EDUCATION INQUIRY
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EDUCATION INQUIRY

Education Inquiry is an international on-line, peer-reviewed journal with free access in the field of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education. It publishes original empirical and theoretical studies from a wide variety of academic disciplines. As the name of the journal suggests, one of its aims is to challenge established conventions and taken-for-granted perceptions within these fields.

Education Inquiry is looking for lucid and significant contributions to the understanding of contextual, social, organizational and individual factors affecting teaching and learning, the links between these aspects, the nature and processes of education and training as well as research in and on Teacher Education and Teacher Education policy. This includes research ranging from pre-school education to higher education, and research on formal and informal settings. Education Inquiry welcomes cross-disciplinary contributions and innovative perspectives. Of particularly interest are studies that take as their starting point, education practice and subject teaching or didactics.

Education Inquiry welcomes research from a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, and invites studies that make the nature and use of educational research the subject of inquiry. Comparative and country-specific studies are also welcome.

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Editorial

*Education Inquiry* is a new international online, peer-reviewed journal with free access in the field of Educational Sciences and Teacher Education. It is published by the Umeå School of Education, Umeå University, Sweden and is issued four times per year (March, June, September, December). It pursues original empirical and theoretical studies from a wide variety of academic disciplines. The new journal will hopefully fulfil our ambitious expectations as regards publishing interesting and important research from different national contexts. It is our ambition to make it international in that sense. Also, as the name of the journal suggests, one of its aims is to challenge established conventions and taken-for-granted perceptions within these fields. *Education Inquiry* welcomes research from a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches, and invites studies that make the nature and use of educational research the subject of inquiry. Comparative and country-specific studies are also welcome. *Education Inquiry* readers include educators, researchers, teachers and policy-makers in various cultural contexts.

The journal has been established in a period of time when education systems are undergoing radical changes all over the world. Big and strong policy actors in this connection are the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Bank and, from the European horizon, of course also the European Union. What unites the development and proposals that are being brought forward is a logic based on neo-liberal and market-oriented ideas. The guiding principle is competition and surveillance. The Programme for International Student Assessment which today, according to its own statement, covers 90 percent of the world’s economies has now become a hegemonic enterprise as regards the reform of national education systems in terms of more external examinations and more privatised options. Neo-liberalism and a market orientation also have an impact on higher education, where excellence research, external research funding on a competitive basis, research efforts evaluated in terms of impact and international publication are mantras constantly being repeated. Several articles in this issue of *Education Inquiry* deal with different aspects of this fact.

We are pleased to be able to present articles from Australia, Scotland, the USA and Sweden in this first issue of *Education Inquiry*. Linda Croxford’s article “Tensions between the Equity and Efficiency of Schooling: the Case of Scotland” shows, on the basis of two recently completed research projects in Scotland, “how pressures for continuous improvement in attainment lead to practices that exacerbate inequalities”. In the article “A Critique of Instructional Objectives”, James McKernan argues that the ‘objectives model’ of curriculum planning predicted upon behavioural performances has become the dominant form in Europe and elsewhere in the world. In his article he argues that the objectives model is satisfactory for training or instruction, but not when applied to a true sense of ‘education’. Cole & Hager’s article “Learning-practice:
The Ghosts in the Education Machine” discusses, on the basis of theoreticians and philosophers such as Ryle, Wittgenstein, Deleuze & Guattari and Dreyfus & Dreyfus that, no matter how thoroughly and precisely one tries to put into words and describe a teaching situation, there is always “an element missing in the teacher’s account”, which in the article is called “the ghosts in the education machine” and which can be attributed to the complexity, multiplicity and variation in every teaching context. The fourth and last article in this issue, Christina Olin-Scheller’s “Literary Prosumers – Young People’s Reading and Writing in a New Media Landscape”, focuses on another international phenomenon, namely the digital media society that has in many different ways changed the prerequisites for teaching and learning. With examples taken from different types of fan culture, she shows that culture is a matter of ‘user generated content’ and that young people in that sense are vital participants as ‘prosumers’. In these contexts patterns for learning are being developed that can also be used in an educational context.

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A Critique of Instructional Objectives

James McKernan

Abstract

The 'objectives model' of curriculum planning, predicated upon behavioural performances, has become the dominant form of curriculum planning in Europe and elsewhere in the world. This paper argues that the objectives model is satisfactory for training or instruction, but falls down when applied to a true sense of 'education'. The paper outlines 13 limitations on the use of educational objectives. It is argued that those interested in using objectives are guided by evaluation as assessment rather than principles of procedure for education. Education is about the process of 'travelling' on an educational journey – not about 'arriving' at a destination.

Keywords: instructional objectives, limitations of objectives, curriculum planning, process model.

Introduction

Perhaps no other issue has been more contentious, nor more words written about, than the notion of the application of objectives to a curriculum. Nowadays folks seem to regularly confuse the concept of education with training and instruction. It has been argued elsewhere (McKernan, 2008; Stenhouse, 1975) that the 'objectives model' is more suitable for training or instruction than for education. Training is a concept conceived of as the acquisition of skills and the capacity for human performance. An example of training might include building a patio deck or a canoe. One might say of an accomplished potter that there is great skill in his work but skill and technique do not alone make one educated. Instruction has largely to do with information acquisition and the ability to retain data such as the names of the capitols of American states or a recipe for a spaghetti sauce. Education, however, results in increased knowledge and belief systems and an introduction or induction into the knowledge of the culture and the capacity to construct new ideas and allow the imagination work. As such, education is constructivist – one can make new meaning with it. It therefore has a cognitive dimension. The objectives model breaks down especially in science and the arts where explorative activity is aimed at. In such an enterprise one cannot predict outcomes of the education process. How can an educator predict what a student will learn from a thoughtful study of Beowulf or Hamlet?

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Professor Richard S. Peters (Peters, 1966: 27) argued that the confusion about outcomes in education arises largely because of extracting the normative feature that is presumably built into the ‘extrinsic’ end. Peters defined education as ‘intentionally bringing about of a desirable state of mind in a morally unobjectionable manner’. Of course, education is seen as a rational endeavour and there was a time when ‘aims’ were the thing, not ‘behavioural or instructional objectives’ that specifically state what one is to know or do as the result of instruction. I will argue that such a notion as ‘knowing or being able to do’ hints more at a performance and is suited better to training or instruction but not education as education has a large propensity to lead one to unanticipated results and outcomes.

The idea of planning a curriculum with objectives has been prominent since the time of Franklin Bobbitt (Bobbitt, 1918; 1924) in American education. Indeed, Educational Psychology defines learning as demonstrable changes in human behaviour, and a whole host of writers have championed the use of behavioural/instructional objectives as performance targets as evidence for learning (Gronlund, 1970; Mager, 1962; Popham, 1968; Popham and Baker, 1970). Benjamin Bloom suggested objectives to be “explicit formulations of ways in which students are expected to be changed by the educative process” (Bloom, 1956). Mager, a leading advocate of behavioural objectives, argued: “an objective is a description of a performance you want learners to be able to exhibit before you consider them competent. An objective describes an intended result of instruction, rather than the process of instruction itself” (Mager, 1962). The Mager model recommended that objectives should be specific and measurable. Mager specified the three parts of an objective as follows: (1) it should have a measurable verb (an action verb); (2) it should include a specification of what the learner is given; and (3) it should contain a specification of criteria for success or competency. For example, ‘The student, when presented with a human skeleton, will identify 30 bones, within 15 minutes, with 80 percent accuracy’. The debate about the value of objectives relative to the planning and delivery of instruction has gone on for many years. This article continues the criticism of using such behavioural outcomes in educational experiences.

The position adopted here is that instructional/behavioural objectives may be useful when working with the concepts of training or instruction but are unacceptable when dealing with the concept of education. In the view of R.S. Peters (Peters, 1966), education involves the development of a cognitive perspective, or mind, whilst instruction hints at information and training lends itself to the development of competence in a limited mode of skills; whilst ‘education’ aims at a wider view of knowledge and system of beliefs. We would not call a person highly educated who has mastered some skill e.g. pottery, even though the skill may be regarded as exemplary; nor one who has been instructed in the evacuation procedure for a building.
Some Criticisms of Using Instructional Objectives

1. Objectives do not exist in reality
A crucial understanding is that we do not have objectives at all. They are conceptions, not objects like textbooks or blackboards. The thing is they are not real – we choose to conceptualise our goals as objectives or we choose not to, remarked Stenhouse (Stenhouse, 1975). We must not fall into the danger of reifying the objectives model. In policy areas like curriculum and education theory serves the function of organising data. The point is that we are often beguiled by systems of organisation that tend to tidy up what are really messy situations. The use of categories and systems of educational objectives tends to ambitiously organise and promise coherence and therefore convince one that the theory is more likely correct when in fact it is merely a mental musing – its purpose should not be to lure us to its coherence but to invite testing that will refute it.

2. Educators are asked to accept objectives uncritically
Objectives are usually formulated at state or central government level and handed down to local education authorities as part of a plan for implementing the curriculum, or what is sometimes referred to as the standard course of study. There is a presumption that in drawing up a standard course of study with objectives that this is the final prescription and must be accepted without question by educators as a mandate for its authority. Successful policy depends upon this ‘culture of compliance’. One should not forget that a curriculum is at best only a proposal, a hypothesis that recommends that this content along with these methods and these purposes (objectives) can be measured by these tests and they will be effective. A curriculum must stand the test of implementation. Teachers have a duty to discard objectives and content that does not perform as a result of evaluation.

   Teachers, in particular, have not been empowered to generate their own decisions regarding curriculum objectives, content and assessment. It should be observed, at least in the USA, that a ‘state-based’ rather than a ‘school-based’ approach to curriculum making is operative. Educators in this model are ‘de-professionalized’ serving as mere functionaries in a state bureaucracy (McKernan, 2008). Being perceived as powerless, it is easy to see how many expect teachers to accept without question the carefully laid plans of the state. One of my graduate students revealed she had to cover several hundred objectives in her social studies classes and another complained of having to deal with some 50 chapters to prepare for an end-of-course state examination. Uncritical acceptance is the last thing an educator should ever submit to.

3. Objectives reduce education to an instrumental-utilitarian activity: taking a means to an end
Since the time of Frankin Bobbitt (1918; 1924) the idea of planning by objectives has been popular reaching a sort of zenith in the work of Ralph Tyler (1949) with
his behavioural ‘objectives model’ that is seen as a teacher taking a means to a specified end. The idea behind this model is seen as changing the behaviour of the student – therefore any statement of purpose (objectives) is seen as changes taking place in the behaviour of students (Tyler, 1949:44). The most useful way of doing this is to select learning experiences and guiding teaching to achieve the objectives. This notion of Behaviourism as a guiding theoretical model has been the dominant force in curriculum-making, despite recent attacks discrediting Behaviorism as a sufficient theory of behaviour and of a model for curriculum (Sockett, 1973).

The Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato believed education to be an ‘intrinsic’ activity as in the development of mind and ideas, and for the development of the self; not as a crass instrumental process leading to some extrinsic goods. Seeing education as an instrument to achieve some goal was regarded as vulgar and, indeed, vocational to these first Western thinkers. In the case of the disciplines, or forms of knowledge, like Mathematics or Music, the justification lies in the execution of the principles of procedure in the discipline itself – not in reaching some instrumental end. If we are always aiming at pre-specified ends then we can never grow. The improvement of education does not rest upon the clarification of ends but in criticising our practice. I shall argue that we possess a ‘marker model’ and not a ‘critical’ model of curriculum.

4. Breaking education down into targets is destructive of the epistemology of disciplines/subjects

Perhaps the most compelling criticism is that the objectives of a course do not reflect the complex epistemology or structure of knowledge and values of a discipline or subject field. The sociologist Michael F.D. Young (Young, 1972) remarked that the translation of disciplines like Mathematics and its deep structure of knowledge into behavioural objectives is a principle cause of the distortion of true knowledge in schools and colleges. By filtering knowledge into lists of objectives, which ultimately become objective test items in multiple choice tests, the school and state exert a hegemony of power over the student by setting arbitrary limits to knowledge and the critical capacities of learners. This sets up teachers as masters of defined fields when, in fact, teachers are learners along with their students. What educators should aim at is getting students to seek the knowledge that none yet possesses, rather than mastering fields already known. It seems somewhat irrational to conceive of a form of knowledge as a blueprint made up of the various cognitive and affective objectives which ideally represent the structure of knowledge in the discipline. The knowledge, values and dispositions of a discipline like Mathematics are not easily incorporated in mere lists of objectives. Can a list add up to a real epistemic coherence? Objectives do not reflect the ‘internal logic’ of a discipline or subject.
5. Objectives are often stated as low-level trivial recall items

Stating outcomes in terms of simple recall is easily formulated and mastered. Most objectives’ test items fall into this ‘knowing that’ category as opposed to more complex synthesis or evaluative items. At a superficial level, the objectives model supports a relationship of ‘banking’ education by which teachers alert students to important facts and use test situations so that students may recall these facts, demonstrating mastery. Now this mastery is not the kind that true education advocates in which students do research and mount inquiries that may lead to unpredictable outcomes and novel and unique experiences. For example, the arts are not concerned to reach targets or goals once and for all but to deepen appreciation through the rational development of judgment, criticism and standards of taste.

Professor Mike Atkin, among others, has levelled this criticism:

There is a strong tendency in the literature about behavioral objectives in curriculum design to make the assumption that the objectives that can be defined behaviorally, the objectives that can be readily assessed, are the important objectives for a school program. The corollary also seems to be accepted. If it seems impossible to detect and assess a specific learning outcome, it probably is not important (Atkin, 1969:17).

6. Predetermination prevents ‘teachable’ moments and pursuing inquiries thrown up by the teaching/learning process

If a teacher feels compelled to cover the content or objectives required of the standard course of study put out by state authorities, this itself may limit ‘teachable moments’ that arise out of student curiosity or inquiry during the process of teaching and learning. A teachable moment is the idea that a student is excited about a new question that arises from their work e.g. a student of American Civil War history knows the location of graves, recently discovered, where Confederate soldiers fell. He wants to learn more about the battle in which they fell as he lives near these graves – are we to expect a teacher to disallow this inquiry or to support it? The National Education Association’s Code of Ethics holds a principle which reads that a teacher should never constrain a student’s inquiries.

Pre-specification prevents an educator from taking advantage of instructional opportunities that unexpectedly and naturally arise in the classroom when active minds are at work. To halt inquiry because of pressure to achieve targets is an unreasonable constraint on the pursuit of human understanding. Inquiry should throw up new ideas and the curious mind is instructed to pursue such inquiries in the spirit of learning.

The notion of a ‘liberal education’ and its relationship between knowledge and the mind is also to be considered. To wit, it is a relatively distinctive activity of the mind to pursue knowledge, and this should not be interrupted. In this sense, the pursuit
of truth and knowledge through mental curiosity is therefore the pursuit of the good life. Since knowledge is based on what is true and not on speculative opinion, it thus contains a ‘certainty’ or ‘finality’ that no other form of education possesses. Thus, education and its encouragement as a virtue for the person has value as the fulfilment of the mind and should be condoned – not arrested.

7. It is not democratic to set targets in advance of instruction

To set objectives in advance of instruction or education is not democratic in that this act fences in the work setting boundaries to inquiry, content and discussion. Moreover, for external agents to do this would seem autocratic in that teachers and students are the active agents in the process of education. Why is it that educators and students have little say in stating the goals and outcomes of a standard course? Leaving parents, teachers and students out of planning is autocratic in the least. To plan in this fashion is highly ‘de-professionalising’. It seems to this author that members of the school community including parents, students, educators and administrators should set the purposes of instruction. It is an act of supreme arrogance and autocracy for state officials to deny educators and the school community this right.

8. Objectives often set the agenda for hegemonic group interests to be served

Critical theorists (Apple, 1979; Habermas, 1972; Young, 1972) have argued that some groups adopt hegemonic practices in order to control others. Paulo Freire (Freire, 1970) has called our attention to the need for ‘conscientisation’ so that the oppressed can throw off the shackles of hegemonic practices directed towards them. This may be one of the major factors that encouraged the ‘teacher as researcher’ and ‘critical action research’ (McKernan, 1996; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Winter, 2001) movements to gather momentum. Critical educational action researchers seek to expose the unjust practices and policies that support inequality. A state curriculum premised upon the theory of Essentialism, where students focus on the 3 Rs and a few core areas of study, sends a very impoverished message: that only the basics and essentials really matter in schooling. It is the duty of educators to unearth these politically motivated policies and to expose these publicly so that all students receive a fair and equitable curriculum with equal opportunities.

9. Objectives represent poor models of teacher-student interaction

The use and formulation of objectives by others requests students to arrive at destinations pre-determined by these others and not through the students’ inquiries. Aquinas said teaching is a loving relationship between tutor and tutee based on love, faith and respect. Genuine journeys of curiosity do not have their destinations charted in advance of instruction. It is dialogue that is Socratic between teacher and student.
that a journey is processed. The objectives will determine how students interact with
teachers and teachers with students when inquiries of learning should dictate that
interaction. Research-based teaching located in students’ questions is much more
demanding than teaching a defined set of objectives-based instructional content which
in reality is teaching a “rhetoric of conclusions” (Stenhouse, 1983:177).

Often the teaching of facts leads to a ‘mastery learning’ scenario where students are
expected to know key terms, definitions etc. Students are tested on their knowledge
in ‘objective’ type tests to prove the worth of their learning. Such a curriculum does
not encourage the students’ curiosity or desire to learn. This instructional pedagogy
focuses upon a finite content – it thus sets itself up as the domain of knowledge that
is valued and taught. It would seem that such a pedagogy of teaching a rhetoric of
conclusions is not a good model that allows for student inquiries or research-based
teaching. It will seriously affect the interaction of students with the teacher and is
appropriate for instruction and training but not education. In calling for inquiry/
research-based teaching teachers are asked to share with students the process of
learning the knowledge which none yet possesses so that the teacher and students can
get into critical perspective the knowledge which they trust they do indeed possess.

10. Empirically speaking, teachers do not plan by starting
the curriculum with objectives

My point here is that after 35 years of curriculum development work with groups of
teachers in workshop settings I have learned that teachers do not start by identifying
objectives when planning lessons and units of work. Educators begin rather with the
content they must teach and the methods for teaching that content. The curriculum,
when all is said, is essentially about content and pedagogy.

When involved in curriculum change, educators often begin with a general situ-
atutional analysis or understanding of what needs to be done regarding content and
resources – not with statements of targets. They usually point to the constraints that
will have to be faced in creating new curricula such as financial resources or time to
conduct the work. Remember curriculum development is about change – these agents
are changing a problematic situation or creating an entirely new content area. Teach-
ers exercising the ‘practical’ factor will consider making an informed analysis of their
setting and situation before launching into making lists of objectives. For example,
what are the requirements of the state examination system? What resources are avail-
able for curriculum change and such queries will occupy educationalists.

11. The limits of discourse act as a constraint on objectives

Elliot Eisner (2002) suggests that discourse itself has limits which prevent one from
adequately describing intentions in clear language. For example, can one describe the
taste of water or the trait of ‘sensitivity’? How does one attempt to articulate in words
what one knows non-linguistically? That is, we do not often have an adequate language
to disclose the special character of our work in education and are thus prisoners due to this linguistic constraint. Eisner argues that educators must develop qualities of connoisseurship and literary criticism to disclose these qualities. We need to strengthen our evaluative talents to use a critical model of evaluation. Instead of simply recalling facts and the like, Eisner calls for “expressive objectives” that disclose these aesthetic and peculiar characteristics. For example, pupils will visit an alternative energy site and report on what they saw and learned there.

12. Objectives are often perceived as having equal value when in fact some are of greater importance and of varying classificational significance

Some intentions or objectives are simply of a different variety (education vs. training) and some outcomes more valuable and important than other outcomes. As values, objectives are ipsative — that is they have a rank order of value — some are more crucial and valuable than others, as Bloom indicates with his **Taxonomy of Educational Objectives** (Bloom et al. 1956). That hierarchies of educational value exist is not the question. What is more significant is that planners highlight priorities among outcomes. For example, is it more important that a student can define the capitals of the American states or be able to critically evaluate programmes of poverty resolution? Let me attempt to sketch a model of curriculum that exposes these two tiers that correspond with ‘instruction, training and education’ (Levels 1-3) and the second tier (Levels 4-6) that represent objectives focusing on ‘education’.

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**A Model of Curriculum Outcomes as Instruction, Training or Education**

| Mastery of information (Knowledge, Comprehension, Application) | **Training and Instruction** |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Skills and competencies                                       |                             |
| Levels 1, 2 and 3 of Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy)              |                             |
| **Analysis, Synthesis & Critical Reasoning**                 | **Education**               |
| Levels 4, 5&6 of Cognitive Domain                             |                             |

Take, for example, the first three levels of Bloom’s Cognitive Domain for his (Bloom et al. 1956) **Taxonomy of Educational Objectives**. A cursory examination of this famous cognitive taxonomy reveals two rough tiers: The lowest levels comport with *instruction and training* along and with mastery of information. The higher-order cognitive skills align in the main with *education*, and include analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Let
me describe briefly what I mean. Tier-one outcomes include knowledge as in simple recalling, defining terms etc; comprehension which includes activities like classifying, and explaining events and, finally, application which serves activities such as solving problems, illustrating plans etc. Levels 4-6 deal more concretely with education per se. Analysis hints at comparing and contrasting; synthesis with arranging, composing and ideation; while evaluation suggests judging, predicting and arguing. There is an informational and skills character to the lower tier while the higher-order cognitive categories bespeak an educational value and character. Too often curricula focus on these lower levels. The big task for planners is to get the instructional, training and educational outcomes into a proper perspective so that all may be realised. At present, it seems more ‘mush’ than mesh.

13. Unanticipated outcomes are always being achieved and sometimes they are the most valuable results

Stenhouse (Stenhouse, 1975) argued that unanticipated outcomes are always being achieved. This is the notion Michael Scriven had in mind when he proposed his classic Goal-Free Evaluation model. Scriven (Scriven 1973) suggested that the curriculum must be seeking worthwhile goals as well as achieving what it attempts, and other things that happen as a “payoff” in the evaluation. That is, there is an intrinsic value of content, goals, assessment procedures etc and secondarily there is the effects on students. When one really examines this, what really matters is the effects of the curriculum on students – and these may not at all be what the planners intended. For example, instead of promoting cultural understanding and tolerance for minority groups a race relations curriculum may actually reinforce prejudices. New ideas and knowledge are precisely this stuff. They are novel, unexpected and unplanned for, but here they are. And the effects are often not what were intended. Finally, with areas like the arts and sciences some work in education needs to be deliberately explorative in that it does not seek a predetermined end. After Aristotle, “art loves chance”.

Conclusions

The objectives model seeks to provide the clarity of ends and is seemingly suitable for both training and instruction where skills and performances are paramount. However, the objectives model’s great problem lies in the area of induction into knowledge. From a moral point of view, the objectives model is arrogant and undemocratic in attempting to specify the behaviour of students in advance of instruction. Professor Herbert Kliebard (Kliebard, 1968:246) suggested that pre-specifying objectives amounts to indoctrination in the sense that it purports to stipulate how a person is to behave and then by attempting to control the environments so as to manipulate students into behaving as the teacher wishes them to. Perhaps the most important product produced by a student is a personal project such as a term paper or essay. This product might also include the creation of a piece of music or, say, the making
of a painting. Such a piece of work is imaginative, explorative and uniquely original and should not be designed to meet a pre-specification of design. The objectives approach is a ‘marking model’ and not a ‘critical model’. The advocates for objectives are interested in assessment and not course design or the improvement of pedagogy. To improve practice, we need to study classrooms and the work of teachers, not merely the attainment of pre-ordained outcomes. We do not teach athletes to run faster by setting targets for performance e.g. reducing their performance times, but by criticising their performance. We need a ‘critical’ and not a ‘marking model’ in education because we are dealing with more than mere instruction or training – we are promoting ‘education’.

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A Critique of Instructional Objectives

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