

The incorporation of Venezuelan students into the Colombian educational system in Cúcuta (2015-2020)

La incorporación de estudiantes venezolanos al sistema educativo colombiano en Cúcuta (2015-2020)

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze the incorporation of Venezuelan students into the Colombian educational system in Cúcuta, border municipality of Norte de Santander, in the period 2015-2020. The study is based on a mixed methodology that includes a survey in five secondary schools, interviews with school principals and families with Venezuelan children, as well as discussion groups with teachers. The survey showed that Venezuelan students interviewed had slower and more difficult school access than Colombian students, although with some improvement since the deployment of migration policies for Venezuelans in Colombia. The qualitative data show some specific barriers faced during school incorporation, among which stand out the lack of documentation or apostilles, bureaucracy, the lack of social networks, social prejudices, and discretionary admission processes.

Keywords: incorporation, educational policy, networks, stereotypes, immigrants.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la incorporación de los estudiantes venezolanos al sistema educativo colombiano en Cúcuta, municipio fronterizo del Norte de Santander, en el periodo 2015-2020. El estudio se basa en metodología mixta que incluye una encuesta en cinco colegios de educación secundaria, entrevistas a rectores de colegios y a familias con hijos venezolanos, así como grupos de discusión con docentes. La encuesta mostró que los estudiantes venezolanos entrevistados tuvieron un acceso más lento y difícil al colegio que los estudiantes colombianos, aunque con cierta mejoría a partir del despliegue de políticas migratorias para los venezolanos en Colombia. Los datos cualitativos muestran

Receives on October 14, 2022.

Accepted on October 30, 2023.

Published on November 21, 2023.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



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CITATION: López Castro, E. O. & Vargas Valle, E. D. (2023). La incorporación de estudiantes venezolanos al sistema educativo colombiano en Cúcuta (2015-2020) [The incorporation of Venezuelan students into the Colombian educational system in Cúcuta (2015-2020)]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 24, e134. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2323134>

algunas barreras específicas enfrentadas durante la incorporación escolar entre las que destacan la falta de documentación o apostillas, la burocracia, la inexistencia de redes sociales, los prejuicios sociales y la discrecionalidad en los procesos de admisión.

Palabras clave: incorporación, política educativa, redes, estereotipos, inmigrantes.

Introduction

In 2015, the largest emigration in the history of Venezuela was recorded (Rodríguez & Ramos Pismataro, 2019). This country had experienced crises in the political, socioeconomic and security spheres, which caused a shortage of food and supplies, precarious living conditions and reduced the social welfare of its citizens (Freitez, 2019). The largest number of immigrants from Venezuela was concentrated in Colombia for various reasons: geographic proximity, high socioeconomic exchange, and strong family and intercultural ties. This exodus began with the closure of the Colombian-Venezuelan border in 2015 and intensified between 2017 and 2018 amid the worsening humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

In this exodus, both Venezuelans and Colombians arrived in Colombia; the former had emigrated to Venezuela mainly due to the oil boom (Sierra Musse, 2021) and were returning to Colombia with their children, born in Venezuela. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia increased from approximately 31 471 in 2015 to 1 717 352 in 2020, 55% of them in irregular status (Migración Colombia, 2020). In response, the Colombian state had implemented, as of 2018, a series of prerogative measures for Venezuelans in an irregular situation, such as the Special Permit of Permanence (PEP, by its acronym in Spanish: Permiso Especial de Permanencia); valid for two years, it facilitated access to employment and social benefits. The instrument of the National Council for Economic and Social Policy (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2018) also extended the main guidelines for social care. In addition, Decree 1288 (Departamento Administrativo de la Presidencia de la República, 2018) guaranteed school access. Finally, starting in June 2021, the Temporary Protection Statute was launched, extending the possibility of obtaining immigration regularization and social rights for Venezuelans in Colombia to 10 years.¹

One of the areas where the massive arrival of Venezuelans was experienced was education. Thousands of Venezuelan children and adolescents (VCA) requested entry into the Colombian educational system (CES). According to the information provided by the Headquarters of Access and Permanence of the Municipal Education Secretariat of Cúcuta, gathered at the express request in an official letter in February 2020, only in Cúcuta, a border department of Norte de Santander, the Venezuelan student population grew from 75 VCA in 2016 to 13 445 VCA in 2020. As it is the responsibility of the Colombian state to “leave no one behind” in educational matters (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura [Unesco], 2018, p. 11), access to education is protected by international regulatory frameworks that

¹ At the time of the fieldwork in this research, none of the migrant families interviewed had pre-registered for access to this status on the Migración Colombia website.

guarantee the human rights of children and adolescents (CA) (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, 2009). The school incorporation of VCA has been a challenge both for their Venezuelan families and for the CES. One barrier that migrant families have experienced to enrolling their children in the school system has been their lack of immigration documents (López Villamil et al., 2018) or of any identity validation at their destination (Algarra, 2021). In addition, for the CES, Venezuelan immigration has implied strong internal challenges, such as expanding educational services, infrastructure and human capital for a large contingent of Venezuelans, as well as the consideration of the curricular differences and cultural diversity between both countries (Gómez, 2021).

To understand the educational incorporation of Venezuelan migrants, it is important to empirically examine their characteristics, as well as their particular reception contexts. Therefore, the central objective of this research is to analyze the incorporation of Venezuelan students into the Colombian educational system at the secondary level (grades six to nine) in Cúcuta during 2015-2020. First, based on quantitative data, it demonstrates the migratory, sociodemographic and school incorporation profiles of VCA. Second, based on qualitative data, we identify certain structural factors that have either facilitated or hindered access to school for these migrants in this border context.

This article is presented in four sections. First, the bases for the theory used in the study are synthesized, and a documentary review is performed of the main barriers found on the school access of migrants in host societies. Second, the adopted methodology in this research is described. Third, the most relevant results found in the fieldwork are presented. Finally, fourth, the article closes with a discussion of these results, elaborating specific conclusions and recommendations for public policy.

Theoretical research on the social incorporation of migrants: contributions to the destination school space

This research is developed from the theoretical perspective called modes of incorporation (Portes & Zhou, 1993). The concept of incorporation is defined by Castles et al. (2002) as “the global process by which newcomers become part of a society” (p. 117). Modes of incorporation thus refer to the main structural aspects that grant migrants social recognition at their destination and allow them access to rights and privileges in a certain time and space (Castles et al., 2002).

According to Portes and Zhou (1993), these modes of incorporation can be classified into three areas: *a*) public policy in the host country supporting immigration and integration; *b*) the social networks of migrants; and *c*) the degree of prejudice in the host society. In societies where there are migratory and social policies, support networks for migrants and a low degree of prejudice toward them, possibilities are opened for migrant families and their children to establish relevant social relationships, to earn or use different capital and to access social institutions in their destination. However, the modes of incorporation can facilitate or block the social mobility of migrants. For example, downward mobility can occur if migrants lose access to academic or work opportunities or are located in places (neighborhoods) where they find conditions of poverty, informal work and social segregation.

Migration and social policies favoring migrants is the first aspect that includes the modes of incorporation approach. The incorporation of migrants depends on the commitment of the State, and, in the educational field, on the public policies that are generated, to achieve the schooling of all children, regardless of their immigration status or lack of documentation, whereby these migrants can enjoy their educational rights in their host community (Organización Internacional para las Migraciones [OIM], 2019).

Their incorporation in the schools allows progress toward the recognition of the migrant student population by the State. In receiving contexts, educational institutions play a fundamental social role, an integrating space for the construction of relationships, support networks and various forms of socialization (García-Yepes, 2017). However, migrants may experience barriers to school entry when regulatory frameworks are not based on social justice or incorporation processes are not consistent with these frameworks. In many recipient countries, these measures are only provisional, and obstacles continue to be generated such as long and complex procedures for school enrollment, revalidation and certification (Agámez, 2015; Vargas, 2022). For example, obtaining documentation (of identity or school history) and validating it in Venezuela has become an obstacle to school incorporation due to a lack of supplies in Venezuela, difficulties in the platform of the Administrative Service of Identification, Migration and Immigration (SAIME, by its acronym in Spanish: Servicio Administrativo de Identificación, Migración y Extranjería) and the costs of obtaining birth certificates and passports, as well as legalizing documents (Algarra, 2021). A common problem in several Latin American countries is the requirement for apostilles on documents issued at the point of origin to carry out school procedures at the destination (Berganza Setién & Solórzano Salleres, 2019; Jacobo, 2017).

A series of barriers are also linked to the administrative bodies of the receiving education systems (Jacobo, 2017; Vargas, 2022; Vargas Silva & Lugo Nolasco, 2012; Zúñiga, 2013). It is up to these bodies to provide access in accordance with legislation or educational standards; however, managers, principals and officials typically implement these bureaucratic procedures or discretionary mechanisms outside educational regulations (Jacobo, 2017; Stefoni et al., 2010). Other barriers include the availability of places, the absence of efficient strategies for academic leveling or placement in grades, a lack of information or sometimes imprecise information and disorientation at the destination (Berganza Setién & Solórzano Salleres, 2019; Child Resilience Alliance & Unicef Colombia, 2020; Vargas, 2022).

In addition, the limited state funding for the expansion of infrastructure and the costs associated with schooling is evidenced by the high density of immigrant populations in the educational systems of some countries in the last decade (Agámez, 2015; Da Silva Ramos et al., 2020; De la Torre Díaz, 2011; Stefoni et al., 2010). There are problems regarding the availability and accessibility of infrastructure, basic services and the provision of qualified teachers in destination societies, including Colombia (Child Resilience Alliance & Unicef Colombia, 2020, p. 6). In addition, the economic limitations among migrant families prevent them from being able to meet the persistent fees and costs for entering the educational system (Child Resilience Alliance & Unicef Colombia, 2020; Stefoni et al., 2010; Vargas-Valle & Camacho Rojas, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of immigrants whereby educational

policies and regulations are proposed with a differential approach, in defense of their human rights (Aliaga Sáez et al., 2020, p. 57).

Regarding the social networks of migrants in their place of reception, these can help mobilize social capital, favoring their incorporation (Portes, 1999), which may be fundamental for Venezuelans due to the family disruption that generates migration and the precariousness of their living conditions in neighborhoods in Colombia (Rodríguez-Lizarralde et al., 2022). Family and friend networks provide information that helps migrants locate themselves in their place of settlement, obtain jobs, and place their children in schools. In contrast, with limited social networks, migrants face greater challenges in the incorporation of their children, a situation that can lead to school dropout, marginalization and conflict at their destination.

These links can be strong or weak (Granovetter, 1973). Migrants with strong networks, especially family and community networks, at their destination may have a better opportunity for social mobility through their use of the social and economic capital that these communities make available to them in their host country (Portes & Zhou, 1993). On the other hand, the institutional networks of migrants, which tend to generate weak links, contribute to establishing social connections and valuing the cultural capital of migrant communities (Portes, 1999). Although weak networks do not always facilitate economic capital at destinations, they can contribute by offering information about educational institutions.

In addition to their regulatory barriers and lack of social networks, migrants may confront social prejudice at their destination. Portes and Böröcz (1998, pp. 55-58) point out that in certain contexts, the native population looks down on the arrival of immigrants due to such prejudice. Prejudice is based on a cognitive element, a “stereotype” that society manifests when it observes differences among immigrants that are far from the known patterns in their social group (Arriaga Martínez, 2009). When there are no stereotypes, migrants enjoy more equal opportunities, especially when host governments offer active assistance, both legal and material, resulting in a favorable public reception of immigrants. Unfortunately, based on prejudices and feelings of superiority and self-assertion, a host society can exercise discriminatory behaviors toward migrants, denying them rights and opportunities (Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, la Xenofobia y el Racismo [Inadi], 2016, p. 10).

Since Colombia is a traditionally expelling country, upon the arrival of Venezuelans, there were no normative antecedents and strategies that could effectively assure their integration into the school environment. As of 2018, changes in public policy had been implemented for the care of Venezuelan immigration, although amid enormous challenges for their implementation, revealing the weaknesses in the social systems welcoming them. Therefore, the focal question in this article is as follows: How did the incorporation of VCA in the Colombian educational system unfold between 2015 and 2020? For this purpose, modes of incorporation theory is applied (Portes & Zhou, 1993); although it was first adopted to explore South-North migration, it is an effective frame of reference for identifying the social structures that influence the integration of all migrants, even in South-South contexts. However, studies that use this framework to address migrant access to education are still scarce in Latin America (Medina & Menjívar 2015).

Accordingly, the principal hypothesis in this study posits that the incorporation of Venezuelan students in Colombia has been affected by *a*) an educational policy inconsistent with the exercise of the right to education of migrants; *b*) the absence of family and extrafamily support networks at their destination; and, *c*) certain stereotypes that permeate discretion in school admissions and hinder access to education.

Methodology

This research was performed in the first semester of 2021 in fieldwork across five public educational institutions in the official system (IESO, by its acronym in Spanish: instituciones educativas públicas del sistema oficial) in Cúcuta² (hereafter referred to as schools); four are located in the urban area and one in the rural area of Cúcuta. A mixed sequential method was followed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), developed through two consecutive phases: quantitative and qualitative. In the quantitative phase, through a survey, Venezuelan students were placed in an IESO, and their educational and sociodemographic profiles were characterized. In the qualitative phase, the analysis of the ways of incorporating VCA into schools was deepened with reports from students, teachers and principals. In both phases, participation was voluntary, and the informed consent of all informants was validated.

In the quantitative phase, the survey was administered to 410 CA, 327 Colombians and 83 Venezuelans,³ sampled via convenience nonprobabilistic sampling. The application was virtual, through a Google form, and when it was carried out from home, parents, representatives or guardians could supporting its completion. Among the Venezuelans, the sample presented parity by sex, while among the Colombians, 57 out of 100 were female. In addition, four out of every ten Venezuelans had dual citizenship. Regarding their age, the young people were uniformly distributed in the different grades, and the average age was slightly higher among the Venezuelans than among the Colombians (13.4 years versus 12.9 years).

In the qualitative phase, first, five interviews were carried out with principals to explore and identify relevant educational policy as well as the institutional care and management of the access of VCA to their schools. Second, 20 semistructured interviews were conducted with families with children who were born and had studied in Venezuela, five Venezuelans and 15 mixed (with returned Colombian parents or dual nationality acquired by kinship). These 20 families came from different municipalities in Venezuela; 14 had arrived in Colombia as of 2018, but all their family members were living in their homes. Finally, three discussion groups were held in three schools in which 66 teachers⁴ from different training areas participated.

² A total of 57 IESO from the sixth to ninth grades in Cúcuta, 2020, with 3 073 Venezuelan children (Jefatura de Acceso y Permanencia de la Secretaría de Educación Municipal de Cúcuta, personal communication, February, 2020).

³ The total population of Venezuelans enrolled in these five schools is unknown; the schools did not share enrollment documents specified by country-of-birth in 2021.

⁴ The discussion groups were conducted with technological tools and the use of the Zoom platform in three general rooms that corresponded to the three IESO; via the Jamboard virtual tool, the 66 teachers were also divided into small groups (between 8 and 12 teachers).

In the semistructured interviews, four thematic axes were addressed: sociodemographic aspects; national and institutional policy and requirements for access; prejudices or stereotypes; and the support networks for obtaining a place in a school. In the discussion groups, the generating question revolved around educational policy and its adequacy in responding to the situation of migration and education in Cúcuta.

The processing and analysis of the quantitative data were conducted with the statistical software Stata version 15-1, with a descriptive scope (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). Sociodemographic and educational variables were constructed for the analysis of the profiles, and frequencies and percentages were obtained. The sociodemographic variables included country of birth (Colombia or Venezuela), time of arrival (in years), reasons for migration (yes or no in each reason), sex (male or female), age (in years), identity documents presented for school enrollment (yes or no in each document), co-residence with father, mother or grandparents (yes or no in each area), education (highest grade achieved) and unemployment of parents (yes or no for mother and father), work by the child (yes or no), ownership of the home (own, rented or loaned), residence in a room (yes or no) and condition of the home (bad, fair or good). The educational variables were late access (yes or no), difficult access (yes or no), or difficulty in access due to lack of documents (yes or no) or lack of money (yes or no), and the last grade passed in Venezuela (yes or no).

Qualitatively, the interviews were transcribed with the Atlas.ti version 7.5 program, which included all free codes and axial coding (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014). A limitation of this methodological approach is that only the families of the focal students were interviewed, not those excluded from the school system discussed in other studies (Observatorio de Venezuela-Universidad del Rosario & Fundación Konrad Adenauer, 2018; Ruiz Mancera et al., 2020). It is likely that these families are in an irregular condition and have even been denied access to school due to this situation.

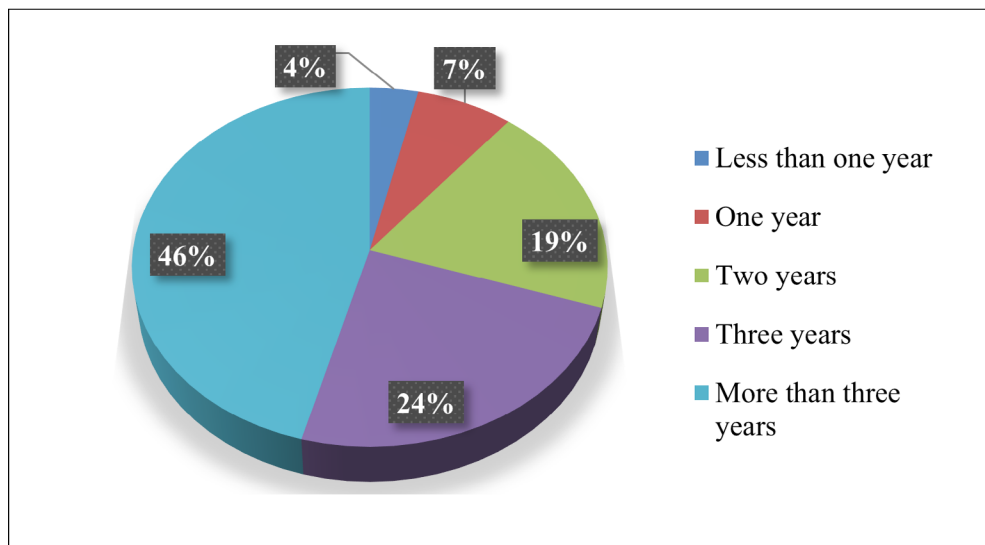
Characterization of Venezuelan students in Cúcuta and their educational incorporation

The length of time that the Venezuelan students have lived in Colombia allowed us to reflect on their possible diverse trajectories of school incorporation, as the school system has had to adapt to accommodate immigrants. Of the 83 Venezuelan students surveyed, 11% had been in Colombia for less than two years, 19% for two years, 24% for three years, and 46% for more than three years (see Figure 1). The latter arrived in Colombia before the implementation of policies for access to social rights among migrants with irregular status, which could have made their incorporation more difficult.

When asked about their reason for migration, most Venezuelans stated that their migration had occurred due to the economic crisis in Venezuela (85.5%), regardless of period of arrival (see Figure 2). This coincides with reports on the loss of well-being and quality of life among the inhabitants of Venezuela (*Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida [Encovi]*, 2021). Second, the work reasons were identified; 28.9% identified the work of their parents. In addition, with very similar values, the educational reasons included those who wanted to continue studying in Cúcuta (28.9%) or considered the quality of education in Colombia better (27.7%). Another 16.9% declared that they had migrated to Colombia because there were no teachers or classes in Venezuela.

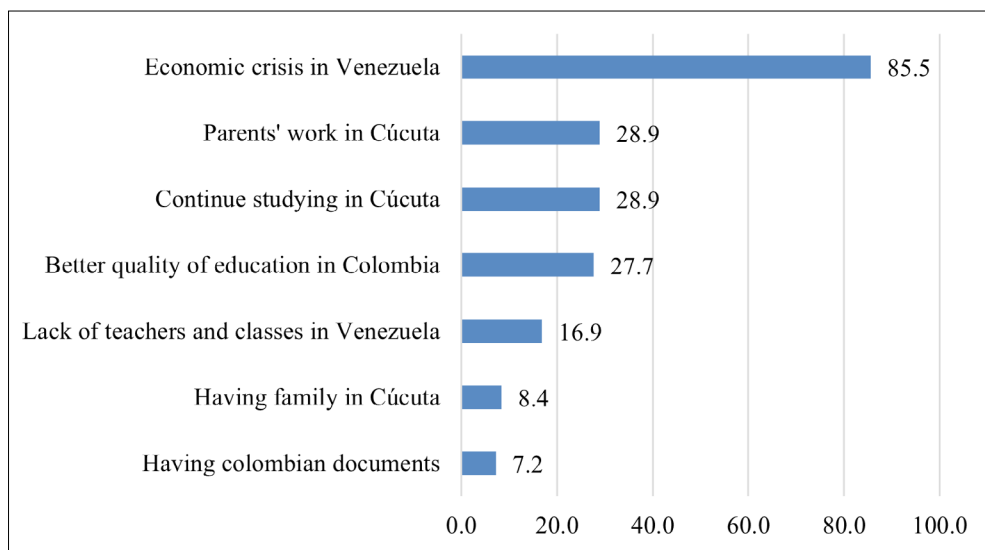
Finally, other causes that stood out were having a family in Cúcuta or documents for living in Colombia.

Figure 1. Time living in Colombia among Venezuelan lower secondary students. Cúcuta, Colombia, 2021



Source: own calculations, based on a survey of vca in Cúcuta (2021)

Figure 2. Reasons why Venezuelan lower secondary students migrated from Venezuela to Colombia. Cúcuta, Colombia, 2021



Source: own calculations based on a survey of vca in Cúcuta (2021)

Regarding the documentation that the Venezuelan students had according to their period of arrival in Colombia, there are notable differences before and after 2017 (see Figure 3). Until 2017, in order of importance, students entered school with a border mobility card (TMF by its acronym in Spanish, Tarjeta de Movilidad Fronteriza, 42.2%) and, later, with a Colombian identity card (20.0%) or without any official documents (17.8%). A border mobility card was issued to Venezuelans located in the area adjacent to Colombia and was used as a valid document at the national level for students in an irregular situation to enroll in school.⁵ As of 2018, the main increase had been registered among those with a Special Permit of Permanence (29%), although those with a Colombian identity card also doubled (42.1%), which indicates both an increase in VCA who managed to take advantage of immigration policies as well as those with dual nationality (by kinship).

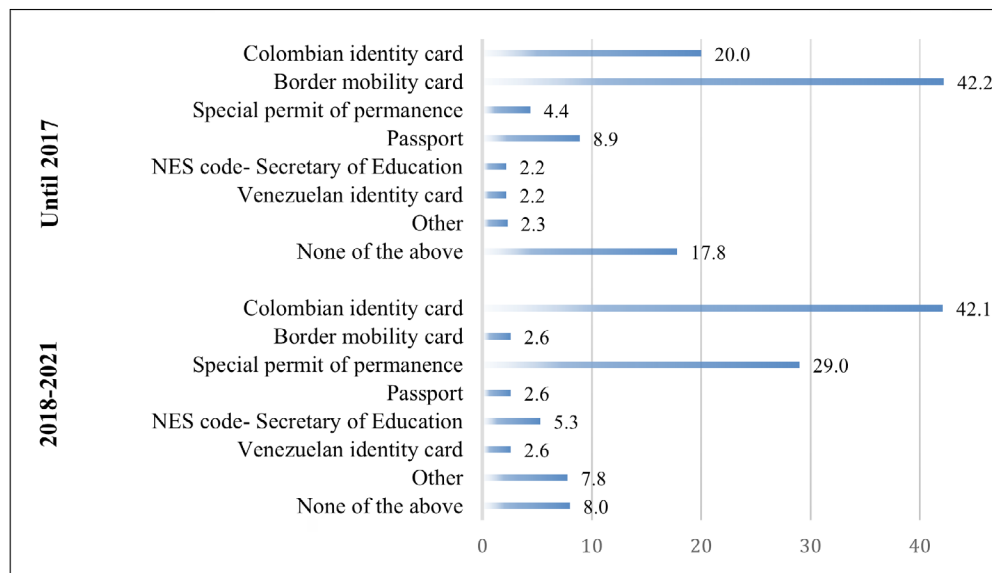
Furthermore, the sociodemographic characteristics of Venezuelan students reflect their disadvantages in living conditions, which can influence their social integration at their destination (see Table 1). Compared to natives, Venezuelan students report working much more frequently and having less access to health services, a situation that is worse among recent Venezuelan immigrants.

Regarding the characteristics of their homes, Venezuelans live in households with a greater number of members than the Colombians and show a lower co-residence with their father but a greater one with their grandparents, especially among those who arrived in Cúcuta before 2018, which is common in migratory return processes (see Table 1). It is also striking that the Venezuelans have college-educated parents more often than the Colombians, although this decreases among more recent immigrants. Finally, the Venezuelans report that their parents have higher unemployment than the Colombians and that unemployment worsened for those who arrived after 2017.

Regarding the housing conditions of the Venezuelan families, most pay rent or borrow someone else's home, while the Colombians are more likely to have their own home (see Table 1). Additionally, a higher percentage of Venezuelan than the Colombian students live in a room inside a house that they share with other families or in houses in poor condition, which reflects their conditions of extreme poverty. In addition, recent immigrants exhibit a greater proportion of borrowed housing, and more of them live in a room and/or poorly maintained homes, indicating that the most recent waves are populations with even greater socioeconomic vulnerability.

⁵ Colombia Migration allowed the issuance of this card not only to Venezuelans living at the border but to all those who entered Colombia (through official migration sites).

Figure 3. Documents possessed by Venezuelan lower secondary students enabling them to enroll in school in Colombia. Cúcuta, Colombia, 2021



Source: own calculations based on a survey of vca in Cúcuta (2021)

The results of the survey show that the Venezuelan students had greater difficulties than the Colombians in entering and integrating into their school (see Table 2). Among the Venezuelans, the frequency of those who had late access to school was almost double that of the Colombians (13.3% versus 7.3%). In addition, the frequency of those who had difficult access to school was approximately three times higher than that of the Colombians (18.1% versus 4.6%). When asking for the reasons of such difficulties, the most important reason, among approximately a quarter of these Venezuelans, was not having identity documents, followed by not having money for the school process. Upon admission, 34.9% reported that a passed grade from Venezuela was not respected, a decision usually made by a school director, supported by a validation exam (diagnosis of academic competency). When evaluating these indicators by arrival period, both the delay and difficulty in these school access processes seem to have decreased among recent immigrants, but the percentage of schools that do not respect the areas studied in Venezuela has increased.

Table 1. Select sociodemographic characteristics of immigrants and natives: lower secondary students. Cúcuta, Colombia, 2021

Variable	Colombian %	Venezuelan %		
		Total	2017 or before	2018-2021
Dual citizenship	0.9	41.0	26.7	57.9
Health service	96.0	54.2	33.3	78.9
Works	7.0	14.5	8.9	21.1
No. of household members	4.7	5.3	5.0	5.7
People with whom they co-reside				
Father	65.4	50.6	48.9	52.6
Mother	91.7	91.6	88.9	94.7
Grandparents	15.9	21.7	26.7	15.8
Parent education				
Father with university	2.8	24.1	26.7	21.1
Mother with university	5.5	25.3	28.9	21.1
Parent employment				
Unemployed father	2.4	9.6	6.7	13.2
Unemployed mother	5.2	14.5	10.5	17.8
Characteristics of the property				
Own	68.8	10.8	6.7	15.8
Rented	23.2	78.3	84.4	71.1
Borrowed	8.0	10.8	8.9	13.1
Live in room	7.6	16.9	8.9	26.3
In bad condition	1.5	6.0	4.4	7.9
n (Sample size)	327	83	45	38

Source: own calculations based on a survey of VCA in Cúcuta (2021)

School incorporation of Venezuelan immigrants in Cúcuta

The semistructured interviews of 20 families with Venezuelan children and the principals of their schools, as well as the discussion groups with the teachers, allowed us to obtain more details on the ways of incorporation into school, in particular, the barriers to school entry that are still encountered amid the policy of flexibility adopted in Colombia, as well as the role of social networks in school access and the perceptions of prejudices and stigmas against migrants prevailing in the educational system. In addition, some suggestions that arose for necessary changes in public policy are discussed below to improve the educational care of VCA.

Table 2. Indicators of school access for immigrant and native lower secondary students. Cúcuta, Colombia, 2021

Variable	Colombians	Venezuelans			Difference A-B
		Total	2017 or before	2018-2021	
	A	B	C	D	
Access to school was late	7.3	13.3	15.6	10.5	*
Access to school was difficult	4.6	18.1	22.2	13.2	***
Difficulty due to lack of identity documents	1.2	26.5	21.2	31.6	***
Difficulty due to not having money	2.8	18.1	17.8	18.4	***
Grade passed in Venezuela was not honored	-	34.9	28.9	42.1	-
<i>n</i> (Sample size)	327	83	45	38	-

Note: ***= Pr <0.001, *= Pr <0.05

Source: own calculations based on a survey of VCA in Cúcuta (2021)

Obstacles to guaranteeing school access: the experiences of VCA in school enrollment

In Colombia, parents and guardians are forced to complete long procedures for the enrollment of their children in school. Among the documents requested for the enrollment of children are a legalized Venezuelan birth certificate, a passport or a document that proves legal residence in Colombia (birth certificate, visa, Colombian identity card, immigration card, PEP or TMF), a transcript of the immediately preceding grade, a vaccination report, and health insurance.

Some of these requirements are not easily processed because they depend on the administrative authorities in Venezuela and Colombia and on the limited financial resources of the families. For example, apostilled identity or educational documents for Venezuelan children are difficult to obtain when parents migrate without papers and must face the bureaucracy in Venezuela, resorting to intermediaries to complete their applications. Mr. Cárdenas, a Colombian returnee, expressed this reality as follows:

The lawyer is charging him three hundred dollars to legalize a birth certificate whereby the Venezuelan father can bring the birth certificate to Colombia and here the registrar can access the child's identification (...) there are none (...). In addition, you arrive and they charge you, well give me one hundred thousand Colombian pesos, and I'll pull some strings here and there. (Father Interview 01)

Another type of documentation that parents are asked to provide in schools concerns the immigration regularization of their Venezuelan children, essential before 2018 for access to school: “In the beginning, it was very complicated because if they did not have the complete documents in order from the beginning, the places were denied because our enrollment system, our integrated enrollment system, Simat [sistema integrado de matrícula], did not allow it” (Principal Interview 02). According to Mrs. Pérez, a Venezuelan mother who came to Cúcuta five years ago, “They did not receive Venezuelan children because at the time of enrollment the girl did not have an immigration card, that is, a document that allowed her to enter, practically had the birth certificate” (Father Interview 13).

On the other hand, the school incorporation of Venezuelans has been facilitated for *vca* with dual nationality (Colombian identity card). Mrs. Rincón expressed this: “Because I was Venezuelan at that time, the doors were not open as such because I came from Venezuela (...), but when I told her that he was the son of Colombian parents (...), the situation changed to get the space of him” (Father Interview 05).

Over time, although some reports show that it is still difficult to meet all the requirements of the schools, the mechanisms imposed by the Ministry of National Education (*MEN*, by its acronym in Spanish: Ministerio de Educación Nacional) have become more flexible, while identification numbers have been granted to Venezuelan students in irregular migratory situations, known as *NES* codes.⁶ As one principal pointed out,

As the issue of migration has advanced, these processes have become more flexible (...) with the decrees and guidelines at the national level. Therefore, I can receive a student from Venezuela who, although not fully regularized, (...) allows me to register him in the database at the national level (...) and give this family time to complete their regularization process. (Principal Interview 02)

Although the requirements for school entry have been made more flexible, *vca* must complete the revalidation of degrees and present academic levelling tests from Colombia, in accordance with the guidelines of Decree 1860 of the *MEN* (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1994). Of the 20 families interviewed, 15 students had taken an exam when they arrived at school in Colombia. The principals stated that they were administering such tests due to the difficulty of obtaining academic revalidation and the disadvantages in the educational quality of Venezuela. As a principal pointed out, “due to the conditions of Venezuela, (...) it is not easy to arrive, for example, with a validated document, so in that sense they authorized us to carry out these validation tests” (Principal Interview 01). In addition, another principal indicated the importance of taking these tests for the school success of *vca*: “The guideline that we have from the Municipal Education Secretariat of Cúcuta is that, basically, the school itself has the autonomy to place the student where it believes that the student is capable of performing” (Principal Interview 02).

While *vca* have had to demonstrate their knowledge through various learning tests, it is not clear if their minimums respect multiculturalism in the content of

⁶ Based on Joint Circular No. 16 of 2018, of the *MEN* and Migración Colombia, the Simat contains the “variable country of origin = Venezuela”, which allows the identification of Venezuelan immigrants. In the case of those without documentation, the *NES* code (number established by the secretariat) is created to register them.

the expected learning. In general, the contents of the tests are related to minimum expected learning and the curricular component, according to the degree to which they aspire to study, which corresponds to the basic learning rights proposed by the MEN (Principal Interview 01; Principal Interview 02; Loya Ortega, 2017). However, some VCA expressed that they evaluated the geography of Colombia: “he asked me about Cúcuta, about some things from here in Cúcuta and that is it. He told me about the municipalities, he asked me about the Norte de Santander Department (...) and some customs from here in Cúcuta” (Interview VCA08); “The test had several things to answer, they asked questions from here in Cúcuta that I did not know and it was difficult for me, but I did pass it” (Interview VCA12, student from Mérida, Venezuela).

One consequence of such barriers to education access is late entry. Of the 20 families interviewed, five experienced late entry due to a lack of school space, by requesting access at the beginning of the school year, or by not being able to meet requirements due to a lack of resources. For example, as one parent declared, “Almost six months passed because (...) they did not receive them until the end of the school year (...)” (Parent Interview 01). In other families, their children did not attend school for up to a year: “they both lasted a year without studying” (Father Interview 12); “He missed a year of study because when we got here, we came with the clothes on our backs” (Father Interview 05).

In addition, the administrative requirements that entail placement tests can affect grade repetition and age. Only eleven of the VCA interviewed continued in Cúcuta at their corresponding grade; six were returned to their last grade completed in Venezuela, and five of the students did not take a placement test but were supervised by those responsible at each school.

A problem regarding timely admission is that whether a placement test is taken and the validation of competencies is granted is subject to the discretion of the principal. A father in one family thus expressed, “we insisted on the exam (...), and we prepare him for that test, for grade promotion, and we did not let him repeat the same grade” (Father Interview 17).

Finally, in urban areas, when a VCA is 15 years old or older, notably, he or she can no longer be registered in the basic education registry. Upon exceeding the normative age for a level, the principals suggest that such an adolescent attends other educational programs: “the acceleration of learning or the variation by cycles, a model for young people (...) who are not in the system for several years, who they want to finish their studies (...) the Simat does not accept them, due to age” (Principal Interview 02). In contrast, in rural areas, age-grade gaps are seen as part of the educational dynamic: “Extra-age is common and the municipal Education Secretariat generates guidelines in this regard” (Principal Interview 02).

Stigmatization and rejection of students concerning incorporation

In the interviews, the directors, coordinators and teachers at the schools expressed the existence of stigmas about school education in Venezuela, especially in the beginning of this massive immigration. These stigmas led the directors to deny school access to VCA because they considered that they did not have the same educational skills as Colombians and that their levels of school performance could affect the educational

quality in their schools when evaluated by the Institute Colombian for the Promotion of Higher Education (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior). For example, as a principal commented, “we almost always had the idea that if a Venezuelan child came to our school, his academic performance would suddenly drop and the institution would lower the results of the tests. Know it, this is what we look after” (Principal Interview 03). In addition, another principal stated that.

It is not a mystery, it is not a secret (...) that the educational qualities of Venezuela and Colombia are not the same (...), although the children of Venezuela have access to a school grade, when they arrive in Colombia they find that they were not prepared to assume the degree that they supposedly said they were ready for. (Principal Interview 02)

In contrast, the findings show that the students interviewed with validation tests achieved positive results and entered their corresponding grades and that some even occupied the first places on the honor roll, mitigating the stigmatization toward them. However, a principal stated that such rejection still persisted, although actions were being generated to resolve it: “at the beginning I see a very strong attitude of rejection, yes, with respect to Venezuelan students [...], but there is an International Rescue Committee, they have worked so hard in the institution to reduce that conflict in the students” (Principal Interview 04).

Similarly, some parents stated that their children had been rejected at school because classmates replicated the comments that their parents made at home:

I have seen how Venezuelan are humiliated, it hurts my heart because first my children are Venezuelans and my wife is also Venezuelan and there has been such discrimination, they say that children are tricky (they steal), because they are children from Venezuelans (Father Interview 01).

Other expressions indicated discrimination. As stated by a grandmother, “a child made fun of my granddaughter for not having all the supplies, he told her: go to sell candy at the traffic light like all Venezuelans” (Grandmother Interview 12). In addition, VCA encountered pejorative words such as “veneco, which is said to offend immigrants” (VCA Interview 05).

The network of family and friends: support for acquiring a place in school

Some of the Venezuelan families had the support of their family network in obtaining school space in Cúcuta. A family of mixed conformation revealed a strong bond when commenting that “An aunt of the girl works in the institution in cleaning, through her we obtained the space, later they did a series of examinations to verify in what degree they were going to adapt. Getting space is not easy” (Father Interview 18). Some interviewees managed to activate family networks with the support of cousins:

Well, my cousin had his three children studying there, so my cousin ran the errand for me, spoke with the secretary, with the principal and everything (...) he asked me for the papers, I told him, I truly do not have papers and they allowed my daughter to be enrolled. (Mother Interview 02)

Another family, also mixed, received information about a school through its network of friends that it had established in Venezuela. In this case, a Colombian teacher had provided them these guidelines and helped them obtain enrollment: “It was a student that I gave her class in Venezuela, that I contacted her and, she told me that she worked in that school and that she could help me (...) through her I was able to contact the institution” (Father Interview 17). These kinds of strong networks allowed these families to obtain better opportunities.

However, the situation was the opposite for families without networks, as they tended to lose a school year while finding a space: “when the school period had already started and I could not find help for the space, that is why she lost the entire year, no I had someone to talk to before for the space” (Mother Interview 09). In other cases where there were no networks of relatives or acquaintances when emigrating, the parents obtained information on a school space from neighbors and teachers, that is, via these weak networks, they found routes linking them to a school. For example, as a Venezuelan mother who had arrived in a rural area in 2017 commented:

Living near the school allowed me to talk with the coordinator and the teachers until I received advice to go to carry out various procedures in the educational area of the municipality (Ministry of Education) and request the space because the enrollment window had already closed. (Father Interview 14)

Educational policy for the school incorporation of immigrants

The above experiences with the incorporation of Venezuelan students point to the need for coherence between migration policy and educational policy whereby VCA can regularize their stay in Colombia, access basic services and, simultaneously, enter schools in a timely manner. These can be spaces for social integration.

The principals and teachers pointed out that the school incorporation policy in Colombia complies with the legal framework, i. e., “it has been given the same priority as Colombians, no exception has been made, that is, a difference has not been maintained between Venezuelan students and Colombian” (Principal Interview 04). However, they also raised the need to “review the existing regulations” (Principal Interview 05), to reinforce “policies to protect their rights and less bureaucracy when accessing the educational system” (Discussion Group 1_docente01). A principal also pointed out that VCA are allowed to enter without documentation but not to graduate from the ninth grade and that this will affect the future educational continuity of Venezuelans:

Colombia allows them to access education, yes, but if you do not have a passport and a student visa, you will not be able to graduate from high school (...). As long as migration, documentary and access to education policies are not real enough, not about promises, not about media action, but about real events, we cannot speak of an educational policy that promotes access for the migrant population. (Principal interview 01)

In addition, the principals recognized that Colombia was not prepared in terms of education for VCA; therefore, it has been improvised without an expansion of the educational offerings or budgets. For example, as one rector stated,

The country is not in a position to receive that large amount of migrants from Venezuela. There is no experience to serve these numbers of people who have entered the country and add that in this context, we are in an armed conflict and an unstable economy. (Principal interview 05)

Moreover, the educational policy for migrants, according to rector 01,

(...) is insufficient, late and little adapted to reality (...) many of the population that wants to regularize their condition has to go through a number of procedures and things are not as easy as they are intended (...) there is also a large budget deficit, because it is not just about generating decrees, resolutions and texts, when there is no investment.

Another aspect that was highlighted in the discussion groups was the need to invest in teaching staff to reduce the size of the groups and improve the effectiveness of teaching: “expanding the teaching staff in border areas due to the high concentration of Venezuelan migrants” (Discussion Group 2_docente04).

In terms of institutional policy, rectors and teachers pointed out that it is necessary to adapt learning support programs that allow VCA to overcome academic difficulties according to their grade and age instead of lagging them regarding grade. For example, it was proposed that education secretariats reactivate learning acceleration programs for immigrant children. In a discussion group, a teacher stated, “I hope there was a program that would accelerate at least the basic skills so that they could be placed in a grade according to their age, and according to their skills so that they are not left out of the educational system” (Group discussion 3_docente01).

Educational actors also considered it necessary to create care plans that encourage interculturality as follows: with “protocols for the acceptance and adaptation of Venezuelan migrants” (Discussion Group 2_docente04); “Planning mechanisms to face the demands of attention in different areas” (Rector Interview 05); “Comprehensive care for all students from the point of view of induction and knowledge of our educational system and health care through the school”; and actions that “modernize the curricula by forcefully revising Law 115, which endorses interculturality in education, which has been lost” (Discussion Group 2_docente03).

Conclusions

This article has analyzed the incorporation of Venezuelan students into the Colombian educational system in Cúcuta between 2015 and 2020 based on a mixed methodology. Overall, the study hypothesis has been tested. The school incorporation of VCA has therefore depended on the inconsistency of the Colombian educational policy in guaranteeing the right to education, as well as the influence of the social networks of Venezuelans or their Colombian relatives or acquaintances in Cúcuta and the prejudices in the host society that permeate the admission and grade assignment processes.

In the quantitative phase, we found that the Venezuelans have greater barriers to entering school than the Colombians; access for them is more difficult and delayed, which results in a lag in degree or extra-age. This type of educational disadvantage among migrants has also been identified in Colombia and other Latin American countries (Berganza Setián & Solórzano Salleres, 2019; Child Resilience Alliance & Unicef Colombia, 2020; Vargas, 2022). First, the school admission processes have been complicated by a lack of identity documents. VCA have mainly presented a border mobility card, which at first was only for Venezuelan residents in the Colombian-Venezuelan border area; as of 2018, a special residence permit (PEP) was used as valid identity documentation, or a NES code was assigned when there was no other document. Another barrier to timely incorporation was not having an official revalidation of school documents; consequently, the processes for assigning a grade were determined by validation tests of the expected learning. Hence, the above data suggest that Venezuelans' access to school has improved over time but that the recognition of the degree they brought from Venezuela has worsened. Finally, another common obstacle to VCA's access to schools in Colombia is a lack of money. This aligns with their socioeconomic profiles, as although the schooling of Venezuelan parents is very high, these Venezuelan families have a greater number of members in their household, pay rent in houses whose conditions are fair or bad and even live in rooms with other families. In addition, VCA tend to work to contribute financially to their homes.

In the qualitative phase, we found that the incorporation of Venezuelans in some cases presents multiple difficulties. Venezuelans encounter barriers when carrying out the administrative procedures of the apostilles and the processes for validating academic competencies due to the absence of sufficiently flexible educational policies for school incorporation. The above reports show that to safeguard the right to education among VCA, access to education for migrant children and adolescents should not be limited by administrative processes that impede this universal right due to the lack of immigration regularization in Colombia (Clavijo & Balaguera, 2020).

In addition, the school access experiences of Venezuelans show that in general, migrants with family and extrafamilial networks in Cúcuta obtain a place faster than Venezuelan parents who must approach the receiving community and the MEN to receive such information. Another factor not initially contemplated is the importance of dual nationality for educational incorporation due to social recognition as Colombians and social capital; those without immigration regularization face a double disadvantage by not being able to meet school requirements and lacking social networks that could help them evade bureaucracy. However, as of 2018, as a result of the document Conpes 3950 and Decree 1288, reports show that VCA had greater possibilities of access, regardless of immigration status.

These reports also show that the directors maintained stereotypes about the school education of Venezuelan students and that this had affected their decisions to grant a place in schools or to respect the maximum grade passed in Venezuela and, therefore, the access to and repetition of grades. The directors thus considered that the academic competencies needed in the schools in Cúcuta were more advanced than those achieved in Venezuela, whereby admitting Venezuelans could affect the evaluation of the educational quality of their own schools, i. e., a justification for denying school access. In addition, exams were conducted to demonstrate basic academic competencies as a common validation resource for studies, but some included an evaluation of the history and geography of Colombia. Thus, when students did not pass these exams,

these *VCA* were forced to repeat a grade, which constitutes another barrier to the recognition of the educational credentials of Venezuelans.

Based on these results, in terms of educational public policy, the temporary protection status that the Colombian State granted to Venezuelan immigrants as of 2021 guarantees not only the school incorporation of *VCA* but also the continuity, permanence and certification (degrees) of their studies completed in Colombia at all levels. In addition, a policy should be generated that standardizes the administrative procedures for admission and the application of tests with specific guidelines by grade and that implements learning support programs to achieve leveling across all stages of academic training. Furthermore, the departmental and municipal education secretariats should monitor the enrollment and access requests of *VCA* in each school in Cúcuta to end the discrimination in the admission of Venezuelans. This will improve enrollment in schools located in neighborhoods or communities where there is a higher percentage of Venezuelan families with school-age children. Moreover, the migration policies in Colombia should be consolidated and articulated with other ministries to facilitate school continuity and the professionalization of Venezuelan immigrants who desire, for example, to continue their technical training in the National Learning Service (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje). Future studies could thus explore the educational trajectories of *VCA* and their continuity across other educational levels in Colombia.

Likewise, it is necessary to incorporate educational and institutional policies that mitigate the actions of discrimination toward the Venezuelan student population. Awareness and training campaigns can be conducted among the recipient populations, families, teachers and officials and authorities who make decisions at different levels of government whereby the secretariats and schools should promote intercultural education as a transversal axis, the respect for cultural diversity and the dialog of knowledge between immigrants and natives. Finally, strategies can also be promoted for the successful educational incorporation of immigrants in border and nonborder areas as part of institutional educational projects (proyectos educativos institucionales); accordingly, the administrative, social and cultural obstacles faced by *VCA* in Colombia may be eliminated through local actions in public or private schools.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate the financial support of the National Council of Science and Technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología) of Mexico. The authors wrote this article based on the results of research carried out by Eder O. López Castro in the Doctorate of Migration Studies at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, under the direction of Eunice D. Vargas Valle. Additionally, we appreciate the recommendations made by María Dolores París Pombo and Felipe Andrés Aliaga Sáez.

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