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Teachers Are Making a Difference: Understanding the Influence of Favorite Teachers

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Abstract

Using the theoretical framework of occupational socialization, the purpose of this study was to examine preservice physical education teachers' beliefs and values of teachers and teaching through analysis and interpretation of favorite teacher narratives. One hundred and eighty six preservice physical education teachers' narratives were collected and analyzed using open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The qualities and characteristics identified through analysis were organized into seven inclusive sub-categories of favorite teacher characteristics and abilities and were articulated into three central themes, described as Pay it Forward, Caring in Teaching, and Motivated to Learn. The findings suggest that understanding favorite teacher influences on preservice teachers provides insights into maximizing the impact of physical education teacher education programs.

Keywords

Caring, Physical Education, Preservice Teachers, Teacher Socialization, Qualitative Research

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Teachers Are Making a Difference: Understanding the Influence of Favorite Teachers

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Using the theoretical framework of occupational socialization, the purpose of this study was to examine preservice physical education teachers' beliefs and values of teachers and teaching through analysis and interpretation of favorite teacher narratives. One hundred and eighty six preservice physical education teachers' narratives were collected and analyzed using open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The qualities and characteristics identified through analysis were organized into seven inclusive sub-categories of favorite teacher characteristics and abilities and were articulated into three central themes, described as Pay it Forward, Caring in Teaching, and Motivated to Learn. The findings suggest that understanding favorite teacher influences on preservice teachers provides insights into maximizing the impact of physical education teacher education programs. Key Words: Caring, Physical Education, Preservice Teachers, Teacher Socialization, Qualitative Research.

Those, whose careers lay firmly intertwined within the corridors of learning and the pathways of formal education, know that teaching is a rewarding and tenuous career of highs and lows, filled with known objectives which are imagined, yet rarely witnessed. Teachers of physical education know this all too well, because the results of one's efforts are built in the present, but are not seen until well into the learner's future. For example, the objectives of physical education professionals have included instilling in students a perspective of physical activity and health that students will develop into a lifelong pursuit of healthy, active lives. Yet, the outcomes of these stated objectives and philosophies often are not seen until many years later.

Through dedication, passion, caring, knowledge, intelligence, willingness, creativity, and support, teachers inspire students to not only pursue careers and dreams that they helped instill but also to lead healthy, active lifestyles. This is particularly true for individuals wanting to reenter the corridors of education as teachers. It should not be surprising to discover that prospective teachers have a well-developed set of personal beliefs about learning and teaching prior to entering a preservice teacher education program (Calderhead, 1991a, 1991b; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Lortie's (1975) notion of "apprenticeship of observation" (p. 61) has constantly been used to categorize research examining epistemological beliefs, educational philosophies, and perspectives of preservice physical education teachers. As explained by Schempp and Graber (1992), a preservice teacher's apprenticeship of observation "has a distinct and traceable influence on an individual's future decisions, practices, and ideologies as a teacher" (p. 333). How we teach can be traced to beliefs and understandings formed about teaching and learning long before we enter formal teacher education.

Many theoretical frameworks and stances have been used to examine a teacher's apprenticeship of observation. However, one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for physical education research has been Lawson's (1986) theory of occupational socialization, adapted from the work of Van Maanen and Schein (1979). Lawson (1986) defined occupational socialization as "all kinds of socialization that initially influence persons to enter the field of physical education and later are responsible for their perceptions and actions as teacher educators and teachers" (p. 107). Lawson also identified three types of socialization likely to shape physical education teachers' perspectives and practices: acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization (Lawson, 1983a, 1983b) and includes both direct and indirect training experiences. Socialization into sport, socialization via sport (Lawson, 1986), and positive experiences with sport (Dewar & Lawson, 1984; Dodds, Placek, Doolittle, Pinkha, Ratcliffe, & Portman, 1992; Sage, 1989) have all been viewed as contributing factors of preservice teachers when considering physical education as a career.

Researchers have also identified a number of socializing factors which shape the views and values of prospective physical education teachers, including experiences in physical education (Curtner-Smith, 2001; Evans & Williams, 1989; Schempp, 1989), sport (Dewar & Lawson, 1984; Templin, 1979), the type and level of sport and physical activity engaged in (Curtner-Smith, 1999; Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000), and experiences and interactions with physical education teachers, coaches, and others working in physical activity settings (Mawer, 1996). Preservice teachers have definite beliefs and values about teaching and physical education, as well as strong perceptual images of themselves as teachers as they enter a teacher education program. These values and beliefs not only influence how preservice teachers think and act during teaching, but also how they interpret teaching (Bullough, Knowles, & Crowe, 1992; Butt & Raymond, 1987; Pajares 1992) and implement new curricula and instructional approaches (Curtner-Smith, Hastie, & Kinchin, 2008; Li & Cruz, 2008; McMahon & MacPhail, 2007; Stan & Curtner-Smith, 2009).

Research findings have suggested that formal teacher education programs have limited immediate and long-term impact upon the values and beliefs of preservice teachers. In some cases, preservice teachers' belief systems remain largely unchanged through the teacher education process as personal experiences overshadow teacher education pedagogy (Doyle, 1997; Kagan, 1992; Matanin & Collier, 2003; Webster, 2004; Weinstein, 1990). In other cases, lessons learned and changes made through the teacher education program are at risk of being quickly (potentially unknowingly) dismissed on entering the field as the now in-service teachers divert back to socialized teaching practices and beliefs experienced as students during their apprenticeship of observation (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Freese, 2006; Goldstein, 2002). In other words, once the preservice teacher enters and is faced with the challenges of the "real life" teaching, this individual is likely to assume practices employed by his/her own teachers during his/her own experiences as a student, rather than employing the evidence-based practices promoted through his/her teacher education program. Goldstein (2002) and Goldstein and Lake (2000) noted an increased potential for preservice teachers to become discouraged upon entering field experiences if they held on to the same unexplored, unchallenged, and unchanged ideals and beliefs about themselves, teachers, and teaching they held when entering a teacher education program. Consequently, it is necessary for

teacher education programs to explicitly address the beliefs and values possessed by preservice teachers entering the teacher education program, and integrate these belief systems with developmentally appropriate teaching practices. Therefore, the relationships between teachers and students lend themselves to occupational socialization, the process by which a person acquires the values, attitudes, and practices of a particular occupational field—in this case teaching physical education (Lawson, 1986).

To date, research supports the notion that coaches and teachers are influential role models for preservice teachers (Mawer, 1996; Stroot & Williamson, 1993; Templin, Woodford, & Mulling, 1982) and that interactions with significant people lead to an understanding of what it means to be a physical education teacher (Curtner-Smith, 2001). However, few have examined the influences of these individuals during the occupational socialization process and the influences these have on preservice teachers' career development. It is therefore important to examine not only the sources of occupation socialization that influence preservice teachers but also the specific qualities and traits that preservice teachers identify within those influential persons. Therefore the purpose of this study was to examine preservice physical education teachers' beliefs and values of teachers and teaching through analysis and interpretation of favorite teacher narratives. More specifically, the following three research questions were used to guide the study:

- Who are preservice teachers' favorite teachers?
- Is there a prototypical favorite teacher for preservice physical education teachers?
- What favorite teacher qualities and characteristics are identified by preservice teachers?

Role of the Researchers

As is customary with qualitative research, it is important to contextualize the study, through a brief discussion of the authors/researchers responsible for designing, collecting, analyzing, and representing the data. We are both teachers in the marginalized *specials* of education, Mark in Physical Education and Karen in Music. Since earning a PhD in Physical Education, Mark has worked at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) in the Physical Education Teacher Education Program and has been the instructor of the introduction to physical education class since arriving at UNC. Karen, at the time of the research, was pursuing a PhD in educational psychology, with a personal emphasis in music education. Both Mark and Karen have strong philosophical beliefs that education is more than the measurable knowledge that makes up the scope and sequence of a curriculum. Both of us believe that teaching and learning are as much about the process as it is the product. Through discussions and reflections geared around the research project, we have both discovered that through our own occupational socialization into a profession our favorite teachers were instrumental in our professional development. For example, Mark's favorite teacher is a Welsh secondary physical education teacher and rugby player/coach/referee, and while Karen's favorite teacher taught secondary English he never actually taught her in the classroom. Instead, she knew him as her dedicated cross-country and track coach, who supported her every endeavor,

including her participation in music (even when it conflicted with cross-country meets) and academic achievements.

As investigators, Mark and Karen play different roles and bring different experiences and expertise to the table. For five years, the favorite teacher assignment was an integral component of the Introduction to Physical Education Class taught by Mark. The assignment and the corresponding newsletter were conceived in 2004 as a way to have students explore tacitly held beliefs about physical education and teaching that they acquired through their prior education experiences or what Lawson (1983a, 1983b; 1986) refers to as their occupational socialization. As the number of narratives grew, the underlying trends within and through the narratives emerged, but remained informal. However, it was not until an interested student sparked the process that the narratives became data and a formal research process started.

In the spring of 2009, I (Mark) was afforded an opportunity to teach the introduction to qualitative research class at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC). The purpose of the class was to introduce and inspire doctoral students from all walks of life and academic programs to understand, appreciate, and enjoy the facets and nuances of qualitative research. One instructional unit of the class was to have the students practice and explore different ways to preliminarily analyze data generated from a variety of data sources, including interviews, observations, narratives, documents, artifacts, photographs, and pictures. One of the sources I provided the class was three favorite teacher newsletters, constructed using the preservice physical stories about their favorite teachers. The response to the assignment sparked excellent conversations and discussions with the class regarding the process of thematic analysis and the themes and categories being extrapolated through analysis. After the class, Karen and I continued a conversation about the influence of favorite teachers; we discussed and hypothesized possible differences and similarities between the favorite teacher narratives of preservice physical education teacher and preservice music teachers. It was during these conversations that I asked if she would be interested in designing a study that focused on analyzing and interpreting the narratives. Over the next several months we formulated the purpose statement, examined appropriate theories and frames, submitted and received Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Northern Colorado, and designed, developed, and conducted data analysis.

Methods

As is customary with qualitative research, it is important to articulate not only the methodology and methods that were employed, but also provide a justification as to why we selected and used them (Crotty, 1998). According to Crotty, researchers need to examine assumptions which underpin the reality of their work and in doing so the theoretical perspective which guides methodological aspects of the study. Additionally, through understanding our reality, Crotty posits that we must also understand our epistemology since it directly informs our theoretical perspectives. Therefore, in scaffolding our study we will describe our research framework through Crotty's proposed four elements of social research: epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods.

Our researchers' epistemological perspective for the study was constructivism because, simply put, we believe knowledge is constructed through our personal experiences with life and engagement with learning activities and not simply discovered. Therefore a constructivist perspective best framed this study, since it focuses on "the meaning making of the individual mind" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). In other words, a narrative describing a favorite teacher provided an opportunity for a preservice teacher to not only share his/her story but also to understand and construct new meaning as a result of reflecting upon it and sharing it (Bruner, 1990; Richardson, 2000). Therefore, narratives and stories are a product of preservice teachers' constructed experience, since engagement with teachers during their own education aids in the construction of knowledge and the interpretation of good teaching. Additionally, epistemologically, we also agree with Freeman (1999) who commented that constructivism sees narratives as making explicit the meaning that is there in experience. Researchers have continued to apply constructivism as an epistemological perspective in qualitative research to examine students' perspectives (Rovegno & Dolly, 2006) and professional development program for in-service teachers (Armour & Yelling, 2004; Richardson, 1997).

Interpretivism best describes the theoretical perspective brought into the research process by the researchers, since an interpretivist approach "looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). The stated purpose of this study clearly follows an interpretivist perspective since we sought to examine preservice physical education teachers' beliefs and values of teaching from prior experiences. Subsequently we wanted to derive meaning about their teaching perspectives based on their narratives of their favorite teacher. Additionally, when one examines the theory of socialization as outlined by Lawson (1986), clear connections can also be made with interpretivism, since socialization refers to prior constructs of knowledge and experiences which influences individuals' perceptions and actions as they enter the teaching profession.

Researchers examining the impact of values and beliefs acquired during occupational socialization have explored students' pre-existing beliefs about teaching and learning (Curtner-Smith, 1999, 2001; Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000; Dewar & Lawson, 1984; Evans & Williams, 1989; Schempp, 1989; Templin, 1979). The challenge is to utilize appropriate instructional and research strategies that allow students to be reflexive and reflective about their conscious and subconscious experiences. One such method of increasing popularity is the personal narrative, including written stories and autobiographies, interviews, discourse, peer community activities, and similar activities targeting the telling of personal experiences (e.g., Dome et al., 2005; Estola, 2003; Freese, 2006; Lee & Ravizza, 2008). As described by Dome et al. (2005), not only can narrative reflection help students identify personal preexisting beliefs about teachers and teaching, they can also aid students in beginning to explore their "professional possibilities" (p. 78). Similarly, the favorite teacher story assignment utilized in this study served as an assessment of the values, experiences, and philosophical perspectives that preservice teachers held regarding learning, teaching, and teachers. Therefore the methodology that best framed this study was narrative research (Creswell, 2007). It is first important to recognize that "narrative has emerged as one important dimension of constructivist research" (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 296) and that epistemologically, narratives have emerged as both a way of telling about life and a method or meaning of

knowing (Bruner, 1990; Richardson, 2000). Additionally, Sparks and Smith (2008), when citing multiple sources noted that a “narratively orientated dimension of constructionist research has developed into a rich terrain with vistas of understanding and vocabularies for theorizing lives, doing empirical work, teaching, and shaping practical engagement with the world” (p. 296). Therefore, based on the researchers’ epistemology perspective, theoretical frameworks and employed methodology, the study fits Sparkes and Smith’s (2008) definition as a narrative constructionist inquiry. In order to further elaborate on Crotty’s (1988) fourth element of social research, methods, three sections will be used to describe specific components: participants and context, data collection, and data analysis.

Participants and Context

The participants were 186 undergraduate preservice physical education teachers enrolled in an *Introduction to Physical Education as a Profession* course (SES 266) at UNC. The course is the first methods course in a five-class sequence that culminates with student teaching. The catalogue copy reads that the class will: “Focus on historical and current issues and philosophical perspectives of physical education, sport, and fitness. Implications for today’s physical education programs will be identified and discussed” (University of Northern Colorado, 2010). Through the class students are asked to reflect and examine their beliefs and values related to teaching, physical education, and K-12 students that they have developed prior to entering the teacher education program.

Data Collection

Over a 4 ½ year period (9 semesters), Mark collected 186 favorite teacher stories as an assignment in a physical education teacher education program course. The students were provided with the following written prompts and instructions: *Have you stopped recently to ponder where you might be today if it weren’t for an exceptional teacher/coach who decided you were special and worthy? The answer to the question can bring to mind good memories about exceptional individuals who played a major role shaping our lives. Your recollections about your favorite teachers/coaches can help contribute to your understanding and exploration of a possible career in physical education and/or coaching.*

For this assignment you will compose a short (250-300) word description of your all-time favorite teacher/coach. For a teacher/coach there is probably no greater tribute than to be remembered kindly by a former student. The following could be included in your story:

- 1) The teacher's name and the school/program where he/she taught*
- 2) The subject or sport that he/she taught*
- 3) What characteristics make them such a good teacher/coach?*
- 4) Describe a specific event that stands out in your mind that happened with that teacher.*
- 5) How did your favorite teacher/coach treat you?*

A completion grade of five points was awarded to those students who completed the assignment within the specified timeframe. Students completed the favorite teacher/coach assignment during the first week of the semester as an assessment of the values, experiences, and philosophical perspectives that students held regarding teaching and teachers. Having preservice teachers reflect and write about a favorite teacher allows them to examine the influence that a specific teacher has had both personally and professionally, and also provides a starting point for examining their own perceptions of teaching physical education. The assignment was always completed early in the semester to avoid instructional influences of the class and afford the opportunity to examine the concept of occupational socialization within the class using the narratives as an example. Additionally, Mark compiled the stories in a newsletter made public to the students at the end of each semester. The purpose of the newsletter was threefold. Firstly, the students were encouraged to share the newsletter with their favorite teachers. Secondly, the newsletter was used as content for the final exam from which students were asked to draw on classroom discussions and activities to examine the role of teachers in education. Finally, the newsletter served as a vehicle through which students could reflect on what teaching is, what makes a good teacher, and the responsibilities that come with teaching.

Data Analysis

Open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was utilized in analyzing the 186 favorite teacher narratives. Open and axial coding provides researchers with a structure from which to analyze collected data. It is important to note that the “actual procedures are not as important as the task of identifying the essence of the meaning of data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 160). Therefore, our analysis is in line with our epistemology and theoretical frameworks, since we construct meaning and provided a theoretically grounded interpretation into the essence of the data through the following analysis process.

We first independently read the same 20 narratives and preliminarily identified common descriptors across stories, such as caring, emotion, inspire, motivate, passion, and respect. Once we completed our independent analysis, we met to compare notes. As we discussed and described our interpretations, we combined codes and listed the following common categories: *caring; respect/students as people; self-sacrifice; tough love; mentor/life skills/counseling/parent/friend; inspired to teach specific content/subject; inspired to teach to pay-it-forward; passion (subject); passion (life)*. As the discussions continued these initial categories were categorized into seven sub-categories:

Categories and Subcategories, Take 1

Caring is Teaching

- Respect/Students as People
- Tough Love
- Mentor: Life skills/counseling/parent/friend

Inspired to Teach

- Pay it forward

- Content/Subject

A Passion...

- Subject
- Life

However, this preliminary organization of data left us with questions of representation. For example, did the coded themes and categories appropriately represent the student narratives of their favorite teacher? Did the coding simplify the complexity of the student narratives? Additionally, clarification of subcategories caused the broader categories to no longer be mutually exclusive. For example, a teacher's perceived passion may have been what inspired the student to teach, meaning that it actually bridged two main categories. Therefore, upon further review we examined the context behind the coding as well as the code itself. The second revision included the following changes (in bold):

Categories and Subcategories, Take 2

Caring is Teaching

- Respect/Students as People
- **“Self-sacrifice”**
- Tough Love
- Mentor: Life skills/counseling/parent/friend

Inspired to Teach (Inspired to Learn?)

- Pay it forward
- Content/Subject
 - **The subject, itself, is regarded as interesting/fun/creative (but does this translate to learning the skills to teach the subject?)**

A Passion...

- **The subject, itself, is regarded as interesting/fun/creative**
- **Teaching equals a desire to continue Learning**
- Life

Since “qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meaning of human experience” (Saldana, 2009), we independently analyzed all 186 narratives using the revised categories and subcategories and proceeded to analyze the data, using what Saldana calls “second cycle coding” (p. 10). During second cycle coding “there may be some rearrangement and classification of coded data into different even new categories” (Saldana, p. 10). Once we completed our second independent analysis we again met to collaboratively discuss and further refine and rearrange categories and potentially even identify additional categories and subcategories. After further analysis, reflection and refinement we arrived at the following:

Categories and Subcategories, Take 3

Pay-It-Forward: preservice teachers expressed desire to provide future students with the same positive experiences provided to them by their favorite teachers.

Caring in Teaching

- Dedication
- Tough Love
- Serving as a “life coach” or mentor

Motivated to Learn

- Make the subject interesting and fun
- Help each student connect meaningfully with concept(s)
- Instill intrinsic motivation and values toward education.

Ultimately, these three overarching categories (*Pay it Forward*, *Caring in Teaching*, and *Motivated to Learn*) were preserved, and three further subcategories were identified both for *Caring in Teaching* and *Motivated to Learn*.

Initially, the research plan was just to analyze the narratives qualitatively, using open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), to generate categories and subcategories. However, as we read through the narratives coding and categorizing information did not capture the essence and voice of the preservice teachers as they introduced us to their favorite teacher. We then decided to also include examples of agreed upon exemplary stories prior to discussing our analysis in order to represent the voices and experiences of the students, and also to allow readers to interpret these voices from their own perspectives in addition to our analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Providing the narratives of the preservice teachers as well as the analyzed and therefore constructed interpretation of the narratives was an important determination in successfully and appropriately representing the data and constructed interpretations to the reader within the socialization context. It is also important to remember that the “images of teacher and teaching that students construct are their interpretations of the significance of those memories, reconstructed and reinterpreted through the lens of their own personal histories, their personalities, and culturally inscribed desires” (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000, p. 37).

When an independent researcher conducts qualitative analysis there is always a potential for bias to occur. By having two researchers independently and collaboratively analyze the narratives, investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002) was established and the potential for bias reduced. Additionally, trustworthiness was enhanced through identification and acknowledgement of researcher bias (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Reliability was addressed through inter-reader agreement of the emerging themes and an audit trail, including records of the specific assignment guidelines, as well as data collection and analysis procedures (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Finally, the timing of data collection minimized the impact of the class content on students’ selection and justification of teachers.

Results and Findings: Sharing and Adding Meaning

The results and findings of this research are presented in two distinct yet complementary sections. In the first section, *The Selected Nine*, nine favorite teacher narratives will be randomly presented. These particular narratives were purposefully selected by the two researchers as robust illustrations of the three categories described above. In presenting the selected stories, our hopes for the readers are that first, the experiences shared might resonate with you. Second, that you will examine the influences of your own favorite teachers on your current practices. Third, that you revisit your motivations for entering your profession. And finally, that the voices of the preservice teachers continue to resonate and enhance the presentation of the thematic analysis. Following the nine narratives, we will discuss the three common themes and the eight inclusive sub-categories of favorite teacher characteristics and abilities that were generated through narrative analysis.

The Selected Nine

Before introducing you to nine of the favorite teachers of preservice physical education teachers it is important to note that these nine narratives have been purposefully selected to represent the variety, depth, and range of influences that the favorite teachers have had on the 186 preservice teachers, as well as the characteristics and abilities valued by the preservice teachers. It must also be noted that the order of narratives is not significant. Additionally, it is important to note that the names of the teachers have been changed as well as any other factual information that could identify the teacher.

Mr. Caresmore (high school physical education teacher and volleyball coach): *Everyone thought very highly of him, probably because of his fun, easy-going attitude. He encouraged a play hard attitude and his classes were centered on having fun. I remember he would sometimes yell at students in a fun way, just to get their attention and intensify the class. Everyone always knew he was not serious because he always had a slight grin. If he was mad, he would let you know. These times were few and far between, but he was the type of guy that you would know the difference between when he was mad or when he was just joking. . . I would go to him for advice in school and personal problems. He always made as much time for me as I needed - even if he was busy. He treated me like I was important. Around the middle of grade 12, I was starting to prepare for college and he helped me apply to 7 or 8 different schools and send letters to the head baseball coaches. Mr. Carsmore guided me in this process, letting me know the different things that I needed to do. He proofread my letters and wrote letters of reference. In the end Mr. Carsmore invested around 35 hours of his personal time. This extra effort was something I will never forget. He cared about his students. I want to be a teacher because I want to affect others lives like he affected mine. I want to be the same type of teacher he is and I want my students to remember me the same way that I remember him.*

Dick (little league coach): *Dick had a great passion for coaching and it showed with the way he coached. ... Through football and baseball he was able to teach me and my*

teammates the value of hard work, teamwork, perseverance, respect, leadership and many other lessons that have become the staple for the way I live my life. For me as for many other children... he became our father figure. My brother and I were raised by my mother and grandmother. The only constant male role model in our life and at home was our alcoholic Uncle. Dick's son is my best friend and has been for the past ten years... Dick became the father I never had. He has always treated me like I was his own son and he is an important part in my success as a student, athlete, coach and most important a person. I can only hope that when my coaching and teaching career is over that I will have touched half as many lives as he has.

Mr. Klien (high school civics teacher): *“Not many of you will do well in my class. Most of you will get Cs, some will fail, and a few will get A’s.” He spoke in a deep tone, swinging his golf club for dramatic effect, which he often did when he was trying to make a point. While the words may not be exactly what he said on that first day of class, the sentiment certainly is. It was in that moment that I decided that I would be one of the few to take on his challenge and get an A. ... Mr. Klien wanted each and every student in his classes to meet success. He often talked about the importance of education and the reality that what we do today will affect every single tomorrow. He told us about the benefits of a college education and the necessity of an above-average high school performance to get there. He taught me how to study, and I often use his methods to this day—almost ten years later. He taught us the importance of having dreams and setting goals, and the practical steps to make them become reality. Mr. Klien is one teacher that I admire and hope to exemplify. He is not my favorite teacher because of the things he taught me out of the civics book. In fact, I remember only three specific lessons. But what I do remember is that he taught me how to believe in myself and in my dreams. He is my favorite teacher because he expected more out of me than anyone had ever before. Mr. Klien taught me how to expect more out of myself, and I believe that any success I have had to this point in my life or will have in the future is due, at least in part, to Mr. Klien, the man who taught me that I can achieve any dream I have if I am willing to work for it. Thanks, Mr. Klien.*

Mrs. Staley (middle school teacher): *There are not enough words to describe the talented Mrs. Staley. She has been such a huge inspiration in my life. I am attending University and my major is physical education. She is the one that has inspired me to become a teacher. If I can touch someone's life as much as she has done to mine, then I know I can make a difference. As I finish writing this letter, I am breaking down into tears because of how proud I am of her and how much of a difference she has made in my life. There are some people that come into our lives, and then quickly go. Others stay awhile, leave footprints on our hearts and we never stay the same. Mrs. Staley has left many footprints on my heart. She is the best teacher ever, Mrs. Staley.*

Mr. Nager (middle school teacher): *Mr. Nager inspired me to be a better student and more of an open-minded thinker. He also taught me about trust, loyalty, and how to appreciate the finer things in life (such as the Chicago Cubs). Imagine growing up on the South Side of Chicago with a family of White Sox fans and rebelling to be the only Cubs fan in the family. Mr. Nager supported the idea of being different and independent. He*

was always energetic and excited to present new information. He was patient, kind, and understanding. He paid attention to my idea's, thought's, and feelings and made me feel important. More than anything he inspired me to become me. ... Well Mr. Nager, if there is one thing that I have learned; it is that life isn't all smiles. You gave each and every one of us your heart and soul, even if you didn't think you could get through that day, you did. You taught us about life, you shared your sadness and happiness with us. I needed you and your smiles whether they were happy or sad. I learned the meaning of life from you. You made my days better and I will always be thankful for you.

Mr. Faceman (high school teacher and coach): *He always treated everyone with respect and was easy to talk to. If a student needed help with something, he would drop his grading and help that student until they fully understood the material. To Mr. Faceman, learning was more than just words on a page or things to be tested on. To him, it was a true journey with a brilliant light at the end of the tunnel just waiting to be found. It is teachers like him that breed more teachers and inspire students to strive for more.*

Coach Cox (middle school physical education teacher and coach): *Coach Cox will always be an inspiration in how to do it right. Whether you're a teacher, coach, or just a friend, he has had a huge impact on me in becoming a coach and PE teacher. I have learned that as a teacher you have the chance to make a remarkable difference in a young person's life. Just the subtle "how are you doing today," can make such an impact. As well as the innocent hug of affection which can make a student feel wanted and appreciated. Just knowing that when you go to school you can count on someone to talk to, adds encouragement, respect, and motivation to your day which helps build confidence as a person and a student. Giving a student the feeling of importance and self worth is priceless. Coach did that for me in a critical part of my life and frankly, I want to return the favor to someone else. . . .Thanks Coach. I am now going to become a teacher. I am going to model myself a great deal in how you taught me, using encouragement, respect, sympathy, organization, and affection. By being a regular person with feelings can mean passing on the opportunities to others like Coach Cox did for me. I thank you Coach Cox, it meant a lot.*

Steve Smith (high school physical education teacher and coach): *"Truly Inspirational." When I look back at the time I spent in the classroom and on numerous playing fields I can't help but focus all of my attention on an incredible man by the name of Steve Smith. He was not only a very hard-working and inspiring man in the physical education classroom, but he was also an unbelievable and exceptional basketball coach. He taught me the true meaning of dedication, sacrifice, hard work, and satisfaction. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't give special thanks to Mr. Smith for what he has instilled in me not only as a student and an athlete, but more importantly as a person. He spent his free time helping us to excel both in the classroom and on the basketball court. He showed concern for our well-being, our academic standing, and he expressed a special concern for our commitment to bettering ourselves. He taught me the true meaning of self-discipline and to never accept anything less than the best. He is a class act and is looked at by his colleagues and students as a role model and an inspiration. He is a prime example of what it means to devote your heart and mind to your students. I am so*

fortunate to have encountered such an amazing individual and to have had the chance to feel the impact of his dedication and investment. I have high standards to live up to, but I am so thankful to have something to shoot for—thank you.

Mr. Sota (middle school physical education teacher). *We all remember our middle school years. Years filled with uncertainty and change. New friends, changes in our bodies, new surroundings—everything was changing and you could count on very little remaining constant. For me, however, I knew I could always count on Mr. Sota and his P.E. class. He was a good teacher, but more importantly to me, he was a great person and role model. Marc Sota was not what I consider a typical teacher. He did not rely on a sharp sense of humor and was not extremely outgoing. He did not place a strong emphasis on becoming good friends with his students. Don't get me wrong, he loved his job and working with children, but he was much more of a quieter, reserved individual. Because of this, most students never really got to know the man that I look up to and who inspired me to become a physical educator. Marc Sota was a person who strongly believed in certain principles and was sure to always follow his principles. A few that come to mind are respect and honesty. Respect was something that Marc never asked for, yet received. He was never quick to shower students with respect either. Respect was considered something which had to be earned.... The other moral code was honesty. Marc detested lying from his students. I got the impression that there was not much lower than lying. That applied not only lying to others, but lying to yourself. Mr. Sota taught and coached successfully for years, but out of nowhere, he developed an aggressive form of cancer. He admirably fought the cancer with all his might, but his fight eventually ran out.... Although I was crushed by the loss of a great man that I had looked up to, I took comfort in the fact that he was able to instill in me some of the principles with which he lived by. We lost a great educator, and an even better person, but although Marc Sota has left this world, he will never leave my memory.*

After reaching the end of this initial journey, grounded in raw narratives, we can only hope that we achieved our first intent and inspired those of you who teach to continue teaching with the same passion, belief, and even naiveté which the narratives from future teachers portray. Although the narratives in their original form are informative and impacting, further analysis also highlights the collective impact of these favorite teachers and provides insights into the presage variables and constructs formed through students' occupational socialization. This, in turn, offers insights into individuals' development and transition from students to teachers.

What Did We Learn?

Analysis of the 186 stories revealed qualities and characteristics of favorite teachers that positively impacted each student. Of the 186 favorite teachers, 99 were in a sport-based field (i.e., a physical education teacher, an athletic coach, or a combination of the two) and 87 were teaching in non-sport-based academic fields, suggesting that content area did not necessarily influence students' decisions to specifically enter the field of physical education. Twenty-seven preservice teachers also reflected that favorite teachers were involved in their lives beyond the field or classroom walls. While

preservice teachers wrote about teachers from all grade levels (elementary through college), a majority of both male and female preservice teachers focused on high-school teachers. Another interesting finding was that, while female preservice teachers were equally likely to write about male or female teachers, male preservice teachers were more likely to write about male teachers.

After systematic analysis of the data, three central categories were determined through analysis: *Pay it Forward*, *Caring in Teaching*, and *Motivated to Learn*. The category of Caring in Teaching was further analyzed and stratified into 3 sub-categories, *Caring Behaviors*, *Dedication toward Students and Work*, and *Serving as a Mentor*. Additionally, *Make the subject interesting and fun*, *Help each student connect meaningfully with concepts*, and *Instill intrinsic motivation and values toward education* were identified as three subcategories of Motivated to Learn.

Pay it forward. Preservice teachers expressed a desire to provide their future students with the same positive experiences provided to them by their own favorite teachers, described here as a desire to *pay it forward*. For example, one preservice teacher wrote, “[My teacher] is a major factor in why I want to become a teacher, so I can have a positive effect in others’ lives as she has on mine.” Similarly, another reflected, “Looking back now I can see that [my teacher] is the real reason I have wanted to become a PE teacher and give that love and care back to my students,” while still another, “hope[s] one day to have an impact on someone else’s life the way [my teacher] did on mine”. This finding supports similar findings in prior studies. For instance, a participant in Bontempo and Digman’s (1985) study remarked, “I have always wanted to be a teacher and nothing can change my mind. When I was in school my teachers gave me many opportunities to improve myself. I want to give my students the same opportunities” (p. 10). While it remains unclear the extent to which such sentiments will continue to reinforce preservice teachers’ decisions to persist in the field, this desire to give back served as a strong source of initial inspiration for many students.

Caring in teaching. Favorite teachers, as depicted through the narratives, were consistently identified as caring individuals. While definitions and descriptions of caring varied among individual stories, the recurring emergence of the theme as a whole highlights that preservice teachers’ perceptions of caring teachers is an influential variable in their development as students and teachers. Consistent with prior research findings, conceptions of caring identified in the current study fell into three main categories: (a) caring behaviors, (b) dedication toward students and work, and (c) serving as a mentor.

Caring behaviors. Preservice teachers described many teacher behaviors that were equated with caring, ranging from kindness and concern to respect toward students to tough love. Kindness and concern, comparable to Roger’s (1994) description of caring as “gentle smiles and warm hugs” (p. 33) and Alder’s (2002) “care as talk and time” (p. 254), refers to accounts of teachers expressing interest in students’ lives, offering gentle encouragement and support, and generally making students feel valuable. For example, one preservice teacher related, “[my teacher] was so good at making sure every student knew how much they mattered in her life that I felt like I was almost another one of her

sons.” Another emphasized, “I never had anyone in my life besides my family, make me feel so loved and supported.” Others explained, “[my teacher] always took an interest in her students lives,” “[my coach] would treat me as if I was the only thing in this world that matter[ed],” and “Her kindness towards others still touches my heart, always radiated the room and made every student feel special.” While these definitions of caring are potentially overly-simplistic (Goldstein & Lake, 2000), they clearly highlight one way of enacting caring.

Respect was another caring behavior, conceived largely in terms of teachers treating students as adults or, as one preservice teacher expressed, “as equals and not low scum students.” One observed that, “[This teacher] was the first teacher to ever treat me as an equal...he would talk to me as if I were the same age as him. This made him very approachable for everyone.” Another connected respect with feeling valued as well as equal, relating, “She also gave all of her students respect so we never felt inferior or unimportant.” Respect was often mutual, with preservice teachers attributing their respect for the teacher directly stemming from the teacher’s respect for the student(s), as in the case of the student who observed, “I also had a lot of respect for [my professor] in that he always treated me with the utmost respect.”

The final caring behaviors fall into the category of tough love. Tough love described those teachers who challenged students to live up to high expectations, while providing tools and support along the way. One preservice teacher recognized, for instance, that “[My teacher] always put me in positions in the classroom and on the athletic field that he knew would challenge me, but at the same time, in positions he knew that...I would not fail.” Preservice teachers appreciated that their teachers pushed not for personal gain—not in order to achieve high scores on standardized tests or win the championship to improve their own name—but to help students reach their own greatest potential. Several of the teacher candidates reflected on their need to be pushed and acknowledged teachers who stepped up and demanded excellence, such as the student who admitted, “She was the first teacher who treated me like an adult by making me accountable for my actions.” Preservice teachers often interpreted this as an implication that the teacher believed in their abilities. For example, one preservice teacher remarked, “The reason I think that [my coach] was such a great coach is because he pushed me, and believed in my talents when others wouldn’t.” Many of the students went on to internalize this behavior and began pushing themselves, like those who stated, “[My teacher] made me more aware of who I was as a person, how far I could push myself,” and “[My teacher’s] creative, unique, unforgettable style have pushed me to become a better student and now making me strive to be a teacher that will give as much to my students as she gave to me.” Tough love became another way teachers expressed caring toward students.

Dedication toward students and work. Preservice teachers also recognized teachers’ caring through their dedication toward students and teaching. Frequently, this dedication was described in their stories as time and energy spent above and beyond basic instruction—teachers who arrived early and stayed late to spend extra time on exercises and explanations until students felt comfortable with the concepts at hand, such as the teacher who “would drop his grading and help that student until they fully understood the material”, or the teacher who “[Sometimes] came to school at 6:30 in the morning or

stayed until 7:00 at night just to help me type a big paper”. In addition to this dedication of time, preservice teachers valued teachers expending extra energy to help them, such as assisting in preparing college and scholarship applications. In the same story as quoted above, the student discussed entering the room one morning “to find [my teacher] typing at the computer. I asked her what she was doing, and she replied, “I’m typing you a letter of application for a college scholarship.” Another appreciated that “when my football coach neglected to help me get into college, [this teacher] offered to help me through the process.”

Serving as a mentor. Finally, preservice teachers frequently placed their favorite teachers in mentoring roles, including acting as parental figures. Favorite teachers essentially offered students skills and knowledge applicable to life outside of the classroom, helping to shape the students into their current selves. This is exemplified by the preservice teacher who reflected that “[my coach] made me realize that you can never give up; all you can do is work harder. I can honestly say that I try to live by that philosophy now and I owe it all to [Coach]. She is not only a basketball coach but also a true coach of life.” Another preservice teacher thanked her teacher: “You taught us about life, you shared your sadness and happiness with us...I learned the meaning of life from you...and I will always be thankful for you.” There are several more instances in which preservice teachers discuss their favorite teachers acting as mentors, guides, and parents, discussing how this not only helped them to feel valuable and cared for, but also provided many skills and influenced personal values and motivations which students carried with them through future endeavors, as addressed below.

Motivated to learn. Favorite teachers utilized teaching skills and approaches that motivated students to want to learn and succeed. Preservice teachers highlighted favorite teacher’s abilities to make the subject interesting and fun for each student, help each student connect meaningfully with concepts, and instill intrinsic motivation and values toward education.

Make the subject interesting and fun. Many of the preservice teachers were impressed by their teachers’ abilities in the classroom. In particular, preservice teachers were struck by teachers able to make the subject interesting and fun for each student. Often described as passion or enthusiasm on behalf of the teacher toward both the subject and teaching in general, preservice teachers found this passion contagious and became excited about the subject and also about the prospect of teaching. There was the teacher who made math interesting “through little bursts of energy and his willingness to act a little ‘crazy’ for the education of his students.” The preservice teacher elaborated:

To keep us awake he loved to make noise which ranged from hitting the ruler on the desk and jumping onto of his desk bringing laughter to the classroom.... [He] liked to write on the ceiling and windows and loved to use colored chalk when writing on the chalkboard. Never have I been taught by someone who loved their job this much and never in my schooling had I ever seen someone who didn’t care about how they were seen as long as they got the message to their students.

Another preservice teacher described a similar, albeit less ornate, experience with a teacher who had “such an obvious passion for teaching and learning...[he] always...made his class engaging and exciting, even for those who loathed science.” Yet another student found her teacher’s fervor to be “infectious”.

Help each student connect meaningfully with concepts. Preservice teachers also appreciated teachers who they felt recognized students as individuals and, as such, helped each student connect to the material in meaningful ways. Through getting to know students personal interests and experiences, and sometimes employing nontraditional techniques (as in the case of the math teacher above), teachers not only demonstrated respect for students, but were able to hold their attention and help students relate to concepts. A physics teacher “with a burning passion for physics” exemplified this for one student when he “made a point to find new ways to teach us... [he] began to use different analogies.... It was so different and funny, that everyone one of us laughed and almost aced the test because we could remember it so vividly.” Another teacher “made his students want to be in class [by] how well he related the topics he spoke about to topics that we would understand, or to things that we enjoyed, like sports.” Again, this seemed to leave an impression on students not so much for the content they learned and retained, but for the level of skill demonstrated, the time and effort expended, and the implication that the teacher respected and cared for each student. In order to help students form meaningful connections, a teacher must care and must make the effort. In the words of a student, “If it wasn’t for [my teacher] and his ability to relate and understand me, it is very possible that I would not be where I am today. I thank [him] for taking the time to allow me to open up to him and realize who I am and what I’m about.”

Instill intrinsic motivation and values toward education. Finally, these favorite teachers, as illustrated through preservice teacher narratives, instilled in their students intrinsic motivation in educational settings, as well as a continuing value of education. This became clear through the number of narratives in which preservice teachers attributed their decision to attend college and pursue further self-education. Further, a number of preservice teachers were motivated not only to pursue self-education, but to educate others, as well. In this, favorite teachers came responsible for inspiring future teachers. In many cases, preservice teachers directly connected valuing education and motivation to teach with other factors described above, such as respect and passion. For example, “[My teacher’s] passion for her job and respect...is single-handedly the greatest reason why I am where I am, doing what I am doing today.” Similarly, another preservice teacher reflected, “[My teacher] always treated with me respect...She never gave up on me, and because of her, I’m here in college, still going strong.”

Discussion: What Does It Mean?

Before summarizing and constructing a discussion based on the findings of the study, it is imperative that we first underline some of the studies limitations. Reissman (1993) highlighted the strength of narrative research when noting, “narrative analysis allows for the study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been

constructed by active subjects” (p. 70). However, indirectly she also identified a limitation in that collected data is constructed by active subjects and is therefore subject to change based on new information and reflections; a teacher who is perceived as a favorite today may not be considered a favorite tomorrow. Similarly, the specific qualities and characteristics of favorite teachers on which students chose to focus might differ today from those noted at the time these stories were collected.

With any narrative research study an assumption must be made by the researchers that the participants have represented their accounts honestly. When asking preservice teachers to accurately recall their favorite teacher it is assumed that not only their favorite teacher but that the events and details described in the narrative are also accurate and honest. Another study limitation was the nature of the data collection via an assignment and the specific assignment guidelines. Student voices may have been influenced by the knowledge that the narrative was a required component of the course and the knowledge that a professor would be reading the assignment. Additionally, a word limit was placed on the length of the narrative which may have restricted the depth and detail of the narrative account. Also, the five guiding thoughts provided to the preservice teachers appeared to constrain the accounts, since many of the narratives directly responded to the guiding prompts only. Finally, a very important assumption, and also limitation, of both the study and the assignment guidelines is the use of the term *favorite*. Although the narratives are powerful testaments to the impact these teachers have on their students and these students’ career choices, a possibility exists that another teacher, or even several teachers, had greater impact and influence on students’ occupational socialization into the realm of teaching. Indeed, regardless of the assignment guidelines to focus on a singular favorite teacher, six students acknowledged multiple influential teachers in their narratives.

Although several limitations of the study exist, the findings strongly indicate that affective aspects of teaching, such as the teacher’s attitudes and interactions with students, left greater impressions upon both male and female preservice teachers than the mechanics of content, planning, instruction, classroom management, and evaluation—skills commonly associated with teacher education programs. What is more, many preservice teachers directly cited teachers as role models and major influences in their desire and decision to teach. This offers insights into why teacher educators face difficulty in changing and modifying preservice teachers’ views of effective teaching. Teacher education programs often neglect affective components, instead focusing primarily on mechanical components of effective teaching. These favorite teacher narratives support that preservice teachers viewed effective teaching in the realms of affective constructs, in relation to their favorite teacher, rather than in terms of traditional appropriate and effective teaching constructs. Further, it became increasingly evident that preservice teachers consider teachers and teaching not in terms of an itemized list of qualities and actions but in broad, inclusive understandings, forming personal connections between various qualities and actions based on their role-models. Additionally, favorite teachers of physical education preservice teachers are not just confined to the gyms and playing fields of sport and physical education. Although much of the existing literature describes influential socialization factors related to sport (Dewar & Lawson, 1984; Templin, 1979), such as the type and level of sport and physical activity (Curtner-Smith, 1999; Curtner-Smith & Meek, 2000), findings from this study

demonstrated that approximately 47% of the favorite teachers actually represented non-sport, physical education and coaching settings.

The notion of caring in teaching, in particular, is a central issue, as evidenced by prior research as well as its frequent appearance in the narratives. Multiple authors have noted that caring is persistently identified as an important characteristic of *good* or *effective* teachers by primary students (Murphy, Delli, & Edwards, 2004), secondary students (Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002; Mowrer-Reynolds, 2008; Murphy et al., 2004), and by teachers themselves (Murphy et al., 2004; Nias, 1989; Norton, 1997). Further defining caring is a difficult task, as individuals interpret and express caring differently (Gilligan, 1982; Goldstein, 2002; Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Noddings, 1991, 2005; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). The categories of caring identified through analysis reflected this challenge, but are consistent with those described in prior inquiries into students' conceptions of caring. For example, Alder (2002) identified student descriptions of caring as falling into the categories of "care as talk and time", "care as the work ethic", and "care as good teaching", comparable to the categories of caring as kindness and concern, caring as tough love, and caring as dedication, respectively. Similarly, McBee (2007) highlighted teacher candidates' perceptions of caring as offering help, caring as compassion, and caring as showing interest and getting to know students, comparable to the categories of caring as dedication and caring as kindness and concern.

It is also important to note the instances of teachers-as-parental-figures as they relate to the issue of caring as a feminine trait (see Gilligan, 1982; Goldstein, 2002; Murray, 2006; Noddings, 1991, 2005). Despite preservice teachers' varying ways of interpreting caring, it is evident through these narratives that caring is a heavily influential factor in students' decisions to teach, as well as their constructions of self-as-teacher and future practices in the classroom. For example, one student expressed that "[my professor] is a teacher of caring and concern for the well being of his students and is a perfect example of what kind of teacher I want to strive to become," and another declared, "most of the learning in class is not from the material but from a caring and involved teacher to present it." Clearly, preservice teachers' impressions of teachers shape their development as students of education and as future teachers, as well as their initial motivation to enter the field of teaching. However, these conceptions of caring may go unidentified and unexplored as they progress through the teacher education programs. Therefore, it is safe to say that caring is a concept in need of further exploration within teacher education programs (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Lee & Ravizza, 2008). Favorite teacher stories offer insight into this issue, as well as offering a venue for preservice teachers and teacher educators to begin discussing and addressing it.

Dome et al. (2005) strongly urged teacher educators to have preservice teachers identify, question, and reflect on motivations for teaching, and to engage in this throughout the teacher education program—a process, they argue, that is vital for commitment and recommitment to the profession. Favorite teacher stories as instruments prove useful in accomplishing this through a non-invasive way of highlighting and helping preservice teachers explore values, beliefs, and concepts of teaching and teachers acquired through occupational socialization. The narrative inquiry process also provides students with an opportunity to not only share their favorite teacher stories, but also reflect and construct new knowledge based on their current educational context. By

making the implicit knowledge of teaching and being a teacher more explicit, teacher educators are better able to understand preservice teachers' prior interpretations and constructed knowledge acquired through the socialization process, which in turn provides insights into the socialization forces that shape a preservice teachers philosophy regarding teaching, learning, and content.

Preservice teacher narratives and stories can also allow teacher educators to address important teaching concepts in a way that works with, rather than against, existing student beliefs, and values. At the very least, they emphasize qualities and characteristics that inspired the students to enter the teaching profession. Favorite teachers impact motivations to teach as well as teaching practices. Think back to when you were learning through apprenticeship of observation. Think back and remember your favorite teacher and the impact he/she had on you present teaching practices. By thinking back and reflecting on the impact your favorite teacher or teachers have had on your learning, you are actually reflecting upon socialization factors that have impacted you. We firmly believe that through reviewing and analyzing the stories, that the influence of teachers on preservice teachers highlights the traits of teaching that are often forgotten by administrators, parents, and teacher educators—traits such as respect, caring, passion, enthusiasm, and devotion; traits that are seldom taught, but are expected; traits that are beyond organization, content knowledge and test scores.

Finally, the stories provide testament to the impact teachers have on their students and to successes that are rarely seen and rewarded. At the outset, we describe teaching as a profession whereby success is hard to measure; we also sort to examine the influences that these favorite teachers have, though occupational socialization on future teachers. However, the narratives and analysis of the 186 narratives also provided an even bigger testament to the field, meaning the stories validated a profession whose impact cannot be measured solely through standardized test scores, assignments, and grades. The stories made a statement that teachers do matter and that a teacher's ability to impact others is what makes the profession of teaching great, and what makes great teachers inspirational.

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