

Exploring Positive Culture Incentives in the Classroom for Bully Prevention

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Abstract

Despite the efforts of many, bullying behaviors continue to be on the rise in schools. However, limited research has been conducted to support the bullied population of students through positive culture initiatives in the classroom. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' support for the bullied population of students through positive culture initiatives in the classroom. The conceptual framework was based on ecological systems theory related to bullying involvement and classroom initiatives, as well as the portion of the role construction theory focused on positive communication and relationships. This study was conducted in a school district in the Southwestern United States. Data were collected from individual interviews with 14 experienced teachers. Data analysis involved open coding and categorization to identify patterns and themes. Results revealed that teachers are genuinely interested in creating a classroom that is conducive to learning. Further, results indicated that it would be useful to conduct more studies to explore teachers' support for bullied students through positive culture initiatives in the classroom. This study contributes to social change by providing instructors and educational leaders with a deeper understanding of the pedagogy teachers employ in the classroom to support bullied students by using positive classroom initiatives and how they can create positive classroom environments.

Key Words: Bullying education, bullying, school support, classroom learning, instructional support

Introduction

Given the prevalence of bullying and its potential impacts, preventing all types of bullying has become a priority for schools (Acosta et al., 2019). This phenomenon is an underreported safety problem on American school campuses. Contrary to popular belief, bullying occurs more often at school than on the way to and from there (Sampson, 2016). Once thought of as simply a rite of passage or relatively harmless behavior that helps build young people's character, bullying is now known to have long-lasting harmful effects, for both the victim and the bully (Sampson, 2016).

There is growing national awareness of the negative and long-term consequences associated with bullying (Hart-Barnett et al., 2019). For the school, the costs of bullying are countless hours consumed in tackling a problem that is resistant to change, truancies, reduced student retention, low teacher morale, negative perceptions of the school by the wider community, and parent hostility (American Society for the Positive Care of Children, 2018). The school campus becomes a place where many students are marginalized and where no-one feels safe (American Society for the Positive Care of Children, 2018). As a worldwide problem, bullying can occur in any school and is not restricted to any specific school. School is, therefore, one of the main contexts where bullying is most felt since it is a place where many children

come together (Augusto, 2020). Bullying is sustained harassment over time by one or more students of other individuals who are viewed by the bullying individuals as especially vulnerable and who may have difficulty defending themselves.

Bullying can take physical or psychological forms and have negative consequences on the victims to varying degrees (Gil Villa, 2020). Students who bully others have different motives for doing so. One of the reasons it is so difficult to prevent bullying is that bullying is an effective behavior. Bullying is relatively easy to learn and can be ‘traded’ for power, control, respect, status, a sense of belonging, and other desired outcomes. At the same time, teachers are believed to exert considerable influence on the tone of their classrooms, and their influence on bullying may result from interactions with students as a group or individually (Ertesvåg, 2016).

There is no single factor that puts a child at risk of being bullied or bullying others. Bullying can happen anywhere in cities, suburbs, or rural towns. Among school-aged children, bullying can be viewed as part of a social dynamic, with varying levels and bully role behavior among individuals within the same learning environment. Research has identified several role behaviors in the bullying situation including:

- *being victimized by bullying,*
- *engaging in bullying others,*
- *assisting or reinforcing the bullying behavior joining in or laughing along,*
- *defending the victim, and*
- *outsider behavior such as witnessing bullying behavior but choosing not to act in any way (Malecki et al., 2020).*

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), about 20% of students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school during the school year. Of students ages 12–18, about 13% reported being the subject of rumors; 13% reported being made fun of, called names, or insulted. 5% reported being pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on; and 5% reported being excluded from activities on purpose. Additionally, 4% of students reported being threatened with harm, 2% reported that others tried to make them do things they did not want to do, and 1% reported that their property was destroyed by others on purpose (see Table 1).

Table 1

Types of Bullying.

Types	Percent		
	Female	Male	Total
Bullied at School	23.8	16.7	20.2
Subject of Rumors	17.5	9.3	13.4
Made Fun of, Called Names or Insulted	15.8	10.3	13.0
Pushed, Shoved, Tripped, or Spit on	4.4	6.1	5.3
Excluded from Activities on Purpose	6.9	3.5	5.2
Threatened with Harm	3.6	4.2	3.9
Tried to Make do Things did not Want to do	1.9	1.9	1.9
Property Destroyed on Purpose	1.5	1.3	1.4

Note. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019).

The recognition of school bullying as a pervasive and harmful phenomenon has given rise to the development of numerous antibullying interventions in the last three decades. However, even successful programs have failed to produce large declines in bullying behavior and their effectiveness may be limited to bullying perpetrators who are not highly popular and to childhood or early adolescence (Garandeanu&Lansu, 2019). Often, teachers and administrators can be unaware of bullying, making it difficult to develop appropriate policies that are proactive instead of reactive (Waters & Mashburn, 2017). Bullying and violence, which can bring detrimental effects, are situations that young people faced in their process of development (Eadaoin et al., 2017).

A growing body of literature suggests that belonging may act as a buffer for bullying perpetration (Slaten et al., 2019). Other studies imply that social contexts can either attenuate or exacerbate the effect of individual characteristics on bullying behavior (Slaten et al., 2019).

Young people are rarely bullied because they are perceived to be like everyone else. Rather they are often bullied because they stand out in the environment for being different from their peers' incidents. Research has shown that children with disabilities are bullied three times as often as children without disabilities (Espinoza et al., 2019). However, there are no bullying prevention programs that address the unique requirements of this population (McNicholas et al., 2017). Given that the ethnic composition of schools is one critical feature from which adolescents derive their sense of acceptance and belonging at school, ethnic ingroup representation is a particularly relevant factor to consider when examining the school-related adjustment of victimized youth and bullying (Espinoza et al., 2019). Bullying harassment can occur in the absence of an imbalance of power, or it may occur in a way that would be inconsistent with the repetitive, or potentially repetitive, nature of bullying based on race, national origin, ethnicity, sex, age, disability, or religion (Whisman & West Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

Little is known about teachers' support for the bullied population of students specifically through positive culture initiatives in the classroom. Bullying has been conceptualized as a phenomenon that focused mainly on individuals and individual behavior (Eadaoin et al., 2017). How teachers understand and perceived student behavior have influenced their reactions and interventions when responding to aggression. In particular, the perceptions and understanding teachers have regarding bullying have shaped how bullying is addressed in schools and classrooms (Rose et al., 2018). Successful approaches for decreasing bullying among youth hinge on the competence of teachers, yet teachers' perceptions of bullying often differ from those of students (Rose et al., 2018). This is the reason, when students have concerns or problems, they often turn to each other for support instead of consulting with parents, teachers, counselors, or administrators (Acosta et al., 2019). This kind of peer influence may be the strongest single motivational force in a student's life. Though students can exert negative influences on one another, they can also be strong positive forces (Acosta et al., 2019). They can act as positive role models, demonstrate appropriate social behavior, and listen to and understand the common frustrations and concerns of other students. This peer support can be a valuable social support for many students who felt socially alienated (Acosta et al., 2019). According to Ertesvåg (2016), students who bully others have different motives for doing so. One of the reasons it has been so difficult to prevent bullying is that bullying is an effective behavior. Bullying is relatively easy to learn and can be 'traded' for power, control, respect, status, a sense of belonging, and other desired outcomes. At the same time, teachers are believed to exert considerable influence on the tone of their classrooms and their influence on bullying may result from interactions with students as a group, class, or individually (Ertesvåg, 2016).

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' support for the bullied population of students through positive culture initiatives in the classroom. As an international phenomenon, school bullying occurred at similar rates in disparate cultures, countries, and educational settings. There is growing national awareness of the negative and long-term consequences associated with bullying (Hart-Barnett et al., 2019). Although few school climates studies have used student self-report and aggregated student data at the school level, informants approached that considers both student and teacher perceptions of perpetration and victimization is less common in the extant literature (Espelage et al., 2019). Although negative and long-term consequences associated with bullying have been examined, there is little evidence about teachers' support for the bullied population of students through positive culture initiatives in the classroom.

3. Research Questions

To study the problem and phenomenon, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ 1: How do teachers support the bullied population of students through positive classroom interventions?

RQ 2: How do teachers create opportunities within the curriculum to determine positive support for the bullied population of students in the classroom?

4. Research Design

A basic qualitative research design was used for the study. The instrumentation to collect data was semi-structured and probing interview questions which were used to interview participants in the study and guided the participants and researcher throughout the interview process. Two research questions guided the interview protocol, eight sub-questions, and 11 probing questions.

5. Methodology

5.1 Participant Selection

A purposive sampling strategy is generally recommended whereby researchers select “information-rich” participants who can articulate perspectives relevant to the research question.

The sample size for this study was 14 middle school teachers from various middle schools within the district. This is a relatively small sample size, however, a small sample size of 14 participants is appropriate if the sample is relatively homogeneous, the participants possess cultural competence or a certain degree of expertise about the domain of inquiry, and the objectives in the research are narrow (Burkholder et al., 2016). Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who have unique abilities to answer the research questions.

5.2 Semi-structured Interviews

To study the phenomenon, supportive semi-structured and open-ended research questions were addressed, based upon the frameworks of the study. Probing interview questions were also used to interview participants in the study and guided the participants and researcher throughout the interview process. Two research questions guided the interview protocol, eight sub-questions, and 11 probing questions. Questions were developed based on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and the reviewed literature relevant to the topic with the assistance of my committee chair. For example, the first research question explored how “positive classroom interventions to ensure students feel safe in a classroom conducive to learning.” The second research question explored, “how teachers created opportunities within the curriculum to determine positive support for the bullied population of students in the classroom.” This question was also developed, tested, and proved with the help of SMEs. Eight sub-questions supported the research questions. Each sub-question had one to three possible probing questions to use for participants to elaborate on an answer to a semi-structured interview question.

6. Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted and transcribed from an oral to a written mode structured conversation into a form that is amenable to closer analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The interview transcripts were read several times for content familiarity and to confirm insights recorded in the research’s journal, after which open coding of the data in which segments of text were identified and labeled. This was done by reviewing the data line-by-line giving attention to specific words, sentences, or sections of text. This was followed by conducted axial coding, which allowed the clustering of repeated patterns that were used to develop categories. Once the initial analysis of the data was completed, the transcribed interviews were uploaded to the NVivo 12 plus software for windows files, where a closer coding process began.

Themes and Subthemes Aligned to Research Questions 1

In analyzing the data, five major themes and seven subthemes emerged that are aligned with the research purpose and research questions. Three themes and four subthemes were aligned with research question one and two themes and three subthemes were aligned with research question two. The first three themes and four subthemes are portrayed in Table 2 below. These themes and subthemes are in alignment with the first research question. Also included in Table are the codes that are connected to the first three themes and subthemes in the first research question.

Table 2

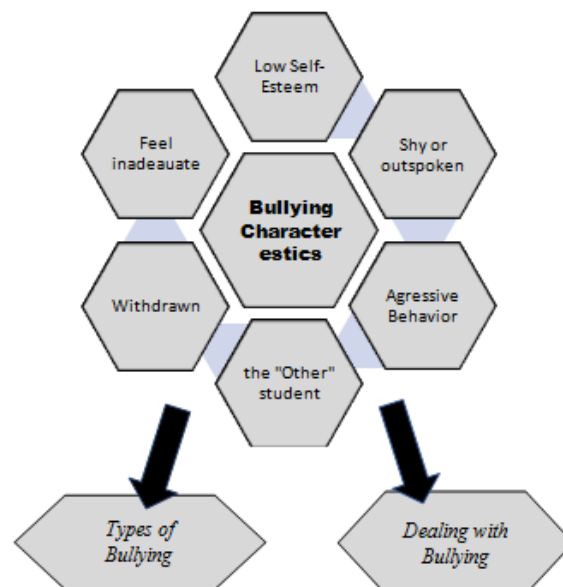
Themes, Subthemes, and Codes Aligned to Research Question One

RQ1: How do teachers support the bullied population of students through positive classroom interventions?		
Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Theme 1 Bullying Characteristics	<i>Types of Bullying in the Classroom</i>	bullied students, bullying, shy or outspoken, "other". Low self-esteem. classroom, population, behavior bullying, behaviors, school, aggressive behavior, withdrawn, inadequate
Theme 2 Differentiating Bullied Students	<i>Types of Bullying on Campus</i> <i>Dealing with Bullying on Campus</i>	bullied population bullied students, Population, bullying, classroom, verbal, cyber, population, behavior
Theme 3 Positive Classroom Initiatives	<i>Capturing Kid's Hearts And Social Contracts</i>	classroom initiatives, positive, school initiatives, teachers, intervention, period personal, students, schoolyear, capturing kids' hearts, social contract

Bullying Characteristics

The first recurring theme that emerged after coding and categorizing the data was bullying characteristics. This first theme portrayed the different traits that are associated with bullying behaviors. To answer this question, participants were asked to reflect on the behaviors of students and share their characterization of the characteristics of a bullying student. Probing was used when necessary, which helped to solicit, clarify, or request more elaboration which allowed for a more open discussion. Figure 1 below, depicts characteristics experienced by participants of students on campuses.

Figure 1 Bullying Characteristics Experienced by Participants



There were different views from participants on their characteristics of bullying behaviors. From this theme emerged one subtheme, which is Types of bullying in the classroom. Participants rated these behaviors from being reserved or shy, to loud and aggressive. Participants mentioned they associated with bullying on campus and in the classroom. These behaviors are associated with negative connotations. Some participants described bullying characteristics they observed with their students. They cited examples that reflected the themes that emerged from question one.

Types of Bullying in the Classroom

This subtheme derived from the first theme and is aligned with the first research question. Participants were asked to identify the different types of bullying they encountered in the classroom.

The data revealed that verbal and cyberbullying were the most types of bullying experienced. However, verbal bullying is most seen in the classroom. Findings also revealed that bullying is very common among students in the classroom. Though most classrooms have gone to a collaborative seating arrangement, participants revealed they have seen students try to bully other students by exclusion, by muttering under their breath, by writing terrible things on a table, and by rumors and hearsay.

Differentiating Bullied Students

The second theme, Differentiating Bullied Students, is aligned with the first research question. It asked how to identify a student who is at risk of being bullied in the classroom. From this theme emerged two subthemes namely Types of Bullying on Campus and Dealing with Bullying on Campus. Participants were asked to identify students who are at risk of being bullied. Findings revealed that these students are identified as low academic achievers who exhibited low self-esteem, are from low socioeconomic status families, are withdrawn and shy, have gender identity issues, and exhibited some form of disability.

Types of Bullying on Campus

This subtheme derived from probes that aligned with the second theme of the first research question. Participants were asked what types of bullying encountered if any in the classroom or on campus. Participants revealed that they have encountered some form of bullying. The findings showed that bullying does happen in the form of verbal bullying through name-calling and online by cyberbullying.

Dealing with Bullying on Campus

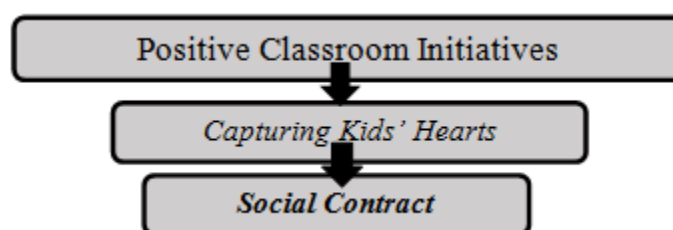
This subtheme also derived from probes from the second theme in the first research question which asked what strategies were used to deal with bullying on campus. Participants described different approaches that materialized from their many years of experiences. Participants believed that setting standards from the beginning helped alleviate bullying behaviors on campus. Participants used various methods in dealing with bullying issues. Participants also recognized the importance of dealing with bullying issues, but findings revealed that not all participants actively participate in curbing the behavior on campus.

Positive Classroom Initiatives

The third theme is Positive Classroom Initiatives. This theme provided insight into the different options teachers used in the classroom in preventing bullying behaviors. Through this theme emerged two subthemes, which are Capturing Kids Hearts and Social Contracts. This theme is also aligned with the first research question, in which participants were asked to describe classroom initiatives used, if any, in preventing bullying behaviors in the classroom. Figure 2 below depicted the most used initiatives participants used in the classroom to create a positive environment conducive to learning.

Figure 2

Positive Classroom Initiatives Used in the Classroom



Findings showed that participants presented various positive initiatives used in the classroom. Participants mentioned the importance of building rapport with their students. While participants reverted to the most used “Social Contract”, others reverted to individual classroom strategies.

Capturing Kids Hearts/ Social Contract

Capturing Kids Hearts and Social Contract were combined because they contained elements that are related. These themes are a set of processes intended to create healthy relationships between adults and youth and to support high-achieving learning environments. Participants found it beneficial because it established, maintained, and restored positive relationships with students. During the interviews, participants were asked to share their positive classroom initiatives used to help the bullied population of students in their classrooms. Participants mentioned that they used a social contract with their students.

While the method varied in implementation, this theme was the most common and favored among participants. Capturing Kids Hearts and Social Contract was administered by the school district. It is expected that all teachers utilize this program, however, some participants reverted to their individual strategies.

Themes and Subthemes Aligned to Research Question 2

The second research question asked what classroom initiatives exist within the curriculum to support the bullied population of students in the classroom. From this question, two themes and two subthemes were developed. The first theme for this research question was, ‘Bullying Training through Professional Development, and the second was Creating Positive Classroom Culture’. Below in Table 3 are Themes, Subthemes, and Codes Aligned to Research Question Two. Also included in Table 3 are the codes that are connected to the two themes and subthemes in this research question.

Table 3

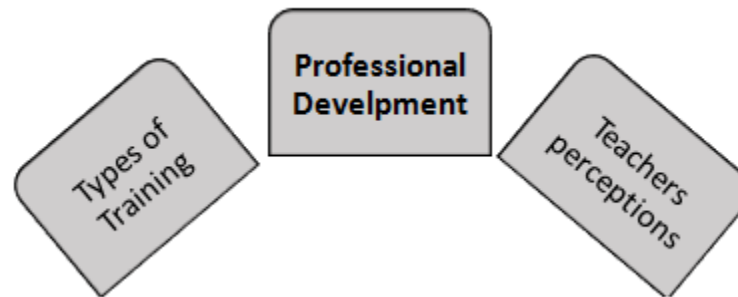
Themes, Subthemes, and Codes Aligned to Research Question Two

RQ2: What classroom initiatives exist within the curriculum to support the bullied population of students in the classroom?		
Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Theme 4: Bullying Training through Professional Development and Creating Positive Classroom Culture	<i>Types of Training Programs</i>	professional development, training, teachers, school year, social media
	<i>Teachers’ perception about Bullying training</i>	
Theme 5: Creating Positive Classroom Culture		positive culture, intervention, class, personal, period, school, students, school year, teachers, classroom

Bullying Training Through Professional Development examined the types of preparation teachers are given to combat bullying in the classroom. From this theme emerged two sub-themes which are types of training program and teacher’s perception. These themes and subthemes are in alignment with the second research question. Figure 3 below presented the first theme and subthemes in the second research question.

Figure 3

Professional Development Training and Teachers Perceptions



Bullying Training Through Professional Development

The findings of this theme indicated that participants have not experienced any direct professional training addressing bullying with the district. Participants believed that other training such as Capturing Kids Hearts and self-directed personal training assisted them in this area. Participants felt that professional development is essential and would be beneficial to them.

Types of Training

Participants are committed to curbing bullying behaviors but lack the skills necessary to do so. They sought outside training to help combat this behavior. Participants reverted to the Capturing Kids Heart training offered by the district. This training, however, is a voluntary and self-directed implementation. There are no set guidelines in the execution of the Capturing Kids Heart program. Teachers are free to develop individual classroom strategies. Because of this, P4 believed that the program is not as effective. He believed that having teachers develop their classroom strategies created confusion as there is no consistency in dealing with bullying within the classrooms. Participants agreed that professional development that addresses bullying would be beneficial.

Teachers' Perception About Training

This subtheme developed from the question probe which asked about the effectiveness of professional development programs received from the district. Findings suggested that many participants have partaken in the Capturing Kids Heart training session but not all participants are implementing the strategies in their classrooms. Findings revealed that participants reverted to individual strategies in their classrooms. Findings indicated that the use of the social contract derived from the Capturing Kids Heart program is the most used among participants. The social contract that has been a useful strategy in classroom control is a voluntary strategy introduced by the district. Participants are expected to create and implement a social contract with their students. It was stated that there has been a pushback between some teachers about using the social contract in the classroom. This is because every teacher can create their individual classroom social contract and at times caused confusion. Findings indicated that participants surveyed are aware of and using the contract in some form, it was reported that many participants declined to use the contract.

Creating Positive Classroom Culture

The second theme that emerged from this second research question is the theme of Creating Positive Classroom Culture. The theme centered around how teachers displayed in modeling personal actions in demonstrating the desired behaviors of their students in the classroom. This theme answers the interview question of strategies used to create a positive classroom culture which was developed from research question two. Findings concluded that teachers involved their personal experiences in the classroom to generate empathy with their students. Findings also suggested that participants generated creative ways in creating a classroom conducive to learning and building rapport with their students. Making connections through building rapport with students is a recurring occurrence with all participants in this theme. It was discovered that participants explored different ways to connect with their students.

7. Conclusions

This research study explored teachers' support for the bullied population of students through positive culture initiatives in the classroom. The results of the study depicted participant's responses as they described initiatives, they applied for the bullied population of students in their classrooms using rich descriptions of their experiences and provided details

that assisted with the research study. Interviewing participants provided an understanding of the ways they saw, viewed, approached, and experienced the bullying phenomenon as they make meaning of their experiences.

Participants presented several different viewpoints on how the support of the bullied population of students is addressed through positive classroom initiatives. The general agreement is that these students seemed to have a plethora of issues which when addressed using effective intervention strategies can be productive for learning and created a positive school environment. Bullying comes in many different forms and alternatives to alleviate bullying behaviors aimed to keep students engaged in the classroom and allowed learning to take place in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. To mitigate the negative impacts of bullying behaviors in the classroom and on school campuses, implementing alternatives that are accessible to teachers will keep students in school and improve the overall school climate. These strategies aimed to address student misbehavior by building strong and healthy relationships and improving engagement in the learning environment. While the strategies differed in content and implementation, the collective aim is to create a positive classroom environment for students.

The results indicated that all participants perceived bullying as a negative act and expressed their disregard for such behavior. They strived to find ways to address bullying behaviors by adopting strategies such as the social contract where students and teachers collaborated on classroom rules and consequences, or by reverting to techniques that stem from their years of experience in dealing with such behaviors. Whatever strategies they applied, it was obvious that they are very much concerned and are interested in alleviating or eliminating bullying behaviors both in the classrooms and on campuses. At times, participants are unaware of, and are not adequately trained to manage student behaviors.

The literature review indicated that understanding responses to bullying behaviors contribute to reducing bullying and students benefit when teachers take an active stand against bullying. The results indicated participants were invested in their efforts to reduce and or eliminate bullying, however, they feel that a collaborative strategy is essential in doing so. It is evident that when school staff is engaged in a collaborative effort on bullying prevention strategies, they are more likely to feel comfortable in intervening. It is important therefore to involve teachers and staff in the development, modification, and evaluation of bullying prevention programs if the programs are to be effective.

The results of this study revealed participants experienced many types of bullying both in the classrooms and on campuses. It was revealed name-calling and cyberbullying were the two main types of bullying behaviors evident in the school. While participants are aware of these occurrences and addressed them as they occurred, there is no collaborative effort by the school or district to directly address these issues. The literature review indicated collaboration amongst staff helped participants to make connections with their students. The results of this study suggested that participants worked to build rapport so that students feel comfortable in reporting bullying issues.

Although the focus of this research was to determine initiatives teachers used in support of the bullied population of students, results indicated that students' academic achievement improved when they feel safe and achieved empathy from their teachers. The literature revealed that the groups with whom the individual interacts permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interactions with the immediate environment (Horton, 2019). Results also indicated that teachers presented themselves as role models in the context of their classroom, modeling positive behaviors for students to emulate, simultaneously setting firm limits on bullying. Modeling behaviors by using personal experience and true personal stories of participants engaged students and create a positive classroom environment.

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