

# Motivational factors influencing students' learning: A Samoan case study

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*When students leave the schooling systems prematurely, a common question is: How can students be motivated to remain and be successful in their educational journeys? The qualitative research discussed in this article examined the factors motivating students in a Samoan context. Fifteen primary school students were interviewed about the factors influencing their learning. The findings did not reveal intrinsic motivation as a significant drive for student participants. On the contrary, extrinsic factors (e.g., family expectations and positive learning environments) took precedence over internal motivations. This finding suggests that other factors, such as students' culture, may significantly influence students' motivation. Future research could further explore whether or how intrinsic factors may influence students' academic success within a Samoan context.*

*Keywords: Motivation; Samoa; student success; culture; learning*

## INTRODUCTION

When students fail or drop out of school systems, educational systems and, particularly, teachers are scrutinised and criticised as a cause of student failure. However, other factors can influence students' academic performance. It is important to understand what motivates students to be successful at school. Motivation is a key determinant of academic success, influencing how students engage with their studies, persistence, and overall performance. Research has shown that various motivational factors, such as intrinsic interest and external rewards, play significant roles in shaping students' academic outcomes. This study aimed to examine factors that affect students' academic performance within the Samoan context. Particularly, we examined intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the impacts of social and environmental influences. By understanding these factors, educators and policymakers can better develop strategies to enhance student motivation and improve educational outcomes.

### Context

In the Samoa Development Strategy (SDS) (Government of Samoa, 2016), the role of Education is connected with the 'improvement of quality of life for all Samoans' (p.31). For instance, the aim is to increase and broaden access to education so that everyone in Samoa is educated and productively engaged. Key SDS outcomes relate to 'increased access to education

and training opportunities especially for vulnerable groups'; and ensure 'that every child that enters year 1 can complete year 8'. This goal is also accentuated in the Education Sector Plan 2013-2018, with one of its priority goals being to improve the quality of Education through effective teaching strategies. The strategies are deemed critical factors for enhancing students' experiences. However, despite numerous initiatives to improve teaching and learning, the Education Sector Plan 2013–2018 review revealed disappointing results for numeracy and literacy at primary and secondary levels and in mathematics and science subjects at the secondary level (Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, 2019). In addition to the poor results, there was the finding that many students dropped out of the Education system, a factor noted as a risk in the Education Sector Plan 2019-2024 report (Ministry of Education, Sports, and Culture, 2019). These factors raise questions concerning students' motivation to attend school: How is motivation associated with these factors? And are students motivated in their educational journeys? Research shows that students' motivational level can highly influence their academic performance; hence, it is crucial to investigate the factors that may influence students' motivational levels in the Samoan context.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Motivation is a critical factor in student engagement and achievement within the educational context. Schunk (2002) pointed to numerous studies exploring the relationship between student motivation and academic success, drawing attention to the factors influencing students' motivation, such as social, external rewards and environmental influences. These factors will be further examined.

### **Culture**

Cultural influences can be both intrinsic and extrinsic. Education systems worldwide are shaped by cultural contexts, which influence student behaviours, attitudes and motivations within the classroom; for example, with respect to values and beliefs, cultures that stress personal growth, self-expression, creativity, innovation and autonomy foster intrinsic motivation because individuals are encouraged to pursue what they find fulfilling. Similarly, cultures that value learning and skills mastery will be reflected in individuals being intrinsically engaged in educational activities. However, cultures that emphasise external achievements, such as awards, grades and social status, may influence individuals to be extrinsically motivated. Additionally, social pressure can be an external motivator, particularly in collectivist cultures like Samoa, where group harmony and family expectations are paramount, and individuals can be extrinsically motivated to meet societal or familial expectations.

Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), when exploring the impact of parents' expectations for their children's academic performance, emphasised the role of sociocultural factors in shaping expectations and how different cultural backgrounds can lead to varying expectations and educational practices. In Samoa, students might be motivated to contribute positively to their families and communities. The Samoan culture is deeply rooted in communal values, respect for authority and interconnectedness. It places values on community, family and respect for authority. Hence, individuals from this cultural context will likely develop a strong desire to uphold familial honour and contribute to their community. This ambition can significantly impact their engagement with school learning activities. The cultural concept of *fa'aaloalo* (respect) can affect students' extrinsic motivation to strive to please their teachers and parents and be successful in their academic efforts.

Tuiasosopo (2009) advocated for integrating Samoan cultural elements into the curriculum to positively impact students' engagement and intrinsic motivation by increasing the relevance of schooling to students. Sapolu and Malupo (2018), in their study on the impact of motivation on the learning satisfaction of Samoan students in New Zealand, stated that cultural values and community support played a crucial role in shaping students' motivation and satisfaction levels. Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that students are more motivated when they see the relevance of the learning material to their personal interests or future aspirations. Their intrinsic motivation increases once they detect the connection between what they are learning and real-life situations. Sapolu and Malupo (2018) found that intrinsic motivation (such as personal interest in or enjoyment of the subject) significantly influenced the learning of Samoan students compared to extrinsic motivation (such as grades, rewards or approval from others), which influenced learning satisfaction to a lesser extent.

### **Parental expectations**

Another factor that could affect student motivation is parental involvement. High parental expectations of academic success are generally linked to better academic outcomes. In a meta-study, Castro et al. (2015) examined the relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement. They found that parental involvement can have a positive though moderate impact on academic achievement. Further, Jeyne's (2005) meta-analysis found that parental expectations were among the strongest predictors of academic success.

Similarly, Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis found a positive impact of high parental expectations on students' academic performance. Wang and Sheikh (2014) emphasised the role of parental expectations in boosting students' academic outcomes and resilience. Yamamoto and Holloway (2010), when exploring the impact of parents' expectations for their children's academic performance, highlighted how high parental expectations inspired children to achieve better academically, while unrealistic expectations resulted in stress and negative outcomes. Parents' expectations can act as a motivating factor and are extrinsic. For example, a student can be driven to study to please the parents because s[h]e is expected to learn and be successful.

### **Rewards and recognition**

The impact of external rewards, such as symbolic rewards like praise and recognition, has been shown to generally boost student motivation more effectively than tangible rewards, such as money and prizes. These symbolic rewards can elevate students' self-esteem and encourage positive behaviours. The issue with using external elements to motivate students is that students might study hard to earn rewards rather than for the enjoyment of learning itself. Intrinsic motivation is driven by personal satisfaction, enjoyment or a sense of accomplishment — a student may be driven to study because of the joy that comes from learning. Wong and Thomson (2014) found that while many teachers use rewards to boost motivation, excessive reliance on them can negatively affect students' intrinsic motivation and long-term academic achievement.

### **School environment**

In addition to rewards and recognition, research highlights the influence of the learning environment on students' academic performance. For example, Rafiq et al.'s (2022) study on the impact of the school environment on students' academic achievements at university reveals the significant impact of the school environment on students' academic achievements. They found a strong correlation between good academic performance and factors such as physical

environment, teacher support, timing and discipline, goal orientation, extra-curricular activities and reading facilities.

### **Teacher-student relationships**

Studies show that when teachers establish a good understanding of students, this helps foster a supportive and motivating classroom environment. Becker (1952) and Brandmiller (2020) noted that poor relationships often exist between students of lower social status and their teachers due to differences in social background. In Samoa, where interpersonal connections are deeply cherished, teachers play a crucial role in educating, mentoring and guiding students. As well as influencing students' academic achievements, teacher enthusiasm positively correlates with students' motivation (Keller, 2016; Dewaele & Li, 2021). Van Petegem et al. (2005) submitted that teachers could tangibly demonstrate their well-being through positive student interactions, such as smiling, using humour, providing feedback, and designing engaging activities. In essence, when teachers are mentally and emotionally well, it reflects how they connect and communicate with their students, creating a positive and productive learning environment. Establishing a supportive and respectful connection between teachers and students encourages students to actively participate in class and take ownership of their learning.

### **Teacher pedagogical practices**

Research indicates that the interaction of teaching methods with student participation is linked to increased intrinsic motivation. For instance, when students feel their opinions and choices are respected, they are more likely to be motivated to learn. Hattie and Timperley (2007) advocated the value of providing effective feedback focusing on specific goals and strategies because it enhances students' self-efficacy and motivation.

An interesting phenomenon is the connection between external motivation and punishment avoidance. For example, Skinner (1938) theorised that when people are motivated by external factors, such as rewards or fear of punishment, their actions are driven by the consequences imposed by others rather than their own internal desires. Therefore, teachers who prioritise disciplinary measures over supportive guidance may contribute to extrinsically motivated behaviours. For instance, disengaged students can be extrinsically motivated to avoid punishment. Based on our own experience as educators, we note that the idea of students being motivated to learn to avoid punishment is a prevailing concept in the Samoan classroom. This notion of being driven into doing something is extrinsically centred. While this motivation may drive students into learning, it can be temporary compared to an inner motive. Hence, a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic is an important consideration for teachers.

## **THE NEED FOR RESEARCH**

The literature review has highlighted studies on motivational factors for students outside of Samoa; hence, there is a need for a study within Samoa on the perceptions of students who learn within the Samoan context. Filling this gap, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What primary factors influence students' motivation to learn in the classroom?
2. How do cultural norms and values affect students' motivation?

3. How do family expectations and socio-economic background impact students' learning motivation and aspirations?
4. How do teachers' instructional approaches and teacher-student relationships affect students' motivation?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

When delving into factors that motivate students in their academic performance, Self Determination Theory (SDT) and Functionalist Theory offer a comprehensive lens to analyse and understand the multifaceted motivations behind students' performance. Deci and Ryan (2015) explain that SDT is a theory of human motivation that enables examination of a wide range of phenomena across gender, culture, age and socioeconomic status. SDT categorises two types of motivation: autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. Autonomously motivated individuals are self-regulated and can act under their own volition. Individuals influenced by controlled motivation act out of obligation or by the use of coercion without the privilege of choice. Autonomous and controlled motivation can be differentiated by the intrinsic or extrinsic forces that lead to action (Deci, 1975). While intrinsic motivation is reflected in individuals who act of their own volition because of their interest or love for the activity, extrinsic motivation involves using stimuli or incentives such as rewards, prizes, scholarships and desire for social approval to prompt behaviour. Students can be extrinsically driven to succeed by threats of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972), assessment deadlines (Amabile et al., 1976), and surveillance (Plant & Ryan, 1985). Some students may also be extrinsically motivated to gain approval from friends or fulfil family obligations.

Functionalist Theory (Parsons, 1959) focuses on the interconnectedness of various elements of a society and how they collectively contribute to its stability and overall functioning. Concerning Education, the theory enables examination of how different aspects of the educational system work together to promote student learning and motivation. The functionalist framework can be applied to analyse how social structures and norms within educational settings influence student motivation. For example, the expectations set by teachers, parents, and peers can significantly affect a student's drive to succeed academically. The concept of interconnected systems stresses how elements like family, community and educational policies influence student motivation. Understanding these interactions can help identify factors that either enhance or hinder motivation.

Having established the foundation of our study with SDT and Functionalist Theory, we now turn to the methodologies employed in this study to investigate student motivation.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research employed a qualitative research approach. Neuman (2014) noted that qualitative research is about depth rather than breadth. Researchers draw upon qualitative methods to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced in a particular setting rather than draw broad conclusions about a particular aspect of human behaviour. In this study, the qualitative method allowed for in-depth probing and further interviewing of student participants based on their responses on what motivated them to be in a classroom. This qualitative research methodology was deemed suitable for exploring the culturally influenced motivator that may not be easily quantifiable.

Before starting the research, consent was enlisted from participants regarding their participation. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents likely to yield appropriate and useful information (Kelly, 2010). The sample was selected from a rural primary school, with seven students from Year 7 and eight from Year 8—a total of 15 student participants. Due to time and researcher constraints, study participants were selected based on convenience and accessibility.

For this study, eight semi-structured interview questions were developed to interview the 15 participants. The interview questions were developed based on the SDT and Functional theory. Semi-structured interviews (Dejonckheere, 2019) involve predetermined questions with some probing questions to obtain data from the respondents. Semi-structured interviews effectively gain insights into hidden aspects of the different students' motivations in the classroom. Easwaramoorthy (2006) stated that an interview is a way to get information from a person by asking questions and hearing their answers; it is a conversation for gathering information' DeCarlo (2018) stated that interviews are intended to discover participants' experiences, understandings, opinions or motivations.

The interviews were individually conducted in the teacher's classroom (one of the researchers of the study) before school, during intervals or after school. Each interview lasted 40 minutes. A tape recorder was used to record the information, which was later transcribed and analysed.

The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach of Miles and Huberman (1994): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining themes. The themes were derived from analysing participants' responses to the research questions and in connection to the predetermined categories that guided the analysis. Data was analysed according to extrinsic and intrinsic factors that affected students' learning, and three major themes emerged with their own subthemes. The major themes were: External Rewards and Recognition, with the sub-themes of Recognition and Encouragement, Grades and rewards; the second theme of Environmental Factors, with sub-themes related to classroom environment and teacher-student relationships; the third theme was Social Influences with the sub-theme of Parental expectations. These findings will be presented in the next section.

## **FINDINGS**

The study aimed to examine factors that affected students' academic performance within a Samoan context, focusing on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the impact of social and environmental influences. The following sections are a thematic presentation of the findings.

### **External rewards and recognition**

External rewards and recognition emerged as an important theme when considering what motivates Samoan students to perform well academically. While the literature on external rewards and recognition emphasises tangible rewards, such as prizes and certificates, in addition to striving for high marks and academic recognition, this study only highlighted the value of being recognised and acknowledged, plus the importance of striving for good grades.

### **Recognition and encouragement**

Social recognition acknowledges the role of social approval and refers to the notion of being acknowledged either by the teacher or those within the students' inner circle. The findings showed that 90% of the students indicated recognition and acknowledgement as an important

motivating factor. Participants noted that recognising and celebrating their achievements, whether big or small, can boost confidence and motivation. That is, when their academic efforts are publicly acknowledged, it can motivate students to do more. One student has this to say:

Whenever my teacher praises or says a good comment on any of my work including my home works, I feel so happy and that makes me want to continue on doing greater things and work harder each day. (Year 7 student)

### **Grades and rewards**

Several students highlighted the value of grades and rewards as a significant motivational factor. For example, about 30% of students indicated being motivated by rewards and grades, as noted by this student:

The rewards from each activity and assignment including rankings and grading, were what kept me going but most importantly, if you want to be the best you have to try your greatest to be the one. I tried my very best to maintain my ranking and grades so I could make my parents and teachers proud. (Year 8 student)

In summary, while rewards and recognition act as motivators, students found these to be insufficient on their own. The classroom environment, discussed in the following section, supports the proposition that external motivators are effective.

## **Environmental factors**

As alluded to earlier, while many students identified external rewards and recognition as key motivators, the learning environment they are part of is also vital. According to the literature, the school environment, such as positive classroom dynamics, supportive teachers and institutional support, such as resources and facilities, are important motivational factors. The findings of this study supported this proposition.

### **Classroom environment**

About 85% of the students stressed the importance of a safe learning environment where the teacher encourages students to care for and support one another. Participants emphasised the value of being in a safe and inclusive learning environment as this gives them a feeling of comfort and inspiration to learn:

In my classroom, our teacher always tells us to be friendly or help everyone that needs help, this what motivated me more because I used to be shy and now I am not anymore. (Year 8 student)

Students indicated a safe environment as being one without bullying. Several students raised the importance of addressing bullying, discrimination and other negative behaviours to create a positive and happy learning environment.

### **Teacher-student relationships**

In addition to a positive classroom environment, a positive relationship between students and teachers can affect student motivation. An indication of a positive learning environment that enhances motivation is when teachers show genuine care for their students, are good role models and inspire significant engagement with students. About 80% of students emphasised how this relationship helps boost their enthusiasm to do well in the classroom. In a supporting comment, a student explained:

At first I was scared to ask the teacher questions when I did not understand an activity. But when I started asking him questions, that made me realise that what I needed to do in order to do great in my own studies is never be afraid to ask questions. (Year 7 student)

To sum up, while recognition, rewards and classroom environment play major roles in motivating students to excel in their academic pursuits, they are inadequate by themselves. As discussed next, social influences also significantly impact student motivation.

### **Social influences**

According to the literature, social influences in terms of parent expectations and family pressure are crucial elements for understanding motivation. This study also found parental expectations to be a significant motivational factor, as noted below.

#### **Parental expectations**

About 50% of students noted that parental expectation is a driving force for them and one of the main reasons encouraging them to strive to do better at school. According to the participants, they deeply empathise with their parents and the daily struggles parents face to ensure their children can attend school. Hence, for children, one way to express appreciation to their parents is by doing well in their studies. The comment below illustrates these sentiments:

I love how my parents sacrificed so much just to get me and my siblings to school. They sell our crops and fish so we can get money for school fees and to put food on the table. I want to make them happy and proud and this is what keeps me going for their own sake. (Year 8 student)

Obviously, parents who emphasise the importance of education and provide support can positively impact their children's motivation.

Overall, the findings indicate that while external motivators, such as rewards, recognition and parental expectations, are vital for Samoan students, they work best when paired with a nurturing learning environment.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study found that external factors, namely, external rewards and recognition, social influences and environmental factors, are significant motivators for students' academic performance. The following sections discuss the study's findings in further detail.

### **External rewards and recognition**

The study found that external factors, such as rewards and recognition, motivate students to perform well academically, as predicted by other studies. For example, Deci (1975) noted that intrinsic motivation is reflected in individuals who act of their own volition because of their interest or love for the activity. Extrinsic motivation involves using stimuli or incentives, such as rewards, prizes, scholarships and desire for social approval to prompt behaviour. Students in this study are motivated by being recognized and acknowledged by the teacher or family members, especially their parents. Some students can be extrinsically driven to succeed by threats of punishment (Deci & Cascio, 1972) and surveillance (Plant & Ryan, 1985); others may also be extrinsically motivated by wanting to gain approval from friends or to fulfil family obligations. This appears to be the case with these Samoan students. In addition to being extrinsically motivated by a sense of recognition and acknowledgement from teachers or family



members, obtaining grades and rewards, such as certificates or scholarship sponsorships, also serve as external motivators for students in this study. These tangible outcomes align with cultural and social expectations for success and achievement. In Samoan culture, family expectations can play a significant role in shaping students' academic performance.

### **Social influences**

The literature supports the study findings concerning the impact of social influences on student motivation, such as parental expectations influencing students' academic achievement. For instance, Castro et al. (2015) found that high parental expectations can significantly boost students' academic achievement. In the Samoan culture, family and community are highly valued, and parents' expectations can carry a lot of weight, as noted by more than half of the students. Parental involvement in a child's education can significantly impact their motivation, and Samoa is no exception. For instance, Finau (2018) found that parental involvement in children's education is common in Samoan households. This is evident in parents investing time and money in their children's education with the expectation that they will be successful. This parental expectation can create a sense of obligation for a Samoan child to do well academically because they do not want to disappoint their parents. One crucial way parents support their children is by monitoring their progress and setting clear expectations for performance. When parents are actively engaged with teachers in monitoring their child's progress and addressing academic challenges, students are more likely to stay motivated. Moreover, when parents attend parent-teacher meetings and offer encouragement and guidance, students are more likely to feel motivated in their academic pursuits. What is also worth noting is that in Samoa, where competition seems to be the norm, students can be driven to compete in their exam results to bring status and esteem to the family name—a motive that can be classified as extrinsic (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991).

### **Environmental factors**

This study's final motivator for students is connected to the classroom learning environment. The literature consistently underscores the significance of a positive classroom environment for motivating and supporting academic achievement (Rafiq et al., 2022). The Samoan culture emphasises community, respect and relationships, which can be leveraged to create a supportive and motivating educational setting. Additionally, promoting a safe and inclusive classroom environment where all students feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of discrimination or bias makes them more engaged and motivated in learning.

This process requires dedication to building strong and positive relationships with students; strategies can include greeting them warmly, getting to know them individually and showing genuine interest in their lives in and out of the classroom. Students cannot be motivated to engage in class discussions if the classroom environment is not conducive to their learning. Parsons (1959) discussed the role of the school class in socialising individuals and maintaining social order from the functionalist framework perspective. In that perspective, educational institutions are key social structures that contribute to the stability and functioning of society by providing a structured environment. Schools help maintain social order and prepare students for their future roles in the workforce. The structure can motivate students by providing them with clear goals and expectations; hence, the teacher's role in supporting and motivating students cannot be overstated.

The study's findings stressed the importance of teacher-student relationships as a motivating factor—a concept echoed by Ryan and Deci (2009), who maintained that supportive instructors

lead to autonomously motivated students who internalise the course material better and achieve higher grades. The key is to build respectful, culturally sensitive and supportive relationships that encourage students to engage actively in their learning journey and strive for academic success while honouring their cultural heritage. When teachers create supportive learning environments that consider students' cultural needs, students are more likely to excel academically and uphold their cultural values. Brandmiller et al. (2020) indicated that the differences in students' socio-economic backgrounds may hamper the teacher-student relationship. However, if the teacher is well equipped to cater for everyone's needs, including those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, these dissimilarities may not affect students' desire to learn.

Overall, the study's findings provide evidence that extrinsic motivators are more important than intrinsic ones. Such a finding contradicts Sapolu and Malupo's (2018) study findings, who found that intrinsic motivation, such as personal interest in or enjoyment of the subject, more significantly influenced the learning of Samoan students than extrinsic motivators, such as grades, rewards and approval from others. The study's findings are unexpected but might be attributed to the nature of the Samoan context. For example, a notable phenomenon in most Samoan classrooms is the issue of student passivity, which can be attributed to the very hierarchical nature of the Samoan culture. For example, students may not have the desire to learn for the sake of learning but to satisfy those in authority.

### **Balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivation**

It is crucial to strike a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the Samoan classroom. While extrinsic motivators can provide short-term incentives, they should be aligned with intrinsic values to maintain long-term engagement and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). For example, while both types of motivation drive students to learn, the sense of fulfillment from either may differ. For instance, intrinsic motivation, driven by students' interests and passions, may result in a deeper engagement with learning and a higher academic performance. In contrast, extrinsic motivation driven by external rewards, such as social recognition within the community or meeting family expectations, can also drive students to excel academically. However, external motivators may not result in the same level of personal satisfaction as intrinsic motivators. Balancing these motivations can help students achieve their academic goals while fulfilling their personal and social aspirations. Encouraging a supportive environment that values both types of motivation can benefit students overall.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has provided valuable insights into the motivational factors influencing Samoan students' academic performance. While the findings align with existing literature concerning the significant roles of extrinsic factors on students' academic performance, the absence of findings on the impact of intrinsic motivation is concerning. Participants demonstrated that external factors such as parental expectations, grades, and external rewards, as well as environmental factors such as the learning environment, which encompasses the teacher-student relationship and pedagogical skills, drive them in their educational trajectories. It is fair to argue that while external rewards can boost motivation in the short term, they may undermine intrinsic motivation over time. For example, students who receive frequent tangible rewards may become less interested in the learning activity and more focused on the rewards. Hence, a balanced approach that combines intrinsic and extrinsic motivators tends to be most effective.

For example, providing external rewards for initial engagement and gradually shifting towards intrinsic motivators can help sustain long-term motivation and engagement.

### **Study limitations and recommendations**

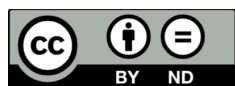
The study is limited in several ways. First, it was limited by the scale of participants. Expanding the research to include more students from urban and rural schools would enable a closer examination of its wider value. A future comparative study could utilise survey and interviews to gather information from more schools from urban and rural areas and private schools. Further research is also needed to explore additional dimensions of motivations specifically related to the Samoan cultural context and its implications for educational policy and practices and how they interact in shaping students' educational journeys in a Samoan classroom. However, on a global scale, the work points to the importance of context in students' motivation and acts as a warning to those who might uncritically generalise from one context to another, especially from Western contexts to cultural spaces which are greatly different.

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