

What We Don't Know *Can* Hurt Them: White Teachers, Indian Children

White teachers in Indian schools often find themselves unprepared for their task — they don't understand the history, culture, communities, and learning needs of their students. Ms. Starnes challenges these educators to become better teachers of Indian children and gives them some sage advice.

BY BOBBY ANN STARNES

UNTIL a few months ago, I lived in Loachapoka, Alabama, a small rural community laced with cotton fields and long dirt lanes. More like a wide place in the road than a town, Loachapoka has one through street lined with a hardware store, a post office, a town hall, and several big, old homes. Long ago Loachapoka, or “land of the turtles,” was a vibrant Creek farming town. The 1832 census reported a population of 564 Creeks. Also in 1832, Loachapoka was the site of the Creeks' last council fire before they were forcibly removed to Oklahoma. My house sat across the railroad tracks from a national historic site marking the event.

The Creeks lived in and around Loachapoka and most of southern Alabama and Georgia for hundreds of years. They were skilled farmers long before Columbus got lost in the Atlantic and found his way to “the new world.” When, not long after Columbus, invading Europeans demanded that they assimilate, the Creeks,

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Cherokee, and other southeastern tribes assimilated so well that by 1830 many had adopted European dress, religion, and language. Some owned productive plantations and had been educated in the best white schools in the East. By 1828, the Cherokee had developed a written language; had begun publishing a newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*; and had a 90% literacy rate — much higher than the whites squatting on Cherokee lands. But successful assimilation was not enough to save them. In the end, the invaders wanted Indian land. And years before John O’Sullivan first declared that the United States had a “manifest destiny to overspread the continent,”¹ Europeans would do anything to get it, be it treachery, betrayal, or worse.

Nestled between cotton fields, Loachapoka’s elementary school sits off a paved side road about a mile from the historic site. Outside the building, a large banner calls for Indian Pride — Indians being the school’s mascot. In the entryway, a brightly painted mural, apparently designed to reflect Loachapoka’s strong Native American influence, welcomes visitors. Unfortunately, the mural includes a tipi and the faces of alarmingly happy children wearing feathered headbands. Honoring the Creek — if depicting a people as mascots can be an honor — seems appropriate in this community. Unfortunately, since the Creek did not live in tipis or wear such headdresses, the mural actually depicts the stereotypical Plains Indian.

Does it matter that, in a community where a rich history is so well documented and so close to the surface, the school mural “honors” the wrong Indians? I think it does. I think it symbolizes a deep issue that we, either as citizens or as educators, seldom consider or, worse yet, fail to even recognize.

THE EDUCATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN: WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

In 2001, I began to work at Rocky Boy Elementary School on the Chippewa-Cree reservation in northern Montana, first as a volunteer and later as a classroom teacher in grades 5 and 3. I was not a novice. To the contrary, I was an award-winning teacher with 18 years of classroom experience in public elementary and middle schools and in an independent school I founded. I’d taught teachers and preservice teachers and earned graduate degrees in education. I was also a history lover who had always been interested in learning as much as possible about Indian and American history. I’d read *Black Elk Speaks* and knew about smallpox blankets and

the dreadful conditions at Indian boarding schools. I’d rejected the ways Columbus and the first Thanksgiving are depicted in history and in our cultural celebrations. I’d walked the Trail of Tears. I’d stood almost paralyzed by Wounded Knee photographs and artifacts displayed at the Red Cloud School Museum. And I was seriously committed to culturally appropriate and community-focused curriculum and teaching practices.

I thought I knew enough to teach Indian children. I was wrong, and I learned new lessons every day, most of them hard, ego-wounding lessons. Of all I learned in those years, perhaps two facts are most important. The first is how very little we know about the ways Native American children learn. We don’t recognize the chasm that exists between their needs and our traditionally accepted curricula and methods. The second is how difficult it is for even the most skilled and dedicated white teachers to teach well when we know so little about the history, culture, and communities in which we teach — and when what we do know has been derived from a white education. In such cases, solid teaching skills, good intentions, hard work, and loving the kids just aren’t enough. There is too much we don’t know about teaching Native American children, and what we don’t know definitely hurts them.

We ask a lot of our teacher education programs. The credit hours available for faculty members to prepare prospective teachers are extremely limited. At the same time, teaching even the most “typical” child requires the acquisition of a broad array of skills and knowledge. As a result, most teachers, whether white, Native, or from other cultural and ethnic groups, would say they were ill prepared for their first teaching experiences. Therefore, it is not surprising that most teachers working in reservation schools are poorly equipped to meet the challenges.² It is usually necessary for teachers to become prepared on the job.

THE EDUCATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN CHILDREN: WHAT WE DO KNOW

We know a lot about how, why, what, and under which conditions Native American children learn. In spite of poor funding and lack of coordination, a research base has emerged over the last 20 years. William Demmert’s comprehensive research review identified more than 100 studies that “provide evidence of what works or does not work to improve academic performance of Native students.”³

Because the Native American nations represent dra-

matically different histories and cultures, we must be careful to avoid overgeneralizing or stereotyping when we study this research. We can, however, use it to inform our thinking about what works most often for Native children. Regardless of the research methods, the instruments used, or the nations studied, three powerful strands of findings have emerged. First, most Native children learn best when hands-on, experiential teaching and learning approaches are used.⁴ Second, there is a positive relationship between students' academic learning and their strong sense of cultural identity.⁵ And third, informal and flexible learning environments enhance Native students' learning.⁶

An informal, "culturally friendly" classroom⁷ in which "teachers act as facilitators"⁸ is conducive to Native students' learning. Moreover, findings support the use of democratic principles and "democratic consequences" as effective classroom management styles in Native American classrooms. Research on interventions in Native American classrooms found that children achieved and retained at higher levels *and* developed more positive attitudes when they learned through collaborative processes.⁹ Learning is also enhanced when dialogue, open-ended questioning, and inductive reasoning are common classroom practices.¹⁰

Research also supports the use of methods and materials geared to certain dominant learning preferences.¹¹ Native American students tend to be holistic, or "whole-to-part," learners. Therefore, they learn best when presented with the whole concept before focusing on segments and details.¹² And, more than any other group, Native American students tend to prefer the use of visual learning strategies. This is a significant finding since Richard Riding and Steven Rayner discovered that students with a visual preference almost double their learning if they are presented with information that includes text and illustration, as opposed to text alone.¹³

Reflective processing of information allows students to integrate new knowledge into old and to build new learning out of prior knowledge.¹⁴ Such an approach requires a relaxed atmosphere and ample time. This is true for decision-making processes as well.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF CULTURE

Perhaps the most crucial point for us to understand as we try to help Native American students achieve academic success is the importance of culture and community.¹⁵ This realization is not new, nor is it controversial, at least in theory. In 1928 the Institute for Govern-

ment Research (now known as the Brookings Institution) issued a report titled *The Problem of Indian Administration*, commonly known as the Meriam Report. Seen by many as the most complete analysis ever done of federal policies' impact on Native Americans, the report highlighted, among other things, the need for bicultural education that is less formal and avoids highly mechanical content handled in a highly mechanical way. It also calls for teachers to develop reading materials out of the

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life around them. The importance of an education that emphasizes community, culture, and tradition continues to be recognized by the federal government. For example, President Bush's 2004 Executive Order on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Indian education acknowledged the need for teaching and learning in a manner that is consistent with tribal traditions, languages, and cultures.¹⁶ Unfortunately, while the links between American Indian education and community and culture are widely acknowledged and accepted, the gap between these theoretical statements and actual policy and practice is as evident today as it was at the time of the Meriam Report.

Whether the approach is referred to as culturally responsive, "nativized,"¹⁷ place-based, culturally infused, or "bottom-up,"¹⁸ an astonishing amount of data illustrate that when students' culture is "tapped" in the classroom, it "build[s] a bridge to school success."¹⁹ There are three primary areas that must be addressed in a culturally based program. The first has to do with values and beliefs.²⁰ Linda Cleary and Thomas Peacock propose that the key to improving Native students' success, and the first step that must be taken in that direction, is "grounding . . . students in their American Indian belief and value systems."²¹

The second involves the adoption of a "both/and approach"²² that values both Native and Western knowledge.²³ Greg Cajete advocates constructing a contemporary, culturally based educational process that blends

traditional values and principles with current and appropriate educational concepts, technologies, and content.²⁴ Perhaps Lisa Delpit's classic discussion of "other people's children" makes the point most effectively. Delpit sees the need for minority children to develop the skills necessary to communicate in the language of power while, at the same time, valuing their own differences from members of the dominant culture.²⁵

The third emphasizes learning that begins but *does not end* in the students' home communities. The community served by the school is an important source of knowledge and expertise.²⁶ A culturally based program will respect students' cultural knowledge and ways of knowing and will allow them to connect the Native perspective to issues beyond their own communities and, at the same time, to see how larger issues affect their daily lives.

Over the last several years, studies of culturally linked school programs have provided ample evidence that such approaches result in increased student learning, higher test performance, and improvements in related indicators. For example, a study of the Navajo immersion students at Fort Defiance, Arizona, demonstrated that they significantly outperformed their non-immersion counterparts on standardized math and English tests.²⁷ And for more than 30 years, research conducted on the Kamehameha Schools, as well as more recent research on the Native Alaskan Curriculum Immersion Program,²⁸ among other programs, has provided sustained evidence of academic growth when culturally based programs that emphasize appropriate teaching, learning, and content are used with Native populations.

FIXATING ON THE POSITIVE

... through it all we never stopped praying . . . never stopped beating our drums, dancing and singing songs to the Creator. . . . Somehow you couldn't silence us. . . . — *Sioux Elder*²⁹

Something about Native American peoples made it possible for them to survive serious efforts to eliminate them. Reaching down within themselves, they found the courage and strength to endure disease, starvation, forced religious conversion, mass murder, and more. Alan Siebert's description of resilient people sounds as though it could have been written about Native Americans:

Some of life's best survivors grew up in horrible situations. . . . They have been strengthened in the school of life. They have been abused, lied to, de-

ceived, robbed, raped, mistreated, and hit by the worst life can throw at them. Their reaction is to pick themselves up, learn important lessons, set positive goals, and rebuild their lives.³⁰

Considering Siebert's description alongside Native American history provides insight into a remarkably strong trait that is seldom considered when we think about educating Native American children. Discussions about their needs, education, and futures tend to focus only on the serious challenges they face. Certainly suicide; substance abuse; and high rates of dropping out, teen pregnancy, unemployment, and poverty do create hardships and cannot be ignored. But all too often, the discussion begins and ends with deficit thinking. Two Native American researchers, Steven Wolin and Sybil Wolin, propose a different approach. "We need to hear less about our susceptibility to harm," they say, "and more about our ability to rebound."³¹ Recent research identifying resiliency as a factor in the school success of Native American children reinforces their point.³²

Research indicates that resiliency may be a genetic trait. And more than 30 years of research into the nature of highly resilient people has created an understanding of human resiliency and how it develops.³³ This research has demonstrated that even children who are not genetically predisposed to resiliency can learn it. However, it can't be taught as a series of skills using some prescriptive program. Instead, it must be constructed by individual people in individual ways. And schools, more than any other public institution, can provide the environment and conditions that help build and strengthen resiliency.

Bonnie Bernard reports that resilient children have certain common attributes. These include social competence (responsiveness, flexibility, empathy, a sense of humor); problem-solving skills (reflection, abstract thinking, ability to find alternative solutions to challenges); autonomy (a sense of one's own identity and an ability to act independently); and a sense of purpose or future (healthy expectations, achievement motivation, hopefulness).³⁴

Interestingly, the conditions that allow resiliency attributes to thrive are the same as those conditions shown to be the most appropriate fit for the ways Native American children learn. For example, in a learning environment where teachers act as facilitators, where democratic principles drive classroom management, and where students are encouraged to engage in

reflective processing of information — all best practices for Indian education — students are also more apt to find conditions that promote flexibility, problem solving, and autonomy — all factors in resiliency development.

NCLB: THE BOARDING SCHOOL SOLUTION OF THE 21ST CENTURY

There are no necessary evils in government. Its evils exist only in its abuses. — *Andrew Jackson*

For generations, education has been the primary tool of both religious and governmental efforts to assimilate Native peoples into the mainstream. In the past, the most effective manifestation of these efforts was Indian boarding schools. Children were forcibly taken from their families, sometimes under the threat of physical harm and other times under the threat of starvation, as rations were withheld until children were given over. At the schools, the children were stripped of their identities, forbidden to wear their hair long or to dress in traditional clothing, and punished severely for speaking their native language or practicing their traditional religion. Much has been written about the effects these schools had on Native American attitudes toward teachers, schools, and schooling and about their impact on Native culture, language, and religion.³⁵

Today, NCLB has a similar effect on Indian children, and its implementation is not only ineffective, it is detrimental to them. It threatens academic achievement, guts effective culturally based programs, and further alienates children and communities. To the extent that it is “fully implemented,” it will leave these children further behind. In part, this is the result of the incredible mismatch between the programs NCLB supports and what we know works with Native American children. This mismatch is justified and sustained by faulty reasoning about research.

NCLB claims to fund programs that provide “scientific research” demonstrating their success in raising student achievement. One of the most basic principles of any real research is that findings are valid *only for those groups represented in the study’s population*. However, none of the programs currently funded has conducted research with a significant Native American population. The lack of research specifically aimed at understanding the effects of various programs on Native American children means that findings cannot be generalized to this population and invalidates any assertions

about a positive relationship between the programs being promoted and the achievement of Native students. In other words, there is no “scientific research” to support the use of these programs on reservations or in schools that serve predominately Native populations. To claim otherwise is a dishonest representation of research; to require the use of such programs is an evasion of ethical responsibility.

While one could, perhaps, make an argument that the learning environments and methods associated with NCLB are effective for some students, the research on Native American learning, coupled with the lack of studies showing gains through the implementation of these programs, makes it clear that these approaches are not desirable for generalized use with Native students. By their very nature, these programs create learning environments and require the use of teaching and learning techniques that have been demonstrated to be generally ineffective with Native American children. (See Table 1.) Furthermore, these programs are not related to the culture, history, or communities in which Native American children live.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW: NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

A quick study of current textbooks as well as those used during our own elementary, secondary, and college educational programs will illustrate the dearth of American Indian history typically presented. Native peoples are woven into American history as required to tell the white story — the Pilgrims’ survival, Andrew Jackson’s victory over the British, and Manifest Destiny. As a result, we learn that the buffalo disappeared but do not learn how successfully the calculated outcomes rendered Native Americans dependent on the U.S. government for their very survival.

Moreover, our cultural fables stand steadfast in the face of their obvious historical inaccuracy. Take for example, the Thanksgiving myth or the Columbus saga. Each is easily shown to be historically inaccurate. Yet each continues to be presented in schools in virtually the same ways they have been for generations. And efforts to present them in historically accurate or even complex ways can raise the cry of “revisionist history” or be labeled as simply “politically correct.” As a result, we are ill prepared to teach or understand the impact of the history lived by the generations of Native peoples. Nor can we understand that historical experiences form a legitimate basis for many Native Amer-

icans' attitudes toward schools and schooling, curriculum and materials, white teachers, and white control over their schools.³⁶

When we white teachers accept positions on reservations, the job comes — or should come — with a commitment to gaining an understanding of the history and culture of the specific nations represented in the school population. There is not *an Indian history*; there are Indian histories. And the difference is important. For example, although their Montana reservations place them in close proximity, the Crow and the Northern Cheyenne have quite different perspectives on the Battle of Little Big Horn. The Crow were mortal enemies of the Sioux and fought with Custer against them. On the other hand, having suffered horrific massacres at the hands of the U.S. Cavalry, the Northern Cheyenne were strong allies of the Sioux and fought with them at Little Big Horn. That means, in part, that teaching that the Battle of Little Big Horn was a great victory

for Indians is historically inaccurate.

Beyond the history and culture, we white teachers often live outside the community. We may have taught on a reservation for many years but still remain unable to locate the different communities in which our students live or to identify reservation landmarks. We may not know the tribal leaders or the major socioeconomic issues they face. And too many of us do not attend community events. As a result, we remain strangers without any understanding of the everyday lives, hopes, and challenges that affect our work with children every day.

WHAT WHITE TEACHERS CAN DO

I recall nothing in my teaching career that was harder or felt more perilous than trying to integrate into my teaching practice a culture, history, and community that I did not understand. And my feelings are widely shared. We know that white settlers and the United

TABLE 1.

The Mismatch Between NCLB Programs and the Research Base on Native American Learning

Best Practices	No Child Left Behind Programs
Hands-on, experience-based Use of culturally appropriate materials Informal, flexible learning environment Collaborative, teamwork Teacher as facilitator or coach High levels of dialogue	Abstract, "drill and kill" Culturally bland/generic Highly structured, extreme inflexibility Highly individualistic, isolating Teacher-centered, top-down Scripted, unnatural interactions
Learning Styles (Preferences)	No Child Left Behind Programs
Holistic approach, whole-to-part Reflective meaning-making Visual learning mode, including pictures and illustrations	Fragmented learning, part-to-whole Rote learning, memorizing Heavy print emphasis
Culturally Appropriate Programs	No Child Left Behind Programs
Based in culture's values and beliefs Both/and approach (local and global) Begins but does not end with community	Dominant culture's values and beliefs Dominant culture only Content irrelevant to community
Environmental Conditions That Support Resiliency	No Child Left Behind Programs
Promotes close bonds Uses high-warmth, low-criticism style of interaction Sets and enforces clear boundaries using democratic principles Encourages sharing of responsibilities, service to others, expectation of helpfulness Supports development of autonomy/independence Expresses high and realistic expectations Encourages personal goal setting and future focus Encourages development of values and life skills Encourages development of leadership, allows for decision making and other opportunities for meaningful participation Appreciates unique talents of each individual Emphasizes creativity Encourages development of sense of humor	Not addressed Failure-focused Uses top-down imposed rules Not addressed Teacher-controlled Expectations are low Not addressed Not addressed Scripted participation and decision making Group-focused Emphasizes conformity Absent

States government did horrible and unforgivable things to Native peoples. White teachers are not well prepared to teach our Native American students. And we remain isolated from our students' daily lives. As grim as those facts are, I am not calling for white guilt. To the contrary, I hope to inspire white action. There are steps we can take on our own and steps we can take to influence others. Following are some of the lessons I learned about becoming a better teacher of Indian children.

Find mentors. There are people in every school who want to help us find our way through the cultural and historical fog. We cannot wait for them to approach us; we must find them. We can begin by asking Native faculty, staff, and community members factual questions about social expectations, community life, and traditions. If we are using Native American language or traditions in the classroom, it is important to work closely with a mentor to ensure that what we do is both correct and appropriate. And the cultural differences between our mentors and ourselves will not disappear because we come to know one another. The greater the distance between our own cultural understandings and those of the children we teach, the more difficult it will be to bridge. In all cases, building effective mentoring relationships across cultural lines requires a serious commitment of time, energy, and patience on both sides.

Get educated. We do not know, nor are we expected to learn, Native American history and culture — not in general and certainly not specific to the tribal groups we teach. Written histories and biographies may exist, but finding them may require an extended search. Some tribal colleges offer classes that focus on reservation or tribal history. There are hundreds of websites and books designed to provide historically accurate and culturally specific information. As with all such materials, it is important to use them with caution since sources can perpetuate stereotypes and pass along erroneous information. (My website includes references and links to many sites that I found helpful.) It is always good to share any information with a mentor before using it with children.

Know and participate in the community. Since most of us do not live in the Native American communities in which we teach, a concerted effort is required to connect to them. Attend *appropriate* cultural events (and not all are appropriate for non-Natives), meetings, and sporting and social events. Learn who the community leaders are and how the reservation is governed. Become informed about current and historical legal and social issues.

Question personal knowledge of historical "facts." Even when we think we know history and even after we've studied it, discerning the intricacies required to understand history from a Native perspective remains challenging. What seem like small matters of word choice are important (e.g., did Indians wage war or resist aggression?). The facts we uncover may be unsettling. The emotions that can be aroused by finding out about an injustice committed against people, or by people, with whom we identify can lead us into uncomfortable waters. But it is a place we must go in order to work through the difficult realities of our shared history.

Create materials. Unless we are very fortunate, we will find that there are few, if any, materials that relate to the reservations on which we teach or to our students' daily lives. Yet we know that children learn best when the content is connected to their communities and cultures. Such teaching requires the development of materials that relate to the specific children and communities in which we teach. With all there is to do, finding time to develop materials is a challenge, but it is possible to start by simply altering existing materials to include local landmarks, locations, and people. And the students' excited responses, academic gains, and increased motivation can help us find the energy to continue.

Expect measured success. Success will not be immediate or consistent. The more our awareness is raised, the more we realize we need to do. We have to find a pace that is comfortable, a direction that feels right, and give ourselves time — think years instead of months and months rather than weeks. We need to remind ourselves to focus on how far we have come rather than on how far we still have to go. We can expect certain difficult cultural issues to emerge over and over again. We are, after all, trying to change generations of cultural interactions and mistrust. That is slow work.

Push for training. We need to encourage school leaders to use those dreaded professional development days in ways that will better prepare us to work with our students, to understand their history and culture, and to develop materials and methods that will increase their motivation and accomplishment.

WHAT INDIAN SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLPEOPLE CAN DO

Nobody has ever yelled at me for doing nothing [in terms of integrating history and culture into the cur-

riculum]. But I know if I do *something* and get it wrong, I'll just be seen as a stupid white teacher. And even if they don't yell at me, I'll be at the center of a controversy. — *Janice, grade-7 reservation teacher*

Janice has been teaching on the reservation for more than 20 years. Recently she began to use Montana Indian history and culture to teach her middle school students. Fear that she would do something to offend or disrespect the community had kept her from trying culturally appropriate teaching practices for years. This year she is taking the risk, slowly and very cautiously. Several factors have made the difference for her: she has strong support from her principal, she has been working with others to develop culturally appropriate materials, and she has made links to community elders. Even with all of this help and support, Janice continues to experience almost constant anxiety that she will do something to offend the community — or even individual members of it.

Many teachers like Janice want to take the risks, and there are ways that reservation school boards and Native schoolpeople can help. It will take a concentrated and purposeful approach that helps teachers feel safe enough to take risks, gives them historically and culturally appropriate knowledge, and provides a strong mentoring program.

Educate teachers. Teachers will not take the risks necessary to implement culturally appropriate teaching practices and history unless they *know* the history and culture. I believe schools should *require* teachers to participate in serious courses that teach them the necessary history. The Cherokee Nation has developed an excellent course that is required of all employees.

Those long meetings that open each school year can be altered to make time to take teachers on organized reservation tours. More time can be set aside to teach them to participate in appropriate cultural events — to round dance and understand the workings of a powwow. School leaders can keep teachers informed about reservation issues, the impact of federal and state laws, and the decisions made by the tribal council. And professional development days can be used to study, research, and develop materials and experiences that bridge the school and community.

Ensure ongoing support. We should not expect that classes or other one-time educational experiences will be sufficient to ensure that white teachers avoid the cultural minefield. The support needs to be ongoing

and personal. The school should provide a mentoring program by *carefully matching* white teachers with supportive and knowledgeable tribal members. In order for such programs to be successful, mentoring processes should be thoughtfully developed, written down in detail, and rigorously implemented.

Create a culture of safety. Perhaps most important in encouraging white teachers to reach out to the community, the school must support cultural risk-taking. Cultural rules that are so clear to community members are opaque to those of us on the outside. So when white teachers make mistakes — and we will — emphasize the positive as you explain what went wrong. And remember that the reservation is not a monolithic community. There are cultural differences determined by spiritual, historical, and tribal backgrounds. It is important for mentors to recognize the controversial issues *within* the community in order to protect teachers from controversy. Setting up a school cultural council that includes teachers, elders, and parents could help to develop and screen activities and content.

TOO MANY things have been done that cannot be undone. Too many dreams have been dashed and too much promise has been lost. To build bridges that will allow us to rise above a difficult history and a cultural clash, we must open our eyes wide and seek the connections between the past and the present. None of us can do it alone, so we will have to find ways to do it together.

The Founders did not promise us *a perfect union*. Rather they called for us to work to build a *more perfect union*. Building a more perfect land requires us to work together, to reach across divides, and to rise above what separates us. As teachers, we have given ourselves the responsibility of educating our students using methods and materials that place the American Dream within their grasp. And when we do, we will have done our part to build a more perfect union.

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