

In the 1970s, linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity became the central, if not *the* defining, feature of urban schools in England. Such schools were places where teachers and children from many heritages and backgrounds came together and interacted for the first time. These were sites of cultural exchange as well as places of tension and conflict, where wider, pressing social realities were sometimes uncomfortably present. Looking back, the surprising thing is that English teachers took it as their professional responsibility to get to grips with it all.

Diversity forced English teachers to reconsider what English was for. In the grammar schools, where functional literacy had never been a central concern, the principal objectives were to prepare pupils for university entrance and for entry into the professions. In the secondary moderns, where 75% of the relevant population resided, the curriculum was framed in terms of a 'preparation for life'. In the grammars, where academic attainment mattered above everything else, the governing aim was to pass on the 'literary heritage.' (We might add here that the question as to what the literary heritage consisted in – there was no consensus - was a matter of ongoing professional debate.) In classrooms where there were children from many heritages, English teachers felt it was their responsibility to make sense of the cultural transactions that were unfolding before their eyes, and this entailed re-thinking what they were about. How should they teach, for example, Joseph Conrad's novel, a prescribed A level text, *Heart of Darkness*? Nobody told them what to do or how to do it. Rather, taking responsibility for changing the subject was part of their professional duty.

In those days, of course, developing curriculum and pedagogy was considered part of teachers' professional work. Professional responsibilities were defined for them through their training and by their terms of employment. And because (as far as large-scale diversity was concerned) there were no ready-made templates, no established practice, no commercially available resources to speak of, good teachers realized that they had to extend and refine their own subject knowledge to meet the new contingencies at the same time as teaching.

Curriculum development made heavy demands on teachers' time. There was a financial cost involved, but chiefly it depended upon a spirit of co-operation among teachers. Extending and refining the syllabus to meet the needs of a diverse school population involved giving over time to finding out about the histories and heritages of the pupils in their classrooms as well as collaborating with colleagues to bring about change. This meant reading in new areas, seeking specialist advice, innovating, re-writing the syllabus, framing language policies and so on. Above all, it meant garnering and sharing relevant information gathered from the pupils themselves.

Garnering information required moving away from authoritarian relationships between teachers and pupils in order to foster a spirit of trust. (This was interpreted by some as permissiveness, a *laissez*

faire attitude towards school discipline at a time when a multitude of social ills were attributed to poor discipline in schools.) However, younger teachers were sometimes encouraged and supported by the senior management who felt the pressing need for change. English teachers improvised, experimented, consulted, campaigned for reform, scrutinized policy, made mistakes, weathered criticism, but also, crucially, shared their experiences of success and failure in a generous spirit of co-operation. Education was not viewed as a market place and competition between schools made little sense.

Old teacher networks continued and new networks emerged. Before the digital revolution, teachers kept in touch with colleagues in other schools and in professional associations through low-tech publications. Many education authorities, - the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was outstanding in this regard - arranged regular meetings in school time as part in-service provision. Small bursaries were made available to teachers who were keen to improve their qualifications. And teams of inspectors and advisory teachers fostered and encouraged co-operation among schools. Not all teachers participated, of course, but for those who did it could be both an involving and a rewarding aspect of their work. From a school management perspective, such participation helped to retain specialist English teachers at a times when there was generally a high teacher turnover. All of this drew on *honourable* – a curiously old-fashioned word – traditions in English teaching and it made the job seem purposeful, worthwhile.

A pivotal change in English teaching methods came about when a handful of key teachers working mostly in urban schools who were linked through their professional association (especially the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE)), ‘discovered’ (contrary to prevailing staff-room wisdom) that they could get the majority of children (including disaffected, unresponsive and resistant ones) to talk and write about their lives and experiences successfully with the minimum of teacher interference. As a consequence, more lesson time was given over to writing. Personal writing, as Douglas Barnes recalled vividly in a recorded conversation with one of the authors (Hardcastle, March 3, 2011), was rare in grammars in the 1950s. In many schools, writing displaced literary studies as *the* central activity in class in the majority of secondary schools.

Additionally, talk assumed a new importance. Increasingly, pupils were encouraged to express themselves in their own words and to listen to one another. This allowed children’s interests and concerns to emerge freely, and it also provided jumping off points for writing. But talk was justified chiefly for its contribution to the language development of the child. (There was, undeniably, a strong element of pragmatism in all of this, particularly in urban schools, where teachers were often challenged to win pupils’ co-operation and engagement.) Thus, a handful of English teachers who

were mostly well-qualified specialists with respectable degrees in English Literature (and with a clear idea of what they were about), supported by a few committed university lecturers in education as well as one or two inspectors began to transform the subject.

Practical moves to reform the subject meant jettisoning outmoded methods and materials dating from before the war. As early as the late 1940s, progressive English teachers were already turning away from the over-reliance on dog-eared text-books and the use of tired anthologies that characterized both specialist and non-specialist teaching during and immediately after the war when there was a shortage of trained staff and no money for new books.

Progressive teachers gave up lifeless, pre-war, grammar text books and found new, engaging materials including books written specifically for adolescent readers. This did not necessarily imply that they ceased to teach knowledge about language, but it marked a reduction in time given over to outmoded formal grammar teaching. Instead, there was greater emphasis on context and use. By the late 1950s, sufficient money was available in schools to replace old stock. Modern course-books and fresh selections of canonical texts were supplemented with contemporary literature as well as books written for young readers. (Sadly, course books geared to public examinations with substantially the same old content were given a make-over.) New methods reflected pupil-centred approaches to learning and development. Classroom activities – children talking, reading and writing together - replaced the deadening regime of tests and exercises as the staple fare of English lessons (Medway et al. 2014).

Such changes were not universal, nor did they happen overnight. In the first instance, they were local and piecemeal and they relied heavily on the initiative of individual teachers and the ethos of particular schools. And there were important differences among schools. By and large, progressive teachers in independent schools and grammars looked to the universities for validation. In ordinary state schools, where links with universities were less developed, teachers looked for support *locally* from colleagues, from specialist inspectors and advisors in their local education authorities as well as teacher-training establishments and university departments of education (UDEs).

Of course, there was resistance to change. Broadly speaking, older teachers, who had trained before or just after the war under emergency measures, persisted with traditional, authoritarian, methods, (military service cast a long shadow) relied on course-books, while younger teachers, adopted pupil-centred approaches that also reflected changes in the academy – for example, the expansion of the syllabus to include American literature. What characterized the new methods was not teachers' hankering for 'fun' or 'relevance', but rather the daily professional need to engage students in a mutually worthwhile enterprise.

Above all, curriculum reforms in the 1950s and 1960s were not top-down. They were not driven by 'energetic' interventions from politicians. Rather, they were teacher-led within the framework of public examinations. The Secretary of State did not (indeed, *could not in law*) meddle with the detail of syllabus content. (Public examinations were the determining factor there.) The inspectorate preferred to influence curriculum and pedagogy by building, slowly and incrementally, a broad professional consensus backed by substantial argumentation. This process proved too slow for politicians conscious of timescales imposed by elected office. Inspectors relied upon tacit assumptions about the purposes of English shared principally with English specialists belonging to professional associations and university lecturers. They offered advice and made 'suggestions' (HMI, 1954). They were rarely adversarial, nor were they meant to be, but existing divisions were deep. HMI also *inspected* schools, of course - they were powerful. But before the advent of the National Curriculum (1988), in times when the school syllabus was still the responsibility of head teachers, who relied on public examination board syllabuses for substance, the inspectorate was ineffectual when it came to real reform.

Lasting improvements in classrooms came about locally when key teachers – grammar school teachers in the early days, but increasingly, after 1965, English teachers working in the new comprehensive schools - began reshaping the subject to cater for the needs of the majority. For the three decades after the war, the 'whole population' meant a majority of working class urban pupils. Post-war secondary schools required new kinds of teachers for new kinds of pupils. With the expansion of teacher-training establishments, most new teachers entering state schools were either trained as post-graduate students in university departments of education (UDEs) or in the colleges, where they did degrees in education. Where students trained to become primary teachers, serious attention was paid to learning and development in the early years. The role of language in child development was an important topic. Before the expansion of the universities in the 1960s, new specialist teachers with honours degrees in English were comparatively few in number. They graduated from the ancient or red-brick universities, where 'schools of English' as such were still comparatively new. Their eyes were on developments in English studies rather than the learning and developmental processes of children in schools.

English 'departments' as we know them now didn't exist before the war. Yet, by the end of the 1950s, a few key schools were beginning to work more collegially and emerging 'departments' took on new functions. Previously, they had operated as administrative units within whole-school management structures. (The principal function of senior masters, later known as 'heads of department', involved the ordering stock, the allocation of texts, managing examination entries and 'assigning' classes.) In departments organized along more democratic lines, teachers planned lessons

together, shared resources and, crucially, inducted new teachers into the profession in a co-operative spirit of mutual support.

The advent of departments enabled teachers to forge collective understandings about how to improve pedagogy and enhance pupil attainment. They built up a fund of knowledge and expertise. And teachers became curious about their pupils' lives and backgrounds in the process of finding more effective ways of organizing for learning. (This last development would become especially important when diversity reshaped the landscape.) In the best departments, where there was a slow turnover of staff, shared practice grew incrementally through the making and use of shared materials, eventually becoming part of the fabric and texture of departmental ways of working together. In the mid 1960s, with the advent of comprehensive schools and the expansion of teacher-support facilities by local education authorities, key departments played an active role in running courses and developing new materials. Where there were partnerships between departments and teacher training establishments the arrangement was mutually beneficial. Problems over the recruitment of well-qualified new teachers were eased and opportunities for school-based research were increased.

In London, there has long been a tradition among English departments of looking to the Institute of Education for ideas about learning. The tradition goes back at least to the 1930s with the Institute's – then, The London Day Centre - involvement in teacher education. Behind many London English teachers' awareness of the role of language in pupils' development lay research into students' writing abilities, a Schools Council funded project, led by James Britton based at the Institute of Education (Britton et al. 1971). Britton drew on current work in linguistics (for example, Jakobson, 1960) for his research into writing, but his thinking was informed by intensive reading in philosophy, psychology and above all, literature. The focus of the project was on the development of writing in school-age children, but it was framed within a larger, universalistic concern with of *the role of signs in the genesis of mind*. Britton was in search of a unifying meta-principle that might serve as a foundation for English for all. Britton and his colleagues were intent on building theory. They were engaged in an intellectual project that grew steadily from both theoretical and practical concerns with classroom teaching.

Britton was always intrigued by the intrinsically human ability to create representations of 'experience' with the aid of symbols of our own making. He was never just concerned with individual psychology. Rather, he turned to the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, for a socio-cultural theory of the role of language in *human development*. 'The world we respond to,' writes Britton, 'in fact the world towards which our behaviour is directed, is the world as we symbolize it, or represent it to

ourselves' (Britton 1970). The idea that children continually work on their representations of their experiences in order both to make sense of the world as well as to act in it constitutes a foundational principle for a unified curriculum subject that avoids the traditional separation between language and literature. Such ideas were carried forward into official policy. The Bullock Report (DES 1975) appeared with its defining insistence on the role of language in learning across the curriculum.

By the end of the 1950s, some English teachers had realized that changing English to cater for the majority of pupils would necessarily involve challenging prevailing assumptions about language, learning and social class. One assumption (with deep historical roots – see Smith 1984) was that the language that working-class students brought with them from home and community had no place in educational settings. Perceived linguistic 'deficiency' was used widely to explain working-class educational underachievement. Well-meaning teachers aimed to equip their students, especially working-class students, with the language they 'needed' to succeed in education. This seemed like common sense. In order for this assumption to change it would require a radically new appreciation of working-class history and culture. Such an appreciation was fostered in the first instance through reading in social history. However, the prevailing assumption, the 'common sense', (in reality an unexamined social prejudice) insisted that working-class speech was *inherently* deficient. And because the language of the home and community was generally regarded as *the* major obstacle to educational success it was also widely assumed that it was the English teacher's responsibility to replace the language of home and community with something better - a bit like slum clearance.

As long as the contribution that the language of the home had already made to the child's development before starting school was overlooked, working class experience of English entailed *an unremitting pedagogy of linguistic remediation*. English lessons typically involved - following on from course-book exercises and tests - excessive amounts of time given over to correcting students' speech and writing. Indeed, for some students who survived the regime of remediation, and who went on to succeed in higher education, there was often a lingering sense that their willingness to submit to the rigors of correction had been the necessary precondition of their academic attainment. You had to change your language to get on.

However, two deeper assumptions lay beneath the prevailing one. (They were rarely disaggregated in debates and discussions.) First, there was widely-held assumption about Standard English, standards of correctness and linguistic authority. In the 1950s, it was not uncommon to hear well-meaning but unthinking teachers shouting at working-class children (for the children's sake): 'Don't say 'we was', say, 'we were.' Adding (as if to settle the matter), 'There are TWO of you.' The second

assumption was about the functions and value of the highly-differentiated languages of specialized domains (especially science and the law). The flawed 'common sense' that the student's home language was barrier to learning in school because it was not capable of handling ideas of a high order was challenged by leading members of LATE. Harold Rosen's influential, short polemic against the work of Basil Bernstein, *Language and class: a critical look at the theories of Basil Bernstein* (1972) sparked a fierce debate about the function of pupils' own language in education, dividing English specialists and sociologists of education.

In the 1960s and 1970s, English had a strong international presence. The hostility of some English academics towards sociology was manifest at a landmark conference in the USA in 1966. In a major seminar at Dartmouth college, New Hampshire, which was convoked to establish foundational principles for curriculum reform in English education on both sides of the Atlantic, Boris Ford, a leading member of the then recently established National Association for the Teaching of English, who represented the claims of the centrality of literary studies clashed with Bernstein in the presence of Rosen and Britton. Rosen drew principally on the work of William Labov, and he made effective use of one particular article, 'The language of non-standard English' (1972) which reveals the subtle refinement of the underlying logical structure of ritual insults exchanged by Black males in the streets of Harlem, New York. (Rosen's polemic always had a special resonance for young teachers in London who were seeking to make English reflect urban realities.) Later, Shirley Brice Heath showed how the language of children from certain backgrounds is privileged in the school system in Piedmont Carolinas, and Rosen wrote an early, appreciative review of her book, *Ways with Words* (1975), which helped to draw teachers' attention to linguistic variation among pupils. But the surprising intervention that altered the course of the Dartmouth seminar – and the course of English for decades to come – came from James Britton and it concerned the role of language in learning and development.

Child psychologists (Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Cazden) stressed the role of the child's language in learning and development. Socio-linguistics (Halliday, Labov) stressed the importance of context and usage. However, the 'common sense' about the superiority of standard English was also challenged by teachers armed with first-hand experience. Harold Rosen, who was head of the English Department at Walworth Interim Comprehensive School, and a leading member of LATE (the London Association for the Teaching of English), appreciated the strengths of working class speech better than most. Rosen, with others, argued the case that the language that the child already possesses is not necessarily a barrier, but rather it is the necessary *starting point for what is to come*. As Rosen put it, 'Whatever language the pupils possess, it is this which must be built on rather than driven underground (Harold Rosen, *English syllabus for Walworth School*, 1957). This was a far cry from a

*laissez-faire* indifference to the importance of using language carefully. Rather, it was a call for giving pupils' own words proper attention.

For the leading figures in LATE, English in secondary schools was centrally about enabling students to understand and engage critically with language and literature *as well as* gain mastery of specializing discourses (e.g. science, the law), *starting with what they brought with them from outside the school gates*. But what exactly *did* they bring? The notion of 'subject knowledge' had to be expanded to include knowledge of the pupils' heritages. From this point on, for many English teachers learning about their pupils' languages, histories and cultures became a *necessary* as well as an enriching aspect of their work.

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How were new ideas disseminated? Through what channels? New ideas were most frequently mediated in the first instance through talks given to study groups in teacher-led organizations, especially LATE, where working parties, conferences and seminars that teachers organized for themselves drew on relevant scholarship in the academy. Teachers took the initiative, aiming to provide much-needed professional theoretical support where previously there had been none. In a few instances, such as at Walworth and Minchenden Grammar School, Southgate, where Douglas Barnes led the English department, participation involved just about every member of the English departments. Collaboration among teachers and university lecturers was a typical feature of LATE in the early years, especially where teachers and lecturers worked together on improving methods of assessment, campaigned for the reform of the public examinations. Such collaboration enhanced immeasurably teachers' interest in their daily work as well as their sense of professional worth and commitment.

The world changed. The working-class students that Rosen taught at Walworth Interim Comprehensive School in the late 1950s came mostly from long-established working-class communities south of the river. Social housing policies associated with rebuilding after the war, especially large-scale urban planning programmes of 'slum-clearance' had the unforeseen effect of breaking up settled patterns of life based on the extended family and its associated support systems. During the 1950s, these working-class communities emerged from post-war austerity into a period of relative prosperity with almost full employment.

However, in the 1970s and 1980, with low economic growth, high inflation and high unemployment, especially among the economically less prosperous minority communities, there was widespread social distress and disturbance. The demographic changed radically, with increasing numbers of white families moving out of traditionally working-class neighbourhoods in Britain's towns and cities. Mid-career, experienced teachers followed. The bulge in the school age population was passing



through the system and pupil numbers reduced. With falling pupil rolls, teacher redundancies and severe difficulties with teacher retention, and with well-qualified, experienced teachers moving away, the influx of new minorities, created conditions of instability in many if not most urban comprehensive schools.

The African-Caribbean community, which was concentrated in the declining districts of Britain's cities, was particularly hard-hit. Racism, discrimination, poverty, powerlessness as well as oppressive policing sparked 'riots' or 'uprisings'. The Scarman commission was set up to look into the causes of these disturbances. However, the underperformance of Black students in British schools was already a matter of national concern. Previously, the Commons Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration had highlighted concerns about the poor performance of 'West Indian' children in British schools. The committee recommended that the government should institute an independent inquiry into the causes of this underachievement. In 1979, the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups was instituted to look into the causes of underachievement. The committee, concluded that the main problems were low teacher expectations and racial prejudice among white teachers and society as a whole. The Swann Report (DES 1985) recommended that teachers, *should learn more about the languages, histories and cultures of their students.*

The questionable assumption that the students' home language was inherently 'deficient' and that linguistic 'deficiency' somehow explained working-class educational underachievement was revived once more in the context of national concern over poor performance in Black students. Linguists drew attention to the complexities of Caribbean languages, alerting teachers to the pitfalls and dangers of linguistic prejudice by pointing to the central importance of speech for one's sense of identity and self-worth. Research finding and recommendations concerning the issue of the language of students from Caribbean heritages circulated through the ILEA, UDEs and professional associations, LATE and NATE.

Teachers who looked to find out about the languages of the Caribbean quickly discovered that as yet unresolved debates about the status of language varieties had previously arisen in Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados, where linguists, educators, poets, politicians and parents had clashed over the nature and historical significance of Creoles. (Brathwaite, 1984, Carrington 1978). Teachers in Britain had somehow to get on terms with complicated, linguistically technical and politically sensitive research claims. However, it was already apparent to some English teachers (for example, English teachers who were involved in the NATE multicultural working party) that from the perspectives of the history

of enslavement and colonization linguistic matters could not be separated from current questions about race and power. Further levels of complication arose where the generation of parents educated in the Caribbean, who had not been exposed to current ideas about the richness and complexity of Caribbean languages, often looked on progressive ideas about the role of the child's own language in development looked on with suspicion. However, parents who kept abreast with educational change in the Caribbean often saw things differently. For this group, speaking Creole was a matter of identity. How were English teachers expected to navigate this minefield? English teachers looked first for support to their own networks, teacher-led associations, such as LATE, and then, beyond, towards subject-centres and courses funded by local education authorities. In the 1980s before the onset of neoliberal policies and the full-scale marketization of state education, ILEA played a central role in supporting innovation. Peter Mortimore, former Director of the Institute of Education writes,

Much of Ilea's strength stemmed from its interest in innovation. With its economy of scale, the authority was able to develop a range of ideas, many of which were later adopted by authorities all over the UK. Initiatives such as its adult education service, specialist teachers' centres, joint inspection and advisory teams, and the research and statistics branch (in which I worked so happily for six years) influenced developments nationally and internationally.  
*Guardian, 2 July, 2008*

Professional associations, university institutes and UDEs as well as LEAs provided well-attended courses that addressed teachers urgent preoccupations, especially racism, teaching English as an additional language and choosing books that would appeal to their students. Backed by their schools (with modest financial support), and crucially, their departments (by covering classes for colleagues on courses), teachers met new ideas, discussed, criticized and shared practice.

Once more, English teachers worked to make sense of rapid, large-scale societal, demographic and cultural change and to reassess children's needs in altered conditions. And it is probably fair to say that for most teachers, very little in their own formal education prior to teaching had prepared them for the task in hand. In the early 1970s, relatively few teachers even knew with any degree of specificity or confidence, (if former pupils' testimony is to be credited) where their students came from, what languages they spoke or even what to call them. In error, children from the Nigerian homes were routinely described as 'Jamaicans' – a crude instance of a demeaning misrecognition that caused deep resentment. In sum, students' lives were denied proper complexity by their teachers because they didn't know enough about their pupil's histories and cultures. However, in

classrooms where students' own stories contributed to the very content of lessons, English teachers were often well-placed to learn about their interests and experiences.

But it was never plain sailing. In lessons where talk was the main activity, distractions, unwelcome contributions and conflicting viewpoints were difficult to manage. It was plain that simply telling students to respect one another had little effect. Yet, skilful English teachers who were not afraid to take risks learned how to foster a climate of positive cooperation and inclusion through discussion and debate. There was broad agreement that controversial topics handled well made for vibrant, engaging English lessons. As a consequence, teachers invested time and energy in improving the *quality* of student interaction, (for instance, by insisting that speakers took turns, that everyone had the right of participation (as well as a right of reply) rather than concentrating exclusively on individual performance.

The political stakes were raised in those settings where many backgrounds and heritages were in daily contact. The traditional values embedded in heritage cultures – the everyday practices that ordinarily guide the most trivial actions – could be thrown suddenly (and uncomfortably) into relief in ways that were difficult to predict and sometimes hard to manage. Sometimes it was hard for teachers to know what was going on.

World-wide events carried serious implications for classrooms. At the ILEA secondary school referred to by Sir Michael Wilshaw at the start of this article, pupils from; Nigerian pupils -Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa (Muslims) – arrived during and after the Biafran war and famine (1968-70); Israelis and Palestinians after 1973; Greek and Turkish Cypriot homes arrived in classrooms following the Turkish invasion in 1974; Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese (Hoa) arrived after 1978/9, following what English teachers then called the 'War in Vietnam' which they later learned to call 'the American War'. In classes where the students came from Sylhet), from East Bangladesh or Pakistan, or Shri Lanka there were significant language differences as well as suspicions, tensions and animosities with roots outside the school that occasionally spilled over into lessons. How teachers handled conflict mattered to all students. As one student reflected in an English lesson, following a clash of opinions among Caribbean heritage students about teaching the history of slavery, 'Just recently I have realized that I am the first generation of Pakistani students...'

Looking back, what is striking is that more often than not pupils appealed to a sense of teachers' fairness and consistency. For some teachers, awareness dawned that students' outlooks (as well as teachers' own), were undergoing transformations through subtle (and not so subtle) processes of social interaction, moments of recognition, frictions, absorptions and reflections - especially in those lessons where the students themselves had a measure of control over the content, pace and

direction of the work. The outward signs of such processes invariably carried with them modest indications of changes to the national culture. Thus, even during the course of routine, uncontroversial lessons, teachers watched the fabric of the national culture undergoing small-scale, incremental changes. How were they to make sense of it all? How should they respond? What were the implications for the subject English? They were forced by events to act quickly, but they also needed time to reflect.

As far as English was concerned, there was a consciousness among those teachers who saw what was unfolding that their students stood in various, complicated relations to the national culture and its institutions. They were positioned differently by diverse histories and heritages towards a central component of the national culture, the English literary heritage. Teachers' preconceptions about how texts might be read and interpreted were challenged, unsettled and sometimes overturned by their students' divergent readings - their various expectations, assumptions and ways of interpreting texts. Thus, in addition to learning about their students' languages, histories and cultures, teachers were prompted to ask how their students made sense of what they read. English teachers who made their pupils' experiences a focus for lessons rarely looked directly to the academy for guidance about content, standards or methods of teaching. Rather, they read intensively in literatures written in English (or in translation) from an increasingly wide variety of sources and evolved new methods of study.

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