Case Study of Classroom Practice: A Quiet Form of Research

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Abstract

This paper documents the use of ethnographic research methods as a heuristic for inquiry and teaching. More specifically, it focuses on reflection as situated at the heart of teacher-research, including research conducted by prospective English language arts teachers. In a retrospective analysis of her student's case studies in literacy at an urban site, a teacher researcher explores whether and how her students come to "know their knowledge." She explores students' construction of knowledge and theories of practice, how these develop over time and what impact they may have on teaching and learning. These constructions inform not only her students' practice but also her own.

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This paper documents the use of ethnographic research methods as a heuristic for inquiry and teaching. More specifically, it focuses on reflection as situated at the heart of teacher-research, including research conducted by prospective English language arts teachers. In a retrospective analysis of her student's case studies in literacy at an urban site, a teacher researcher explores whether and how her students come to "know their knowledge." She explores students' construction of knowledge and theories of practice, how these develop over time and what impact they may have on teaching and learning. These constructions inform not only her students' practice but also her own.

Within what Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993) identify as process-product paradigms of research on teaching over the past fifteen years, I argue for a "quiet form of research" (Britton, 1987): I argue for research conducted in classrooms by teachers. As a teacher of prospective English language arts teachers, I further argue that ethnographic research methods serve as a powerful heuristic to encourage these candidates to become self-reflective practitioners through teacher research. I use the term *teacher research* as Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993) define it: that is, as systematic, intentional inquiry carried out by teachers (p. 7).

To understand the construct of teachers as researchers, Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993) posit two paradigms. One paradigm, the process-product paradigm, explores what we mean by effective teaching by correlating particular processes, or teacher behaviors, with particular products, usually defined as student achievement and measured by standardized tests. Such a paradigm assumes that teaching is a linear activity with teacher behavior identified as the cause and student learning as the effect. It further assumes that *actions* of teachers take precedence over their *judgments* as practitioners so that sets of teacher behaviors are isolated to be reproduced. Such a paradigm envisions the teacher's role here as one of technician (Apple, 1986).

In contrast to this "technician" role for teachers, Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993) envision the teacher as researcher in an alternative paradigm where, through interpretive studies of questions emerging from practice about their students and class practice, teachers understand how their teaching is context-specific, highly complex and interactive. Such studies offer richly described accounts of school and classroom events that provide insights into meanings for the participants involved, an *emic* perspective. While some university-based and school researchers collaborate on research on teaching, Cochrane-Smith & Lytle (1993) claim that both paradigms constrain

teachers in the generation of knowledge because teachers are still rendered "invisible." They write, "What is missing are the voices of teachers themselves, the questions that teachers ask and the interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and improve their classroom practices" (p. 7). What is missing is the "quiet form of research" (Britton, 1987, p. 13) that freeze-frames practice in time and space so that each lesson becomes a site of inquiry or, as Britton (1987) claims, "some further discovery . . . [a] time to reflect, draw inferences and plan further inquiry" (p. 15).

In arguing for reflective practice as integral to teaching and to educational processes of pre-service English language arts candidates, I call for a re-conceptualization of teacher "action"-not as a construct to be isolated and reproduced-but as a construct for informed, reflective practice leading to human agency. Teaching's essential grounding in inquiry, or what researcher James Britton (1987) calls the "heuristic nature of teaching" (p. 17), complements teachers' roles as researchers and emergent professionals by encouraging teachers to apply research to their own situations and practice. Such development uses research as the starting point and proceeds to fresh hypotheses and new questions.

Theoretical Frameworks

Teacher research traces its roots to the action research of the 1950's and 1960's. Defined by Lewin (1948) "as comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action" (pp. 202-203), action research demystifies the research process while, at the same time, it encourages teachers to strengthen their judgments and improve their practices. In introducing my students to teacher research, I want to understand ways in which they make sense of reflective practice as situated at the heart of teacher research. Despite the varieties of qualitative research genres that exist, I want to understand the "habits of mind" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) upon which most qualitative researchers agree so as to invite my students to take on roles as teacher-researchers. Some characteristics of qualitative research include the following: 1) it is naturalistic, 2) it draws upon multiple methods that respect the humanity of participants in the study, 3) it is emergent and evolving, and 4) it is interpretive. Qualitative researchers view the world as holistic, engage in systematic reflection on their own roles in the research, are sensitive to their personal biographies and how these shape the study and rely on complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2).

As early as 1904, Dewey argued for teachers' reflecting on their practices and integrating their observations into their emerging theories about teaching and learning. In this regard, Dewey predates the landmark work on reflective practice of Schön (1987) that classifies practice as an intellectual process of positing and exploring problems that teachers identify for themselves. Dewey's emphasis on process and inquiry are germane to my choice of the ethnographic or *contextualist* model for my class of prospective teacher researchers.

The work of Miles Myers (1985) adds credence to qualitative and ethnographic research as a heuristic to explore and understand processes such as reflection in practice and research. Distinguishing between research that he classifies as *rationalist*, *positivist* and *contextualist*, Myers calls *positivist* the process-product paradigm to which Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993)

allude. In contrast, *rationalist* and *contextualist* research both "contrast pieces of data and [use] the logic of reason and insight and intuition to make claims about the significance, reliability and validity of the hypothesis" (Myers, 1985, p. 15). *Contextualist* research is well suited for examination of such behaviors as reading, writing and discussion and, unlike *rationalist* research, is best for examining the dynamics of a process such as reflective practice repeated over time. In this regard, it not only captures development in context, but also the dynamics of processes such as language and literacy. In fact, a number of studies in practitioner research in language and literacy (Atwell, 1987; Berthoff, 1987; Calkins, 1985; Graves, 1983; Myers, 1985;) have gained prominence since Janet Emig's (1971) landmark case study, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*.

As *contextualist* research, ethnography makes visible a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants; it is not "field-testing research" (Calkins, 1985) but field-making research-that is, a way for prospective teachers to understand "the development, assessment and revision of theories that inform [their] practice" (Myers, 1985, p.149). As such, it captures the ordinary work of teachers even as it encourages them to suspend judgment as they gain insider knowledge of learners and teaching in different sites. To understand literacy, pedagogy and poverty from multiple perspectives would help my students gain what Carolyn Frank (1999) calls "an awareness of the power of diversity and how differences can be a resource for community development" (p. 5), especially in my students' co-construction of educational goals with Hope House learners.

Finally, as Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (1993) argue, "because teacher research emerges from praxis and because it preserves teachers' own words and analyses, it has the potential to be a particularly robust method for understanding whether and how preservice . . . teachers construct their knowledge and theories of practice, how these may change and develop over time, and what impact these may have on teaching and learning" (p. 61). It is with that potential that this paper is concerned. The question that guides my retrospective analysis of my students' work is this: in what ways (if at all) have my students come to "know their knowledge" through reflective practice? By "knowing their knowledge"(Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 45), I mean to suggest the ways in which my students, Hope House learners and I negotiate what counts as knowledge in the classroom, who can have knowledge, and how knowledge is generated, challenged and evaluated (Cochrane-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 45). In the process of ethnographic research methodology, I hope to make praxis, or critical reflection of practice, visible.

The Classroom and Research Contexts

Given this framing, prospective English language arts teachers at a state college in New Jersey identified in this work as "Old State" have conducted qualitative research as part of a methods class, English 492: Teaching Writing and as a community out-reach program to a nearby urban learning center for disenfranchised students. The city in which the learning center is situated, "Markton" is only about five miles from Old State's campus but seems "another country" to the predominantly white and privileged students who matriculate there. "Hope House" provides a rich research context in which to explore literacy practices in what the director, Father Bill, has called a "culture of poverty": "This is a culture of poverty. I'm interested in the students earning

their diplomas and being good people. If I don't do that, I've failed. I'm not a failure, but I've failed. That's an important distinction (Field note, 3/21/00).

Hope House sponsors two educational programs for its untraditional students: Young Men of "Markton" and the Twilight Program. These programs seek to provide literacy skills so that students pass not only the state-mandated HSPT (High School Proficiency Test) but also their GED (General Education Development) test. In addition to helping his community members gain access to a better life through literacy, Father Bill's goals also include his hope that they become good workers and good citizens.

The last four weeks of Methods of Teaching Writing (March 29-April 26, 2000), my students and I took on roles as participant-observers and tutors at Hope House. It is important to note here that our work is part of a larger community out-reach in operation at Old State. A number of freshmen are required to perform service to the community as part of the college's nationally recognized First-Year Experience; therefore, in addition to tutoring, several freshmen participate in Habitat for Humanity in restoring the architecturally magnificent but decaying homes in this community. Fr. Bill and a fellow priest direct these efforts, collaborating with community members and employing them in building construction and in maintaining The Mustard Seed, a thrift store located next to both Hope House and Center and the Community Center Building.

Course and Research Design

Before taking on roles as teacher researchers at Hope House, my twenty-three students and I use the first half of the semester to explore writing as a field of inquiry. We learn about various composition theories and imagine what they might look like in practice; we explore informal, formal and alternative assessments in writing; we learn to design and implement writing tasks as well as to set goals with our students; and we explore Atwell's (1987) *In the Middle* as model of teacher-research in literacy. We also read together a theoretically grounded text that provides practice in teaching grammar in context.

I use two activities the first class meeting to collect personal data from my students. I ask them a number of questions about their own experiences with self-sponsored writing tasks as well as writing tasks at the college. These I analyze to demonstrate quantitative data analysis. I also have them generate literacy stories that I analyze to model how to code for patterns and themes. These two activities serve as a brief introduction to some differences between qualitative and quantitative data and analysis and to our further exploration of ethnography. This discussion becomes a segue to reading of Carolyn Frank's *Ethnographic Eyes: A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Observation*, a text I chose because it documents Frank's use of ethnography with preservice teachers, demonstrates how to record, analyze and represent classroom culture as well as encourages students to expand their own cultural perspectives through critical reflection.

We then investigate our own personal questions about writing and pedagogy. I ask my students for five questions, and I have them rank in terms of how passionate they feel about these and whether they are researchable or "do-able" to use Cochrane-Smith and Lytle's (1989) term.

The chart that follows isolates two questions of those initial five that students ranked as most important to them. In addition to providing a context in which to discuss research, my students' questions also provide me with an opportunity to make visible to them their own assumptions about literacy as well as to help them understand naïve theories they have about writing that our work with students may make more visible. One such a naïve theory (identified with asterisk) demonstrates student belief that skill-and-drill grammar exercises transfer to actual writing tasks. Another underpins a student's query about a "right way to write": such a question discounts the notion that writers in the real world both read and write for many purposes-any of which is "right" for that context.

"Styles"	Motivation	Process	Practice	Skills/Tools	Evaluation
What new, innovative writing styles are there?	How can I get my students to enjoy the process of writing?	What types of questions stimulate the writing process?	Should I focus more on grammar usage or essay form?	Should I focus more on grammar usage or essay form?	How can a student objectively evaluate a student's paper?
Students often get discouraged with writing styles. How can I as a teacher help them?	How can you motivate students who don't like to write?	What is the best way to tell students to begin writing, especially if they have writer's block?	Where do I begin teaching writing?	What is more important-the actual writing and creative force behind it or grammatical accuracy of the writing?	What are the best methods for evaluating writing?
How do I comment on students' writing without imposing my writing style on them?	What do teachers do to make kids hate writing so much-and not only hate it but hold no value themselves as writers.	How can I best teach the writing process to students who do not know what it is?	Should teachers isolate technique or approach writing technique as it comes up?	How much emphasis should be on grammar? Is it important to know the parts of speech to be a good writer? *	How can you fairly grade a student's paper, if, for example, you do not like the writing style?
How do you teach writing without influencing them too much with	How do I make writing fun for those who have little interest in it?	How can I use writing as a tool to improve their reading? Should	What is the most expedient way to bring illiterate or semi-illiterate	What are some techniques for teaching proper grammar?	What are the major problems that students have with their

your own style?		students have to take specific classes in writing or is it better to incorporate writing into all subjects?	students up to par with their classroom peers? Should they be included or isolated in a basic skills classroom?	What is the best way to improve grammar skills?	writing?
			How do I teach students the "right way to write? *		

Because I am concerned that my students are able to articulate and critique theories about composing and explore their own, I use Killion and Tandem's (1993) "A Process for Personal Theory Building" and, more particularly, their "Elements for Professional Reflection" (p. 12) to encourage critical reflection linked to practice. This schema describes the shape of our fieldwork during the last four weeks of class. More specifically, my students and I develop activities for Hope House learners to reinforce competencies those learners need to master for formal assessments including the HSPT and GED. We then were to draw upon our roles as participant observers to document our practice in field notes and analyze reflections of these to inform our practice as we pose new questions and collect more data. Students also use that analysis to revisit their earlier questions about composing (by which I mean both writing and reading processes) to interrogate underlying assumptions and theories.

Figure I: Elements of Professional Reflection

Plan → Act → Observe → Create Meaning

Decide ← ← ← ← ← Reflect
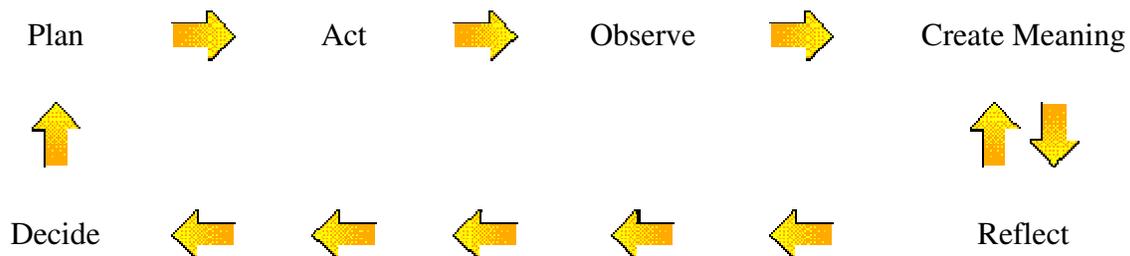
Data: Reflection and Analysis

Our data included field notes based upon our participant observation over four weeks, interviews with students, student writing, and informal surveys and writing inventories. Tutors were required to draw maps of the rooms where instruction occurred to interpret ways in which these configurations might reflect how district- assigned instructors understood learning and knowledge. They also were instructed in how to observe and write field notes with "thick

description" (Geertz, 1983). In her field note, Ashley describes a conversation she has with Mr. Mills, a district-appointed instructor at Hope House, as she and her English 492 partner, Tom, wait for their students, Joann and Raymond:

We heard loud rap music out of a window in a row home. We spent about twenty minutes waiting for our students and about fifteen [of those twenty] speaking with Mr. Mills [not his real name], the computer coordinator at the Center. He spoke about the cause of educational decline in urban populations and suggested that we, as educators, get involved politically to affect the inequities in schools (Field note 3/29/00).

In this brief interchange, Ashley has her first introduction to the ideological nature of classroom practice: that is, what counts as knowledge (HSPT, GED) and who gains access. Mr. Mills sees educational opportunity as inequitable and invites Ashley and Tom to become involved as future educators. Ashley does not commit herself, and as Tom's field notes below document, he declines the invitation by evaluating Mr. Mills' position as "radical."

As their instructor, I understand this view of education not only from the perspective of Mr. Mills but also from that of the director of Hope House, Fr. Bill. Fr. Bill likens the inequity he sees manifested in educational experiences of Hope House learners in the metaphor of a traffic ticket:

I see the process of failing much like getting a ticket for a traffic violation. No one would support paying a fine based upon income. But another could argue, why do the rich and poor pay the same fine? It's really not fair. I simply want our students to pass, to earn their diplomas, use their skills at work and be good people (Field note, 3/21/00).

In retrospectively analyzing this event, I acknowledge that Fr. Bill's ticket metaphor makes explicit the tacit nature of educational access. In providing the opposition ("some may argue"), he interrogates the assumption of paying equal fines despite income level as "fair" and raises a serious ethical issue about educational access: how do we encourage our students to be good people and good workers in an intrinsically unfair system?

Tom sees Ashley's "read" of their interaction above a bit differently. He concurs with Ashley that they have to "track down" their students after waiting for them to arrive. This theme is repeatedly documented in field notes of my students. With obvious concern, he also notes two small, "unattended children" near a "busy street." He documents his discussion with Mr. Mills whom Tom sees as "radical" in his remedy for educators: "Mr. Mills said that teachers should be offered combat pay for the potential violence they might come across." Tom never interprets what meaning he makes of the two unattended children, and his notes continue to document his conversation with Mr. Mill's about how technology will change schools in the future.

In retrospect, I interpret this event as one of many ways in which children slip through the system, documented in the "chaos" (Justin, field note, 3/29/00), "noise" (Ashley, field note, 3/29/00) and "turnover ratio" (Fr. Bill, field note, 4/5/00) my students and I describe in field notes. What does it mean to be "unattended" in this context? It is significant to document here, too, that while the center has computers, most were locked in closets or inoperable. Only about

three outdated ones were in use during the four weeks we observed. This information is significant given Fr. Bill's praise of a programmed learning software package on "several" computers that would help students become acquainted with questions they would confront on the GED test. So much hope, I thought, not borne out by practice. So much hope for access to technology and education not borne out by reality. In my own field note for our first meeting, I noted that the heating system was not in operation and that most of us were forced to wear coats inside the building. Which demands more attention?: repairing computers or repairing the heating system?

What's Going On Here?: What the Teacher Learned

In *Ethnographic Eyes*, Carolyn Frank ([1999](#)) adapts Berthoff's ([1978](#)) heuristic of double-entry notes to audit meaning. As I retrospectively analyze my students' field notes, I understand how useful this heuristic will be for my students to understanding the inductive-deductive nature of ethnographic interpretation. As I teach this course again and continue research with my students at Hope House, I will make better use of this heuristic. Granting that the operant question for ethnographic inquiry, "what's going on here?" is a heuristic in of itself, Ashley and Tom point out a number of themes which are verified in the notes of their classmates: these include "waiting to teach," "teaching as doing time," "here today, gone tomorrow," and "making workers and good people." In the evolution of our research, my students' initial research questions (see [chart](#)) were fore-grounded by more immediate ones about their relationships with Hope House learners. Some of these questions are explicit, such as Tricia's; others are implied and will need to be reflected upon through "ethnographic eyes" as I teach this course again.

"Can you imagine …?": "Waiting to Teach" and "Doing Time"

In an April 12th field note, Tricia describes being jostled out of her reverie by a classmate's comment, "Wow are you out of it or what?"

Tricia responds, "Oh, sorry. I was just looking around the area. It's such a difference from [Old State]. Can you imagine anyone growing up here?" Like Tricia, Suzanne expresses her concern about "starting a conversation let alone forming a significant student/tutor relationship with someone who belongs to a culture very different from mine" (Field note, 3/30/00). My students learn that their academic questions are not as important as the relationships they need to foster before they begin to work. In fact, only one student returned to her original research question and linked it to her practice at Hope House. Lori observes:

When I first came to English 492, my main question was whether or not separate English classes were better as opposed to methods such as writing across the curriculum (WAC). After tutoring the students, I really feel that separate writing classes are needed. I feel that basic writing skills for the students were so low that trying to teach writing while incorporating subject matter may be too difficult. . . . (Field note 4/5/00).

Lori's observation further affirms for me the difference between "academic" questions my students and I can ask and questions related to real students in real contexts. Here Lori reflects

upon a method (WAC) and its appropriateness for the students before her in her classroom, especially given the goals of making good workers and good people.

"Doing Distraction" and "Here Today and Gone Tomorrow"

In an earlier field note, Tricia documents her attempts to operationalize Fr. Bill's goals to make good workers and good people. From textual reading, she learns the historical precedence of these two goals in English language arts instruction. Like Andrea's student Chet who is "more interested in people around him than concentrating on his work" (Andrea's Field note, 3/29/00), Tricia is forced to track down Alonzel:

Conclusion and Implications

In *Ethnographic Eyes*, Frank (1999) makes the case for ethnography not only as a means to study classroom culture but also as a heuristic for informed action (pp. 2-3). This paper has demonstrated the ways in which I used reflection as integral to ethnographic interpretation as a heuristic for informed practice. My hope was to teach my students to use reflection and analysis to inform their literacy lessons with Hope House learners. I also hoped to improve my own practice by retrospectively analyzing my students' work and to understand if and in what ways they would "know their knowledge." That is, I would look for evidence that they were exploring what counts as knowledge, who has it, as well as how it is generated, challenged and evaluated. I also wanted to see in what ways my preservice students would construct theories of practice, understand how these develop over time and understand what impact these might have on teaching and learning. The data reveal that students did come to know their knowledge, even as I may have made that process even more explicit for them.

Because of what Fr. Bill identified as the "turnover problem, my students were often required to reflect-in-action (that is, as they taught) when, developmentally, they were still struggling to reflect-on-action (that is, after they taught) (cf. Schön, 1987). Of the nineteen Hope Learners who drop-in and drop-out, only John, Joel, Jazz, Tyrone come each week. Suzanne feels as if she is one of the lucky tutors: "I believe I was one of the students in Methods of Teaching Writing who had the opportunity to get the most out of this experience. I accredit [sic] this largely to the fact that I was able to work with the same student all four times I went to the Center"(Field Note, April 26, 2000).

In terms of students' documenting their experiences in field notes, I did observe that some did improve in their reflective and analytic skills, but a number of them had a difficult time providing validity through a triangulation of sources. Early field notes were replete with evaluative comments, but as Krissy's notes demonstrate, students did come to understand what it meant to "write in the moment" and to ground their notes in specific details. As their instructor, I can encourage such contextualization by encouraging the notetaking/notemaking model Frank provides in *Ethnographic Eyes*.

A number of my students became so involved in the day-to-day tasks of teaching and tracking down students that they abandoned their original questions. Stephanie reports that her original question changed the first night she met with the students (Field note 3/29/00). Rosetta remarks,

"I have many questions about these boys at this point" (Field note 3/29/00) and concludes her case study with the comment: "I believe my time with these boys was a positive experience, and I value the time that we shared together. However, I am ending out time together with more questions than answers." As Rosetta demonstrates, I believe my students use reflection and analysis in ethnography as a heuristic in the way Britton (1987) means it.

Furthermore, students challenge knowledge and theorize for themselves. In her analysis and interpretation of Fr. Bill's construct of "a culture of poverty," Tricia posits her own construct of a "culture of dysfunction." While she never defines what she means by dysfunction, she looks to cultural artifacts such as graffiti, broken windows not so much as evidence of poverty but of misbehavior. Like her partner, Ed, who worked with a student expelled from "Markton" Central High, Tricia recommends one-on-one tutoring as a way of "connecting" with her student and confronting her theorized "culture of dysfunction."

Similarly, Kristy reflects upon her feelings of sadness as she drives through this area. She acknowledges her students and herself as "working together against a corrupt and greedy system." The best I can do is help create a respecting relationship with my students and give them all I can. I also have to be willing to learn as well. To deny they can teach me things would be ignorant (Field note, 3/29/00). Here Kristy demonstrates her understanding of the humanity of the participants and what they can teach her.

Despite Kristy's good intentions above, it is too soon to know if students used this foray into ethnography as "action research"-that is, research linked to social change. I can report that at least three students extended their service at Hope House beyond our course requirements, and participating members of class who were also members of Sigma Tau Delta, Old State's English honor society, took funds they raised to celebrate their work during their year together-some $500.00-and donated it to the Center.

In summary, despite all the frustration my students voiced, teacher research has potential to help them develop as prospective teachers to reflect upon their practice and, possibly, to contribute to reform. For its benefits, I tolerate the messiness that seems to be integral to the process. I believe in the importance of teacher research, and in the process of writing this paper, I have come to understand some ways in which I can make this experience more meaningful for my students and Hope House learners. We will continue to work with together. While I am happy to report that Hope House has recently been awarded a grant to continue its work and that we will be participants from the academic community, I am sorry to report that after earning his GED, Jazz was shot and killed on a street corner near the center.

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Please Note: Dedication

The author would like to dedicate this paper in memory of her father, Richard Reckeweg and to one of the learners at "Hope House," Jazz, who was shot and killed.

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