The Translation of Western Teaching Approaches in the Hong Kong Early Childhood Curriculum: a promise for effective teaching?

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ABSTRACT This article reports data from a study about the challenges of teaching reform carried out by three in-service kindergarten teachers in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. Intending to improve the quality of teaching and learning, these teachers adapted Western teaching approaches such as High Scope and Project approaches, which they had learnt about in their teacher education course, to Hong Kong classrooms. By tracking the enactment process of an implemented change for half a year, it was observed that teaching reform could not simply be achieved by just putting theories into practice. It requires the constant dialectical interplay of practice with theories in a continuous manner in the specified context. The findings highlight the difficulties of making pedagogical shifts and the merits of employing collaborative inquiry to support the use of effective pedagogies.

Introduction

In Hong Kong, all kindergartens are privately owned and are not included in the formal nine-year compulsory educational system. The government does not have direct responsibility but adopts an advisory role in this sector. There was no formal suggested curriculum for local pre-primary education until the 1980s (Hong Kong Government, 1982). 'Learning through play', the direction for the teaching and learning of early education curricula was first proposed for pre-primary education in Hong Kong by the Llewellyn Visiting panel (Hong Kong Government, 1982) and was subsequently endorsed in Education Commission Report Number 2 (Hong Kong Government, 1986). It is the government's stated aim to improve the quality of education in the early years and one of the mechanisms has been through introducing 'play' as being central to the curriculum. It is believed that an increased emphasis on the role of play in learning will facilitate a paradigm shift in pre-school teachers' pedagogy (Hong Kong Government, 1986) that will result in the improvement of the quality of teaching in the sector.

Underlying the above suggestion is the assumption that learning to teach means learning to put theory into practice (Cheng, 2001). In order to help teachers to be more interactive as opposed to being didactic, teacher education programmes in Hong Kong have adopted what are considered to be successful Western approaches, such as the Project approach (Katz, 1994), Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1996) and High Scope (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

Project learning as described by Katz (1994) is an in-depth investigation of a topic which is regarded as being worth learning about when undertaken by a small group of children within a class, or by an individual child. The key feature is to find answers to questions. Yet, the goal of a project is to learn more about the topic rather than seeking right answers to questions posed by the teacher. Extending the idea of project learning, children and their teachers in the Italian city of Reggio Emillia have developed spiral activities of exploration in the form of symbolic media like drawings, craft-work, movement, songs, building blocks and shadow play. Children's work is not

casually created but is the result of a guided exploration of themes and events that are relevant to the lives of children and of the community (Gandini, 1984; Gandini & Edwards, 1988; Malaguzzi, 1996). Also grounded in cognitive constructivist theory, the High Scope Curriculum Model represents the open-framework approach. Adults engage children as active learners and arrange their classrooms into discrete, well-resourced interest areas in order to promote the most effective learning. Each day, children plan, carry out, and review their own activities. They are engaged in small and large group activities and spend time outdoors (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997).

These teaching models stress child-initiated tasks and learning rather than teacher-dominated activities. They are aligned with the teaching reform proposals by policy makers in the Hong Kong context (Hong Kong Government, 1982). In order to link theory with practice, student teachers in Hong Kong are asked to experiment with ideas about the teaching approaches mentioned in the practicum, an integral part of the teacher education programme. Student teachers have two supervised teaching practices a year in the Certificate-kindergarten teacher programme in Hong Kong. Anecdotal evidence suggests that student teachers have immense anxieties when attempting to enact Western teaching approaches in Hong Kong settings. Many of them are reluctant to change and even if they do, there is an obsessive intention to replicate the theories and approaches, rigidly disregarding authentic contexts. Paradoxically, even when student teachers successful link the curriculum model with practices, the effects are not contextualised or lasting and dissipate upon their graduation. In order to help them internalise the change, it has been proposed that there is a need to activate the practical knowledge of student teachers to support their professional inquiries. To this end, a project aimed at encouraging teachers to implement their ideas as practical experiences in the classroom was initiated. This is the project that is presented here.

Aims of the Project

The aims of the project were twofold. The first aim was to improve in-service teachers' quality of teaching and learning by activating their critical and reflective abilities in identifying problems and drawing implications from established teaching approaches. Second was to document the process of professional inquiry regarding the enactment of Western approaches to teaching and learning and to identify the difficulties that were encountered. In this article, I focus on two types of early childhood curriculum implementations, namely, the High Scope curriculum and the Project approach.

Much research went into investigating the relationship between teachers' cognition and behaviour. Various conceptualisations of teacher's practical knowledge have been identified, with terms like 'theories-in-use' (Argyris & Schon, 1974), 'teacher's practical knowledge' (Elbaz, 1983) and teacher's personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to describe teachers' implicit knowledge. They all deal with the knowledge and theories that teachers use in action. This project investigates three in-service teachers' professional development, while they attempted to implement specific Western teaching approaches into their own contexts. It involves not only how they articulated their understanding of the approaches but also how they put their interpretations into action. Thus, this study focused on tapping the implicit practical knowledge of the teachers implementing teaching reform.

Means of Inquiry

According to Shulman (1998):

> A case resides in the territory between theory and its practice, between idea and experience, between the normative ideal and achievable real. Case capture pieces of experience that initially existed solely within the life of a single individual, and they transform that solitary experience into text. (p. 13)

Case study is thus the ideal method to look into teachers' practical knowledge and to understand its link with practice. It is adapted for this study to allow links between decisions and actions to be identified (Yin, 1994).

There were seven participants in this project, including:

- three in-service teachers, who were headmistresses and a head teacher, enrolled in the in-service Certificate Course for Kindergarten Teachers in an Institute of Education;
- three lecturers from the above Institute, who were the researchers in the project, and
- one kindergarten headmistress acting as advisor.

These participants formed an investigation team which supported the three in-service teachers' process of curriculum change, tapping into the interplay of the three teachers' decisions and actions in improving their teaching in their unique classrooms in six enactment cycles.

Multiple means of data collection were employed, including capturing the teachers' enactment process through video recordings, their reflections on the framing and reframing processes, classroom observation, and discussions based on the above sources of information. The inquiry process followed the action cycle outlined in Figure 1. The team started by identifying the problems in teaching and learning in each of the participants' kindergartens. They were then helped to analyse the reasons for the identified issues or problems and to draw from theories learned on the teacher education course to address the identified problems.

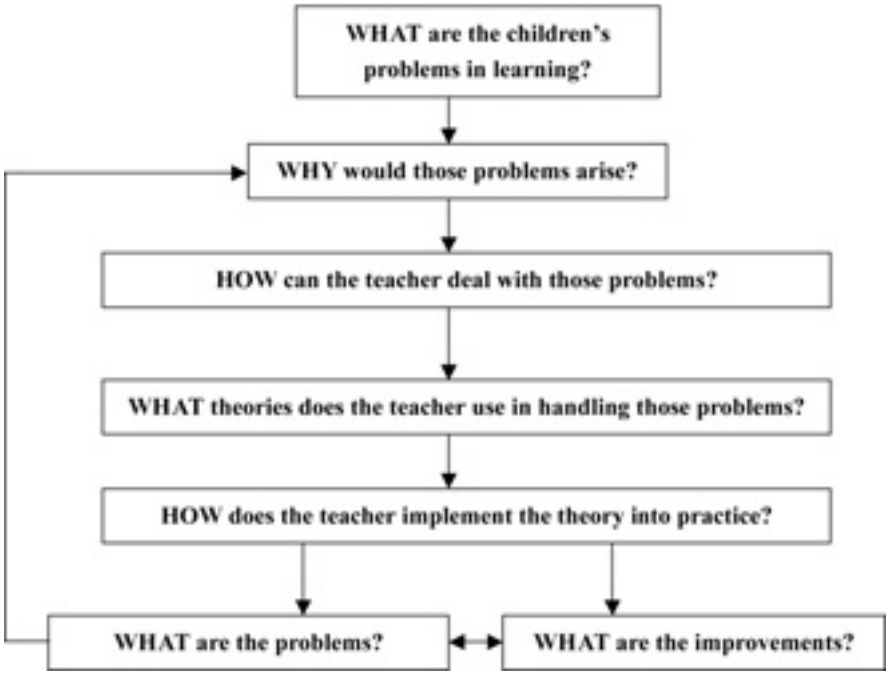

Figure 1. Process of exploring alternative teaching and learning approaches.

Two participants chose the Project approach while another chose the High Scope approach as their implementation. This was based on their belief about which of the approaches they felt could be most suitably accommodated in their context. The participants had to interrogate the chosen approaches in order to draw out the essence of the theories and apply them in local contexts. Evaluation was crucial in order to critically assess the effectiveness and value of the implemented changes. Participants had to identify what aspects worked and why, and consider the issues related to the process of implementation. Based on this data, the team then helped the participants to further investigate the issues and to identify causes, and develop ongoing directions. The research team had the important role of facilitating their reflection and the flow of the inquiry. They had to keep the action cycle going and to keep track of the data that emerged.

The project took place over a period of a year and a half and there were six meetings in all. Through processes of contextualising, decontextualising and recontextualising, actionable teaching models for each teacher evolved. The audiotapes of these meetings, together with the videotapes

and the lesson plans of the participants, form the data of this study. Multilevel coding (Merriam, 1998) was used to analyse the data, centring on the core issue of the investigation – the interplay between the conception of the adopted approaches and their classroom realisation.

The Findings

The Case Reports

Three personal practices of enacting the constructive learning approaches were developed through the process. These cases are summarised below and pseudonyms are used.

Making sense of a High Scope approach in promoting children's self-exploration in learning areas. Alice was the teacher-in-charge of an established kindergarten attended mainly by children from middle-class Hong Kong families. Alice was the head of curriculum and had her own class. She stated that she had joined the project in order to improve the teaching and learning at her school. Alice believed children should take initiative in their own learning. However, she had the feeling her teaching was too teacher-directed and designed in a top-down manner to deliver the prescribed activities to the children. Hoping to bring a better quality education to the children, Alice started to consider the concept of the High Scope approach to promote children's active learning by reorganising the classroom environment.

First, Alice focused on a 'plan–do–review', where children were taught to prioritise the activities they liked to do in the 'grouping time', and follow their plans accordingly. However, she found that the choices were limited because the children were not sure how to use their experiences and had not been involved in this type of decision making before. Guided by the team, she reorganised the classroom into four new learning areas, namely:

- family
- art
- language
- mathematics and science.

By making use of the desks, Alice successfully set clear physical boundaries for each of the learning areas. However, after this alteration, the classroom seemed congested in her opinion. Constrained by space, Alice thought of making use of the area outside the classroom, which she did.

Apart from tackling the problem of space, Alice discovered that the content of the materials in the areas was also of crucial significance in children's learning. Thus, she turned to the ideas of incorporating 'key learning concepts', like 'floating' and 'sinking' in relation to the theme of water, in the learning areas to help children explore learning concepts through the aids and toys provided. She felt that the classroom atmosphere was more enlivened and enriched than before, as children were found clustered around the learning areas instead of sitting on their seats. There were more discussions and interactions amongst children and teachers. However, furnishing key learning concepts in the learning areas was not easy due to the increased workload and resource implications, and this posed as a continual challenge to the teachers in her school.

During the process, Alice attempted to use different means to improve the practice of 'plan–do–review'. For instance, forms were first designed for children to tick to show their plans, and they were then asked to draw signs and use words to indicate their choices. Alice needed to be skilful in observing and documenting the progress of the activities, and in providing support to the children if necessary. In the review time, again, Alice had tried many different ways to help the children share their experiences. She asked the children to tell the class about their progress, things they had finished and things they had not. However, the children seemed bored, so instead of sharing their finished products, Alice asked the children to share activities that they were interested in. In this way, she changed the focus of the communication or sharing session and in doing so the children in the class were able to articulate their ideas more effectively and be engaged with each other, and thus the flow of conversation and ideas was enriched. The fact that she recognised,

reflected and took action with the children to implement this course of events meant that the change process was more effective.

Making sense of the 'Project' as a small group activity to promote children's exploration. Belinda is a headmistress and mainly responsible for administrative duties. She does have a teaching role in her kindergarten, which is mainly attended by children from a low socio-economic background in Hong Kong. She wanted to help the children learn actively so she decided that she needed to personally work with a class in order to ensure that the proposed change would have the maximum opportunity for success. She incorporated the Project approach in order to promote children's exploration within a traditional thematic approach to teaching. At first, the Project approach was an extension of a theme and the children were asked to make sense of the content through their artwork. For instance, for the topic 'Hong Kong is our home' where 'the basic knowledge about Hong Kong was taught', Belinda explained, 'children were then asked to make sense of one aspect of their knowledge in a project by making models of sky-scrapers'. However, time was a constraint and Belinda had to frequently cancel movement and music lessons to incorporate planned project activities. Belinda experienced conflict and tension as she believed that these activities were important components that contributed to a balanced curriculum for young children. In addition, the time usually taken for homework was an issue and could not be modified due to cultural expectations in Hong Kong, where parents strongly believe that children need to spend time at home working on activities that they believe would support their performance. Through the collaborative sharing of the supporting team, Belinda identified the children's ability in learning through projects by their own investigations and, thus, she no longer provided them with information on any particular topics beforehand. She was more confident to take risks in her own teaching by incorporating an interest group in the small-group time; for instance, in the theme of 'animals', there was a small group of children investigating the life of the panda.

Though there were limitations to the children's exploration, Belinda had empowered them to work in the 'plan–do–review' cycle. Choices of small-group activities were granted. The atmosphere was more relaxed and children were able to move around the classroom. Visits to relevant places were arranged more frequently to stimulate thinking. When a project was over, an exhibition was held among classes. Children were involved bringing boxes and leaves for the panda, showing more commitment in their work.

Thus, Belinda was able to implement change on a small scale and even though she was constrained by time and the presence of traditional activities the work of the classroom made a small shift towards being more child centred and less teacher directed for these sessions.

Making sense of a Project approach in helping children to be active learners. Cindy was also a headmistress in a kindergarten in a new town catering for children from a low socio-economic status background. She did not teach and thus she had to collaborate with a teacher in her school for this project. In this study, Cindy attempted to adopt the Project approach to help children learn actively.

Before the study, Cindy viewed learning as being the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the child. Thus, even though she wanted to try the Project approach, the implementation strategies that she used remained very teacher directed. Her interpretation of the project at the beginning was the extension of formal teaching as she was worried children did not have enough information to carry out the project. For instance, in the project on frogs, she brought tadpoles, small fish and crabs for observation, and asked the children to make some more fish to decorate the pond. She found it difficult to extend the children's experiences because they were often waiting for more instructions after completing what had been given previously. She also indicated that the constraint of time was a major problem for her, as there were so many content areas in which they felt 'pressured' to teach in more of an instructional mode. These included Putonghua (Mandarin) classes, computer-time in the laboratory, writing exercises, movement and musical activities in the curriculum. Thus it was difficult to find time for the project. She said that

she frequently had to shorten the project activities in order to 'catch up' with other activities in the curriculum.

As the study progressed, Cindy's idea of projects gradually changed. She started to try out a project in an alternative way. She changed the focus of the projects so that they utilised the children's real-life experience, such as 'going into primary one'. Then Cindy found it easier to help the children to construct their own experiences because they were interested in what they were doing, whereas previously they had no say at all. As children wanted to seek answers to their own queries by visiting a primary school, such a visit was arranged. When they returned to the kindergarten, the children were excited about expressing their ideas of a primary school and enthusiastic about taking charge of their own investigations during the process. Cindy was impressed with their motivation toward learning in this new context.

Though Cindy experienced difficulties in trying out the Project approach, she said that she found the experience worthwhile. She said that she began to appreciate meaningful learning experiences and felt that she became better at interacting with the children during the course of the project.

The Challenges

The three stories were not without challenges. Local contextual constraints such as parental expectations about academic competency, conventional drilling of facts and processes and the examination-driven mode of learning are predominant in Hong Kong and do not support child-initiated learning. These constraints are difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate in Hong Kong by using pedagogical alterations (Pong & Chow, 2002). It is easy to note that there are gaps between the traditional teaching modes and the recommended Western approaches and this made change difficult. Working with these contextual constraints caused some implementation difficulties. They are now discussed.

Focus on teaching rather than learning. The findings suggested that the teachers started replicating the approaches in a physical manner instead of adapting their existing practice to the underlying principles of the approaches as they were eager to lead children to make models. It was uncomplicated for teachers to attend to the symptomatic features of the approaches while neglecting their rationale for teaching reform. Hence, the teachers tended to manipulate the ends, such as providing information to the children and instructing them to make something out of it. For example, both Belinda and Cindy concentrated on coaching children to do models, which was supposed to be a prominent feature of the Project approach. Cindy explained:

> The topic of my project is 'frogs'. I started off introducing frogs and their habitat. Then I asked the children to decorate a pond by some related artworks.

This indicates that Cindy has transferred her teacher-directed approach into the project approach. Similarly, Belinda said:

> This week's project topic is 'Hong Kong is our home' and ...the children were doing some artwork related to the science museum … For example, some of the children were responsible for the entrance tickets, and others arranged a sample of butterflies and a sculpture of the human body.

This example shows that for Belinda, the Project approach was a means to apply children's learning instead of helping children learn through it. Belinda's explanation of the Project approach revealed her linear concept of teaching and learning: 'basic knowledge was taught to the children before they were asked to do the project'.

The participants tended to replicate the physical features of the approaches. However, they neglected the 'here and now' learning quality of the children. In other words, there was no formative assessment tracking the performance of the children. Thus, instead of helping children to be active learners, the teaching reform was conducted mechanically – 'old' wine in a 'new' bottle.

Entrapment in simplistic or mechanical enactment. Teachers tended to incorporate prominent features of the approaches, such as children constructing artwork for the Project approach, having learning areas or centres, and adopting the 'plan–do–review' procedure in the High Scope approach. Cases showed that participants' ways of enactment were superficial at the beginning of the process and there were tendencies to stop the inquiries at that very early stage because participants thought that they had successfully put theories into practice, whereas in fact they had not shown that it would work on a consistent basis over time. The quality of the change was dubious without continuous reflection and team support.

Adding to an already crowded curriculum. Teachers found it difficult to tailor their existing modes of teaching and learning to the adopted approaches. The mastery of Chinese characters, English words and numbers and the time needed to consolidate them could not be eliminated due to parental expectations (Cheng, 2001) and the teachers were not able to transform the curriculum but had to expand it to accommodate both the 'new' and 'old' activities. Thus, learning was treated quantitatively and children, as well as teachers, were very busy coping with the ideas of both. Moreover, there was the possibility of worsening the quality of teaching and learning by cutting cultural elements like musical and movement activities to make room for the new activities. In this respect, the former curriculum was jeopardised.

The cycle of blame. Focusing on producing a 'genuine' approach, the teachers inclined to blame people and factors preventing them from reproducing the selected approach in their contexts. For example, when faced with constraints, Cindy made remarks such as:

> Teachers in my classroom are not used to carrying out this kind of investigation with the children. So, once the children have answered all the questions, the teachers would think that it is the end of the project.

Cindy also commented about parental perspectives:

> Parents are very anxious about the mastery of writing and mathematical skills of their children. They may complain if we cut short those activities.

Thus, when faced with dilemmas Cindy said:

> Children in Hong Kong do not have the curiosity because they are brought up in the traditional model of education, thus making it difficult to carry out the explorative approach.

Similar explanations were heard from Belinda:

> Parents may not accept that their children do not have seats in the classroom. [That is why there is no space to install learning centers.] The reason why we have to stick to the curriculum kit is content-oriented parents. They will think that we are not teaching their children if the content in the curriculum kits has not been covered.

Unfortunately, when teachers faced constraints, a blame cycle was identified, acting as a kind of psychological justification for practices remaining static. It is likely that teachers would stop their teaching inquiry without the support of the team and, thus, the professional development of teachers would be obstructed.

Discussion

The present investigation shows that transferring Western approaches to Hong Kong's early education does not necessarily translate into permanent and effective teaching and learning for young children. Any process of change is regarded as being difficult but the implementation of ideas from outside a culture into an existing system means that continuous reflections and adaptations on a small scale are required. The findings of this collaborative, case-based inquiry suggest several implications for effective professional development and quality teaching and learning.

The Need for Empowerment of Teachers as (Co-)Producers of Innovative Practice

The findings of this study show that connecting theories and practice is a complex process. It is an area that needs to be explored further in Hong Kong as far as teaching and learning reform is concerned. The creativity and the quality of teachers may be impeded if the government and policy makers keep proposing teaching reforms in a top-down manner; as Goodson pointed out: 'Teachers can no longer rely solely on the academics to develop and clarify for them a knowledge-base for teaching' (cited in Hargreaves & Lo, 2000). Teachers should be encouraged and viewed as able and independent seekers of knowledge in a scientific manner. Thus, Western approaches should be seen as examples that may help individual practitioners to generate actionable knowledge (Hargreaves, 1999) in their own contexts. The key notion is to focus on developing the environment and conditions for adapting the underlying principles of the successful approaches in a school-based manner supported by an inquiry such as engaging front-line teachers on this kind of collaborative project (Cochram-Smith & Lytle, 1998). In this connection, government officials and policy makers can launch systematic parental education to the public by considering what constitutes quality in early childhood education.

The Necessity of Activating Multiple Knowledge in a Collaborative Manner

The results of the study revealed that the translation and transmission of theories and ideas by practitioners themselves is complex because practitioners can fall into a simplistic, superficial and mechanical enactment of the selected curriculum approaches, which is not sustainable. Guided only by individual self-reflection, it is not easy to direct one's attention to the underlying intellectual and motivational processes of the learners. Shulman (1998) warned teaching professionals that the reflection of practice that fails to integrate the practitioner's personal theories with social influences is not productive. In this respect, it is necessary to integrate different kinds of knowledge to support the enactments. The process should not be the sole responsibility of student teachers but should be supported with a group of inquirers such as teachers and researchers. This study showed that three possible sources of knowledge can guide teachers from falling into unproductive behaviour. The different perspectives of knowledge shape and reshape the change process and they are identified as follows:

Theoretical knowledge as a means to ensure the quality of the inquiry. Findings showed that the adoption of new teaching and learning approaches led to an expansion of the curriculum, but in a simplistic and superficial way. The articulation of theories underpinning the approaches was significant as a framework and guiding reference for quality enactment. The decontextualisation and recontextualisation process helped teachers to reflect on the rationale of their enactment and to examine whether the enactment matched the underlying theories of the approaches. It is a crucial process in order to ensure that the quality of learning would not be jeopardised by the alteration in curricula.

Practical knowledge as a means to activate the inquiry. Uncertainties and difficulties were common during the change process and when teachers faced problematic situations where the theoretical knowledge was too abstract to be able to inform the complexity of practice, teachers found that their practical knowledge may have been inadequate to solve the problems. They were stuck and were likely to give up their planned curriculum changes.

It is suggested that sharing of practical knowledge of the enactment processes could be a means to boost the morale of the practitioners to continue with their own inquiry loop. Moreover, successful practical examples could be a positive psychological impetus for anxiety-ridden teachers. Working collaboratively with a team of inquirers who had similar enactment challenges could generate more practical knowledge interflow, which is essential during the change process.

Contextual knowledge as a means to identify possible areas for the inquiry. Change will occur and persist when it is embedded firmly into a context where feasibility is developed on a thorough

understanding of the contextual difficulties and constraints. The 'here and now' performance of the children under new circumstances was a vital source of contextual knowledge and information used to evaluate whether the new activities could challenge the cognition of the children. For instance, Belinda gave up passing information to the children before the implementation of the project activities when she became aware of the children's ability. Cindy also started working on the children's authentic needs when she found that the children were not motivated in their previous project. The information provided by formative assessment of the children during their activities was found to be the most effective pedagogy by the Department of Education and Skills report in the UK (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002). It was vital in lifting the practitioners from their entrapped visions of teaching to align them with the development of the children in their respective settings.

Conclusion

This article suggests that the translation of theories embedded in Western teaching approaches into a totally different context is not an easy task. The findings show that it is time for teacher education to go beyond the narrow mission of helping student teachers to put theories into practice and to help them appreciate the complexity of teaching and learning in all its varied forms. Using a team approach, this project helps to illuminate the complexity of linking theories with practice and highlights the need to create environments in which 'knowledge is used, transformed, enhanced, and attuned to the situation' (Bullough & Baughman, 1995, p. 461). Teachers as well as teacher educators can effect change in the light of their reflections and generate actionable theories in context. This kind of continuous inquiry is the key to the pursuit of effective teaching and learning that is sustainable.

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