

TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE OR TEACHING OBEDIENCE: DO OBEDIENT STUDENTS LEARN BETTER?

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify 1) strategies adopted by teachers to retain students' attention on the lesson and 2) counter strategies adopted by students in responding to teacher behaviour.

The paper is based on data gathered in a leading girls' school in Colombo. A convenient sample of three Grade Nine classrooms was studied through non-participant observations for a period of 20 hours in each classroom.

Majority of teachers depended on the 'authority' that is traditionally attributed to teachers in Sri Lanka while some others used more 'democratic' techniques to retain students' attention on the lesson. Students were not entirely hostile to the idea of 'teacher authority' during a lesson. However, they resisted certain teacher strategies; particularly demands to which adherence was not essential for learning to take place. Students seemed to prefer a democratic style of teaching with the 'right' blend of authority as and when necessary.

Keywords: Traditional classroom, authoritarian teachers, democratic teachers, student resistance, passive learners

Introduction⁷²

Classroom interactions in the Sri Lankan Government school setting has been identified as typically representing teacher-student interactions in a 'traditional classroom' (Karunaratne & Chinthaka, 2012; Karunaratne, Nissanka & Chinthaka 2012). Generations of Sri Lankan teachers have been

⁷² The research discussed in this paper was conducted by the students in the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo studying in their Third Year in 2012. The study was an assignment for the students registered for the course entitled 'Education and Society' (SOC 3267) and the research activities were conducted under the supervision of the lecturer in-charge.

trained to advocate a very authoritarian style of teaching in the classroom. Furthermore, the profession of teaching attracts a great deal of social recognition within wider society which in turn reinforces teacher authority in the classroom as many parents are willing to submit their children to this authority structure. It has also been pointed out that an ‘authoritarian’ teaching strategy is also appreciated by many Sri Lankan students (Karunaratne, 2009).

It is very easy for a student to become a very obedient and submissive learner in this pedagogical context. Irrespective of whether such learners actually ‘learn’ subject matter or not, teachers seem to appreciate their behaviour in class as it makes teaching easier for them (Karunaratne, 2009). It is in this backdrop that the current study has been formulated with two main objectives in mind, namely

1. To identify strategies adopted by teachers to retain students’ attention on the lesson and to keep them engaged in the learning process and
2. To identify counter strategies adopted by students in responding to teacher behaviour.

The paper discusses observational data gathered in a Government girls’ school situated in Colombo 7. Three Grade Nine classrooms (each with a student population of 45-50 students) were observed by three observers in two of the classrooms and four observers in the remaining classroom. Approximately 20 hours of teaching and learning was observed in each classroom. Mathematics, Sinhala Language, Tamil Language, English, History, Buddhism, Physical Training (PT) and Practical Technical Skills (PTS) were among the subjects taught during these hours of observation. Informal discussions (i.e. chatting) with students about their experiences in school were also carried out when teachers were absent for teaching.

‘Learning’ in this case was entirely measured based on notes taken during classroom observations taking into consideration mostly the attention given by students in engaging in learning activities prescribed by teachers.

The ‘Traditional’ Teacher-Student Relationship

It would not be an exaggeration to say that the teacher decides all or most aspects of classroom teaching in a classroom labeled as a ‘traditional’ classroom. As opposed to the ‘modern’ classroom which is more student-centered, the traditional classroom is entirely or mostly dominated by a teacher who exercises considerable authority over the students (Cornelius & Herrenkohl, 2004).

Pace and Hemmings (2008) identifies authority as something very important for classroom life, students’ achievements, teachers’ work, and democracy. Classroom authority, which comes in multiple forms and types, according to these authors depends on 1) teachers’ legitimacy, 2) students’

consent, and 3) a moral order consisting of shared purposes, values, and norms. They further point out that authority is enacted in the classroom as a result of negotiations between teachers and students which in turn may result in subtle or overt conflict. Pace and Hemmings (2008) also point out that teachers gain authority through institutional and personal means. Institutional means of authority comes from traditional and bureaucratic legitimacy through the school. Personal means of authority comes from the teacher's charisma and expertise. Students respect teachers because they perhaps have a university degree, a place in a bureaucratic establishment and also because they have more knowledge than the students; that is expert authority (Amit & Fried, 2005).

In the Sri Lankan context where wider society and the work place expects "obedience to authority" from individuals, the concept of the "hidden curriculum" also becomes relevant in a discussion of classroom authority. LeCompte (1978) points out that irrespective of whether teachers adopt traditional authority or democratic authority in the classroom they always try to instil in children the traits that are required by the work place through the hidden curriculum.

Sri Lankan government school classrooms have been recorded as one where teachers adopt strategies ranging from soft to strict in trying to direct classroom interactions in their desired direction (Mosback, 1984; Karunaratne et al., 2012). These authoritarian styles of teacher-centered practices have also been recorded as a 'preferred' teaching style in the Asian context by many researchers (Coleman, 1996; Karunaratne, 2009; LoCastro, 1996; Shamim, 1996).

However, research conducted in other areas of the world show that students probably prefer a student-centered teaching approach because such an approach gives them the opportunity to be actively involved in what they learn (Carpenter, 2006). Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, Collins, Filer, Wiedmaier and Moore (2007: 21) describe a student-centered teacher as one who places "students at the centre of the learning process, prioritises instruction in response to student diversity and interest, posses strong interpersonal skills." In his discussion of classroom discipline, Clark (1998) too states that a student-centered teaching approach is likely to develop a more disciplined student and thereby enable successful learning.

What constitutes good teaching is a largely debated topic that is nevertheless very important in judging effective teaching and learning practices. Axelrod (2008 in Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan, 2010) points out seven characteristics of a 'good' teacher. They are, accessibility and approachability, fairness, open mindedness, mastery and delivery, enthusiasm, humour and, knowledge and inspiration imparted. These

characteristics undoubtedly describe a more student-centered style of teaching.

Be it traditional or modern, classroom interaction patterns have been identified as an important element that affects the students' learning process. Szejnberg, Brok and Hurek (2004) who argue that student-teacher interactions play an important role in the management of classrooms point out that healthy student-teacher relationships have a positive effect on students' achievement. A similar finding has been recorded by Decker, Dona and Christenson (2007) in a study of African American students.

Reasearchers have also pointed out that the way teachers affiliate with students and control classroom processes is an important factor in explaining the effectiveness of classrooms for student learning (Brekelmans, Mainhard, den Brok, & Wubbels, 2011). These reasearchers conceive affiliation as the warmth and care, and control as the authority or interpersonal influence a teacher conveys in class. In fact, Brown (2003) goes to the extent of saying that teachers in urban schools have to provide more care for their students compared to the rural or semi-urban teacher in order to compensate for the care that is missing in the urban child's home.

There are also some important external factors that might hinder a teacher's capacity to engage in teacher-student interaction that is most conducive to learning. Among them class size is one improtant factor. A teacher dealing with a big class size has to spend more time on disciplining students and on administrative tasks (Blatchford, Moriarty, Martin & Edmonds, 2002). Furthermore, a teacher is likely to give more group instructions than individual instructions in bigger classes making close classroom interaction with individual students difficult (Blatchford, Bassett & Brown, 2011; Blatchford et al., 2002).

The literature discussed here clearly indicates different approaches to teaching and their impact on the learning process. The data gathered in this study will be analysed to see the existence of these prevalances in the selected Sri Lankan Government school.

Teacher-Student Interaction and its Impact on Students' Attention

The data that was gathered through non-participant observation in classrooms were thematically analysed to identify patterns of teacher behaviour and student reactions to those and the resulting teacher-student interaction patterns. Four such patterns of interaction were identified, namely 1) strict teachers - intimidated students, 2) soft teachers - comfortable students, 3) interesting teachers - interested students and 4) labelling teachers – labeled students. These different patterns of teacher-student interaction were mainly a result of teaching strategies adopted by teachers to retain students' attention on what was being taught in class. Furthermore, several

factors external to the teacher and the students were identified as affecting students' attention levels.

Strict Teachers and Intimidated Students

The 'strict' teacher here has been called an 'authoritarian' teacher in a previous study (Karunaratne et al., 2012). The English teacher, Ms. Wettasinghe⁷³ was probably the strictest teacher observed during the study. During her lessons, the students could not do anything other than assigned classroom work. Students in her class were not even allowed to scratch their heads during her presence. Once she told such a student "Where is your hand? Put it down. You have to behave according to the taste of the teacher. If you cannot, you can go out!" (Observer notes 12.06.2012). One observer noted "The students cannot even turn their heads and look at another student during this class" (Observer notes 05.06.2012). On the same day another observer noted "This teacher looks a bit tough. She doesn't even have a smile on her face. Goes on jabbering in English, the students seem lost."

Ms. Kumarasinghe was also quite strict towards the students whenever they did or said anything that she did not like. On the 20th of June 2012, she came for her Tamil lesson a little ahead of time and one student said "Madam,⁷⁴ it is still the 1st period (Tamil was scheduled for the 2nd period)". "Ms. Kumarasinghe scolded the student in language that is inappropriate for a teacher", noted one observer. She told the student "Whatever you guys⁷⁵ (*thamusela*⁷⁶) may say, I will do my work." After few minutes of scolding, the student then had to worship⁷⁷ and formally apologise to the teacher. Right at that time, their class teacher came to the spot and she too scolded the student. Both teachers then asked this student to go round the school apologising to and worshipping all the teachers in the school. As the student left the classroom, Ms. Kumarasinghe told the rest of the class "The rest of you better keep in mind to not associate her." The Mathematics teacher, Ms. Gomez who came to the class next was very sorry to hear what had happened and told the observers that "Many teachers despise this girl because she is a child who is talented at anything she does" (Observer notes 20.06.2012).

These teachers can be claimed to be exercising or even exploiting the authority that is traditionally attributed to teachers in Sri Lanka. The

⁷³ Person names mentioned in this paper are all imaginary names.

⁷⁴ Form of addressing the teacher

⁷⁵ Sinhala words have been translated to English and the Sinhala word has been given in italics where necessary

⁷⁶ Derogatory word meaning 'you all'

⁷⁷ Worshipping individuals who are either older or are in higher social positions than you is a 'traditional' Sinhalese-Buddhist way of showing respect

institutional structure also seems to support this kind of authority (Pace & Hemmings, 2008). The class teacher approving and in fact suggesting a new punishment is an indication of the institutional authority that is enjoyed by teachers.

This ‘strict’ approach to teaching, particularly that of Ms. Wettasinghe undoubtedly got almost perfect attention from all students in the class. However, this kind of student attention was the result of ‘fear’ and not any appealing personal qualities of the teacher or an attractive teaching style. The students were constantly under pressure to keep their classroom behavior under check. However, when a particular teacher was too strict, students always seemed to look for a ‘vent’ to release their stress and quite often this resulted in drifting away from the lesson. Once, a student was observed eating something while holding a pen and pretending to write notes in Ms. Kumarasinghe’s class (Observer notes 22.05.2012). Likewise, the students were never reluctant to grab any opportunity to talk with other classmates.

All teachers irrespective of their general approach to teaching were never hesitant to make use of the authority they are traditionally given as teachers. Ms. Silva, the PTS teacher is not classified as a strict teacher here. However, on 12.06.2012 she lost her temper with the students because they were not attending to the assigned work and said things that were exceptionally bitter. She said, “This class has the worst children in the whole of Grade Nine classes”, “Mothers and fathers should be beaten for bringing up children like this” and “A bunch of wretched (*kalakanni*) children who have come to sicken the teachers.” At a time when understanding child psychology is considered an important part of a teacher’s professional role, it is almost surprising to hear a teacher call students ‘wretched children’. This is a clear example of exploiting the traditional authority structure in the school.

The subtle or the overt conflict that may result from classroom authority (Pace & Hemmings, 2008) was also observed with regard to Ms. Wettasinghe and Ms. Kumarasinghe. Given the authority structure of the school, students would not dare to express overt conflict. However, two instances of such subtle conflict were observed. Once when the bell rang for Ms. Wettasinghe’s English lesson a student said “Oh now the English teacher will come running with her saree lifted up to the knee” (*apo dan english madam ei sariyath ussagena*). The nuance “*sariyath ussagena*” would not be considered appropriate to describe a teacher. It describes a woman who is always unnecessarily rushed and may be looking for a fight (Observer notes 29.05.2012). Likewise, on 12.06.2012 when Ms. Kumarasinghe got late to come to the class and when the class leader (as that is her duty) was going to look for the teacher, few students told the leader

“Please don’t go. We will worship you and give you whatever you want, just don’t go.” These student remarks are clear indications of the stress they feel during the lessons by these two teachers.

Soft Teachers and Comfortable Students

The teaching strategy identified here as ‘soft’ has been called ‘democratic’ elsewhere (Karunaratne et al., 2012). However, the term ‘soft’ seems more appropriate as the strategies described here are not exactly fully democratic.

‘Soft’ teachers had a friendly and kind way of talking to students, paid attention to student requests regarding the content of the lesson, made sure that a majority in the class understood what was being taught before proceeding and did not mind student misconduct as long as it did not disturb the class. Ms. Perera who teaches Sinhala played back a song for the class to listen. She too joined the students and sang with them. She used a lot of humour when explaining the literary significance of the song. “The class looks very relaxed and seems to be enjoying the lesson” noted an observer (Observer notes 22.05.2012).

On 29.05.2012, Ms. Perera said that she planned to give a small test that day and the class refused to do it in a very polite manner saying “please, (no) madam” (*ane madam*). The teacher accepted their request and decided to do a lesson instead of the test. This is clearly a case of democracy in action in the classroom and these democratic practices made the classroom a more disciplined place in the presence of Ms. Perera as noted by Clark (1998). During her lessons many students, even the ones at the back of the class, actually engaged in the assigned classroom tasks.

However, Ms. Perera’s democracy had its limits and she did not hesitate to be stern about her instructions when she was convinced about its significance for learning. She did so in her own soft and kind way. Finishing her lesson on 29.05.2012, Ms. Perera asked the students to complete two activities in the textbook at home. Again the class said “Please (no) madam”. Then Ms. Perera said “If you all are children who suit this time and age, then you are talented (*daksha*) children, so complete it and bring tomorrow.” This seems like a perfect example for successful negotiation of classroom authority that has been described by Pace and Hemmings (2008).

Ms. Pinto, the English teacher also had a similarly ‘soft’ approach toward the children. One day, just before Ms. Pinto’s lesson, the students were punished and were made to stand in the corridor. Ms. Pinto who called the students back to the class, did not scold them. Instead she advised them and said that they must always live their lives in a manner that they do not bother other people. A further observation during Ms. Pinto’s lesson was that she encouraged students to ask questions from her. On one occasion when a

student asked a question she said “It’s good you asked that question son (*putha*)” (Observation notes 19.06.2012) and then she made the clarification for the entire class. It is also important to note that this teacher spoke entirely in Sinhala with the students except for when she was teaching subject matter. The comfort a student may feel when spoken to in the mother tongue by the teacher during a second language lesson has been noted (Karunaratne, 2009). The students’ enthusiasm towards engaging in classroom tasks during Ms. Pinto’s lesson is undoubtedly what Carpenter (2006) calls “active involvement” in the learning process.

Ms. Pinto also seemed to encourage students to engage in extracurricular activities; a rare practice by many teachers according to the students. She gave such students special attention during her lesson if they have missed class work due to such activities. Encouraging students to engage in extracurricular activities and then helping them catch up with missed lessons is also a form of democracy that is student-centered. Exposure gained by engaging in extracurricular activities and the one-on-one attention received by the student later can in fact result in better learning achievements. This could also be considered a situation where students were kept “at the centre of the learning process” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007) in making classroom decisions.

There were also teachers who were 'soft' to the extent of not being at all keen about whether students engaged in learning activities or not. This style of teaching has been identified as an 'ignorant' style of teaching in a previous study (Karunaratne et al., 2012). During Ms. Herath’s Buddhism lesson, only the students in front were observed responding to the teacher’s ‘group’ instructions and questions. The students at the back were either talking to each other or engaged in other activities such as completing notes for other subjects. Ms. Herath who walked to the back of the class while teaching noticed these students. However, she did not say anything to the students. Likewise, when she corrected books later she did not say anything to those who had not completed their assigned work (Observer notes 29.05.2010). This style of teaching, though soft and democratic in the sense that students enjoy “learning freedom”, is not at all effective in terms of engaging students in classroom activities as there was almost no compliance on the part of students.

Even in the case of ‘soft’ teachers, there were instances of subtle classroom conflict (Pace & Hemmings, 2008) where students mocked the teacher. As Ms. Pinto left the classroom she dropped something that was on the table by mistake. Instead of picking it up, she told a student in the front row to pick it up and left the room. The student picked it up and put it back on the table and then made a funny face (mocked) at the teacher who was leaving the room (Observer notes 12.06.2012). This seems like a clear case of

student resistance towards teachers exploiting the school hierarchy structure which almost gives teachers uncontested authority in the classroom.

Interesting Teachers and Interested Students

The History teacher, Ms. Soysa and the Geography teacher, Ms. Pieris had unique ways of teaching that they adopted largely due to the nature of their subject matter. Ms. Soysa almost acted out historical episodes of Sri Lankan history making it sound like “story-telling” time. The students seemed “mesmerised” (Observer notes 05.06.2012) by this style of teaching and there was perfect student attention on the lesson. The Geography teacher on the other hand used questions and answers to teach her subject matter. Obviously the questions were asked by the teacher and when the students failed to provide a correct answer the teacher answered the question. Here too the students were attentive as they could not afford to miss a question or an answer.

Mr. Edward, a Mathematics teacher was the only male teacher observed during the study. His Mathematics lesson was scheduled after Ms. Wettasinghe’s (English), Ms. Soysa’s (History) and Ms. Peiris’ (Geography) lessons. All the above three lessons required students to be very attentive due to different reasons. Compared to the previous lessons, students seemed very relaxed during Mr. Edward’s lesson. He was never strict on the students even when he noticed them talking to each other. At such times he only asked “Now did I ask anyone to talk?” He also had a different form of address when talking to students, i.e. ‘children’ (*daruwane*⁷⁸).

Ms. Gomez was another Mathematics teacher whose lesson the students seemed to enjoy. She was never strict on the students and repeated the same sum again and again till a majority of the students assured her that they understood what was being taught. She always called students to the blackboard and asked them to do sums on the board and watched them from behind the class. This way she got to keep an eye on the other students too. In the case of both these teachers, they had very soft ways of disciplining the students by exercising classroom authority in a very democratic manner which seemed to have a special appeal for the students. All observers had noted very ‘friendly’ relations between these two teacher and the students during all the lessons observed. The “friendliness” or the “special appeal” is probably the kind of care that is recorded by Brekelmans, Mainhard, den Brok and Wubbels (2011) and Brown (2003) in teacher-student interaction.

⁷⁸ In the Sinhala language both *lamai* and *daruwane* has the same literal meaning, i.e. children. The commonly used form of address was *lamai*. However, the word *daruwane* carries a sense of emotional attachment (like that between a father and a daughter) for native speakers.

Lebelling Teachers and Labelled Students

Some teachers also seemed to categorise students and praise one category over others. The motive behind this strategy seemed to be an attempt to encourage the students to do well and join the ‘better’ categories. However, this approach seemed to have a debilitating impact on every student and was not at all useful in retaining students’ attention on the lesson. The ‘good’ students did what they wanted in the class because their ‘position’ within the class was ‘unchallenged’. The ‘bad’ students knew they did not stand a chance and was anyway not keen on becoming ‘good’.

The PTS teacher, Ms. Silva praised one student for sewing well. She showed the student’s work to the class and said “see how pretty this is. This is not a mischievous (*danga*) child. You can say that when you look at her work. This child has done her work very neatly” (Observer notes, 22.05.2012). Ms. Silva seemed to have identified a group of students as keen to study and she seemed to always talk to them in the class. Duties were assigned to them and she maintained eye contact mostly with them during the lesson. A group of students were asked to bring what was necessary for frying potato chips and then Ms. Silva asked someone to take the responsibility of ensuring that everything is brought to class. Students pointed to one student but the teacher said “she is a very innocent (*ahinsaka*) child. (Pointing to a another student) Can’t you take the responsibility?” (Observer noted 22.05.2012). The implication here was that ‘innocent’ children could not take up a responsibility and obviously the one appointed by the teacher was from her ‘preferred’ group of students.

The students who always received Ms. Silva’s attention were also not particularly happy about being the “chosen ones”. Whenever the teacher was looking for someone to assign a duty, some of these students were observed trying to sit on the floor so as to hide. As explained, it seems that both groups of students do not fully engage in classroom work; hence the debilitating impact.

Another type of distinction made by teachers was of those who have entered the school through the scholarship examination⁷⁹ and those who have continued in the same school from primary grades. The mathematics teacher, Ms. Fernando seemed very particular when the “scholarship” students responded to her questions. She referred to students as “you scholarship child” and made comments such as “scholarship student is correct” (Observer notes 12.06.2012). During her lessons the so called “scholarship” students were more active than the rest of the class.

⁷⁹ Scholarship examination is the first national level (very competitive) examination faced by the students in Grade five and successful candidates are offered opportunities to join “better” schools from Grade six onwards

Researchers such as Watson (2000) and Anagnostopoulos (2006) discuss how teachers identify certain types of students based on informal classroom assessments and sometime based on examinations. They have shown that such teacher assessments can actually affect a student's acquisition level and classroom participation. The classroom interaction pattern discussed here represents such assessments and show how they affect a student's level of classroom participation.

External Factors that Affect the Teacher-Student Interaction

Several factors external to the teacher or students that indirectly affect the teacher-student relationship in the classroom were also identified. Number of students in a classroom is one main factor. Each classroom in the sample had 45-50 students. This generated a lot of noise during group discussions and whenever students chatted during lessons. A further problem was lack of space created by large class size. In some classrooms this made it difficult for teachers to physically reach the students at the back of the class and this also gave students the opportunity to avoid classroom work. It has been reported that large class sizes can block close contact between the teacher and the students (Blatchford et al., 2011; Blatchford et al., 2002; Karunaratne, 2009).

Some teachers claimed that the focus placed on 'covering the syllabi' inhibited their capacity to implement a student-centered teaching approach. Ms. Gomez said that the curriculum only pays lip service to student-centered classroom practices because teachers are burdened with a syllabus which is difficult to complete in one year using entirely student-centered approaches. According to her, teachers are forced to sacrifice student-centered strategies and focus on ways through which they can complete the textbook. A similar observation has been recorded by Karunaratne (2009) about English language teaching.

Conclusion

The study intended to identify and understand strategies adopted by teachers to retain student's attention on the lesson and also student's reaction to these teacher strategies through non-participant observation in a girls' school in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The sample chosen for the study were Grade Nine classes.

This qualitative inquiry identified four types of teacher-student interaction patterns during a lesson, namely strict teachers and intimidated students, soft teachers and comfortable students, interesting teachers and interested students and, labelling teachers and labeled students. The first three types of interaction patterns were identified as being more effective in retaining students' attention on the lesson compared to the last pattern of

interaction. In all of the interaction patterns observed, teacher authority seemed to be a common feature. Classroom interaction was mostly dominated by teachers as a result of traditional teaching practices and general cultural practices in the country. Although students did not seem obviously unhappy about the traditional approach taken by many teachers, there were instances of subtle resistance from students particularly when the teachers seemed to exploit the authority attributed to them. Students seemed much happier and engaged when they were given some amount of freedom and democracy in the class.

The study raises important implications for teacher training and recruiting policy. It is felt that teachers must be made sensitive to the subject of child psychology as some comments made by teachers seemed to hurt students' feelings and also de-motivate them. Even though all teachers in Sri Lanka go through either in-service or pre-service training and child psychology is a compulsory 'subject' in these training programs, there seem to be a lack of sensitivity to the subject in practice. At the stage of recruitment, teachers must be made aware of and committed to a professional ethos that respects students' freedom while appreciating the authority that is attributed to teachers as a mechanism of maintaining classroom discipline which is undoubtedly very important for learning to take place.

The external factors that were discussed here as having an impact on teacher-student relationship needs to be given attention to during teacher training and recruitment. In addition to training teachers in pedagogy and related subject matter, they should be trained to manage large class sizes and to teach the syllabi within a specified timeframe. Teachers must also be made aware of student-centred teaching practices and their implementation must be ensured through school and ministerial-level monitoring. Peer-observation of colleagues' lessons might also prove to be a low-cost training mechanism for teachers in-service.

All in all, a teacher training program that surpasses the 'traditional' content and framework is recommended. Further studies measuring 'learning' through quantitative means and comparing it with different teaching styles is also recommended.

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