



Troubling gender norms: Reflections of two male early childhood teacher educators



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Background: Early childhood education (ECE) in South Africa and globally continues to present low numbers of male teachers. However, studies have highlighted the importance of having men in children's lives in the schooling context. However, getting men into the early years comes with various challenges, including those that relate to men choosing teaching as a career and, in particular, negotiating the gendered norms. Therefore, it is important to understand the reflections of men in the early years of teaching.

Objectives: This self-reflective paper reflects on the authors' experiences as young men becoming early childhood teacher educators in two South African higher education institutions.

Method: This qualitative study employed self-reflexive methodologies and narratives to show how the author has negotiated the normative constructions of gender in ECE.

Results: The authors found that even though institutions of higher education are vehicles for transformation, there are historical and contextual gendered norms that perpetuate inequalities. They also found that the inequalities may contribute to the recruitment, retention and resignation of men in ECE teaching.

Conclusion: The paper suggests the need for conversations on transforming gender relations among staff and students within ECE disciplines.

Contribution: The gendered inequalities experienced by male teacher educators demonstrate a need to revisit career development approaches for teacher education in South Africa.

Keywords: early childhood education (ECE); gender regime; masculinities; self-reflexive; teacher education.

Introduction

Teaching as a profession, particularly in early childhood education (ECE), is universally associated with a feminine image (Bhana et al., 2022). Globally, there have been campaigns intended to recruit more males into ECE (herein Grade R to 3). Countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand recruited males in ECE with the aim of providing male role models and father figures, especially for boys from single-parent households (Wernersson, 2015). Similarly, in Mpumalanga, South Africa, the Provincial Department of Education has trained a significant group of young individuals as ECE teachers, aiming to enhance the quality of education in those areas (SANews 2015, 26 February). Initiatives such as Australia's 'Male teachers strategy' have emphasised the recruitment and retention of male teachers to create an inclusive environment and positively influence boys' attitudes (Palmer et al., 2019). However, no significant improvement has been made thus far. The attempts to diversify the ECE educational space have raised global debates and research interests around ECE teaching and learning (Wernersson, 2015). The debates are mainly centred around how the heteronormative construction of ECE teaching has sustained the educational space as women's terrain and enabled men to distance themselves. The socially constructed idea that ECE teaching as a career path is suitable only for women and not a respectable profession for men has been one of the many hindrances to improving the underrepresentation of men in ECE (Moosa & Bhana, 2019). Moreover, the socially constructed notion that ECE teaching and, subsequently, ECE teacher education is a career suited for women is based on the understanding that ECE teaching is care work, which is not approved as a male responsibility (Bhana et al., 2022; Cruickshank, 2020). The afore is made visible by Kagola and Notshulwana (2022) and Msiza (2021) in their respective studies. These authors state that the ideal identity of a man teaching in the ECE is not what men who subscribe to dominant and hegemonic forms of masculinity aspire to. Therefore, globally, including South Africa, men are sceptical of teaching in the early years because of the discourses of dominant and hegemonic

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masculinities that relegate care as unimportant (Cruickshank, 2020; Msiza, 2021).

In South African schools, there is minimal support for career education and guidance, potentially providing children and youth with a broader understanding of their career choices (Maree, 2013). However, since the dawn of democracy in South Africa, career education has been incorporated into the Life Skill/Life Orientation subjects in the new Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Maree, 2013). Part of implementing the new curriculum in South African schools was to redress past injustices through an education underpinned by democratic values such as social justice and gender equality (Dieltiens, 2002). Equitable distribution of labour forms part of addressing issues of gender equality in the workplace. For schools, this might theoretically mean teachers should provide learners with multiple opportunities to explore all possible professions and not be discriminated against in their career choice. However, because of the sustenance of hegemonic patriarchal practices such as the 'real man' discourse, that is centred around stoicism, violence and aggression (Ratele, 2014), it is difficult for men to ignore the gender binary and work in professions previously regarded as women's terrain, such as nursing and ECE teaching (Bhana et al., 2022; Ratele, 2014). In working towards reimagining new versions of pro-feminine and caring masculinities, Moosa and Bhana (2019) and Ratele (2014) have argued that it is essential for men to consider professions that are historically constructed outside the realm of typical manhood. Wernersson (2015) posits that reflections, courageous conversations and public engagements with men already in the educational system should be encouraged to attract and retain more male teachers. In this paper, we follow Francis's (2021:286) recommendation that to start thinking about change, personal and professional growth is important for one to 'sometimes do painful, critical reflection, especially as it relates to developing a critical consciousness for changing self and society'. Therefore, in this special edition and as teacher educators located in two different teacher education institutions in South Africa, we are responding to the following research question driving the study: How have we negotiated the normative constructions of gender in early childhood teacher education?

Troubling men's presence in early childhood education teaching and teacher education

Literature in both the global North and South postulates that the identities of ECE teachers and teacher educators seem to be centred around the socially constructed idea of the profession as being women's work (Bhana et al., 2022; Chang-Kredl & Kingsley, 2014; Cheruvu et al., 2015). Multiple gendered discourses persist in ECE and are reproduced while the few men within the teaching profession navigate their identities in a highly gendered space (Bhana et al., 2022). Additionally, Brody et al. (Eds. 2020) argue that men who have chosen ECE teaching as a career choice experience

challenges in their career trajectories even though their decision to join the phase is noble. This is visible in literature in the global South because of its unique historical, geopolitical and sociocultural factors that continue to construct the ECE context as a feminine space. Moreover, these colonial legacies, patriarchal systems and socio-economic disparities constantly shape societal perceptions of gender binaries while reinforcing traditional gender norms (Bhana, 2016; Ratele, 2014). Factors such as these affect the recruitment, retention and acceptance of valuable and competent professionals within ECE. Consequently, men who intend to work in ECE disrupt the normative construction of ECE. Bhana (2022) and Msibi (2019) found that schools and higher education institutions are spaces that reproduce and sustain patriarchal hegemonic ideals of masculinities that perpetuate the 'real man' discourse. For example, Msiza (2021) has found that male ECE teachers constructed nappy changing as an activity that relegates their masculinities to a lower level in the hierarchy.

Furthermore, Kagola and Notshulwana (2022) in their study about a same-sex desiring male ECE teacher found that men, irrespective of their sexual orientation, disassociate themselves from teaching sensitive topics and sexuality education. It is therefore important for teachers and teacher educators to be cognisant of how they deliver content, position themselves in their respective contexts and be reflective in their practices (Eds. Brody et al., 2020). Teachers and teacher educators are central to the work of reform. They also play an integral role in developing pre- and in-service teachers tasked with guiding learners, especially in ECE, in becoming active agents of change (Bhana, 2016; Brody et al., 2020; Connell, 2011; Msibi, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, the paper is informed by the theory of masculinities (Connell, 2005). Connell (2005) defines masculinity as a place within gender relations where men and women enact practices that may contribute to culture, personality and experience. In addition, masculinities are multiple; for instance, there are hegemonic, subordinated, marginalised and complicit (Connell, 2005). This suggests that there is more than one way in which masculinities can be performed as they are liable to change and often contested (Connell, 2000). In short, there is no single, rigid and fixated way of being a man. Masculinities are about how men position themselves within gender relations (Messerschmidt, 2018). Masculinities do not exist in isolation or in a vacuum. Instead, masculinities are constructed within specific institutional settings that have history and culture (Hearn & Kimmel, 2006). Also, context is important in constructing masculinities; hence, they are constructed locally, regionally and globally (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within the teaching specialisation of early childhood education, there are normative constructions of gender, particularly of masculinities. This article uses the theory of masculinities to understand how to negotiate constructions of gender in early childhood teacher education. The study reflect on the authors experiences as young men and student teachers and this

experience also includes experiences as academics employed in a career or profession that is statistically dominated by women and socially constructed as suitable for women. To understand the experiences, the article draws on the work of South African masculinities scholars (Mfecane, 2020; Morrell, 1998; Ratele, 2016). Considering the country's history (colonial and apartheid) of men and masculinities and violence, Ratele (2016) has sought to understand masculinities from the African perspective and how black men can be liberated from normative constructions of gender, racism and economic oppression. In this article, the hope was to use the theory of masculinities and pay attention to the theories emerging from the Global South, as Connell (2018:339) argues that 'knowledge about gender not only has a politics, it also has a geopolitics, and this geopolitics has a history'. The theory and the self-reflexive methodologies of doing research adopted for this study are helpful in assisting in sharing how the authors have negotiated the normative constructions of gender in early childhood teacher education and how they have liberated themselves as men and academics (Ratele, 2016).

Research methods and design

A qualitative research approach was adopted. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is about understanding individuals within their context and the experiences they share from real-life situations. Thus, the authors were interested in their lived experiences of negotiating normative constructions of gender within early childhood teacher education. Consistent with Flick (2007), the authors conceptualise qualitative research not only as a methodology to generate data but also as a way in which lived experiences can contribute towards addressing social challenges. Noting that lived experiences in negotiating the normative constructions of gender in ECE teacher education are context-dependent and subjective, an interpretive paradigm was adopted. In line with narrative research, the interpretive worldview is not interested in people's objectivity but in their relationality (Clandinin, 2016; Creswell, 2013).

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry was used as the methodology for this article. The narrative inquiry focuses on stories lived and told. It also focuses on how context shapes individual experiences, meanings and constructions in a particular context and period of time (Clandinin, 2006). The method of personal narratives was used to generate data. Narratives are a creative form that researchers in education, particularly teacher educators, can be used to reflect and think about new ways (Pithouse et al., 2009). Before generating the written narratives, virtual meetings were held to discuss past experiences in the early years. The authors created prompts that they both individually responded to over 2 weeks. The authors also revisited the reflexivity sections of their doctoral theses. The reflexivity sections triggered our memories about past experiences and contributed to the data generation process. After writing the narratives, the authors exchanged and read each other's responses. They believed that although they

were writing the article collaboratively, it did not mean there would be harmony in the responses and way of being (Samaras & Freese, 2006). This was the first process leading to data analysis. Data was analysed using narrative analysis (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1995), where responses were re-storied into a coherent story with plots. They also engaged in the second level of analysis, which is the analysis of narratives, commonly known as thematic analysis in qualitative research (Polkinghorne, 1995). In the data analysis process, they considered the two approaches to analysing the data, namely inductive and deductive approaches. The authors engaged in a rigorous reiterative process of searching for codes and formulating themes.

The authors' doctoral theses, which triggered our data generation process, were ethically approved at the respective institutions. V.M.'s thesis was approved at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and O.K.'s at the University of the Free State. The doctoral theses focus on men in the early years of teaching. In self-reflexive methodologies, the authors are both the inquirers and learners (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Thus, to ensure rigour, the processes of self-reflexive methodologies was followed. The draft manuscript was shared with a critical senior academic member for feedback. The authors engaged with the feedback and strengthened the article.

Results

The findings presented herein emerged from a rigorous data analysis process that included two methods of analysis. First was the narrative analysis followed by the analysis of narratives (themes). Noting the nature of the methodology, the authors presented longer vignettes to privilege the voices and enhance the richness of the narratives (Chase, 2008). The analysis yielded three main themes, namely: (1) receiving career guidance, (2) the journey of becoming an early childhood teacher and (3) being a man in early childhood teacher education.

Receiving career guidance

The existing literature indicates that career education or guidance is not enjoyed by all the learners in schools, particularly noting the contextual differences that exist in South Africa, such as the geographical location of the schools and the socio-economic status in varied contexts (Maree, 2013). The research question focused on how to negotiate normative constructions of gender in early childhood teacher education. However, it was deemed necessary to provide their narratives on receiving career guidance while still in high school. This provides a rich contextual understanding of their lived experiences and the development of the authors' career trajectories. Moreover, it informs the succeeding vignettes. In analysing the data and the vignettes presented that both V.M. and O.K. found that they grew up in the villages. V.M. received two separate career guidance sessions while O.K. received what we can term career education from life orientation (LO)

teachers. The vignettes indicate no concerted effort to challenge gender stereotypes during the career guidance received:

V.M.: Growing up in the villages of Mpumalanga, I attended several sessions of career guidance. The first career guidance I attended was in Grade 11. There were different institutions, organisations and companies. There were institutions situated in Pretoria. There were also various role-players, such as Sector Education Authority [SETAs], the Department of Agriculture, companies like ESKOM [*Electricity Supply Commission*], and various mining companies in Grade 12. I remember attending a specific career guidance session organised by ESKOM and TVET [*technical, vocational education and training*] colleges. At the time, the government presented plans for constructing Medupi and Kusile power stations.

O.K.: Unfortunately for me and those I matriculated with in one of the villages of North West province, we never attended and received any organised formal career guidance. I always got career guidance from my Life Orientation teacher. This was somewhat limited to themes in the curriculum like 'jobs people do' and others were very gendered. Knowing that I wanted to be a teacher of young children has been problematic since high school. I was often discouraged.

What is more apparent, especially from V.M.s vignette, is that the guidance was tailored more for careers predominantly followed by men and those requiring manual labour. The same is also noted in O.K.s vignette that some of the topics they discussed in class involved jobs that people do, and they were mainly gendered. O.K., who wanted to pursue a career in teaching in the early years, was often discouraged because teaching was not constructed as a suitable or lucrative career for men. Such discourses are driven by heteronormativity, and the idea of work in such provinces is understood from a frame of manual hard labour, such as mining and agricultural activities (Msiza, 2022). Moreover, the career education and guidance presented to both were designed to perpetuate the binary construction of what activities men and women should do, which feeds the reproduction of hegemonic masculine identity as doing hard labour and not care work. Ratele (2014) postulates that masculinities are produced for others to validate or reject. Therefore, O.K. was always discouraged by fellow learners and LO teachers from being a teacher. V.M. attended career guidance geared to work in spaces such as mining and engineering and not care work. The data suggest that how careers are understood and how career guidance is conducted in South Africa are still gendered, with ideals of dominant and hegemonic masculinities being prioritised. The discussion in this theme presented the narratives on receiving career guidance; next theme present the journeys of becoming ECE teachers.

The journey of becoming an early childhood teacher

Although O.K. came from an environment where no career guidance was offered, the career guidance that V.M. received did not include careers like teaching. This presented several challenges in their journeys of becoming ECE teachers. The authors found that in both their journeys, different parts of society, such as people in communities and those in teacher

education institutions, were not open to the idea of a man in the ECE. They elaborate in the vignettes:

V.M.: When I chose teaching as a career, particularly teaching in the ECE, I received negative comments from the young men I grew up with in the village. They used to mock me and say I am going to 'wipe bums' in the early years, and that's not a serious job a man should pursue. What was more surprising and shocking were the comments made by some of the staff members at the teacher education institution I was pursuing my degree at. Apparently, for them, it was for the first time seeing a significant number of men in the early years. When we arrived at the institution, male students pursuing the Bachelor of Education in ECE were approximately 40–42. They used to ask why we chose ECE as a specialisation. Are we going to manage? Students who knew our specialisation were also problematic during the extra-mural activities such as the residence soccer league. As men, we were ridiculed and mocked for pursuing a specialisation that was not suitable for us.

O.K.: From high school, I always knew I wanted to follow in my grandmother's footsteps by becoming a professional teacher. Going to university and registering for ECE was a dream come true for me. I was excited, happy and ready to be like my grandmother. The shock started in my first-year class, being one of the only two males in the cohort of students registered for the programme. We got used to being taught by white female lecturers who sometimes felt sorry for us. They would forever ask how we were settling in and if we needed any assistance. We continued as two male ECE students until the completion of the programme. Throughout the four years, we negotiated, convinced and assured teachers, principals and parents that we only had our profession and their children's best interests at heart. 'Are you going to make it? Do you have patience? Don't be too harsh on them they are just kids!' These were the common comments which we got used to during our teaching practice. Through ECE teaching, I experienced what my grandmother always told us about positively contributing to someone's life. I experienced it all, my learners becoming spelling bee champions and prefects learner representative council (LRC) in their intermediate years. It was indeed an experience that I would cherish all my life.

The number of men is apparent in both vignettes. When V.M. was training to become an ECE teacher, his cohort had a significant number of men, while O.K. had only two. Although the authors have mentioned the number of men in ECE, they argue that numeric representation of gender is not the only way of understanding the challenges of becoming a male teacher in ECE (McGrath, 2023). The vignettes indicate further that some of the staff members at the teacher education institutions were shocked to see men and were constantly concerned if we would manage in the ECE. Undoubtedly, the reaction was fuelled by the gendered understandings of careers and what men ought to do. The comment by young men in V.M.s community that he would 'wipe bums' was intended to discourage V.M. from continuing with a profession that is not approved in the realm of hegemonic and patriarchal masculinities. The ideal identity of a man in any society is one that has power that he can use on others and one that is wealthy (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Subtly, O.K. had to convince parents, teachers and

principals that men in the ECE were not a threat to children in any way.

In most cases, the suspicions are gendered, but in a context such as South Africa, suspicions are present because of the high prevalence of violence against women, children and other men (Moosa & Bhana, 2020). According to Cruickshank (2020), men in the ECE are often suspected of child molestation, and their intentions are questioned. The limited career guidance the authors received did not prepare them for the contextual realities, particularly those that relate to the normative construction of gender in the ECE. Mapping out career trajectories through narratives and particularly addressing how they negotiated normative constructions of gender in early childhood teacher education necessitated presenting narratives of being a man in early childhood teacher education.

Being a man in early childhood teacher education

The prejudice and the negative comments received for pursuing an ECE degree did not deter the authors from continuing and furthering studies. Under this theme, the authors present narratives of being teacher educators, particularly as men in the ECE disciplines in two higher education institutions. The findings in this theme are somewhat similar to their experiences as student teachers in ECE. In the vignette below, O.K.'s gender and teacher identities were constantly policed by suggesting team teaching or co-teaching with a female colleague. The suggestions appeared to be premised on the assumption that men cannot teach in the ECE. Also consistent with existing studies, it seems that the suggestions were fuelled by suspicion around how O.K., as a man, would teach the concept of sexuality to ECE pre-service teachers. In their respective studies, Francis and DePalma (2015) and Kagola and Notshulwana (2022) engaged with teachers on the teaching of perceived sensitive topics and who should teach them. They found that women are better teachers of such content. This is premised on the socially constructed idea that women are more prone to engage in such content as it is perceived to be innocent from them, which is the opposite for men (Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022):

O.K.: One thing I have realised from my teacher training to now, being a teacher educator for five years, is that the space of learning and teaching in the early years is highly guarded and gendered. One gets to negotiate every space one goes into, whether pedagogically, in community engagement or research. I teach modules such as values in education. In such a module, one negotiates the pedagogical strategies I use to teach certain sensitive content, such as the sexuality unit found in that module. I remember when we wrote the module, and in our discussion of the content, colleagues suggested that I offer the module by choosing one of the two options: (a) team teaching or (b) teaching with a female lecturer. Another instance is the community engagement aspect within the programme, such as distributing sanitary towels to the girl child project, which I formed part of. Interestingly, I discovered that colleagues did not like my

presence. One even said 'we do not like your line of questioning, they make us uncomfortable, and I think you should stay behind next time. Pads are a woman's thing.' I asked them why boys are dismissed when girls are given towels in schools? I asked these questions because we wanted to normalise the talk about sexuality-related content in schools.

The above vignette by O.K. indicates that apart from being policed on his teaching, there was also a gender division of labour. For instance, O.K. was told to refrain from participating in a community engagement project distributing pads to girls. Because of being a gender activist, O.K.'s line of questioning created discomfort among his female counterparts, despite the benefits of an opportunity to educate boys about sexuality. On analysing the data further, there seems to be discomfort about O.K. and comprehensive sexuality education. Francis's (2017) point about teachers' lack of content and pedagogical knowledge to teach comprehensive sexuality education is evident in how O.K.'s colleagues resisted and were gatekeeping. O.K. was expected to react like most men, who on a daily basis distance themselves from caring activities or those that would present them as caring. In the vignette below, V.M. narrates about his experience of attending an ECE national conference and the lack of awareness he observed on the topic of men in the early years:

V.M.: When I was employed as a teacher educator at the institution, I attended academic conferences, and one of them was specifically for ECE. I realised that there was a general shock amongst the conference delegates. The conference was dominated by academics who were elderly, women and predominantly white. More shocking was the feedback from my presentation since my study focused on men teaching in the early years. Some of the delegates who attended my presentation were surprised to learn that there were men who taught in the early years. I also learnt with shock that one of the teacher education institutions in the country did not have any men students pursuing ECE, and there were no immediate plans to recruit them. Being a teacher educator, I was also able to notice that the call to recruit more men was not only significant for basic education, but it was equally important for ECE disciplines in higher education.

The shock that V.M. observed on his identity as a man in the ECE and on presenting about male teachers in the phase indicates the extent of gender imbalance in the South African ECE teaching. V.M. was also concerned to learn that there was still a teacher education institution in South Africa that did not have male students in their cohorts and with no plans to diversify the phase. The absence of men in teacher education institutions pursuing ECE teaching appears to contribute to the low numbers of male ECE teachers and the overall unfamiliarity in society. Ratele (2016) has advised that as men and masculinities scholars, one should not be uncritical when studying men (including ourselves). Therefore, the authors are aware that the presence of male teachers in the ECE may not be enough to address the existing constructs and stereotypes (McGrath, 2023). However, it is hoped that increasing the number of men in ECE will also

increase men's involvement in caring activities (Moosa & Bhana, 2020). Vusi's observation indicates that ECE disciplines in the country remain untransformed regarding gender and sexuality. Early childhood education disciplines require a concerted effort from various stakeholders to drive and effect diversity in the early years (Msiza, 2022). As Francis (2017) rightly argues the prevalence of heterosexism makes the binaries of gender and sexuality more explicit, particularly in the institutional culture, curriculum and pedagogy.

Discussion and conclusion

The presence of men in the ECE as student teachers or teacher educators contributes to society's familiarity and acceptance of men as suitable and qualified ECE teachers. The study indicates that the silence on the teaching profession, particularly ECE teaching in career guidance, contributes to the current normative gender constructs. The literature in the country on male ECE teachers has focused on student teachers and in-service teachers. We noted a need to do a self-reflexive study and share our stories drawing from our experiences of career guidance as learners to student teachers studying a degree dominated by female students and currently as teacher educators in the same disciplines. The narratives demonstrated the following. Firstly, the teaching profession is neglected in career guidance or education. In cases where it is mentioned, as seen with Obakeng, it is often ridiculed and gendered. Secondly, the gendering of ECE teaching is evident throughout history, and our career trajectories from student teachers to teacher educators bear reference.

The authors noted that what enabled us to negotiate the gendered constructs, doubts and suspicions was our activism, the pursuit of transforming ECE teaching and liberating men from problematic notions of what men ought to do (Ratele, 2016). They share the same sentiments with self-reflexive scholars that 'self-study respects the notion that we teach who we are and who we becoming as professionals' (Samaras & Freese, 2006:48). The authors therefore argue that their self-reflexive process created an opportunity for them to learn from themselves and past experiences. As self-reflexive researchers, the authors were well aware that to share their lived experiences, they had to acknowledge that the personal intersects with the professional (Pithouse et al., 2009). This means the source of resilience in negotiating gender constructs at a time of doubt and shame began with who they are personally (activists) and who they want to become professionally. In line with teaching who they are becoming, their learnings are important for those in the ECE teaching and those interested in joining the phase regardless of gender, sex and sexuality. While we continuously negotiate the gendered constructions, it is clear that men who left ECE teaching – whether in schools or as academics – were not able to negotiate the gendered space of ECE and were not able to handle the conflictual elements of being a man in the early years (Brody &

Gor Ziv, 2020). The findings suggest that teacher education institutions have a role to play as transformative spaces. Institutions should consider ways in which they can progressively lead or initiate inclusive career guidance. Internally, institutions should transform the curriculum and approaches that are pro-diversity. Undoubtedly, a diverse gender teaching force 'demonstrates that education is inclusive of, uniformly valued by, and of significance to, a wide range of demographic groups' (McGrath, 2023, p. 81).

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Authors' contributions

V.M. and O.K. have contributed equally to the development of the article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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