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Language Across the Curriculum

Examining the place of language in our schools

Lip service has been paid for as long as we can remember to the proposition that "Every teacher is a teacher of English." It is the very rare school or university where this is indeed the case. Drawing heavily on the monumental Bullock Report, set up in 1973 to meet concern in English about the quality of English teaching, Bryant Fillion makes plain how complete (but feasible) a revolution is involved in any serious implementation in school of the language policy that the situation calls for. His explorations of the actual daily or weekly written output of students, in three successive inquiries in different schools, reveal some disconcerting realities about what typically happens now; and in spelling out the questions a teacher really must ask about his or her own work, he makes it clear that the kind of activities in class that are required are radically different, even in English classrooms.

"Language across the curriculum" and "school language policies" have become familiar phrases among Ontario educators, at least since the publication of the 1977 Ministry of Education guidelines for English at the Intermediate and Senior levels. Following the lead of the 1975 Bullock Report, *A Language for Life*,[1] both Ontario guidelines refer to language across the curriculum, with the Intermediate Guideline stipulating that the school principal "recognizes the role that language plays in all areas of the curriculum and provides the initiative for a school language policy."[2] The Senior Guideline notes that "In all subject areas, the use of language involves the student in the formation of concepts, the exploration of symbols, the solving of problems, the organization of information, and interaction with his or her environment. Teachers need to recognize and reinforce the central role of language in this learning process."[3] A forthcoming Intermediate Guideline supplement, titled *Language Across the Curriculum*, will provide additional information to teachers and administrators trying to find out just what "language across the curriculum" means, and what they are expected to do about it.

While providing considerable impetus for schools to improve their work with students' language, such official mandates can lead to problems as well. Undoubtedly, more than a few English department heads have been caught off guard by a principal's request to "get a school language policy to me by next week." And Gerald Haigh's *Times Educational Supplement* parody of the situation must ring true for many Ontario schools:

> *Monday.* Arriving at school in a decisive mood, I wrote on my 'Things to do' pad:
>
> 1. See the caretaker again about that funny sticky stuff behind the radiator in room three.
>
> 2. Remove the outdated notices from the board in the corridor.
>
> 3. Institute a language policy across the curriculum.[4]

A school's language policy

The theoretical basis of language across the curriculum derives largely from the Bullock Report, and the work of people like James Britton,[5] Nancy Martin,[6] and Douglas Barnes.[7] Three central tenets of the concept are that (1) language is more than surface structure, (2) the entire school as an environment influences students' language development, and (3) language plays a key role in virtually all school learning. Based on these assumptions, a school language policy is concerned with more than the elimination of errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and usage conventions. It involves broadening teachers' notions and awareness of language, helping students learn to use language, and helping them use language to learn. As one publication succinctly states,

> One of the major functions of language. . . is its use for learning: for trying to put new ideas into words, for testing out one's thinking on other people, for fitting together new ideas with old ones, and so on, which all need to be done to bring about new understanding. These functions suggest active uses of language by the pupil as opposed to passive reception. A 'language policy' is more accurately described, therefore, as a 'language and learning policy'.[8]

Language across the curriculum, interpreted as a concern for improving surface structure, usually results in a somewhat grudging agreement from non-English teachers to pay more attention to spelling and sentence structure in their students' papers. The "policy" which results deals largely with the evaluation and marking of student papers.

Interpreted in the broader sense of "language *and learning*", language policies become considerably more radical, raising fundamental questions about learning and teaching. For example, a 1971 discussion document from the London Association for the Teaching of English includes a sample "Language Policy" containing the following items:

We need to find ways of helping pupils without putting words in their mouths. We could perhaps be less concerned to elicit from them verbatim repetitions of time-honoured formulations than to ensure that pupils engage in a struggle to formulate for themselves their present understanding. Discussion is an essential part of that process. . .

Many school activities should be carried out by small groups which can use their talk to move towards understanding by means which are not present in the normal teacher-directed classroom. . .

Written work asks for the teacher's attention and interest more than (perhaps, instead of) his marks. If prior and exclusive attention is given to spelling, punctuation and correctness (in its narrowest sense) then all too easily the writer feels that the message itself and his efforts to communicate it are of less importance.[9]

Even though these statements, and the entire L.A.T.E. document, are intended as tentative guides for discussion, such a policy obviously goes far beyond an agreement to mark spelling and sentence errors in students' papers. And it poses some very difficult problems for implementation, especially in the secondary school, as Nancy Martin indicates:

. . . the general pattern of the organisation of secondary schools works against it . . . Apart from pressures of time there are implicit assumptions that a specialist will be able to manage his own affairs — including of course, the language proper to his subject . . . This problem is compounded by the fact that most secondary teachers (other than some teachers of English) think of language as something to be corrected and improved.[10]

Existing (implicit) policies and "rules"

Faced with these difficulties, a secondary school staff might well decide to do without a language policy. However, the question is not really whether or not to have a language policy, but whether or not to make the policy explicit. Through the attitudes and actions of individual teachers, the shared assumptions of departments, and the demands and constraints placed on students' language use, every school already has a policy toward language and learning, even though the policy and its effects have probably never been articulated or discussed. For example, the policy in some classes, if not in entire schools, might be something like the following:

Students will learn by listening and reading, rather than by speaking or writing.

Students will be quiet, unless given permission to speak by and to the teacher.

Students will ask very few questions about the subject.

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Students will write down only the words and ideas given to them by the teacher or the textbook.

Students will only speak or write in correct, final-draft language, to demonstrate that they have learned the information given.

This is a parody, of course. But it may be closer to the truth than we suppose. Arno A. Bellack and others, summarizing extensive research into classroom language, indicate that there are several unstated but powerful "rules" which seem to control "the classroom game" for most teachers and students. Among the rules for the pupils are the following:

The pupil's primary task in the game is to respond to the teacher's solicitations.

In general, the pupil will keep his solicitations to a minimum.

Even more important than the *don't* solicit rule is the *don't* react evaluatively rule. Under no condition is the pupil permitted to react evaluatively to a statement made by the teacher; that is, the pupil does not tell the teacher he is right or wrong, that he is doing well or doing badly.

A corollary of the "don't react evaluatively" rule is the general principle, "within the classroom, teachers speak The Truth."[11]

To the extent that Bellack's findings characterize classroom practice, these rules of the game constitute a language policy very much at odds with current theory and research. Among other things, they quite explicitly deny a key principle of the Bullock Report, that "language has a heuristic function; that is to say a child can learn by talking and writing as certainly as he can by listening and reading."[12] A language policy which severely restricts pupils' language use in the classroom impedes both language development and learning for a great many students. One major function of a school language policy is to bring such limitations to teachers' conscious awareness for examination and possible change.

In my work with school principals, I have tried to indicate the primary concerns of a school language policy from the point of view of a concerned and informed parent seeking a linguistically adequate school for my daughters. The following questions suggest the kind of information I think schools should be seeking about their own language policies and practices:

Some Questions for the Principal (From a Troublesome Parent)

In what ways do you want students' language to be different as a result of time spent in this school?

What evidence do you have that students can speak, write, or read better when they leave the school than when they entered?

How much writing do students do in this school? What kinds of writing, and in which subjects?

How many teachers in this school take class time to teach students how to do the kind of writing they require? How many provide opportunity for students to "practise" writing (i.e., without being marked)? How many provide students with models of "good" writing in their subjects?

How many teachers encourage students' "exploratory talk," to put new ideas and information into students' own language?

In an average day (or week) in this school, how much opportunity will an average student have to question, talk, or write about the things she or he is expected to learn? How much opportunity does she or he have to *use* and *apply* knowledge (except on tests)?

How readable and interesting are the textbooks? What additional material is available for students to read about the subjects?

How many students in this school read (or write) for pleasure? What do they read? How many read newspapers regularly? How many are non-readers?

Perhaps it goes without saying that such questions make many principals feel somewhat uncomfortable. But most principals agree that the questions are reasonable, and perhaps even worth the time and energy to find some answers.

Examining present "policies" on writing

During the 1977-78 school year, I was involved with several schools attempting to establish language policies, especially with regard to writing. In each case, we began by asking questions about present practices, and in three Toronto-area schools we conducted "writing surveys" to obtain answers to three questions: How much writing are students actually doing? What kinds of writing are they doing? In which subjects? The results of the surveys have been illuminating, both to the schools involved and to others as well. They indicate, I believe, both the need for and potential of language policies which involve teachers in gathering data and reflecting on their own practices.

In each of the three schools, the survey was conducted for a two-week period (ten school days), during which time we xeroxed daily all of the writing done in and for school by a sample of students. Insofar as possible, we copied every bit of writing these students did: notes, tests, homework, worksheets, rough drafts, and papers.

The three categories devised to describe the kinds of writing found in the first survey also proved adequate for the two later surveys: *copying* (where the student was simply "taking down" information directly from some source), *directed writing* (where students were writing out answers to teacher or textbook questions primarily dealing with the recall of information, summarizing, or making notes in their own language), and *undirected writing* (involving some degree of original thought or creativity, as in stories or reports on students' own topics, where the writer was involved in manipulating information, ideas, and language. "Open ended questions" involving students in the interpretation and manipulation of content would also presumably result in undirected writing.)

The first survey was conducted in a senior public school (grades 7 and 8) in a middle-class area of Toronto.

SCHOOL A (Grades 7 and 8)

n = 21 (random sample)

Amount of Writing in 10 School Days (average pages* per student)
Grade 7   9.3 pages
Grade 8   9.4 pages

*Note: In tabulating these data, we counted as a "page" any piece of paper with some student writing on it, often just a few words. Therefore, on the basis of this sample, students in this school write considerably less than a page a day.

Kinds of Writing: *Copying:* 46 pages (21% of total); *Directed Writing:* 96 pages (43% of total); *Undirected Writing:* 81 pages (36% of total).*

*Note: The sample of writing included very few rough drafts, no examples of informal or "personal" writing, and no examples of extended writing going on for more than two pages.

Writing by Subjects: *English and math* (taught together in this school): 90 pages (40% of total); *science:* 66 pages (30% of total); *history and geography:* 56 pages (25% of total); *others:* 11 pages (5% of total).

Perhaps the only additional comment necessary here is that the teachers in this school were quite surprised at how little writing was being done, and at the dearth of writing in the *undirected* category. Subsequent informal observation indicated that both the total amount of writing and the proportion of undirected writing increased in the school following discussion of the survey results by the teachers.

The second survey

The second survey was conducted in a junior high school (grades 7, 8, and 9) in a middle class neighborhood. In an attempt to simplify data collection, the survey was conducted using a small number of "able, cooperative" students, reasoning that this would produce "best case" findings. Presumably other students in the school would be writing less than these good students were. To provide more precise findings, words were counted rather than pages. On the average, students write about 275 words per page of lined notebook paper.

SCHOOL B (Grades 7, 8, 9)

n = 11 ("Good" Students)

Amount of Writing per Week (average number of words per student per week)

	words in continuous, related sentences	*isolated words, sentences, phrases*	*total words per week*
Grade 7 (n = 4)	223	117	340
Grade 8 (n = 4)	616	210	826
Grade 9 (n = 3)	580	760	1340

Kinds of Writing (average words per student per week; % of total for grade)*

	copied	*directed*	*undirected*
Grade 7	92 (30%)	32 (10%)	190 (60%)
Grade 8	187 (23%)	590 (71%)	47 (6%)
Grade 9	741 (55%)	595 (45%)	0

*Note: The sample contained very few rough drafts and no cases of students writing about or reflecting on their own experiences or commenting informally on the subject matter. Directed writing here consisted almost entirely of summarized or paraphrased information. Undirected writing was primarily play scripts and stories for English. In computing these averages, occasional isolated words which had been included in the "amount" tally were disregarded.

Writing by Subjects (total words by all students in **two** weeks; c = copied, d = directed, u = undirected)

	English	*History Geography*	*Science*	*Others*
Grade 7	u: 1520	c: 100 d: 260	c: 76	c: 564
Grade 8	c: 50 d: 2420 u: 350	c: 660 d: 2195 u: 25	c: 639 d: 49	c: 145 d: 50
Grade 9	d: 1693	c: 4445	d: 200	c: 1680

Because of the small number of students, and the sampling procedure used, we cannot generalize from this sample to the school population as a whole. Nevertheless, as in the first school, teachers were quite surprised at the limited amount of writing done by these "able" students, and the small proportion of it which could be identified as undirected writing. Following the survey, teachers reportedly worked to increase the amount of undirected writing done in various subjects.

The third survey

The third survey was conducted in a secondary school (grades 9 to 13), using a random sample of 36 students (approximately 2.25% of the student population). Given the random sampling, and the fact that the school is on a semestered system, not all subjects were covered for all grade levels. However, with the exception of art (2 students), family studies (3 students), and geography (8 students), all subjects were represented by at least ten students at various grade levels.

To the extent that School C's findings accurately reflect actual practices, they do indicate a clear "language and learning policy" with regard to writing. Writing is done primarily to improve and demonstrate the retention of information. Writers seldom deal with their own ideas, language, or understanding of material to demonstrate some degree of independent thought and work with the content, and they virtually never write imaginatively, or about their own experiences.

Perhaps predictably, when teachers in this school saw the survey results, their initial concern was that the "quality" of writing had not been reported. They were much more in favor of a policy which would "correct" writing than one which would deal with its uses for learning.

Learning to use language

The primary interest in "language across the curriculum" and "school language policies" has come from a concern with improving students' language, rather than from a concern with language and learning. However, the popular concern with young people's language development has had a narrow focus which invites a correspondingly limited response from schools. So long as the concern with language is limited to such surface specifics as spelling and grammatical correctness, attention is focused on direct instruction and teacher correction, rather than on the larger problems of language functions, intentions, and use.

Linguist Courtney Cazden argues, "The most serious problem facing the language arts curriculum today is an imbalance between means and ends — an

SCHOOL C (Grades 9-13)
n = 36 (random sample)

Amount of Writing
In two weeks, these students wrote a total of 98,890 words, an average of 2746 words/student, or slightly more than one page per day. However, amounts varied widely among students, teachers, and subjects. Most students wrote considerably less than a page a day.

Amount by Subject (average words per student per 10 days; average pages per day @ 275 words per page)

	English	History	Geography	Science	Technical	Business
avg. wds/ 10 days:	1323	1962	1640	1360	687	650
avg. pages/- day	1/2 +	3/4	2/3	1/2	1/4	1/4

Kinds of Writing (Note: In this survey, the "undirected" category was subdivided into subject-related, personal, and imaginative.)

In the total sample, 37% of the writing was *copied;*
43% was *directed;**
19% was *subject-related undirected;**
1% was *personal undirected,* and
0.05% was *imaginative undirected.*

*Note: Three long grade-13 papers in English and history account for more than half (55%) of all the *subject-related undirected writing.* Most *directed writing* involved answers to factual, recall questions, or longer "reports" which were largely paraphrased versions of encyclopedia or textbook information.

Kinds of Writing by Subjects (percents of total writing done in the subject)

	copied	directed	subject-undirected	personal undirected	imaginative undirected
English	14%	37%	47%	2%	0.08%
History	47%	39%	14%		
Geography	18%	77%	4%		
Science	50%	46%	4%		
Technical	76%	24%			
Business	35%	41%	24%		
Family Studies	38%	38%	6%	18%	
Math	71%	25%	4%		
Art		26%	57%		17%

imbalance between too much attention to drill on the component skills of language and literacy and too little attention to their significant use." The same pressures which have given needed attention to the importance of language development have done so in such a way as to impede the very progress desired:

> Responding to real or imagined community pressures, able and conscientious teachers all over the country are providing abundant practice in discrete basic skills; while classrooms where children are integrating those skills in the service of exciting speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities are becoming rare exceptions.[13]

Ultimately, of course, such exclusive emphasis on discrete skills will be self-defeating, though it does answer the immediate demand for action in a relatively painless and socially acceptable way. It is certainly far easier to teach (once again) a lesson on run-on sentences and fragments than to follow the advice of the Bullock Report:

> The kind of approach which we believe will produce the language development we regard as essential. . . involves creating situations in which, to satisfy his own purposes, a child encounters the need to use more elaborate forms and is thus motivated to extend the complexity of language available to him.[14]

Once we accept as a basic premise that intention and use are essential elements in the development of language, there are important implications for a school language policy. Among other things, it becomes important to examine the school as a language environment which promotes or inhibits development. In addition to asking "What are students being taught about language?" we must ask "What opportunities do they have to use language in meaningful ways for a variety of purposes?" The results of our school writing surveys suggest that these opportunities may be very limited indeed. There were very few instances where a student clearly encountered "the need to use more elaborate forms" and virtually none where a student wrote "to satisfy his own purposes".

As Joan Tough's research indicates, children arrive at school from homes which have provided markedly different opportunities for language use.[15] The Bullock Report notes the implications of these findings for schools:

> If a child does not encounter situations in which he has to explore, recall, predict, plan, explain, and analyse, he cannot be expected to bring to school a ready made facility for such uses. But that is not the same thing as saying the ability is beyond him. What is needed is to create the contexts and conditions in which the ability can develop.[16]

When we concern ourselves with students' opportunities to use language in purposeful ways, rather than in dummy-run exercises divorced from context, we can raise some very powerful and practical questions about school practices. In my work with teachers, I have encouraged them to consider questions such as the following:

How much opportunity do your students have to use their own language to discuss and make sense of your subject; to talk and write to a sympathetic, encouraging audience, interested as much in what they have to say as in correcting what they say; to use language for such logical operations as explaining, describing, defining, giving opinions, inferring, speculating, comparing and contrasting, questioning, and paraphrasing?

In an average week in your classroom, how often do you *use* an idea or comment volunteered by a student? How often do you encourage a student to elaborate on what he or she has said? How often do you, or your students, ask questions you are genuinely interested in? How many students speak or ask questions voluntarily about the subject? How much voluntary reading do students do? How frequently and how much do students write? How often do they discuss and question what they have read or written?

There is nothing subject-specific to English or language arts in such questions, and in fact teachers of science, geography, family studies, and other subjects seem to find them useful ways to approach the topic of language development in their own subjects. Once teachers see that language use is as important to development as direct instruction and correction, their own role in students' language development becomes much clearer. We must begin, I think, by encouraging teachers of all subjects to look at what they and their students are doing with language, and at the relationship of these language uses both to learning and to language development.

Using language to learn

One major obstacle to the serious consideration of language in schools is that language is so obvious and all-pervasive that it often escapes our attention. Until teachers examine carefully the relationships of language to learning, understanding, and intellectual development, they are unlikely to take seriously their own responsibilities toward language development or to realize the potential of language for all learning. The Bullock Report says, "For language to play its full role as a means of learning, the teacher must create in the classroom an environment which encourages a wide range of language uses."[17] But this principle was clearly not operating in the writing collected in our surveys.

Two key points teachers need to understand about language and learning are that language plays a key role in understanding new information, and language plays a key role in intellectual development. This first point is nicely summed up in the NATE document on language across the curriculum:

> . . . theory and practice suggest that if a learner at any level is able to make his own formulations of what he is learning, this is more valuable to him than taking over someone else's pre-formulated language. In practice, this means that pupils often need to have the opportunity to say or write things in their own ways, in their own styles, rather than copying from books or taking notes from dictation.[18]

Douglas Barnes,[19] among others, offers theoretical and research evidence to support the idea that by putting ideas into our own language we come to understand them. When students are denied the opportunity to use language in this way, learning suffers.

Perhaps more important than the immediate role of language in making sense of new information is the part it plays in developing mental operations and intelligence. A decade ago, James Moffett pointed out the relationship in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse:*

> . . . a pedagogy based on provoking or eliciting thought presupposes that a child is already capable of generating the required kinds of thoughts. Asking "stimulating" questions and assigning "stimulating" reading invites the student to put out but does not give him anything, as teachers of the disadvantaged know well. In order to generate some kinds of thoughts, a student must have *previously* internalized some discursive operations that will enable him to activate his native abstracting apparatus. . .
>
> Elicitation has a place certainly at some stage of instruction, but more basic is to create the kinds of social discourse that when internalized become the kinds of cognitive instruments called for by later tasks.[20]

Although the exact relationship of thought and language remains a largely uncharted area, there is little doubt that restricted language development is associated with restricted mental operations of the type most called upon by schools. At the very least, language must be accepted as our point of access to students' thinking. Despite many controversies, there are two key points of general agreement, cited in the Bullock Report:

> (a) that higher processes of thinking are normally achieved by the interaction of a child's language behaviour with his other mental and perceptual powers; and (b) that language behaviour represents the aspects of his thought processes most accessible to outside influences, including that of the teacher.[21]

In James Britton's telling phrase, language is "the exposed edge of thought."

It is obviously possible to by-pass a good deal of students' language use in our teaching, by extensive use of teacher lectures and audio-visual presentations, short-answer recitation sessions, workbook "fill in the blank" exercises, "copy from the board" note-taking, and objective tests. Unfortunately, such teaching deprives students of two major means of learning — talking and writing — and it may result in limited intellectual growth as well. As Donald Graves points out in his study of the diminishing use of writing in schools:

> A far greater premium is placed on students' ability to read and listen than on their ability to speak and write. In fact, writing is seldom encouraged and sometimes not permitted, from grade one through the university. Yet when students cannot write, they are robbed not only of a valuable tool for expression but of an important means of developing thinking and reading skills as well.[22]

The language across the curriculum movement has great potential for improving both language and learning, by leading us to examine and reflect on the place of language in our schools in light of such admonitions. If they are not trivialized to an exclusive concern for surface correctness, school language policies may yet provide a salutary outcome to the "back to basics" controversy.

NOTES

1. Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Sir Alan Bullock, chairman, *A Language for Life* (London: HMSO, 1975). One of the key recommendations of the report is that "Each school should have an organised policy for language across the curriculum, establishing every teacher's involvement in language and reading development throughout the years of schooling" (p. 514).

2. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Curriculum Guideline for the Intermediate Division English* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 1977), p. 6.

3. Ontario Ministry of Education, *Curriculum Guideline for the Senior Division English* (Toronto: Ministry of Education, 1977), p. 5.

4. *Times Educational Supplement,* 26.3.76, quoted by Nancy Martin, "Initiating and Implementing a Policy," in Michael Marland, et al., *Language Across the Curriculum* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1977), p. 231.

5. James Britton, *Language and Learning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970).

6. Nancy Martin et al., *Writing and Learning across the Curriculum, 11-16* (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976).

7. Douglas Barnes, *From Communication to Curriculum* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976).

8. National Association for the Teaching of English, *Language across the Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976), p. 7.

9. In Douglas Barnes, James Britton, and Harold Rosen, *Language, the Learner and the School* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Education, 1971), pp. 163 and 165.

10. Nancy Martin, "Language across the Curriculum: A Paradox and Its Potential for Change," *Educational Review,* Vol 28, No. 3 (June 1976), pp. 206-219.

11. Arno A. Bellack, et al., "The Classroom Game," in Ronald T. Hyman, ed., *Teaching: Vantage Points for Study,* Second Edition (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1974), p. 351.

12. Bullock Report, *op cit,* p. 50.

13. Courtney Cazden, "Language, Literacy, and Literature: Putting It All Together," *National Elementary Principal* (October 1977), pp. 40-41.

14. Bullock Report, *op cit,* p. 67.

15. For a summary introduction to Joan Tough's work, see Robert E. Shafer, "The Work of Joan Tough: A Case Study in Applied Linguistics," *Language Arts* 55 (March 1978), pp. 308-314+.

16. Bullock Report, *op cit,* p. 54.

17. Bullock Report, *op cit,* p. 188.

18. N.A.T.E., *op cit,* p. 8.

19. *From Communication to Curriculum* (Penguin, 1976). See also Douglas Barnes and Frankie Todd, *Communication and Learning in Small Groups* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), and Douglas Barnes, "Language in the Secondary Classroom," in *Language, the Learner and the School* (Penguin, 1971), pp. 11-77.

20. James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 70.

21. Bullock Report, *op cit,* p. 49.

22. Donald H. Graves, "Balance the Basics: Let Them Write," *Learning* (April 1978), p. 30.

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