The SRI Homeroom – Episode 13

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Welcome to the SRI Homeroom. Today, Re-Imagining Standards for Instructional Quality.

Krystal Thomas:

The rubric, if you will, that we'll use to observe is, it's a bit outdated. And so if we want to talk about improving instructional practices it's really important that we think of how we look at it and what are the consequences of it.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

A More Culturally Responsive Approach to Observation and Coaching, today on the SRI Homeroom, welcome in.

Hello and welcome to the SRI Homeroom. I'm Kori Hamilton Biagas, and I am your host. Today, I am so excited to be talking with my friend and colleague, Krystal Thomas, who is an incredible researcher that focuses on improving the quality of instructional practices in education.

Welcome to the Homeroom, Krystal.

Krystal Thomas:

Thanks, Kori. I'm so glad I get to interview with you or podcast with you or-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Podcast with me. So you focus on improving the quality of instructional practices in education, that seems broad.

Krystal Thomas:

Yes.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah, can you tell us, in that big old umbrella, what is the challenge? What are you trying to solve? What are you trying to address? What are you trying to heal, mend, fix?

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah, I think the challenge is, in particular for what I've been doing in my work lately, is there are so many different ways that we try to measure and assess what is quality instruction. And we look at this in particular because instruction is what... Is that invisible thing that informs children's lives. The experiences that they get to have, the opportunities that they get to have.

And so we take such a big focus on it, in particular, measuring it, and the way that we go about measuring it is we go to the classroom, we sit in the back and we observe it. And the rubric, if you will, that we used to observe is, it's a bit outdated.

It is prescribed to education that doesn't meet the needs of every child. And it also can be punitive for teachers in particular. And so if we want to talk about improving instructional practices, it's really important that we think of how we look at it-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

... and what are the consequences of it, and making it more of a place of supporting educators, helping them to make shared decisions of what they want that improvement to look like, rather than prescribing what that is and what that looks like.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So it's that idea of shining a light and inviting collaboration as opposed to putting down the hammer and imposing a solution.

Krystal Thomas:

Yes. And what's so interesting too, that I've learned about what these measures were intended for is they initially were never intended for the type of decisions that so many states and school districts make.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Krystal Thomas:

A lot of it was just started by researchers that were like, Ooh, let's have a more systematic way to look at this. And then it's-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

For us, we like things to be organized, so let us create some way, darn, those practitioners, we don't care about them. We need to be able to see this more clearly.

Krystal Thomas:

So it's been used beyond its intended purpose. And so now we're really just like, let's reel back.

These measures were created 20 plus years ago.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

Let's readdress. Are we looking at this the same way? Does it pay attention to equity? The makeup of the kids in the classrooms look so much different. Do we attend to the whole child or are we just only focused on particular things?

I've been focused on, where they've made me expand what I think of as a whole child, especially in early childhood.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Yeah.
Krystal Thomas:
We have folks that talk about curiosity. "Oh yeah, they are very curious."
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Which is funny because you apply it to your own child, right? I'm a practitioner and a researcher and a parent. I of course use best practices with my own child, but I don't always translate that when I'm creating these tools that we're using for all children, right?
Krystal Thomas:
It's like the most basic things that I hear and I want, and we don't look at it, like agency.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Right.
Krystal Thomas:
We are one of the most individualistic societies, but we don't measure agency.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Yeah. Hum drum. What's up with that? Right? And why not? So let's do it and let's see what happens.

And so I've got to have really great conversations with experts in early childhood in particular, where

Krystal Thomas:

Let's see how this can improve our practices.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Krystal Thomas:

Right.

Yeah. Well, what's been most exciting is over the past year I've been engaged with a team that's being funded by the Gates Foundation where they are very interested in observational measures of instructional practices in ways that these tools can support instructional coaching between teachers and coaches. And so I think what made me begin to think of the possibilities is we had to create this report, if you will.

So what are some of the ways that... You were giving some high level examples here. What are some of

the other ways or specific approaches that you're using to do this work at all the various levels?

Initially it was called a target product profile. Apparently it's something that's used in the health field where it's like, where are we today? And what do we want the ideal product, if you will, to have, to improve whatever thing they're trying to improve. So if we translate this now to education, it's like what

is an ideal observational tool that is to help instructional coaching? What is an ideal tool look like? What should it have?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

And so we were in collaboration with the Gates, Foundation and Substantial, and Substantial really helped to do some of the background work where they were meeting with teachers, coaches, I think even parents, people that would be either impacted by these observational tools or use these observational tools. And they kind of broke down five themes that we need to think of for what this ideal measure needs to look like.

One is the content. What is it assessing?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

How do we go beyond what we already look at and assess and address with teachers? The other is, is it user-friendly, the way that we use this tool and train people on it. Sometimes these trainings are-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Very cumbersome, yeah, and it's like we don't have the capacity to provide that level of training over that number of hours within the scope of our budgets or our calendars. Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah. So thinking about the usefulness of it, is this actually helpful for what we are trying to address?

The other is psychometrics, which is that fun word of thinking about the reliability of the measure. How consistent is it? We have some measures where it's actually not consistent, and when you look at it from one classroom to another, and that makes sense though, right? Especially in early childhood, you have daycare based settings that might be start, for example, that's going to look very different from a-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Montessori school, right, exactly, or even a Christian or Episcopal type school-

Krystal Thomas:

Right. Or a home-based-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Or a home-based care center.

Krystal Thomas:

They're all so different. And so sometimes these measures try to be applied into the same setting. And so it's like, well, let's think about the psychometrics of this and what does that mean?

And the last category that Substantial was able to help determine was scalability. So when you use it from this one small use, how do you expand it where it's going to be able to be consistently used and scaled up across a larger setting, whether it's a state, for example, trying to uptake these tools.

And so initially we called it a target product profile. I think now it's user informed principles.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Okay, yeah. That's a bit little more accessible to people, yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

And so we were able to put together this advisory group where we had folks in the educational field, whether it was experts in measurement, experts in the racial experiences of Black and Latina kids, experts in students with disabilities and early childhood experts in multilingual or dual learners in early childhood.

So we had so many people coming in from very diverse perspectives and backgrounds that really pushed our team and really challenged our team. And I think one example that comes to mind is we had this g

one researcher where she's looking at our initial set things where we were like, a tool should assess and think about the safety of the classroom. And she was like, "State centers is always going to think about safety." She's like, "Let's forget about safety and think about racial trauma in the classroom and how safe does a child feel in the classroom, and how do those practices ensure that kids are not experiencing racial trauma? I was like-
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Say more.
Krystal Thomas:
That is very true.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Right, right.
Krystal Thomas:
Because again, this is supposed to be as difficult, because you're trying to think of what does the future of measurement look like? And you can only speak to so much because of what you have in front of you but we know from the limitations of what exists.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
How to dream a little bit and what to aspire to.
Krystal Thomas:
Yes, yes.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. Oh wow. That sounds like very fulfilling work because it's the idea to get all of those incredible brains in a space and to push the way that we consider what is priority, right?

It's like let somebody else worry about physical safety. That's what they're going to anyway.
Krystal Thomas: Yes.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Let's focus on something that is not focused on, and that's those equity questions. Who is not at the table? What are we not asking? What is the thing that does not have any light? Let's get some light over here.
Krystal Thomas:
Yes. Yeah. It was just very, it was a very learning experience I think for everyone on the team. We even built into the report the idea that before a measure goes out to marketer, is it widely used, who got to help with designing it? Was it parents? Was it community members? Considerations that the tool gives more guidance to what many tools just often don't they kind of just like it's here and good luck and I hope you use it wisely. It's like, well, maybe the tool should have some guidance in terms of its use and purpose.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Yeah, the contextualization of the tool. Yeah, the conditions that need to exist for this to be the most impactful.
Krystal Thomas:
Yes.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Yeah.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Yeah.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Yeah. Krystal Thomas: We also just thought about the idea of not punishing teachers in schools for resources that they don't have. Because often I think there's one tool that thinks about the environment of the classroom. It's like,
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Krystal Thomas: And it's like not every space has the opportunity to have that.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Or the resources to create it.
Krystal Thomas: Exactly.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: And so what are the ways in which those needs are being met that we can assess?
Krystal Thomas: Yes.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Right? As opposed to what is the physical thing I'm looking for?
Krystal Thomas: Yes.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: And that's back to that whole child statement, the whole, yeah, the wholeness.
Krystal Thomas: Yeah.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: I love that idea about not punishing people for things they don't have control over or don't have access to, which is so part of embedded in our system. Right?
Krystal Thomas: It is, and it's beyond them. The idea of my daughter goes to a school where they have a bathroom in the classroom and it's like a child-sized toilet. Not every building, not every place is going to have those available to them. So do we penalize people because of a toilet that they install? It makes you think a lot.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Yeah. So thinking about just this back to this really broad space of improving the quality of instructional practices, I know that you do work on the other end of this spectrum too.
Krystal Thomas: Yeah.

And so what you are describing right now has so many soft touch points that people can relate to For the littles. We want our littles, we need to see our littles be curious and all the things.

But what about on the other end of the spectrum? How are you utilizing any of these skills or just how are you creating those changes and improving the quality of instructional practices on the other end?

Krystal Thomas:

Well, I would love to talk about work that I hope to do-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

Because I think that there's an organization that I think is really in a place where they're looking to do that, and I'm hoping to secure funding to be able to, in a research perspective, really look at that. But there's this one organization called Open Up Resources where they are creating this pre-K to 5 math curriculum where it's one of the few, and I would say, if any, that actually is a student centered, culturally responsive math curriculum.

And so it's based in this problem solving type of approach where kids can think about their community. So there's this one lesson about geometry, and the kids get to think about their actual community and where are the places where we see these shapes.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

Buildings look like this, a way that they actually are bringing themselves, they're bringing their perspectives and they're able to actually think about that within that lesson.

There's another lesson that talks about food security. And so kids actually get to apply mathematics or multiplication to think about if we have this many people in a household, and this is the budget, and this is thinking about food deserts, things that you don't talk about until you're in college, right?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right, but you're experiencing it in real life.

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah, every day.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

And so there's opportunities where the kids get to apply this into the curriculum. But what I also love about the curriculum is that they are developing this professional learning program that is aligned to the

curriculum so that as the teachers are implementing these lessons, they are also receiving the supports they need to implement it the way it's intended to.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

And to maybe even shift their mindsets and practice that so many don't get the opportunity to do. What I think is so cool about Open Up Resources is that they're OER, so they're an Open Education Resource so the curriculum is free, and it's the hope that if a district or a state decides to go with this free curriculum, maybe then you shift those resources towards the professional learning that is aligned to the curriculum and can not only shape the kids' experiences that are more hands-on and more practical and helps them think about being problem solvers in their community. But the teachers are also benefiting from collaborating with the kids rather than saying, "Four times three is 12."

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right, and exploring with them and helping them to maintain that curiosity. I feel like so often our kiddos as they age up, they lose the opportunity to just be kids and to be outside and to be explorers and to be adventure seekers. And so to have that as part of the fabric of the curriculum is such a cool way to connect the teachers with the experiences of the kids, of the children. That's so cool.

Krystal Thomas:

But it takes time to actually actionably see that it does take a lot of time to shift old habits. When you think about the training that people have received, it can take a while-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

... to really shift that. This wasn't related to the OER curriculum, but I did an interview a while back for another curriculum where the school district was trying out this curriculum for the first time, and we had met with the developers prior to interviewing the teachers and the developers were like, "You have to do it in order chapter one to chapter 10. You can't jump around."

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah, don't skip and choose.

Krystal Thomas:

You just do it the way... And this is all purposeful to really build the habits and practices that's intended for this. So we interviewed the teacher, and the teacher goes, "Yeah, well, when we did the training for it, the district didn't have the materials for us yet. So we're hearing about it, but we don't-"

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Have the tangible thing to engage with.

Krystal Thomas:

Nothing is new to us, right? And then she goes on to say that, "Well, the teachers, they're like, this is just too new. This is too much." And so I think she said within two to three weeks of the school year starting, they said, "Well, let's just go back to the way we used to do it." We are going to do multiplication before we do subtraction or whatever.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right? We just going to do it how we've been doing it, and that's not the order that they told us to do it, right? We're just going to do it. How we do it.

Krystal Thomas:

We're going to do it how we do it. And then they were like, oh, wait a minute. Well, each chapter builds on the other one. So if we're talking about chapter five, before we talk about chapter two-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right, right.

Krystal Thomas:

... we're confused ourselves. It takes time.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

It takes time.

Krystal Thomas:

And I don't know if our systems are built to have that patience. We immediately want to see at the end of that spring year some improvement. And it takes time.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

It does. It really does. And so what are some of the strategies that you deploy to help maybe not accelerate it, but embed that time and embed those opportunities and even level people's expectations of what is possible in this randomized control trial that you're doing? Or there's replication study that you're doing? Right? We're only in seven classrooms.

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah. I will say I have yet to get to that phase of my work where I have been able to test this just yet.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Okay.

Krystal Thomas:

But I think that in the design that I am hoping to employ if this were ever funded, is we would put it upfront, this is going to be a two to three year thing and the most immediate things that we're going to look for, the teacher practices. And then we might think of these more intermediary kind of outcomes where it might not necessarily be academic, but how are the kids feeling about math now? Do they find

it, they think it might have more value than what they used to talk about it? Do they see themselves as actually being a mathematician when they were like, that's not for me.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Right.
Krystal Thomas:
So I think what we will look for is trying to ease expectations of, we're looking to shift the mindsets first because if there's buy-in and there's value to it, sure enough, the kids are going to put in the work to demonstrate those skills.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
But the teachers have to believe that it's going to work-
Krystal Thomas:
Yeah.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
and they have to be committed to trying to ensure it works.
Krystal Thomas:
Yeah, and I would say the teaching profession has taken quite a hit lately in terms of it's a rough market. Everyone has a solution. Everyone has a suggestion. They're changing the different curriculums every few years. And so it's like if you don't give something a chance and see it through.
And so I know we are going to have some challenges up ahead when it comes to that buy-in. But my hope is that because this curriculum is a bit different than most other curriculums and the approach to it and empowering teachers, because what's nice about OER is it does encourage adaptation.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Adaptation, yep.
Krystal Thomas:
So that teachers can think of the materials as to what is useful for their students.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: Right.
Krystal Thomas:
Not changing the rigor of it, but thinking of the content as it applies to their students, which I think is a nice affordances of OER that most other standard curriculum won't allow for.

Yeah, and so I'm wondering, this is... We're aging up and aging up, and so in a post-secondary space, what does this kind of improvement look like? Because we've been talking about systems right now that have a more intact way, but it's like in the post sec, it's like the wild west out there, right?

There's adjuncts, there's full professors, there are the community college two-year institution systems. There are four years, privates, publics, there are HBCUs. We're on a quarter system. We're on a semester system.

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah, I think the most challenging thing with the post-secondary space is many, and I will say us, I too have been an academic at one point in my life is many of us are not trained in pedagogy. We are trained to do research, we are trained to be experts, but we are not trained to teach. And if we are trained to teach, it's like one semester where we're actually building up our portfolio. So we build our state of being a teacher and we haven't taught.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right, right, right, right.

Krystal Thomas:

That is one of the funniest things to me, reflecting back on my experience, they threw me in the classroom my first semester of my graduate year and I was teaching two statistics labs and there was no, here you might want to teach it. They're like, here's the syllabus, go, here are the materials. And you make a lesson for 45 minutes.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right? Say what? What was that? I'm sorry, I thought you said make a lesson. Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Exactly do I go about doing that?

Krystal Thomas:

And so it's like no wonder the post-secondary space is the wild west because there is nothing from my limited experience and from other people I have spoken to, I don't know of anyone that has that formal training. And there are some grants that people win that support their tuition and their research. There are some that it's written in the grant that you are not allowed to teach.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Oh, wow.

Krystal Thomas:

So you have a three or four year grant that's helping you become this awesome rockstar researcher and let's say, you know you want to go into academia, and you can't on the books or formally at your institution, at least get that teaching experience.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

And so we got to come in as researchers where you're in this academic space where people are the experts of what they know, but many of them are not honestly equipped to be instructors or educators.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

Many expect that the students will come to the classroom with a set of skills or a standard of knowledge that many don't have, and they come in and they say, "Here's the objectives. This is what you're going to learn in anything other than that, it's out of my control. That's not my problem."

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

Sink or swim. Good luck.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So you have shared some projects you hope to be able to tackle in the future and principles that you developed. And so what's next with these principles? So you have these principles. How are they going to get utilize? What are your next steps there?

Krystal Thomas:

So we're still doing work with the Gates Foundation. And so the next step is we actually have been tasked with creating a, almost like an alignment tool. So we've created this report that was like, here's the criteria that we need to see or should exist in these measures. And so we've been tasked with creating an alignment tool like, okay, you wrote this out. Let's make a checklist.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

So that if Gates is funding folks that are looking to put a great tool out there, what do the program officers need to have in hand to assess the potential-

Oh yeah.

Krystal Thomas:

... and the quality of this tool? And so it's really interesting to be in the driver's seat of creating this alignment tool tool myself and my colleagues, where we get to revisit the report and think about this more in an actionable kind of way of what's the evidence we need to look for? And also thinking about the phases of work too. So now I get the opportunity to think about the marketing and development in that kind of space that I am not familiar with, but I am quickly learning about there's a pre-phase and a mid-phase and a post-phase. And so thinking of, for example, I think that at the beginning of any tool, it should be, especially that content portion of the report from the beginning, it should be thinking about how do we make sure that coaching supports multilingual learners, students with disabilities, Black and Latin kids, that should be from upfront. And if it's not there, then what are we doing?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, and how nice too to have written a report that is not now just going to go sit on a shelf somewhere. A report that you get to help bring to life or take it another step further and make it something that is really useful, a useful tool for people.

Krystal Thomas:

Yeah. What's funny is we presented at the National Association of State Leaders for Early Education, and one of the people in attendance was someone that is, she actually has created her own observational tool that I think will be tested pretty soon. We had copies of the report and she goes, "Wow, okay. When I think about scalability and what scalability is going to look like for the tool, I don't have these things yet, but I need to think about what that's going to look like." And I thought that was just cool to see someone that's in the phase of developing and trying to, first of all, just get it off the ground where it's going to be used at a state level, but then what does it look like beyond that?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Mm-hmm.

Krystal Thomas:

And so I think there's going to be a lot of use and value to the report that we put out. And then I think the alignment tool that we're putting together now, I think it's just really exciting to think about shaping the field and what's out there.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Yeah. So this is a perfect segue into if you are able to solve this issue around quality in instruction, what does that look like? What if you could dream or think about a profile of what a district would look like that has exceptional instructional practices? What would that be, what would that look like?

Krystal Thomas:

That's great question. I think that first I would love to see school districts and communities have the choice in what tool they want to adopt. What is the tool that makes sense for our community?

Kori Hamilton Biagas: That indicates quality instruction for us? Krystal Thomas: For us, the reason why I think about that is, I can't remember the name of the tool, but there's one that was developed specifically among indigenous people for indigenous communities and indigenous children. And it's like, this is what we value. This is what we want to see in this is the benchmark that we're going to use to look at quality. Kori Hamilton Biagas: Right, right. **Krystal Thomas:** And so that's the first thing that comes to mind is that it needs to be meaningful and valuable to the community and the children that they serve. Kori Hamilton Biagas: Yeah. **Krystal Thomas:** I think that the future of what that quality instruction looks like is that there is a supportive community for feedback and learning and empowering educators to feel like they have purpose in that space. And the voice to be able to say, "You know what? I see this measure and I see that this concept here related to transitioning kids from one task to the next. I really want to work on that." And they have some say in what that looks like and how they want to engage in that. And it being this kind of didactic thing between them and their coach. Kori Hamilton Biagas: That can evolve. **Krystal Thomas:** That can evolve, right? And then almost get them to the place where they too can do that with their colleagues.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right.

Krystal Thomas:

So often it's just like this one person that comes into the room and they sit in the back and they're like, okay.

So I want there to be a tool out there that when a person sees whatever measure it is, whether it's a score or a label, that it has meaning to it, and it can make someone feel like they have the potential to be better than what they were before.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Right.
Krystal Thomas: Right, and at the end of the day, I want the quality of instruction to address the whole child. I want these kids to be celebrated for who they are and what they bring to the classroom and not these very finite academic things that just doesn't reflect every person and everything that is their strength and what they bring.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
And so what keeps you coming back to the work, to the space to pushing against this? You mentioned earlier that so often people just are programmed out, right? It's like, oh, we tried that. It doesn't work. We tried this. It doesn't work. And even though we have evidence to indicate, oh, it does work if you're implementing correctly or if you do it for enough time, if you give it the opportunity. So what keeps you coming back?
Krystal Thomas:
I think what recently has made me feel hopeful and wanting to stay in this space is when I attended that meeting with state leaders, I heard of states that are, in particular, that are trying to create these systems so that coaching can be available to all educators within their state. I think one was Kentucky or Mississippi, where they were really thinking of what does that system look like for support? How do we get more coaches on the ground? And then how can we create a system where people can get that immediate feedback that so many often don't get?
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Right. Krystal?
Krystal Thomas: Yeah.
Kori Hamilton Biagas:
Our time is over.
Krystal Thomas: I see.
Kori Hamilton Biagas: I really want to thank you for coming onto the Homeroom. It's been such a pleasure talking with you and having this chance to learn more about your work.
Krystal Thomas:

Thank you, Kori. I appreciate being in this space with you.

Thank you all for listening to the SRI Homeroom produced by SRI. Take care. We'll talk to you next time. Bye.

Thank you for joining us on the SRI Homeroom, produced by SRI Education, a division of SRI.

Krystal Thomas is a senior education researcher with SRI Education. Learn more about Krystal and her work in today's show notes.

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