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The Golden Thread:

Educator Connectivity as a Central Pillar in the Development of Creativity through Childhood Education. An Irish Life History Study.

This paper presents the narratives of five creative Irish Adults who contributed to the study by sharing their childhood education experiences. The five participants are all of different ages and occupations. All identify themselves as highly creative people and all worked with me over the course of this study to identify how this creativity developed within their engagement with the Irish childhood education system. All excelled with higher education and they share a high degree of success within their careers. Between them, they express their creativity across five key genres. These are: Science, Engineering, The Arts, Entrepreneurship and Social Entrepreneurship. Well-developed themes were analysed to identify interrelationships which formed a theoretical framework of core concepts that demonstrate what holds great importance in the lives of these participants for the development of their creativity during childhood education in Ireland. A clear theme of this study was that of connectivity. Connections and relationships matter greatly. The creative journey is joyful and clear where children experience a positive connection with their educator. Conversely, the creative journey is stymied by a lack of connection or by a negative connection. These stand in the way of creative growth, like a big boulder on the child's developmental path. This paper, showcases, through the stories of these five research participants, how creativity development is affected by the connection between the child and their educator.

Keywords: Life History Research, Creativity, Innovation, Entrepreneurship, Childhood, Education, Practitioners, Teachers, Connectivity, Connections, Relationships, Early Years, Primary, Narrative.

This paper presents the narratives of five creative Irish Adults who contributed to the study by sharing their childhood education experiences. The research was carried out using life history methodology. The participants were chosen against a selection criteria that allowed their experiences to be catalogued against the educational curricula and policies under which they completed their childhood education in Ireland over the past 50 years. A coding system of data analysis was applied allowing for thematic analysis on creativity development across the personal experiences of the participants. Well-developed themes were analysed to identify interrelationships which formed a theoretical framework of core concepts that demonstrate what holds great importance in the lives of these participants for the development of their creativity during childhood education in Ireland.

Life history research is a powerful medium of recording a person's experiences and thereby enriching social understanding of our collective systems (Germeten 2013). As a process, it sets the person and his or her story at the centre of the research and as such is a participant empowering methodology (Bergold & Thomas, 2014).

Collecting data on how systems and policies impact on the lives of the people they were created to serve is a very important pillar of educational research. The insight it affords into the human experience adds great depth to our understanding of the child's voice within educational research. Working with memory can add greater depth as a lifetime of reflection has allowed the adult to have evolved their understanding of that which mattered most to the child they were (Singer and Blagov 2004).

A sample size of five life histories was selected as it spans the Irish education system for the last fifty years. I sought participants who were demonstrably creative people.

This is the common factor among them as they are, by the historical nature of the exercise, inevitably of varying ages and educated under different policies and curricula. Bertaux first (1981) wrote that an aspect of *commonality* served to strengthen the body of evidence in life history research. The *commonality* within the participants of this research is that they perceive themselves as conforming to a definition of *creative people*. Commonality as a principle of Life History Research has held its relevance from Bertaux's time through to today's Life History Researchers (Bergold & Thomas, 2014).

In this study I focused on finding out about the relationship between experiences within the Irish childhood education system and the development of personal creativity. In answering this question, I carried out an extensive review of Irish Educational Policy and of Creativity Literature. I also undertook five life history studies of five people who have travelled through the Irish childhood education system and emerged the other side as individuals who feel that they are highly creative people.

Their stories have made me believe strongly in the importance of the exchanges that occur within classrooms and between educators and children. The experience of the children has a deep effect on them and on their development within learning arenas. This, I believe, is especially so in relation to the development of creativity.

The five participants of this study are all of different ages and occupations. All identify themselves as highly creative people and all worked with me over the course of this study to identify how this creativity developed within their engagement with the Irish childhood education system. In brief, they are;

Manus

Manus is 52 years old. He is educated to PhD level and is a leading research scientist in Health. He has engaged in a number of multi-million euro research projects, has a lengthy publication record and considers creativity to be the single most important skill for the work that he does and the life that he leads.

Melissa

Melissa is 42 years old, also educated to PhD level within the discipline of engineering. She is a leading engineering consultant on development projects and works on an international basis. She considers creativity to be the underpinning ingredient of innovation and something which she relies on heavily within her career.

Dorothy

Dorothy is 37 years old. She is a successful full time artist expressing her creativity across a number of genres. She is a recording artist who writes original compositions, sings and plays four musical instruments, all of which she taught herself to play. She is also a fine artist with a growing international reputation. Her paintings have been displayed in shows in leading galleries in Ireland, London, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle. Dorothy describes her creativity as the ability to solve internal problems through artistic expression.

Rachel

Rachel is 28 years old. She is a social entrepreneur having established a dynamic private school with a unique ethos and approach. She is also a highly creative crafter, engaging daily with her sewing machine to produce toys, quilts, clothes and any number of beautiful products. Rachel says being a creative person makes her happy.

Dominic

Dominic is 18 years old. Dominic is a young entrepreneur. At 15, he identified an import opening in the Irish Market and started an import business with a loan from

his aunt. He had paid her back double the loan within six months. At 18 Dominic heads an enterprise that imports a wide range of goods to the Irish and British Markets and employs 12 full time staff. He describes his creativity as an ability to see things differently.

Life history research is a powerful medium of recording a person's experiences and thereby enriching social understanding of our collective systems (Germeten 2013). As a process, it sets the person and his or her story at the centre of the research and as such is a participant empowering methodology. The participants are adults looking back through their memories to construct a version of reality that resonates with their current identity as creative people. Friedrich Nietzsche (1968) wrote that memory is used by people in the construction of their identity. He coined the phrase 'willing memory' linking desire to identity created through memory and described it as 'the origins of responsibility'. In this way, memory is used by people to help them make sense of who they are and how they live. As this study is based on linking educational memory to how the participant's see themselves as creative adults, this is an important insight.

Memory is a complex and emotive entity often accused of subjectivity and intangibility, yet it has the greatest influence on individuals in terms of their self-concept (Misztal 2003). As this study seeks to give voice to lived experience, respect for memory is key. The subjectivity of these memories does not weaken their relevance as the aim is to capture the interpretation of the child in the classroom with

the benefit of their adult understanding as processed through their identification of milestone memories within their educational journey towards creative empowerment (Singer and Blagov 2004).

Collecting data on how systems and policies impact on the lives of the people they were created to serve is a very important pillar of educational research. The insight it affords into the human experience adds great depth to our understanding of the child's voice within educational research. Working with memory can add greater depth as a lifetime of reflection has allowed the adult to have evolved their understanding of that which mattered most to the child they were (Singer and Blagov 2004).

A process of grouping connected codes within the data based memory set reduced hundreds of original codes to forty two lower level concepts. A process of analysing their connections and relationships led to the emergence of the higher level concepts. The relationships between the higher level concepts were also analysed and where a thematic link existed, a theme emerged. A clear theme of the study was that of connectivity. Connections and relationships matter greatly. The creative journey is joyful and clear where children experience a positive connection with their educator. Conversely, the creative journey is stymied by a lack of connection or by a negative connection. These stand in the way of creative growth, like a big boulder on the child's developmental path.

The relationship that a child has with his or her teacher has a profound impact on the child. A positive connection can lead to greater engagement with learning (Libbey 2004; Roorda et al 2011; Runco 2012, 2013;). It is also one of the most important factors in the generation of positive academic and social outcomes in education (Keddie and Churchill 2005). In fact, Jeffrey Cornelius-White (2007) found that positive teacher-student relationships were shown to be associated with optimal holistic learning in 119 studies between the years 1948 to 2004. Conversely, any negativity within this pivotal relationship becomes an obstacle to the child's creative journey (O'Connor 2014). While overcoming such obstacles can also yield rich learning opportunities, the learning potential within a positive relationship proved far greater for the participants of this study. When asked about the relationship they experienced with their childhood educators, they each shared stories of both negative and positive connections and examined how they felt these connections impacted on their creativity development. All had, on balance, a far greater level of positive experiences than negative, all felt *blessed* or *lucky* in their educational journeys. These are their stories.

Rachel spent her early years in the very free and exploratory care of her mother who supported her to learn outdoors in the wilds of her rural community. She remembers running through forests and rolling down hills, digging soil with her bare hands and following butterflies on their silent journeys. Starting school was difficult for Rachel and she felt stifled by the classroom environment. She recalls how her first teacher supported her needs.

She used to let me get the milk for the lunchtime. It was my favourite part of the day. Leaving the classroom and running to get the milk, I loved it. I knew even then that she knew how hard it was for me to be in the classroom all day and it was her way of giving me a bit of space – space that I really needed. It helped me to trust her on other things and I engaged more with the classroom stuff because I knew that if it was important for her then it was important for me because I knew she was on my side. I always felt that she thought that I was good so I felt I could be good and that I could do things well in her class. She listened to my ideas and I became very confident in having ideas. I think it was safe to be creative in her classroom. I knew that she knew me and that she knew what I needed. I was greatly comforted by that and felt very loyal to her. I still feel like that now, thankful to her for seeing the real me and working out how to help me.

What Rachel's teacher did was simple yet very meaningful for Rachel's learning journey. School could have proved a more difficult cultural shift for Rachel had her teacher not taken the time to notice her restlessness and create a valve for her to release some energy by leaving the classroom to get the milk. At this early age, Rachel understood that her teacher had seen her need and addressed it. The connection that this provided for Rachel allowed her to establish a good relationship with her own creative journey and with the school experience.

Manus had a very different early years' experience where he felt a lack of connection with his early year's educator. He explains it thus:

Unusually for my generation, I went to a child-minder because my mother was a widow and she worked during the day. None of my friends on the street went and I always wished that I could just stay with them but my mother was very big on me not being a burden to the neighbours so I had to go to Nuala's. Nuala was the local child-minder, she minded eight or ten kids in her house. She was ok I suppose. I know a few of the others she minded really liked her but me and her never connected so I didn't ever feel good about her.

When asked if he could recall why they had no connection, Manus took a moment to think and then told the following story;

I think I can pinpoint it. My father died when I was three, nearly four and we had no money at all so my mam took a job cleaning the local factory and it was decided that I would go to Nuala's. I think I was probably pretty put out by it and was probably thorny enough with her anyway but she didn't help matters either. She was all rules and bossiness and it was her way or the highway. I tried my best to get on with it and in fairness to her, she did do stuff with us,

we weren't just hanging around, but again it was all Nuala's way. We did painting but it had to be a house and she'd give out if she thought it didn't look like a house. She cut shapes out for us to learn them and I wanted to do the cutting but she wouldn't let me use the scissors. I often used a scissors at home and I told her that but she wouldn't believe me. I remember feeling sore in my stomach because she didn't believe me. I didn't even try with her after that. I just went through the motions. I kept my mouth shut and just did what she told me to do. I remember waking up in the mornings with cold feet and my breath making fog of the morning air and feeling like I had a brick in my stomach at the thought of having to get up and go spend the day with Nuala. It seems like an overreaction now but I guess I was a sensitive child, I suppose with my dad dying and all, I was going through a bad time anyway.

Where Rachel's teacher was mindful of the individuality of her students, Manus's child-minder was not. The result for these two children was that Rachel's connection with her educator was positive and freed her up to follow her learning journey and Manus's connection with his educator was negative and acted as a barrier to his learning journey. He was left unable to engage with his creativity as he felt disconnected from the whole learning experience. Thankfully for Manus, he only spent six months with Nuala and when he moved on to school, his connection with his junior infants teacher was a positive one. In telling this story he echoes much of what Rachel expressed in her story of positive connection.

I was so glad when school started because I knew I was leaving Nuala's' for good. I remember starting school full of hope and thank God that hope was rewarded and I didn't have another bad experience because from day one I loved my junior infant's teacher. I needed so badly for someone to see me and I really felt she did. She listened to me and was kind to me. It was such a relief that I'm afraid I lost my heart to her entirely and I would have done anything to please her. I used to pick flowers for her on the way to school. I wanted so much to please her that I learnt everything as quick as I could. She responded with praise and more kindness and it just went from there. I think looking back that that was the start of my love of learning. I really believe that because I felt that she could really see me, I wanted to be worth seeing. I wanted to be good and I wanted to be good at things. I was great at school from that class on. No one in my family went beyond primary school and I went all the way. I really believe that that was down to Mrs. _____. I'm getting a bit emotional just thinking about it. I'm convinced of that.

Clearly Manus's connection with his junior infant teacher was positive and influential in his learning. He needed it to be positive and so it was. This meeting of his needs was important for Manus and it helped him to connect with his learning.

The value he felt that his teacher placed on him helped him to value himself and to invest in his own learning to great effect.

Melissa shared stories of her most favourite and least favourite teachers and clearly illustrates what kind of connection a teacher can facilitate from both positive and negative perspectives.

Melissa's least favourite teacher;

I got a new teacher in senior infants and I thought she was ok and I was getting to know her and we were doing ok and getting along quite well in the early days. Then one day, not too long after she started with our class, I got into a bit of trouble. I was sitting beside my friend and she was all excited about her family getting an au-pair, I understood that it was exciting, I mean, I never heard of anyone getting an au pair before but I wasn't really getting a word in edgeways here because she was all chat about it. I actually remember opening my mouth a few times to ask what colour hair she had but I never got a chance. The next thing I was given out to for talking in class, I was so annoyed, especially because I had been trying to talk but not succeeding. Anyway my friend kept quiet then and we got on with our work sheet but I remember feeling annoyed and also feeling that it was unjust. Anyway I had calmed down by lunchtime and I decided to reach out to my teacher to try to get us back on a good footing so I offered her my mandarin

orange. She said 'is this your way of saying sorry'. Oh God, I can't tell you what it was like. It was like a bee sting or something. I couldn't believe it because I most certainly was not saying sorry, I was saying, I forgive you. I wanted to snatch that orange back but it was too late, she had it and she was smiling and she thought we were all good but I could never like her after that. Its sounds strange now as an adult telling that story, I was only 6 or 7, why couldn't she understand me, she went one worse she misunderstood me –twice!. We never recovered from that. I mean what did she want?

Melissa's favourite teacher;

That would be my fifth class teacher. He really made me feel special. He asked questions that were about what I thought rather than about an answer in a book. I knew he was genuinely interested in the real me, not just as someone to learn things off but as someone who could think. There was always space in his classroom for ideas and feelings and thoughts and we really did have big class chats about everything. You knew what you had to say was welcome and valued. I met him when my marriage broke down and he asked me about it and the tears streamed down my face. I hadn't cried at all up to that point but the flood gates just opened up that day. He didn't say anything but I knew that I wasn't being judged. It really struck me then that that was exactly what he

was like in the classroom. We could just be completely real and he was never phased by it, only interested and supportive. I think those qualities are both rare and wonderful in a teacher. I had him for the last two years of national school and the experience of that respect and freedom really shaped my belief in myself as a person with something to offer. I always follow my gut and believe in my own ideas and I think he taught me that just by being himself.

In this way all feelings in a school are present and never hidden (Malaguzzi 1993). The teacher having a bad day can spread their discontent into the realities of the children so easily through a lack of reflection on their offering that day. A goal of the school that wishes to support creativity is to create an ‘amiable school’. An amiable school is one where the children, staff and parents are happy (Malaguzzi 1993) This happiness, enabled by the culture of the school, is a central component of the learning environment as it frees all within the space to enjoy and learn unencumbered.

So, what is the relationship between the connection with the educator and the development of personal creativity? Creativity is a life-force that evolves throughout the human lifespan but as with most human capacity, its developmental grounding within childhood makes childhood learning environments concentrated experiential breeding grounds within which it can strengthen (Wood, 2009). Our experiences shape us on many levels and so it is with creativity. As educational experiences form such an extensive part of our childhood, our experiences within its structures are

pivotal for all human development. The fluidity of creativity and its diaphanous nature make it especially susceptible to the influence of these years (Wood, 2009).

The connections formed within childhood educational communities are of vital importance (Cornelius White 2007; Keddie & Churchill 2005; Libbey 2004). Our relationship with our educator and our peers form the baseline of our relationship with our own creative development (O'Connor 2014). In the style of Maslow's hierarchy of need (Maslow 1954), we can clearly see from the experiences of the participants of this study that any issue within the human connections stands like an obstacle on the road within a child's inner creative journey. Creativity is better served by positive relationships and a sense of connectivity provides a feeling of well-being that allows a child to be free, free in themselves to explore uninhibited their creative selves and engage in the development of their creativity unfettered.

Irish childhood education has changed over the past fifty years. Where young children from the 1960's to the 1980's enjoyed great level of freedom and space within their *out-of-school* life, they were educated under didactic and uninspiring primary curricula and conditions that were not so supportive of creativity development as later curricula (Coolahan 1981). However, the participants of this study all enjoyed lived experiences of educators who went beyond the policy and curricula framework and supported their developing creativity through the engagement of their own pedagogies of empowerment. There was no discernable difference in the experiences of participants based on age and policy framework, all experiences were centred in the individual circumstances of the child, their family, community, school and teacher. In this study, the educator emerged as the kingpin of childhood learning. They hold the power to facilitate and support creativity

development and many do so through their everyday choices, providing children with fertile conditions in which to experience their personal creativity and feel it deepen and grow.

It was clear within this study that the participant's memory of school was firmly rooted in their relationships and learning experiences. The greatest impact factor was pedagogy. All of the participants have many positive memories of school and have a sense of *being lucky* with their teachers. Even participants who shared experiences of very challenging and in one case, even violent, pedagogies, still felt that overall, their educational experiences in childhood were exceptionally positive, supportive and worthwhile. In many ways, the educational stories of the five participants of this study demonstrate the centrality of pedagogy over policy within classrooms and learning environments. Policy is obviously connected with teacher selection and training as well as the societal structures that form pedagogies outside of teacher training programmes. It is interesting to note, however, that within the experiences of the participants of this study, didactic policies and curriculums did not always translate into didactic pedagogies.

Relational Pedagogy has emerged from this study as a complex phenomenon. There was commonality across the participants in relation to several nuanced spheres. These spheres emerged from the data as the key themes of the study and together they elucidate what it was that nurtured and supported the developing creativity of the study's five participants during their childhood education. Connectivity emerged as a strong theme within creativity development for the participants. Connectivity in the classroom flows upwards to the teacher like a golden thread, outwards in all

directions to the child's peers and inwards in a spiral of connection to their personal creative journey and their learner identity as a creative person.

The golden thread between the teacher and each child allows the child to engage in their internal creative journey. When it is damaged or broken, it acts like a barrier to their creativity, like a boulder on the road of flow. Their creative energy is contaminated by the anxiety and disorientation that this disconnection can cause. When this happened in the journeys of this study's participant's, they spoke about *giving up, not trying, not feeling able*. The essence of their memories of this disconnection were centered within not feeling free to engage creatively and just trying *to get through the day* by keeping their *mouth shut*. The feeling was vividly described by Manus as akin to trying to be creative with *a brick in your stomach*. A sentiment that was echoed by the other participants.

Issues were also experienced whenever there were difficulties with the connections to peers. Difficulties in this area also caused a sense of disorientation that impacted negatively on the sense of feeling free to engage in the creative journey and experience *flow* within that journey. Dominic described this efficiently when he said that problems in the relationship were distracting. There was a greater sense of empowerment within situations where the disconnection was with a peer however. The sense of *giving up* or disengaging and *just getting through it* that dominated the dialogue on teacher connectivity was less central within the peer connectivity theme. Here the participants were less likely to remain passive in the situation and often engaged their creativity in the resolution or attempted resolution of the issues. This difference in the way of addressing a disconnection or a broken thread is perhaps related to the power dynamic in a classroom where the teacher holds more power

than a peer and is therefore a more daunting prospect for confrontation. However, regardless of the difference in approach between these two forms of interpersonal disconnection, their impact on the ability of the child to engage in a strong connection with their inner creative journey is clear. The strength of the motivation to engage tenaciously in the effort to explore the outer dimensions of the unknown can best be embraced by the child who is free to engage unencumbered by the *flow* interruptions that are inevitable in the presence of frayed or broken golden threads (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 2007). A creative process is most effectively engaged in within an environment where the child is happy and unburdened emotionally and socially with disconnections to those around them (Cornelius White 2007; Keddie & Churchill 2005; Libbey 2004).

If the study's emergent theme of connectivity was used as the basis of a pedagogical approach, a creativity supporting educator would emerge; This educator would understand the principle of the golden threads in their classroom. They would be mindful and aware of their connection to each child and make efforts in the early days of the school year to establish a healthy and strong connection through the use of warmth and empathy, encouragement and respect. They would focus their awareness and appreciation for each child as an individual and seek to see their unique talents within a commitment and belief that every child has them and it is part of an educator's job to recognise and support them. They would also know that when the thread is damaged, following an incident where they were required to show displeasure or disappointment, that they need to follow up with the child to re-establish the strong connection and mend the golden thread. A creativity nurturing

pedagogy calls for an understanding of the bridge that exists for child between his or her outward connections and their inner connection to their creative journey.

This holistic and involved pedagogical approach requires a great deal of skill on the part of the teacher (O'Connor, 2014, Steiner 2000; Sawyer 2004; Wegerif 2004). As such it has repercussions for teacher training programmes as well as in-service and professional development measures for primary school teachers. However the holistic and integrated empowerment model of learning is indisputably a contributor of creative development (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 2007; Craft 2012; Cremin, Burnard & Craft 2006, 2007). As the basis of the skill needed for this pedagogical approach is first and foremost based on the attitude of the teacher and their commitment to creativity as well as an openness to student empowerment, it also has implications for student teacher selection procedures.

Every educator will work differently on this. The results will also naturally be varied. The ability to reflect on their practice and how to improve it will be a key factor in the levels of success experienced by them in relation to the development of a creativity supporting pedagogy. As such educators need to be highly reflective in their practice. Reflective practice is an essential skill for supporting creativity and one that should be centralised within teacher and practitioner education and training programmes. Self-reflection, reflective skills techniques and practices, commitment to reflective practice and practising reflective practice are all key elements of educating educators that will be equipped to support creativity within their classrooms.

It is clear from the experiences of the participants of this study, that pedagogy is a central component within a creativity nurturing education. All of the participants experienced creative pedagogies despite great variety within the policies under which they were educated. This emphasises how powerful pedagogy is. It would be wrong however, to discount the power of policy on that basis. Their power is not mutually exclusive. A teacher's pedagogy may have emerged as critical for the participants of this study and while it is clear that pedagogy remains vital with varied policial environments, policy will always, also be important. Policy is influential within the formation of pedagogy; it guides teacher recruitment selection, training and development and as such it is influential within the development of pedagogy and therefore influential with the development of creativity. As such, it is positive to note that the policy trend within Ireland is towards a more creativity supporting relational pedagogy within childhood education. The introduction of Aistear (NCCA 2009) as a curricular framework for the early years is a strong step in the right direction. As a curriculum it is underpinned by a strong emphasis on connectivity. It supports unified and experiential learning as well as allowing for spontaneity, possibility and discovery. As the most recent educational policy in Ireland and the only new curriculum to be developed in over a decade, it heralds a new direction towards a creativity supporting educational framework for Irish children. This study's findings suggest that the success of policy changes will be most effective where they intersect with pedagogy and the formation of creativity supporting pedagogies in pre-service and practicing teachers. The professional development role of programmes such as Aistear are therefore very important.

Because of the value of all levels of creative development for both individuals and society, it is imperative that our educational system meet the creativity challenge. In Ireland there is no comprehensive creativity policy within any level of our education system beyond the rudimentary curriculum inclusive of arts based programmes. It is, however, possible that elements of the policy and curriculum framework are unconsciously working in a positive way to unconsciously develop creativity. Certainly, within new early years policy and curriculum, creativity developing approach is present in ethos if not in name within the Aistear Curriculum (NCCA 2009). Aistear, of course, also spans the infant classes in schools and therefore provides a framework that supports creativity development, while not naming it. The fact that no creativity curricular policy exists does not therefore deny its presence either historically or within today's system. In fact, the presence of creativity developing pedagogy and practice is evident within the educational experiences of the five people who contributed life histories to this thesis.

The issue however, is that it is largely the result of chance encounters with creativity enabling educators practising relational pedagogy rather than the result of strategic policy. It highlights the centrality of pedagogy, educator training and practice issues. It also makes one wonder, if chance plays such an evident role, what happened to the creativity of the children who weren't so lucky? At the conclusion of this study, this remains a pressing question for me. A clear focus on the formational nature of relational pedagogy within teacher training programmes and the evolving nature of this pedagogy within professional development programmes is necessary. To support and inform such policy development, I believe a parallel study looking at the educational experiences of people for whom creativity remains elusive may well have shown that within the same educational system, experiences and outcomes can

be dramatically different, thereby delivering greater insights into the power of relational pedagogy.

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