



The Ontario (Canada) Ministry of Education's A Solid Foundation Document: An Extended Commentary

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This commentary contributes to the critical inter-cultural conversations on how public institutions and school cultures negotiate the different cultural and epistemic differences of Aboriginal students. One might argue that it is a collective responsibility of the dominant society to engage in critical reflection and discourse in relation to one's own location in the context of historically marginalized Aboriginal peoples. Further, that such reflection is particularly necessary in the context of the historically silenced Aboriginal students in publicly-funded schools. In Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) has made a public commitment to Aboriginal education in an effort to mediate the experiences of Aboriginal students in public schools. This commentary points to both the merits and implications of such provincial education policies in the broader view of learning as being meaningful and relational for all students and school communities. The commentary suggests that there may be cause for concern that the discourse in the OME's (2013) A Solid Foundation document, particularly when viewed through the lens of Social Reproduction Theory, potentially pushes Aboriginal students further to the margins of public school spaces.

Keywords: Education policy; aboriginal education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This commentary is intended to both complement and extend the critique of a previous analysis on the same provincial policy [1]. The original insights are distinguished in italics so that the commentary of the current analysis is readily identifiable. It should be noted that another objective of this commentary is to contribute to the critical inter-cultural conversations on how public institutions and school cultures negotiate the different cultural and epistemic differences of Aboriginal students.

One might argue that it is a collective responsibility of the dominant society to engage in critical reflection and discourse in relation to one's own location in the context of historically marginalized Aboriginal peoples. Further, that such reflection is particularly necessary in the context of the historically silenced Aboriginal students in publicly-funded schools. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) has made a public commitment to Aboriginal education in an effort to mediate the experiences of Aboriginal students in public school classrooms, hallways and communities. This extended commentary points to both the merits and implications of such provincial education policies in the broader view of learning as being meaningful and relational for all students and school communities.

The OME has self-declared Aboriginal education to be a top priority. Various seminal policy documents, including the OME/Aboriginal Education Office's (2007) Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework [2] have identified the OME's commitment to be adaptive to the needs and gaps of Aboriginal learners in provincial publicly funded schools. More recently, the OME's (2013) A Solid Foundation [3]—a progress report on the Framework—identifies various coordinated efforts on the part of the government, specific school boards, and schools to building conducive and respectful learning spaces for Aboriginal students in Ontario schools. The Foundation document presents the measured achievements of the various policy initiatives stemming from 2007, and declares that the government continues to embrace and consult with Aboriginal communities in efforts to address their “two primary objectives by the year 2016—to improve achievement among First Nation, Métis and Inuit students and to close the achievement gap between Aboriginal students and all students” [4].

The Foundation document states explicitly the OME's intent to honour its commitment to publicly report on the implementation of the Framework that in and of itself entailed a significant fiscal investment. The Foundation document also makes reference to some of the historical and contemporary struggles experienced by Aboriginal students in publicly funded classrooms. These struggles, according to the literature, include the inherent conflicts between the beliefs and socio-cultural traditions of Aboriginal learners and those that are celebrated in Eurocentric educational systems [5,6].

One cannot argue with the OME's intent to be accountable in its investments and initiatives related to the more than 80,000 Aboriginal students in provincial public schools; nor can one help but applaud the monetary and focused investments made to further the educational experiences of Aboriginal children. Yet, such a series of policy initiatives, including the Foundation document, deserves careful attention since they seem to be driven within the constructs of historic change. Specifically, examining the policy through the lens of Bourdieu's [7] social reproduction theory forces consideration of (a) how the Foundation document employs an intentional discourse to strategically position the government as accountable to the general public, and (b) how the language throughout the document frames the government as a diligent and industrious provider of opportunity for Aboriginal students.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Aboriginal peoples benefitted from a sophisticated and developed series of beliefs and traditions that informed their education [8]. Long before the colonial project on Turtle Island, Aboriginal peoples valued unique socio-linguistic perspectives based on holistic models of teaching and learning. Aboriginal traditions of teaching and learning are rooted in contemporary practices that engage children in mind, body, and spirit and as a result contribute to each student's unique development [9]. Although pre-contact Aboriginal educational practices were not formally institutionalized, the respective practices of teaching and learning were meant to instill lifelong values and knowledge in children [10]. But colonization severely interrupted the cycles of intergenerational learning for the diverse groups of Aboriginal peoples who inhabited this land.

Residential school practices forced Aboriginal children to leave their families, homes, and communities and to be assimilated into Eurocentric models of education, even at the cost of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse [11,12]. The ominous legacies of residential schools in Ontario (and elsewhere for that matter) were characteristic of oppressive measures meant to assimilate Aboriginal children into Eurocentric values and belief systems [13,14]. In these government sanctioned schools, church authorities sought to annihilate Aboriginal children's customs and worldviews [15]. These practices, considered oppressive in their very nature, ignored Aboriginal students' knowledge traditions and in so doing shunned the children's distinct learning needs [16,17]. The consequences of this appalling legacy still linger.

Research suggests that in current public school classrooms Aboriginal learners are stifled by more western-based pedagogies that typically place more value on memorization, note-taking, and summative tests [18]. For Tuhiwai-Smith [19] contemporary western educational practices are symbolic tools that serve to further the ends of colonization. Various researchers cite historical inaccuracies of superior models of educative theories imposed upon Aboriginal people by the colonizers themselves [20]. Oral traditions complement Aboriginal learners' growth and knowledge acquisition [21]. In this vein, Aboriginal students appreciate and acquire learning in community-centered contexts that often prioritize community well-being over self-interest. According to Kanu [22], Aboriginal children benefit by learner-directed instruction that includes storytelling, learning by doing, and pedagogical approaches that typify open communication [23,24,25].

2.1 Policy Context

In 2007 the OME called upon boards of education, school administrators, and teachers across the province to create inclusive learning spaces in publicly funded kindergarten to Grade 12 schools across the province. The OME's (2007) policy Framework cited the necessity of collecting "reliable and valid data" [26] to measure Aboriginal student learning, including the ability to chart Aboriginal students' progress on large-scale standardized tests. One of the Framework's objectives is to close the achievement gap between Aboriginal and all other students in provincially funded schools by raising public school educators' awareness of

Aboriginal student learning preferences and by creating more culturally respectful classrooms.

The OME's (2013) Solid Foundation progress report on the implementation of the 2007 policy Framework reiterates the ministry's commitment to improving Aboriginal education and closing the achievement gap. The Foundation document's Background section states that Aboriginal education "remains a key priority for the ministry" [27]. The government provides a succinct purpose for the report that includes various ministry initiatives that have sought to share progress and continue engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders.

The report suggests that OME objectives are aligned to the principles of the 2007 Framework that include excellence and accountability, equity and respect for diversity, inclusiveness, cooperation and shared responsibility, and respect for constitutional and treaty rights. The Foundation report's preliminary pages list the OME's goals and objectives from 2006 to 2012, and include the 10 performance measures from the 2007 policy Framework. In a separate chapter, the Foundation report explains some of the OME's objectives in using the data, which includes assessing Aboriginal student progress, closing the achievement gap, addressing the needs of Aboriginal learners, and assisting school boards to enhance programs tailored specifically for Aboriginal students. The document also includes a chapter that focuses on Aboriginal students' self-identification and achievement data in light of key performance measures. It explains how the various sources of evidence will assist the OME in gauging the level of support offered to Aboriginal students and educators. The Foundation document concludes with a chapter describing how the next phase of policy implementation will continue the advances made in the first 6 years.

2.2 Theoretical Context

The model of social reproduction theory (SRT) may be useful in interrogating the nature of the discourse in the Foundation policy document as it relates to the language of accountability and to the ministry as a provider of opportunity for Aboriginal students and communities. SRT is a sociological approach that investigates the social advantages of privileged groups from generation to generation [28]. According to Bourdieu (1984), SRT can contribute to a better understanding of how social status and related concepts of privilege are often transferable among dominant

groups over prolonged periods of time. In this light, SRT can contribute towards tracing the contours of how certain groups are favoured in specific socio-cultural contexts.

One can deduce how it might be pivotal towards understanding and cultivating an appreciation of how power is enacted in these contexts and, moreover, how certain groups benefit while others are disadvantaged in certain social settings, including schools [29]. *Amongst the components of SRT, and relevant to this analysis, are cultural and social capital [30]. Cultural capital includes what may be considered as the officially sanctioned knowledge and skills that are viewed favourably in some cultural contexts—which includes education. Social capital is the relationships and obligations that are privileged and preferred in various social settings, which again encompasses schools. These models posit that some groups of people are favoured in certain conditions and experiences. Implied in these theories is the notion of how power permeates cultural and social capital for preferred groups. Power, according to these theories, generally favours historically dominant people who equate themselves with the knowledge and skills that are reflective of upward social mobility [31]. According to Bourdieu and others, those who are held in favour of such capital tend to be perceived as having greater autonomy and public approval.*

Relatedly, the human capital models represent an economic-based theory that perceives the acquisition of sanctioned knowledge, skills, and ability as being directly related to financial gain [32]. The human capital perspective considers the decision-making process as linear and posits that privileged groups have sufficient information to make prudent decisions, even on behalf of others. Human capital theory also considers the acquisition of such officially sanctioned knowledge and skills as serving the general economy in terms of productivity and market yields.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Undeniably the OME's focus on Aboriginal education is very pertinent and figures importantly upon the educational landscape across Ontario school boards, schools, classrooms, and communities. The respective policies recognize some of the cultural differences and sensitivities related to Aboriginal

learners and communities and articulate a number of relatively common goals for provincial boards of education and schools to further this recognition.

However, an examination of the OME's (2013) Foundation document from a specific theoretical lens creates an awareness of the hegemonic overtones from which the policy is framed. Stated differently, a conceptual analysis using SRT contributes to a critical reflection of how the OME document uses discourse to strategically position the government as accountable to the general public and how the language of the policy situates the governing body as a diligent and industrious provider of opportunity for Aboriginal learners and their communities.

To begin, the language of accountability is generously distributed throughout the OME's (2013) Foundation document, whose introductory section states that the OME is "committed" to improving Aboriginal education since it "remains a key priority" for the same ministry that "continues" its focus on Aboriginal learners [33]. In turn, the purpose of the report is to honour the "commitment to publicly report on [the] progress" of the OME's (2007) Framework. The Foundation document identifies the pivotal role of the Minister's Advisory Council on First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education as a working forum "for continued engagement" with "key" Aboriginal stakeholders (p. 4). In this same section the report refers to the ministry's focus on "accountability...measurement and reporting". The introductory section of the report certainly establishes the underlying tone of the document. The discourse suggests that Aboriginal education is not only a top priority for the OME but is also a continual focus of time, energy, and investment. The language of priority is embedded in the discursive frames of the ministry's commitment to improving education for Aboriginal students and to closing the achievement gap between them and non-Aboriginal students across Ontario. In an effort to be responsive to all taxpayers, the report stresses the sustained engagement of the government to quantify the progress of Aboriginal student achievement (and hence its encouragement of school boards to implement Aboriginal student self-identification policies) by way of large-scale external assessments.

From an SRT perspective the Foundation document implies that notions of "progress" are best informed by quantifiable and measurable scores on externally imposed standardized tests.

Problematic to this notion is the fact that such large-scale assessments are generally not aligned to Aboriginal student learning needs and preferences [34]. It is interesting that the word "progress" is cited 32 times in the Foundation document, thus contributing to a policy tone and discourse that favours the cultural capital of Eurocentric and western-based values. These provincial standardized tests are based entirely on written instead of oral communication and prohibit any interaction and collaboration between students (and between students and teachers for that matter). In this way the officially sanctioned concepts of knowledge, skills, and progress (as Bourdieu and others describe) are values that privilege those students who belong to the dominant group while serving to marginalize and disadvantage those who do not.

The report gives the strong impression of a ministry of education that is both accountable and committed to measuring Aboriginal student progress and encourages public school boards to implement policies so that more Aboriginal students can self-identify. *There are significant implications related to cultural capital in the OME's (2007) self-declarative statement that "Ontario recognizes the need for accurate and reliable sources of data about Aboriginal students attending provincially funded elementary and secondary schools." From an SRT point of view, one cannot help but question whose definition of "accurate" is being considered and for whose ends the definition of "reliable" serves. According to the Foundation report, such data "is necessary" [35] to address, measure, and report on progress. Such a statement is presented as an absolute truth implying that in the absence of test scores the OME cannot reliably report to the tax-paying public on Aboriginal student engagement and achievement in public schools. In this manner the OME can "identify and close the achievement gap between Aboriginal students and all students".*

One wonders, too, about the imbalance of power inherent in this objective since Aboriginal students have historically scored amongst the lowest demographic both provincially and nationally on standardized external assessments, and in this statement are positioned and distinguished from "all" of the other students in provincially funded schools. It seems to embed the enactment of power at the hands of the dominant group by presenting Aboriginal students as the Other in an us-versus-them paradigm.

The OME's (2013) Foundation report reiterates the ministry's commitment to fund school board policies for Aboriginal students to voluntarily and confidentially self-identify. However, while self-identification may be confidential, the results of Aboriginal student achievement on province-wide assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics are presented separately from "all" other English and French speaking students across the province. The Foundation report, in the series of summary statements, concludes that "there is a persistent gap in achievement levels between Aboriginal students and all students" [36] and lists the respective gaps in test scores according to the grades 3, 6, and 9 results, as well as the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) outcomes. The document notes that the results of the OSSLT are indicative of a wide range in the percentage of Aboriginal students who were successful and distinguish Inuit students as being "4 points above English-language students." Yet, this and other results deserve a closer look since the sample includes a mere 21 Inuit students versus 137,002 English students. The Foundation document cites a number of other measures and initiatives as evidence of the ministry's accomplishments since the implementation of the 2007 Framework and employs the word "success" 23 times throughout the report. The language of progress, commitment, and success contributes to the strong impression of a government that is accountable to Aboriginal learners and their communities.

In continuing with a SRT analysis of the Foundation document, it is interesting to note how the language frames the OME as a conscientious supporter and provider of Aboriginal learner needs to accentuate the social capital of the dominant group. Various iterations of the word "support" are cited 75 times throughout the document. There is no mistaking the impression of the governing body that supports school board capacity-building, teachers and administrator's professional development, and the "mainten[ance] of effective partnerships with Aboriginal education partners". In its introductory pages, the Foundation document states that the OME's progress has "align[ed]" with the 2007 Framework and offers "highlights of the Framework implementation ... priorities for continued Framework implementation and next steps for advancing the critical goals" of the government's policies. The positive tone that frames the language in the Foundation document complements the

undercurrent of commitment and care and positions the OME as a body that successfully provides for Aboriginal students and communities. According to a statement in the principles section of the document, “the Ministry of Education provides support and resources adapted to the specific needs of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students.” In fact, it is stated that the “Government of Ontario creates and supports [schools that] foster First Nation, Métis, and Inuit languages and cultures”.

In terms of social capital, the OME self-positions itself as acting genuinely and diligently on its obligation to a historically marginalized Aboriginal student demographic. The document includes a host of statements that profess the OME’s partnership with Aboriginal organizations to ensure that the government policies, outcomes, and initiatives are perceived as having authentic representation from Aboriginal communities. The OME has provided opportunities for Aboriginal socio-cultural and linguistic traditions to emerge in provincial schools and continues to provide the respectful spaces across school boards to “promote the development” of Aboriginal student identity. The ministry has acted on its obligation to “ready the system” in order to fully implement the goals of the 2007 Framework. Such discursive positioning begs the question of what exactly the system was “readying” itself for. Had Aboriginal students (and perhaps other marginalized learners) not attended provincial schools prior to 2007? And what “system” exactly is being alluded to? Is education not about people and relationships? There is an implicit discourse of preparing or priming an organization to accommodate a supposed infiltration of the Other—Aboriginal students who are different from all the rest. One might question in what condition was “the system” before it was “readied.” The sense is that the governing body, in a position of control and power, are providing Aboriginal students (as the Other) with the knowledge and skills reflective of Eurocentric privilege that have been pre-determined to be indicative of upward social mobility.

There is an inkling in this discursive framework that the dominant and privileged bodies of education have prepared themselves for this (ironically) foreign cohort of students and peoples. According to OME’s (2013) Foundation document, the ministry has “provided funding” for school boards to implement various initiatives (p. 9) so that “many teachers” have participated in “a wide range” of professional development focused

on Aboriginal students and histories (note that variations of the word “provide” are cited 20 times in the document). The Foundation document indicates that “conditions for future success [for Aboriginal students] have been established through progressive collaboration and specific supports”. The impression of a fiscally responsible government is maintained by the language of “targeted funding” for specific projects, including those that aim to close the achievement gap. There is the feeling that the government has been financially prudent in providing for Aboriginal learners, even insofar as stating its intention to “equip Aboriginal families and communities with the information they need to understand how the data from the self-identification process will be used”. In this discursive framework the OME is self-positioned as provider and enabler of Aboriginal peoples who themselves are positioned as dependent upon the government for explanation and full understanding. The OME is favourably positioned in its obligation to the marginalized Aboriginal peoples and benefits from the social capital of both its position and how the discourse situates Aboriginal peoples.

The OME’s (2013) Foundation document includes declarations of the ministry’s progress of various principles related to Aboriginal education, as well as a number of measures of productivity not the least of which are data from the large-scale provincial assessments. *From an SRT viewpoint, an examination of the document reveals a discursive framework of accountability that positions the OME as an enabler that in turn implicates upon the enactment of power in the contexts of cultural and social capital. The theory contends that power generally rests with historically dominant groups (postcolonial educators and worldviews) who align themselves with the knowledge and skills that complement notions of upward social mobility as they are understood in western contexts. In this exercise of power, there emerges the social advantage of privileged groups such as mainstream taxpayers who can feel good about the ministry’s admirable commitment to provide for a reliant cohort of learners.*

The discourse in the Foundation document is suggestive of a paternalistic point of view; it self-positions the OME as the attentive caregiver and charitable provider to a more dependent people, while assuring the tax-paying public of its competency in supporting the Other—in this case Aboriginal students. The document states that

among its foci the OME has “establish[ed] and maintain[ed] effective partnerships” with Aboriginal stakeholders. This suggests a promising and sustaining endeavor on behalf of the OME insofar as accounting for the fact that Aboriginal stakeholders have a voice and role in reviving Aboriginal student engagement in publicly funded classrooms. The perception is that the government has meaningfully consulted with key Aboriginal partners and relied on the latter’s discretion and opinion in formulating the initiatives and strategies in the document. The discourse is highly suggestive of a governing body that espouses a participatory space shared by political and community interests. In a sense, these references therefore serve to both articulate and justify the OME’s decision-making, while making clear to the tax-paying public that Aboriginal voices have authenticated the advancement and cause of Aboriginal student learning. In another sense, it absolves (to some degree) the OME from assuming full responsibility—at least from the perspective of public perception—for any regression in the respective initiatives since key Aboriginal community leaders ostensibly have had a direct and consequential role in these developments for their own people.

Moreover, the Foundation document’s paternalistic tone is strengthened by the OME’s description of its pivotal role in “better equip[ing teachers] to embed Aboriginal perspectives into the classroom” while simultaneously “encouraging First Nation, Métis and Inuit students and families to self-identify” (p. 13) in order to better assess the progress of self-identified students. The discourse connotes the projection of a privileged and powerful governmental voice on a reliant Aboriginal peoples. It embodies a government that is responsible for Aboriginal learners and one that is willing to transfer agency and capital to the needy. As the patriarchal figure, the OME is positioned to provide for and protect the underserved and underachieving Aboriginal students enrolled in provincial schools. As the symbolic parent and caregiver, the discourse points to the OME as a governing body that is committed to mediating the educational experiences of Aboriginal learners by producing and enacting policy that provides ample opportunities for Aboriginal students to achieve. From the public eye one may speculate based on the language and action in the document that the OME is very responsive to the immediate concerns of Aboriginal students. Entrenched in

these perceptions is a moral orientation of sorts that positions the government as having a vested interest in advancing the significant interests of Aboriginal students, all in the name of student achievement. Nonetheless, the paternalistic discursive tone throughout the document is essentially disassociated from the language of standardization as the principle means of measuring Aboriginal student achievement. Very persuasively, the centre of attention rests in the government’s paternal care of Aboriginal students while the emphasis on their achievement is veiled in epistemic practices that resist Aboriginal students’ learning preferences.

Such a discourse cultivates a sense that the government embraces and encourages opportunities to remedy the dissonance experienced by many Aboriginal children in public school classrooms [37,38]. Yet, among the remedies to the historic achievement gaps is a reliance on standardized and externally imposed tests that fail to mirror Aboriginal student epistemologies and worldviews [39]. Hence, while the perception may exist that the paternal government cares to improve Aboriginal student achievement by “infusing” professional development and money into school boards and by “readying the system” for Aboriginal learners, its means may be subject to scrutiny for favouring a western ideology over the same Aboriginal values and traditions it allegedly seeks to advance.

Note as well how the Foundation document includes an analysis of data from the 2011/2012 test scores only after it has reiterated its goals and principles. The introductory statement in this section indicates “that many First Nation, Métis and Inuit students are excelling academically. The subsequent paragraph, however, proceeds to list a number of areas in which achievement gaps still exist between Aboriginal and all other Ontario students. Despite the gaps, the OME self-declares its commitment to “continue to refine strategies and develop new initiatives to close the academic achievement gaps”. The central question, though, is at what cost? The focus on western-based pedagogies, standardized curriculum, and assessment and evaluation indicators that value individual accomplishment over community-gain would seem to further distance Aboriginal epistemologies, values, and beliefs in public school classrooms. By continuing to ready a system and fund initiatives to raise Aboriginal student test scores, the inevitable risk exists that

Aboriginal students' traditional learning practices and preferred learning skills (that resist codification and measurement from western perspectives) will be further discredited. Permeating the Foundation document's discursive framework is the perception that the government, as a paternal agency, is in the position to best define the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are instrumental to human capital for their potential to advance personal and societal financial gain, and that the strongest association to student performance is individual achievement. As a dominant political voice, the OME therefore is self-positioned as an informed agency and one that is most capable of making the best decisions for all students, including Aboriginal learners. Innate to this reasoning is that any advances to the human capital of Aboriginal peoples implicates positively on all other peoples. The tax-paying public, in this regard, benefits from less investment in social welfare services and presumably approves of the governing body's values and initiatives—even at the expense of the Other.

4. CONCLUSION

There is cause for concern that the discourse in the OME's (2013) Foundation document, particularly when viewed through the lens of SRT, potentially pushes Aboriginal students further to the margins of public school spaces. Correlational types of evidence that link student achievement with test scores can be nebulous at best. For Aboriginal students these measures of achievement and advancement can have grave implications. Documents like the OME's (2007) Framework fuel the perception of the OME as an accountable and judicious provider of funding and opportunities that enable Aboriginal students to succeed. The language is one of commitment for the traditionally marginalized learners, as well as one of promise that achievement gaps can close given the generous support of the government and its practice of reaching out to Aboriginal stakeholders.

But the reality is that such quantifiable measures of achievement and progress are not culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students, regardless of how these interventions are redefined and re-envisioned in public documents. The residual and lingering concern, therefore, is the manner in which policy discourse leverages public opinion. Less critical public perspectives might be easily resigned to opposing further financial support if Aboriginal student test scores do not close the

gap by 2016. The general public may question the nature of Aboriginal students' and communities' commitment if they do not capitalize on the goodwill and benevolence of the government (and in turn of tax-payers' money). Given the discursive nature of the Foundation document, a very destructive relationship potentially may (re)emerge in a context where Aboriginal peoples—as a collective Other—are not deserving of the government's self-proclaimed significant, innovative, and altruistic prospects. The government's focus on all students' data may trigger simultaneous and critical attention on Aboriginal student deficit. In socio-political landscapes characteristic of extreme self-interest, there is the danger that such policy discourse will further contribute to the creation of differences, and that the narratives the general public will choose to appropriate will be exclusionary and polarized.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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