

Exploring decolonial and anti-racist perspectives in teacher education and curriculum through dialogue

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This forum piece presents reflections from professional practice, focused on decolonial and anti-racist perspectives in teacher education and curriculum. Following the publication of the Curriculum Journal Special Issue on this area, a series of prompts and questions were developed by Haira Gandolfi and Elizabeth Rushton. These were shared (as a supportive rather than restrictive framework) with Terra Glowach, Lee Walker, and Sharon Walker. Alongside Haira, each provided responses to the prompts. Responses from each individual contributor were first woven together by Elizabeth, and then further elaborated by the whole authorial team through a collaborative dialogic process - i.e., reading the first draft of woven responses and then expanding, commenting and challenging their own and each other's initial contributions - to produce the final version of this reflective dialogue, as presented across this piece.

We begin by exploring below the current context in which each of Haira, Terra, Sharon, and Lee work, drawing on responses to these two initial questions:

- What is your current professional role, including in relation to teacher education and professional development?
- What prior experiences do you bring to your work as a practitioner, teacher educator or other role?

Haira: I have been working as a university lecture across different programmes at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge since 2020, from undergraduate to doctoral levels, including co-coordinating our Secondary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Professional Studies course, which forms part of our year-long university-based ITE programme for those from a range of subject backgrounds to become secondary school teachers. The Professional Studies course is concerned with an integrated study of fundamental educational ideas and their relationship to classroom issues, focusing on common aspects of teaching and the general professional role of the teacher, and drawing on educational research. I am also a core member of our Masters in Transforming Practice programme, which is undertaken by educational practitioners in support of their continuous professional development (CPD) as practitioner-researchers. Within this programme, I co-lead a specific

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community of practice on 'Social Justice and Education' where we explore, among other things, issues of decolonisation and anti-racism. And prior to working in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, I also taught Chemistry at high school and technical colleges in Brazil, my home country, for around 8 years.

Terra: I am currently a Senior Lecturer in Education and ITE Secondary English Lead at the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol. I trained as a secondary English and Biology teacher at the University of Alberta in Canada, then went on to teach high school and work as a teacher educator for the next 10 years in Japan, Ethiopia (part of a Volunteer Services Overseas programme) and India, then went on to teach in state secondaries in Leeds, Leicestershire and Bristol until I took my post at UWE in 2022. In my final teaching position, I was a Lead Practitioner for literacy and decolonising the curriculum as well as an English subject lead. As a university-based ITE lead, I am responsible for inducting student teachers into the profession of teaching the subject of English. This entails an exploration of the moral and philosophical facets of both the subject and the role of teacher, as well as equipping my students with the knowledge and critical lenses that empower them as autonomous professionals.

Lee: I am a Headteacher with responsibility of leading two primary schools in East London, each with approximately 650 pupils. As the Headteacher, I oversee curriculum design and professional development of staff. Through a model of distributive leadership, I facilitate opportunities for middle and senior leaders to develop the necessary skills to lead on an area of school improvement. In this work, I have drawn upon several experiences; previously, as a lead practitioner for English and Mathematics, I was part of a group that reviewed curriculum design/content with the aim of developing policy to facilitate implementation. Currently, as a board member for a local authority school partnership of 50+ schools, I collaborate with a board of fellow Headteachers to discuss wider educational issues, local and national, to determine viable solutions that can be implemented by school leaders. As a current mentor for Headteachers, I also support colleagues to develop best practice, and such varied professional dialogues with colleagues facilitates opportunities for me to reflect on my own practice.

Sharon: I am a university lecturer in the School of Education, University of Bristol, and a sociologist of education, with a focus on theories of race and racial justice. For the last two years, I have also been working in teacher development/education on anti-racist approaches with school leaders from a consortium of schools in London. This programme consists of six three-hour-long workshops, and around 40 school leaders have attended the sessions, with the particular focus on familiarising teachers with key concepts and theories such as anti-racism, decolonising, critical race theory, intersectionality, and whiteness, and how these are relevant to their practices. Prior experiences which I draw on include my work as a primary school teacher in Key Stages 1 & 2¹, and I have also been a school leader for literacy and a vice-chair of governors for a Key Stage 1 school.

Across these contributions of Haira, Terra, Lee and Sharon there is then expertise in teacher education in both university and school settings, with varied school subject expertise (Biology, Chemistry, English, Mathematics) and across primary and secondary settings in England, Brazil, Canada, Japan, Ethiopia and India. In the following section 1.0, we move onto exploring the key concepts of curriculum

¹ The national curriculum in England is divided into Key Stages beginning with the Early Years Foundation Stage (ages 3-5), Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7), Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11), Key Stage 3 (ages 11-14) and Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16).

and curriculum-making through their contributions to another prompt: what do you understand by the term 'curriculum' within your professional practice?

1.0 Understanding curriculum and curriculum-making through the lens of professional practice

Lee: Curriculum (which I see as the school ethos, values, and learning content) is about creating a blueprint that outlines expectations of learning (academic and social), progression of skills and desired outcomes. It is also about the development of a common language so that all stakeholders are delivering the same seamless experience to ensure continuity of teaching and learning across year groups and the school. Ultimately, the curriculum aims to develop lifelong learners who are able to make a valuable contribution to their communities and to society.

Sharon: I would expand on that, Lee, to position curriculum in HE and in schools as potentially referring to several things (Cotton, et al., 2013; Giroux, 2010): 1) the written curriculum content, forming the basis of the knowledge to be negotiated in teaching and learning sessions. 2) the hidden curriculum, which refers to those elements of the written curriculum that are not written down but 'transfer' to the general school environment (e.g., who are seen as knowledge bearers in the written curriculum, whose voices are absent, the types of displays that end up on school walls, the values students adopt, etc.). 3) This hidden curriculum may also have no connection to the written curriculum, but to other aspects of the school, such as mission statements and the attitudes and values of staff, as you mentioned as well, Lee.

Terra: Indeed, Sharon. And to focus on a particular case as an example of this 'written' and 'hidden' curriculum aspects: the English curriculum at the secondary level here in England is firstly tethered to the major exam boards' assessment objectives at GCSE². I state this unapologetically and pragmatically – state schoolteachers are paid by taxpayers to help students attain the best results they can. GCSE exam results are *the* metric by which secondary teachers and schools are assessed. And if you look at the exams that students take at GCSE English, most of the questions invite personal, critical, in-depth analysis of patterns and complexities. This requires attention to detail, sure, but also imaginative empathy and a personal stake in the construction of meaning; rote learning does not suffice.

But in reality, it is much messier than that and much more oppressive. Teachers do indeed have reason to resort to rote learning or examination tailored teaching, particularly for students that express themselves most confidently and articulately in a style and/or dialect not recognised by examiners. To start with, exam board assessment objectives consistently stipulate that students use Standard English, and when I have done training to mark exams (both within school and for exam boards), it has become clear that a White, middle-class style and syntax was coded for in the mark/band descriptors of mark schemes with words like 'clear' and 'perceptive', which are subjective. When I first began teaching in Leeds at a school where White middle-class students were the minority, I found much of my students' writing to be both clear and perceptive. But the White, middle-class colleagues in my department moderated my marking down as they explained the register in which the students wrote was not 'clear'. This meant that their writing could not attain a 'passing' band (of D/C, in the case of England) and that the perceptive ideas in the writing were dismissed. These colleagues had likely been told the same by exam boards and senior colleagues when they started out. So, there is in this example both an explicit curriculum of epistemological hegemony and an implicit curriculum of race and class hierarchy.

² General Certificate of Secondary Education, in England, a **qualification** encompassing Key Stage 4 years.

This is also evident in the lack of diversity of GCSE Literature exam board texts in England, which have a washback effect reaching down to year 7 (aged 11-12) and even further into primary. Secondary teachers for students aged 14-16 are restricted to a set selection of British novels from the Victorian era, all of which are written by White, middle-class authors, and several of these novels include demeaning representations of those who are not White, male and middle-class. It is now common practice for teachers of students aged 11-14 to weave Victorian novels into their curriculum as preparation for their future studies when aged 14-16, as the grammar and contextual references in these works take some getting used to.

Haira: That is indeed a good point, Terra, and one that we strive to help our students to more critically engage with in our ITE and Masters programmes. When working with them, we often draw on Biesta's (2015) positioning of education as a 'teleological practice': "*a practice constituted by a 'telos'—the Greek word for the 'point' and purpose of a practice. [...] If we do not know what it is we are seeking to achieve with our educational arrangements and endeavours, we cannot make any decisions about the content that is most appropriate and the kind of relationships that are most conducive*" (p. 77). As such, my understanding of 'curriculum', both within school practice and in the case of teacher education, is permeated by this core reflection on the purposes behind the knowledges, practices, skills, etc. that are present in our curricula - or the 'content' and the kinds[s] of relationships, in Biesta's words, that we seek to foster as part of our subjects and programmes. Also drawing on Paulo Freire's perspective around critical consciousness and teachers as cultural workers and intellectuals (Freire et al., 2018), 'curriculum' for me is an intellectual enterprise that goes beyond the 'what(s)' (e.g., what should we teach about chemistry to year 8 students?) and the 'how(s)' (e.g., how should we teach such chemistry-related knowledge, skills, etc. to year 8 students?), to fundamentally engage with the 'why(s)' of a particular aspect of educational practices (e.g., of teaching chemistry to year 8 students).

The points above are also intrinsically linked to a position around 'knowledge' as being socio-culturally constructed and, as a result, of curriculum practices (e.g., national curriculum policies, textbooks, schemes of work, lesson plans, classroom practices, etc.) as also socio-culturally constructed within different societies and among competing views, perspectives, and purposes of a variety of stakeholders (Paraskeva, 2021). That is, I understand curricula as socio-culturally constructed through constant encounters between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideas about what education should be about, as you also commented on in relation to the GCSE English case in England, Terra.

Across these contributions by Lee, Sharon, Terra and Haira, we see an understanding of curriculum making as a multi-layered social practice, where curriculum is 'made' by teachers, young people and other practitioners across different sites of activity. These ideas of an 'ecology of curriculum' are consistent, for instance, with the work of Mark Priestley and colleagues (2021). In constructing this dialogue, however, we note that the political and cultural functions of the authorised or national curriculum were not foregrounded in our reflections; such a situation within this dialogue is, in itself, an interesting indicator of how, perhaps, communities of educators in England have been separated from such cultural and political reflections for far too long. Whilst we have pointed to the influential role of a prevailing government ideal of curriculum, we recognise the importance of decolonisation in continuing to disrupt and challenge implicit and explicit acceptance of how curriculum is shaped and formed both culturally and politically by educators working across the school and HE sectors.

As well as such reflections around curriculum and curriculum-making, we invited Sharon, Terra, Haira and Lee to talk about how they understood the terms 'decolonisation' and 'anti-racism' in relation to curriculum, and how these ideas and practices were experienced and realised through their

professional lives through the following prompt questions, whose resulting reflections are presented in sections 2.0 and 3.0:

- What do you understand by the terms ‘anti-racism’ and ‘decolonisation’ in the context of teacher education curricula and/or in your own curriculum work?
- What literature/writings/voices do you draw on when thinking about the terms ‘anti-racism’ and ‘decolonisation’ in your context of practice? Who inspires your thinking?

2.0 Engagement with decolonisation and anti-racism as part of professional practice

Terra: Having taught English in four countries previous to the UK, I was immediately struck by the racism and classism of the curriculum here, as I mentioned above in the case of the English GCSE in England. Michael Gove³'s assertion that English literature is the best in the world, for instance, is laughable to anyone who reads beyond national boundaries and feels that the point of literature is not limited to nationalism. While living in Ethiopia, I mainly read English novels by African writers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah, for instance, stood out for me as exceptional voices that expose the hubris and ignorance of Gove's statement, influential as it has been on GCSE exam boards' choice of texts. Somali colleagues in Bristol have also shared much scholarship to help me understand the rich traditions of Somali poetry, a largely untapped resource despite its value for teaching students context and form (e.g., Orwin & Riiraash, 1997). And there are simply too many people on X/Twitter and in Bristol to mention who have informed my work as thinkers and tireless actors in decolonising the curriculum. That is the thing about decolonial and anti-racist work: it is a beautifully collaborative endeavour, giving teachers back their sense of moral and philosophical purpose beyond getting kids the best grades we can in a system that is rigged to fail a third of them no matter what we do.

Haira: I share a similar experience to yours, Terra, giving our personal and professional experiences outside the UK. In my case, having grown up and worked as a teacher in a formerly colonised country (Brazil), discussions around our colonial history (including the enslavement of African peoples and the genocide of our indigenous communities as part of the construction of the Portuguese-Brazilian colonial state) and its legacies to the country have always been part of my experiences. That context was particularly important for me as well because I was working as a chemistry teacher in a country that was built on the colonial exploitation of land and peoples through, for instance, mining; access to mineral resources was, after all, one of the central drivers of colonial projects across South America. As such, I have sought to constantly engage, both in my chemistry classes and, very importantly, through my own further professional development, with the particular connections between the subject I was teaching and the historical and contemporary landscapes of colonial legacies to that region and its peoples. That is, an important part of my practice as a chemistry teacher was to critically engage (and to support my students' critical engagement) with the connections between science/chemistry and colonial projects, including the role of scientific and technological communities, practices and knowledges in the marginalisation, oppression and racialisation of certain peoples, as I further explored elsewhere (Gandolfi, 2021). And this is certainly the kind of reflection and engagement with decolonial thinking in relation to curriculum, and as part of teacher education, that I have been attempting to continue as part of my work here in England.

³ Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education in England between 2010-2014, instigated and oversaw a major overhaul of English education to focus solely on literary works from England and those traditionally studied in elite private schools.

Lee: It is fascinating to see how our experiences with this area might emerge from different landscapes, Haira. My own interest, being a Headteacher based in England, stems from a different situation: the events of 2020 (the Black Lives Matter marches after the murder of George Floyd in the U.S.), which led to conversations with Headteachers in my Local Authority on how best to approach the conversation with our respective school communities. Through these conversations, it became apparent that there was not a clear enough approach to support school leaders in taking forward concepts such as anti-racism and decolonisation in their practice due to an absence of a shared understanding of the issues and key terminology surrounding this area. It was also apparent that when such conversations had previously taken place, senior leaders did not feel equipped to adequately respond due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, hence my decision at that point to start engaging more deeply with issues surrounding decolonising and anti-racist education.

Sharon: And in my case, my engagement with this area also emerged from a different situation, almost by accident. My original interest as an academic is in educational policy, particularly policy discourses (e.g., Archer, 2007; Clegg et al., 2003). However, theorising race (the processes that reproduce racial thinking, meanings, outcomes, etc.) and examining how policy 'works' through this lens has become central to my research, especially due to my additional interest in Pan-Africanism and the Black Radical Tradition. For example, my doctoral research was an ethnographic study of the widening participation policy agenda in UK HE. I 'followed' the policy - how it is understood, interpreted, implemented and enacted - in a range of HE settings, particularly Russell Group universities, to explore the reproduction of racialised discourses⁴. I also co-led a seminar series on International Black Radicalism⁵ as part of this endeavour several years ago, to reflect on the long tradition of anti-racist activism over many years.

3.0 Understanding decolonisation and anti-racism in the context of teacher education and curriculum

Lee: In my practice, I then see decolonisation as being about providing a balanced perspective of events that may have taken place in history and of contributions from the wider society, not only those with a dominant voice. Meanwhile, anti-racism is about the acknowledgement of unconscious bias, and about redressing biases in teacher recruitment (for example, taking into account an individual's skills, e.g. appointing on merit rather than based on ethnicity or cultural reasons).

Sharon: To problematise your point a bit further, Lee, anti-racism has also strong links to educational policy and practice, especially aiming at challenging and transforming structural racism (the norms/taken-for-granted landscape) in society. By definition, it is critical and transformational in its focus, helping individuals to develop a consciousness of racist systems and practices (Blakeney, 2005). In addition, decolonisation in its original sense, refers to the actions of colonised communities to take back sovereignty/independence from their colonisers; for example, the gaining of independence by many countries in Africa and the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s. Decolonising the curriculum, in this scenario, takes up this original meaning in its efforts to challenge and overturn the legacy of colonial structures. This may be in the area of knowledge (epistemic justice); for example, re-evaluating how knowledge is created, and which knowledge has and is being erased.

⁴ The collective of Russell Group universities in the UK, 24 in total, are 'world-class, research intensive universities': <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/>

⁵ Seminar Series for the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), University of Cambridge: <https://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/research/networks/international-black-radicalism/>

Teacher education is then vital for supporting teachers to grasp the above concepts, including their connections to wider political and social justice movements and what this means for their work in schools. Teachers can be supported in reflecting on the curriculum, pedagogical practice and policy in ways that challenge the racist status quo and transform what is learnt and how it is learnt in school environments.

Haira: I agree, Sharon. And expanding on my reflections on ‘curriculum’ in section 1.0 above, I particularly position ‘decolonisation’ in the context of curriculum work as:

“(...) a process of deconstructing mainstream narratives about knowledge developments through: 1. acknowledging the ‘power relations in the production and dissemination of [any kind of] knowledge; and 2. making these erased histories visible by reconstructing their epistemic, socio-cultural and historical connections with mainstream knowledges - not in a tokenistic, ‘add-on’ approach to diversity in the curriculum, but through a critical exploration of the complex ecologies of knowledges and practices that result from cultural encounters throughout our histories.” (Gandolfi, 2021, p. 511)

In the particular case of teacher education curricula, I then see ‘decolonisation’ as a process of deconstructing – through such teacher education programmes and their curricula – educational practices and narratives about education that have been socio-historically constructed grounded on colonial discourses and practices that sought to marginalise, control and acculturate particular communities via education, such as eugenics, linguicide, epistemicide, etc. (Hall, 2008).

Although emerging from a somewhat different landscape of scholarship, especially from Black thought and Black social movements, I believe that the term ‘anti-racism’ within the context of curriculum and teacher education has several important connections with ‘decolonisation’. However, I also believe anti-racism to be both the driving force behind decolonisation (i.e., to call attention to and counter legacies of historical marginalisation, especially through racialisation processes, of particular communities through education) and its end goal (i.e., to generate and embed educational practices that actively build an anti-racist present and future within school communities).

4.0 Concluding remarks: sources of challenge, solace and inspiration

Terra: To expand on your points above, Haira, I would say that the main barrier to doing such kind of anti-racist/decolonial work as a teacher educator is the lack of racial literacy⁶ at the HE and school level. Exam boards have introduced more texts from Black and Brown authors, which is great. Now we need more Black and Brown colleagues in Bristol so that we can mobilise their racial literacy and ensure all students have the tools to create a more just world. The catch is that schools are not healthy places for minoritised teachers (Glowach et al., 2023), as Lee alluded to above, and there is work to do in schools and at HE before they can be. For instance, I am currently working with colleagues and students at UWE on being more explicit about our legal and professional responsibilities to both the

⁶ Racial literacy refers to “the knowledge and skill set that enables one to understand the concepts of race and racism, which in turn allows one to identify and tackle the latter” (p. 27), as outlined in the [Anti-Racism Framework | Centre for Race, Education and Decoloniality | Leeds Beckett University](#).

2010 Equalities Act⁷ and the Macpherson Report⁸ in the context of England: what does racism look like in school and HE? How do we respond to it? How do we hold each other to account? I am also working with our partner schools to make sure they feel supported where necessary when racism is called out and things get messy.

However, recent attempts in England to reduce the role of universities in ITE⁹, and the newly imposed Core Content Framework (CCF) for ITE, have been a major drain on resources and directly contradicted the 2015 Carter Review¹⁰, which found that 92% of ITE provision in both university and school settings was good or outstanding, that quality provision was dependent on partnership between schools and universities, and that subject knowledge and subject specific pedagogy were essential to quality teacher professional development. Such attempts to constrain university-school partnerships make it increasingly difficult to find space for anti-racist and decolonial praxis in ITE, and have also created an atmosphere of competition across ITE programmes (including between university-based and school-based ones), when we actually need information sharing and collaborative efforts more than ever to tackle the teacher shortage, as well as the many crises faced in schools. Working across institutions is essential to anti-racist and decolonial work, which is why I am continuing to work with the Bristol Decolonising Network (BDN), which includes 75 colleagues from across phases and institutions, to research barriers to anti-racist practice, host anti-racist education forums, share resources and in general to provide an informal and non-hierarchical support network.

Lee: Indeed, Terra. Based on my current knowledge of ITE, there is not enough time within the current framework of ITE and CPD to effectively approach decolonisation and anti-racism. The barriers and challenges include not being able to engage with the school/community audience as they may not be able to understand or have personal experience of the issues. Also, as a school leader, one needs to take care when working within existing frameworks as anti-racism and decolonising is not as relevant as one would hope in current educational policy, for example. This means that resources are not available for schools. I hope for a Department for Education (DfE)-backed agenda in England that supports all educational organisations to effectively embed these issues across the wider curriculum, as I believe this would support transparent conversations within a democratic context.

Haira: I agree with you, Lee. As a teacher educator, especially one working more closely to a subject area (science) that is often positioned as less connected to issues of anti-racism and decolonisation, I think the most challenging barrier for such work is the lack of support at the policy level for such issues to be embedded in teacher education and teachers' work. Important educator-led initiatives have been recently developed around this area – such as the 'Anti-Racism Teacher Education and Training Framework' cited by Terra above – but, as Terra also mentioned, without them being properly positioned at the policy level as central to teacher education and work in England, anti-racism and decolonisation are often seen and included (if at all) as an add-on, one-time-only topic within teacher education curricula; that is, not as central, but as optional to teachers' work in this country. Such lack

⁷ Guidance to support schools in England in relation to the Equalities Act 2010:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-act-2010-advice-for-schools>

⁸ The Macpherson Report published in 1999 was as a result of a public inquiry into the matters arising from the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence in London:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c2af540f0b645ba3c7202/4262.pdf>

⁹ A government framework which imposes a uniform standard curriculum on all teacher education providers curriculum, removing accreditation from those that do not comply:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60e45ae4e90e0764ce826628/ITT_market_review_report.pdf

¹⁰ A review of Initial Teacher Training for the Secretary of State for Education:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/carter-review-of-initial-teacher-training>

of policy interest in this area when approaching teacher education curricula in a country with its own history surrounding colonial projects and race is remarkable to me.

My main hope is for more support at policy level that helps legitimise, consolidate, and expand the hard work that teachers and teacher educators have already started to do in England around anti-racism and decolonisation, which has been done so far mostly in isolation and in spite of national policies and political discourses around the teaching profession. Throughout my work as a teacher educator in this country for the past few years, I have seen good examples of teachers and teacher educators engaging with such areas, including the work by the Terra and her colleagues at the BDN, so my hope is that such examples could be supported to become central, and not the exception, to teacher education and work.

Sharon: It is indeed paramount, in my view, that anti-racist and decolonising perspectives/approaches permeate teacher education. There is a case for stand-alone sessions where new and experienced teachers have the opportunity to explore these concepts and how they can be translated into practice. However, even in sessions not directly concerned with race and racism, we need to re-think them such that they scrutinise their content and pedagogical approaches through these lenses. Also, teacher education providers should be at the forefront of leading the development of classroom resources for teachers to teach a wide range of topics in schools; e.g., resources on Partition in India, the history of the Notting Hill Carnival (the origins of carnival in the Caribbean during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, etc.), and the Haitian Revolution. These are just examples, and there is certainly a need for such resources as teachers often feel in the dark about how to teach such topics across their diverse subject expertise. Much of this work is done at the grassroots level, such as BDN, which is positive in the sense that it responds to community needs and favours creativity; it also means that strong networks (e.g., of teachers) are formed. But while this may be seen as an affordance, political will and an informed public are needed to support these efforts, as you mentioned, Haira. There is no immediate solution for this, but I am hoping for a more educated public debate on these issues to support change at a national level which would hopefully lead to changes in teacher education, curriculum content and policy that promote anti-racist and decolonising practices.

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