms, teachers can:

i. Use simplified audio or captions for learners with hearing or comprehension challenges.
ii. Encourage students to identify main ideas, infer meaning, and evaluate speakers' viewpoints.

This approach develops both language comprehension and critical thinking.

Speaking, Communication, and Collaboration: Speaking activities promote oral fluency while fostering communication and collaboration, core 21st-century skills. Examples include:

Group discussions, Role-plays, Debates, and Peer teaching.

In inclusive settings, cooperative learning groups enable learners to support one another. Students with speech difficulties may contribute through short responses, visuals, or assistive communication tools.

Reading and Information Literacy: Reading activities expose learners to a diverse range of texts, including articles, digital content, and literary works. When integrated with 21st-century skills, reading tasks require students to:

i. Evaluate sources
ii. Distinguish facts from opinions
iii. Interpret texts critically

Inclusive strategies include:

i. Providing audio versions of texts
ii. Using visual aids
iii. Adjusting text complexity without reducing content value

These practices enhance information literacy and comprehension skills.

Writing, Creativity, and Problem Solving: Writing tasks, such as essays, blogs, summaries, and creative pieces, encourage learners to express their ideas clearly and creatively. Integration occurs when students:

i. Collaborate on writing projects
ii. Use digital tools for drafting and editing
iii. Solve real-life problems through written communication

Differentiated writing tasks enable learners to express their ideas in various formats, promoting inclusive participation.

Role of Digital Literacy in Skill Integration

Digital tools play a crucial role in integrating skills in the 21st-century English classroom. Technology supports inclusion by:

i. Providing multimodal resources (audio, video, text)
ii. Enabling assistive technologies (speech-to-text, text-to-speech)
iii. Encouraging collaborative learning through online platforms

Digital literacy enhances students' ability to access information, create content, and communicate effectively, making learning more interactive and inclusive.

Effective Teaching Strategies for Skill Integration

Effective strategies include:

i. **Project-Based Learning**: Students research, discuss, present, and write on real-life issues.
ii. **Task-Based Instruction**: Learners complete meaningful language tasks involving multiple skills.
iii. **Collaborative Learning**: Group work promotes social interaction and shared responsibility.
iv. **Differentiated Instruction**: Teachers adjust content, process, and output based on learners' needs.

These strategies align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), ensuring accessibility for all learners.

Key Strategies for Building an Inclusive English Teaching Classroom

Sayeski (2018) reports on a project undertaken by the Council for Exceptional Children to identify the most effective teaching strategies for students with disabilities. Upon inspection, these strategies are beneficial for all students, reminding us that effective

teaching practices are essential for some and suitable for all. Effective teaching strategies benefit all, and we need to stop thinking that specific strategies are only for students.

Collaboration: Education can be a lonely and isolating experience for teachers at times. It is essential that we maintain connections with our colleagues. We can learn from them, and collaboration is key to success. We must also connect with our students' families. They are the first teachers of our students and know them best. Collaboration can often take a "school-centric" approach, where school staff are viewed as experts and parents as having limited knowledge (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). This type of approach is damaging to family-school relationships. Parents understand what works for their children and can bring this to the conversation with the teacher or the curriculum expert.

Instruction and Assessment: Good teaching practice dictates using assessment to guide instruction. It is the same for students with LDs. Many different assessment types are necessary to determine if students are learning. To capitalize on students' strengths, ensure you request written and oral assessments, tests, and projects. If there are gaps in their knowledge and skills, it is essential to adjust the teaching approach. For students with learning disabilities, explicit instruction has been instrumental (Hughes et al., 2017). Hughes et al. (2017) identified five critical concepts of explicit instruction in a comprehensive literature review. They note that when teachers are transparent about the process, students are more engaged in their learning. The literature suggests that teachers:

a. **Segment Complex Skills**: When multiple steps are involved, teachers are encouraged to teach the sequence of steps, ensuring that students master one step before moving on to the next.
b. **Draw Student Attention to Important Features of the Content through Modeling/Think-Alouds**: Teachers can model internal thought processes and external behaviors more transparently to students by showing them what to do while telling them the inner thoughts of how to achieve the desired outcome.
c. **Promote Successful Engagement by Using Systematically Faded Supports/Prompts**: After modelling the skill, teachers provide the level of prompting (visual, verbal, and physical) needed to ensure success for the student. As students learn what is required, the teacher can remove prompts until they can do it themselves.
d. **Provide Opportunities for Students to Respond and Receive Feedback**: Monitoring a learned skill allows the teacher to see if the student can do it independently or if they need reminders.
e. **Create Purposeful Practice Opportunities**: Maintaining and generalizing the new skill is essential, and teachers can provide the opportunity for individual work to ensure that the skill has been learned.

The process for acquiring knowledge and skills using explicit instruction is the same for all students. Some individuals may require more time than others to complete the steps or need additional prompts to learn the skill. The key idea to remember is that moving forward is a success.

Social-Emotional Learning: Increasingly, there have been calls for school leaders and teachers to focus on social-emotional learning to create more inclusive classrooms that support the mental health of all students (e.g., Law, 2017; Whitley, 2020). Highly effective educators engage in social and behavioural practices that establish respectful, organized learning environments, teach social skills, and provide positive, constructive feedback to guide student behaviour (Sayeski, 2018).

Relationships are viewed by students and teachers as one of the most critical aspects of their school experience (Duong et al., 2019). How teachers respond to students is crucial to how the rest of the class perceives the students**.** Teachers can foster the perception that students with LDs are valued classmates and teach so that everyone experiences the benefits of inclusion. Kennedy and Haydon (2021) provide strategies for teachers to foster positive teacher-student relationships. These strategies will help ensure that students are viewed by their classmates as respected class members.

a. Greet students individually when they enter the class.
b. Ask students about their interests.
c. Be specific about rules and routines and reteach as necessary.
d. Avoid power struggles.
e. Provide genuine compliments.
f. Provide more praise and positive feedback than corrections (suggest a 5:1 ratio).
g. Share positive feedback with the student's parents.
h. Check in with students about struggles to show you care

Principles of Inclusive Teaching and Learning

Inclusive teaching and learning principles may vary across sources but share similar values.

Tanenbaum Pedagogy

Tanenbaum (2011) identified seven principles for inclusive education, briefly described below.

1. **Teaching All Students:** The concepts of multiple intelligences and learning styles suggest that students learn in different ways, and as educators, we must teach in diverse ways to meet the varied needs of our students. In addition to considering these theories, faculty should also take into account the diverse social identities represented in the classroom. Social identities, including race and ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation, differing abilities, religion, and

intersectionality, are important considerations for ensuring an inclusive classroom (Northwestern University, n.d.). Teaching all students requires a flexible approach that makes content relevant to them.

2. **Exploring Multiple Identities:** Inclusive teaching facilitates the engagement of all students by acknowledging and appreciating diverse student backgrounds, creating an environment of acceptance and respect for differences that promotes student engagement. Students feel accepted and respected, creating an atmosphere in which they are comfortable engaging with faculty and one another.
3. **Preventing Prejudice**: As faculty challenge students to expand their worldviews and critically examine their thoughts and assumptions, inclusive teaching encourages students to explore alternative perspectives with curiosity and respect. Inclusive teaching requires faculty to navigate difficult conversations and be prepared to identify and address microaggressions in the classroom.
4. **Promoting social justice**: Inclusive teaching requires faculty to challenge students to develop a worldview that critically examines social injustices. Faculty can utilize these discussions to encourage critical thinking and identify opportunities for student empowerment, promoting social justice in their world and beyond.
5. **Choosing the appropriate material**: Inclusive teaching involves intentionally providing intellectual diversity in all materials by selecting textbooks, images, and examples that reflect the diversity often found within the student population. As students encounter content and images, they can connect with it; this further helps them engage with the course material and the learning process. It also equips students to serve diverse populations better in their professional lives.
6. **Teaching and learning about cultures and religions:** An inclusive teacher welcomes opportunities to learn about diverse traditions and uses diversity to enrich the learning and teaching process. Recognizing the rich diversity and experiences reflected in our students and leveraging this diversity within the classroom is essential. As educators, we should not be "color blind" but acknowledge differences to enhance our understanding of students and help them understand the world in which we live.
7. **Adapting and Integrating Lessons Appropriately:** Inclusive teaching helps faculty ensure equitable access to learning. Faculty must consider how their teaching approaches and modalities are accessible to everyone.

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive English Teaching classroom requires English teachers to utilize their professional expertise to be empathetic and understanding, to respect diversity, to hold

themselves to high standards, to cultivate supportive peer cultures, to engage with the community, and to incorporate communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration into the curriculum. These techniques guarantee that every student succeeds in a cutting-edge, welcoming, and dynamic learning environment. Additionally, inclusive education emphasizes the value of providing people with disabilities with equal opportunity to learn and obtain a high-quality education in a traditional classroom; all of these outcomes will be favourable with the support of integrating 21st-century skills into education.

Recommendations

Creating an inclusive classroom environment in English teaching while implementing 21st-century skills is crucial for fostering an atmosphere where all students can thrive, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or learning styles.

Here are some recommendations to achieve this:

1. **Recognise and Value Diversity:** Teachers should acknowledge and value Students' cultural roots. Use examples and resources that are culturally appropriate and relatable to pupils of different kinds. Additionally, teachers must be aware of and appreciate the various languages and dialects spoken by students. To enhance learning and modify teaching methods to fit the diverse needs of students—including those with varying degrees of prior knowledge, learning difficulties, and language proficiency—encourage code-switching and translanguaging.
2. **Encourage Collaborative Learning:** For students to benefit from one another's viewpoints and strengths, teachers should assign them to varied, heterogeneous groups. To allow students to collaborate with various classmates, rotate groups regularly. Students teaching one another should also be encouraged. By doing this, children develop a sense of belonging and respect for one another and the peer teacher. Ensure that all students are at ease participating in the classroom. Utilise techniques like think-pair-share, in which students complete independent thought processes, have a companion discussion and then present their findings to the class.
3. **Incorporate 21st-Century Skills:** Teachers should urge pupils to consider, assess, and develop original ideas. To promote critical thinking, employ open-ended questions and practical problem-solving exercises. Adding different language activities, such as debates, presentations, and digital storytelling, may help kids become more proficient communicators. Encourage the use of verbal, nonverbal, and digital communication methods. Provide tasks that need collaboration and group problem-solving—Utilise technology, such as discussion boards or shared online documents, to help teamwork. Encourage students' creative expression by

using project-based learning, which allows them to investigate interesting subjects through various media (e.g., writing, film, art).

By integrating these strategies, an inclusive classroom environment that not only supports diverse learners but also equips them with essential 21st-century skills ensures that all students have the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

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