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School's Out?

The Role of Education in Building Democratic Society

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The problem lies in the lack of experiencing democracy hands on and the possibility to see what being an active part of a democratic society is; not just read about it but live it.

– Tomi Kiilakoski

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, populist parties have gained footholds all over Europe and the power structures of party politics in many countries have been turned upside down at an unprecedented rate.

In Finland, young people's interest in societal issues is alarmingly low, and at the same time cynicism and distrust have increased among young people (Myllyniemi 2016). In England, the Brexit vote brought into searing daylight the polarisation of English society and the fact that many have a strong distrust of British politics and feel their voice has not been heard.

These developments have profoundly changed the way democracy is perceived and experienced in these two countries. The growing divisions among people cut deeper as even neighbours find themselves disagreeing on issues as fundamental as what life should be like in one's own country, and who should be allowed to share a home on one's home street.

The perseverance of democracy, and, indeed, the purpose of democracy, has been questioned by many. What could be done to pass on the best of what democracy has to offer for the future generations? What could be done to improve democracy – as so many feel democracy has been failing them?

The role of education plays a fundamental role in terms of acquiring knowledge on societal matters, political structures or participatory democracy. Educating for democracy could be one element in creating more cohesive communities.

The aim of democracy education is to give skills needed, first of all, for living in a democratic society, and, furthermore, to develop and change our democratic societies for the good of all. It is important to enhance awareness of the democratic way of living on all levels of society and to create more possibilities for youth to experience active citizenship.

Tomi Kiilakoski, Finnish youth researcher, interprets the results of polls describing the experience of young people having no power to affect decisions that shape their lives as a downright failure of society. He sees it as the common responsibility of each one of us as citizens and fellow humans to empower young people to participate in the decisions that shape their lives:

“I think these results are alarming: we are failing as a society and as an education system to produce the core experience of citizenship for young people – participating as a member of a community in the planning of the shared, common social and physical environment.”

This discussion paper aims to discover differences and similarities in educating for democracy in England and Finland. In order to be able to identify the key questions, current trends and best practices, we interviewed professionals in the field of education from both England and Finland. A total of nine professionals from research institutes and trade unions of both countries answered our interview, and in addition, we received answers from Finland from the government agency for education and the most prominent youth lobbyist organisation. The interviews were done in November and December 2016 by email except for one telephone interview.

The complete list of interviewees is as follows:

Kristina Kaihari (Finnish National Agency for Education)
Kati Costiander (Finnish National Agency for Education)
Ulla Aunola (Finnish National Agency for Education)
Matti Rautiainen (University of Jyväskylä)
Tomi Kiilakoski (Finnish Youth Research Society)
Olli Luukkainen (Trade Union of Education in Finland)
Olli Joensuu (Finnish Youth Cooperation Alliance)
Robin Head (National Union of Teachers)
Andrea Raiker (University of Bedfordshire)

These interviews were selected in order to gain several perspectives on the issues and current developments regarding educating for democracy. Through the interviews we were able to identify views from both the government sector, unions and education and youth research and discuss matters concerning teacher education, the different levels of education and practical teaching work.

2 THE PRINCIPLES OF A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY - MAPPING THE VIEWS OF EDUCATION EXPERTS

2.1 The role of schools in educating democracy

What are the prerequisites for a democratic society? A great deal has been written on democratic theory, but in this paper we want to focus specifically on the views of the education experts we interviewed.

Our interviewees provided some insights among the same lines: living as equals; having an equal voice; coming together as equals to deliberate on issues concerning oneself and the community one lives in; having choice about common matters; participating in society as an active citizen; being an equal part of a whole. The interviewees agreed on the overarching nature of democracy; it is not only a form of government. Democracy should define all social encounters. Only the level varies – whether it be on the scale of the classroom, your neighbourhood, state, or worldwide.

Democracy education should then take care that citizens are equipped with the skills to preserve these prerequisites. The education experts interviewed agreed that one should of course learn how the parliamentary system works, but great emphasis was laid also on more general skills; skills pertaining to the everyday social encounters of democratic life. These aspects of democratic life outside the ballot box require skills of expressing and reflecting on one's thoughts and opinions, giving well-founded arguments to support one's views, taking others into consideration, respecting each other's rights, listening to others and working together.

How and where should these skills be taught? Who is responsible for passing on democracy from generation to generation? Two of our interviewees, Matti Rautiainen and Andrea Raiker, give an answer in their recently published book, *Educating for Democracy in England and Finland. Principles and Culture*. Raiker and Rautiainen write:

“We argue that it is the role of governments and the education systems they support to create teachers and students who can voice critically appraised judgements to guide their citizenship.” (2016, 1)

According to the experts we interviewed, the people responsible for democracy education are essentially grown-ups, the ones most close to young people in their everyday lives. This essentially means parents as well as teachers. They are the ones who spend the most time with young people, and are mainly responsible for their education and up-bringing. But whatever is taught and learned at home and in schools is put to test and further reflected in everyday encounters outside the home and school. Understanding democracy as a way of social life as well as a way of organising government means democracy is learned and lived in all the moments of social encounters (Raiker & Rautiainen 2016).

This point of view gives an important role to all our fellow citizens: babysitters, neighbours, football coaches and so forth. Another important set of grown-ups are the ones responsible for creating the structures within which the formal democracy education of schools take place, and, furthermore, the everyday encounters and boundaries of lived experiences are formed and take place. Rautiainen & Raiker (2016) refer to governments, but we would like to add to the list policy makers, municipalities and all the people who allocate resources and/or define the institutional settings, which affect democracy education, plan services and realise them. The fundamentals of a democratic society ought to be in place in order for democracy education in schools to achieve the best results.

The definitions that were given in our interviews for democracy education reflect that it is a continuous process, going on from childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, it cannot, and, indeed, should not be allotted to the teaching of a single subject, apart from the rest of social and communal life. Democracy starts at home, and the ballot box is not the final end destination of democracy, but one step on the road. One needs the knowledge of how the government works, but also skills of reflections, critical evaluation, and the capability to evaluate and express thoughts, both one's own and those of others.

Tomi Kiilakoski divides democracy education into the transferal of information concerning democracy and the lived experience of democracy. "This division helps us realise that democracy education is being done in several different education groups and arenas," he says. "Of course in schools and other formal education, families, and also in the streets, hobbies and public decision-making."

All of our interviewees thought that the responsibility of democracy education rests most heavily on the education system, and the government and politics that support it.

"You have to collect information, you've got to reflect on it, analyse it, evaluate it, and come up with a judgement. And that process needs teaching right from the beginning of school," Raiker says.

2.2 Empathy and communality

Democracy inherently entails competition of ideologies and struggle over the dominant view. The competition of political parties and the issues and respective solutions each party supports and furthers receive a lot of attention in news and media. However, in almost all of our interviews a lot more emphasis was laid on the importance of social skills and taking others into account, than the traditional political and party aspects of democracy.

Echoing John Dewey (1966), Raiker and Rautiainen (2016) write that democracy should be experienced in the daily life of schools, not only taught in preparation for a "real life" that awaits pupils once they grow up. In fact, schools should be "miniature societies", in which knowledge is transformed into lived, everyday action.

The thought of schools as "miniature societies" implies that just as in society at large, schools too need to be organised in such a way that democratic life is possible. Democracy in nation states cannot exist without structures of government, elections, representative politics, media, and all other institutions that have been created to foster particular democratic practices. Neither can democracy exist in schools if there are no spaces, places, and structures that allow democratic life to happen.

For this purpose, two prerequisites of democratic life are especially noteworthy. The first is empathetic environments – something that seems to have been lacking in a lot of places lately. Democratic life needs empathetic environments; environments for being heard and being understood (Raiker & Rautiainen 2016).

The other prerequisite, greatly related to the first, is communality. Communality unites individuals and invites individuals to participate – it is "the stuff of democratic living":

"The fundamental work of school is not just to impart and instill the knowledge and understanding required by society for economic growth and profit, it is also to develop communality and communal life, the stuff of democratic living." (Raiker & Rautiainen 2016, 154)

Communality here refers to having common aims or values and shared responsibilities. The democratic community that Raiker and Rautiainen (2016) hope schools would foster would recognise that the value of a person cannot be measured only in terms of economic growth and profit. The

political climate of recent years, in the times of economic crisis, has increased the tendency to view people in terms of the expenses they create. Much less attention has been paid, both in the UK and Finland, on what these individuals can contribute to society.

Tomi Kiilakoski expands the thought of communality and empathy beyond schools. He calls for a broader view of democracy education, and points out especially that intergenerational encounters have value for the purposes of democracy education. Policies and decision-making that extend through generations and affect the lives of people who are only just growing up should be evaluated on what message they convey to future generations, and what value they give to the rights and equality of children today. This applies to several arenas of society.

“Democracy education – especially if it is understood in Dewey’s way, as democratic education – is often simplified only to the activities of the school institution, and sometimes as narrowly as civic education. A wider perspective would understand certain aspects of intergenerational encounters as democratic education. An obvious example would be land use and town planning. It makes explicit how one affects the environment and how changes are made into our physical surroundings. Therefore I would say that there is a need for overall coordination of child and youth policy, but particularly there is a need for a strategic policy in which arenas the civic skills of children and young people can be supported.” (Tomi Kiilakoski)

In this paper we concentrate especially on the school system as the bearer of democracy education, but it is important to keep in mind that the processes of learning and experiencing democracy inside and outside of schools are both important, and should operate in parallel. It does little good to have a democratic school, if a student is confronted with nothing but contradiction to the principles she or he has learned in school once stepping out of the school yard.

3 DO EDUCATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES SUPPORT DEMOCRATIC VALUES? YES AND NO.

3.1 A school system that represents democracy?

From an institutional point of view, the English school system differs from the Finnish in two major ways in terms of democracy education. Firstly, the fundamental: in Finland there are no tuition fees at any level of education for Finnish students. Even school meals are free of charge. Furthermore, early childhood education is planned to enable all children to acquire skills that will enable them to start school on more or less the same level, evening out differences before the start of formal education. Teachers are required to complete a Master's degree, and there are no national tests in basic education or school league tables to serve as bench marks. This creates a very different environment compared to England, where the majority of schools are obligated to undergo Ofsted inspections and SATs.

Raiker explains that teachers often face paradoxes on what Ofsted requires and what would be most useful for students to learn. She describes that teachers try to balance between what they feel is most necessary to teach pupils, and what they must teach pupils in order to perform well with Ofsted. These two aims do not always go hand in hand, and require maneuvering to some extent: "Teachers are naturally subversive: they know what Ofsted wants, and they will do what they know is necessary to get Ofsted approval, but in their everyday lives they will revert to what they think is the right and proper way for individuals to be and to interact with each other."

It seems that in England, democracy is taught in schools within a very stratified setting which gives merely an illusion of possibilities of choice. Head argues that in truth choice, for instance regarding subject options that schools offer, is increasingly restricted in many schools due to funding issues. School choice is restricted as many families cannot even consider sending their children to independent schools due to high fees.

Raiker points out that discussions around Brexit brought democracy into debates all around England, in pubs, at workplaces, in media – how it works, what is the government supposed to be doing. Along with it, Brexit brought into searing light the discontent there is in England: discontent between the comparatively rich South and the poor North, between city and countryside, between the majority and minorities who feel they are not heard.

But democracy education was supposed to be all about giving voice and being genuinely heard, wasn't it? "In this country the class system rules supreme still," says Raiker, and sees it as a genuine obstacle for developing democracy, hoping these debates on democracy will manifest in education as well. Robin Head also points out that the state of democracy education is clearly not up to date, given all these processes that are going on.

An important question is thus raised, regarding whether the education system itself represents democracy – and if not, as it would seem, can such a system convey democratic principles?

Raiker believes that the commodification of education distorts the idea of democracy. Taught and learnt in such a context, democracy no longer remains "a way of life", that would rely on the capability of all individuals (Dewey 1966). Rather, democracy too becomes a commodity. Many of our interviewees believed that the stratified school system of England encourages the perception of pupils as paying customers in the education system instead of citizens. "Pupils are given voice because they are consumers, not because they are part of the democratic process," Raiker concludes.

So far we've been talking about how the teaching and learning of democracy should not be limited to one subject only, but be embedded in everything that happens in schools. We've considered too, how democracy education starts at home and goes on in the streets, in social encounters everywhere, in what you read from newspapers and how you are treated at the local football club, because all that affects not only what you vote on election day, but what you think of voting altogether. Again, voting is only one part of democracy, and the rest is lived every day.

Raiker explains that democracy education is also about a moral and ethical guideline:

"There's something else as well, and that comes from the Brexit experience, where the information you were given was false. We're talking in this country about post-truth society, because the media is such that how do you know what anyone tells you is true unless you've done some research yourself. So because facts are so difficult to come by, you have to have an ethical and moral base to which you relate what you read, what you are told. So democratic education is not only about learning the skills of critical evaluation and reflection and coming to a conclusion – it's about thinking about the "rules" by which you govern yourself, and your behaviour and that of others in a social context."

Shouldn't then the school system depict the moral base that would guide the development of democracy? If the school system is stratified to begin with, how can we expect the pupils of such a system to learn to bridge understanding and work together for the good of all?

"Independent Schools should be abolished," Robin Head argues, "and funding increased to schools so that a student's potential can be maximised through a qualification system designed and monitored by the profession itself."

The state of democracy education in English schooling is then an ambiguous matter. We asked Robin Head, of the National Union of Teachers, whether he believes the English school system and the current education policies support the understanding of democratic principles and the application of them in everyday life.

"Yes and no," he replied. "Many schools have processes which equate to democratic procedures such as school councils and student voice but this is in the context of a system which is totally stratified. Independent schooling, overt and covert admission policies, over-simplified league tables and accountability measures all mitigate against this and it is evident that society has become more socially segregated than it has been."

According to Head, the English school system should be based on a basic sense of fairness, and it should convey both as a value and an end result that all are given the opportunity to succeed regardless of their background and the start they have had in life. However, according to Head, testing students at younger and younger ages entrenches stratification earlier and earlier and an increasing number of students are switched off from education at an earlier age.

"That sense of fairness has become undermined to the point that, perversely, the political solution put forward by the government is to cement inequality via selection for Grammar Schools."

3.2 Democratic procedures in a stratified setting? Contrasting classroom practices in England and Finland

In Finland, democracy is stated as a fundamental basis of education. Practices and needs of education for democracy have been researched even in papers commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Culture (see e.g. Opetushallitus 2011, Rautiainen, Vanhanen-Nuutinen & Virta 2014). Matti Rautiainen states in a positive tone "education professionals generally are not in opposition to democracy per se.

The problem is, that not many develop practices of democracy education in their everyday work.”

Not opposing democracy is one thing. How rigorously democracy education is furthered in practice and how much effort is put into fostering and creating the democratic characteristics of school life is a different matter. Rautiainen says that interventions to improve democracy education in teacher education are now being made, based on a report from a couple of years ago which mapped out the particular deficiencies of Finnish teacher education concerning how well aims of democracy and human rights education are achieved. However, it will be some years before the results of these interventions and other actions brought about from the research will have an effect. Our interviewees still felt that the aims set for democracy education are not fully achieved.

According to our interviewees, the situation in Finland also varies between different schools and is often dependent on the effort of individual teachers. Of course, the knowledge content of subjects is set by the national curriculum, and Finnish children have proven to have good knowledge of civic education. However, the focus on civic structures easily leaves only a marginal value for aspirations to influence the attitudes of pupils or creating a feeling of participation; the lived experience of democracy. Both of these elements are important, as Tomi Kiilakoski says in his interview:

“Democracy education is transferring democracy-related knowledge, for instance, the understanding of municipal decision making. Alongside the knowledge dimension, it is crucial to gain experiences of influence; to learn how to argue and justify your own views and feel how the surrounding community enables and supports influencing. Democracy education is also about learning through doing together as part of a community. This includes also emotional and attitude questions.”

Addressing these aspects of democracy education requires a transformation of the culture in schools to be more inclusive and participatory, both in the way subjects are taught and in the communal level of schools; schools as social communities. Some schools have well established, innovative ways of incorporating democratic elements into school life, whereas others have not yet created such methods.

The decentralised model of Finnish schools relies heavily on the autonomy of the teacher, which, in the best case scenario, gives much freedom to teachers to adapt their teaching methods to the needs and preferences of each individual student, and allows them to react and develop suitable, innovative and interesting ways of teaching. The downside is, as has been pointed out, that there are notable differences between schools in, for instance, participatory practices and ways of developing communality. England, on the other hand, has a more centralised school system, and teaching is quite strictly supervised and predefined.

Despite the rigidity of the English school system, there are a lot of good practices supporting skills for democracy. The Finnish school system has traditionally valued individuality and independent school work (Raiker & Rautiainen 2016). English schools, on the other hand, have a stronger tradition of group work, debate and criticality. Dr. Andrea Raiker, who has studied the English school system extensively from the point of view of democracy education, agrees that there is a lot of good teaching practices:

“For teaching democracy, you first need curiosity. You need to stimulate pupils to come up with their own question, and voice them out and be heard. Secondly, you need communication; being able to express your thinking, and opportunities to socialize your thinking. Thirdly, you need collaboration: working together for the common good. In this country, education has a lot of voice, a lot of groupwork, pupils have to communicate and collaborate. There is a lot of that.”

3.3 Developments in Finland: the new curriculum

The saying “democracy is a verb” resonates strongly with the definitions our interviewees gave for democracy education. Democracy education should spark curiosity and interest, as Raiker points out in the quote above, and as many of the interviewees said, the responsibility of education systems is to raise pupils to be active citizens.

The opposite of a democratic school would be a passive school – a school that has missed out on the verb part of democracy. Such a school lacks participation, community, empathy and critical thinking. It’s a place where the teacher limits the conceptions of democracy by defining what is the good and correct way to act democratically, not giving room for pupils to take part in decisions that affect themselves, and no time and space for working together with each other. (Raiker & Rautiainen 2016, Rautiainen & Rähä 2012.)

Matti Rautiainen, who is an expert when it comes to democracy education in the Finnish school system, has been very critical of the two faces of the Finnish school: good learning outcomes on the one hand, but a passive participatory culture on the other. In an article written in 2012, Rautiainen and Rähä wrote that the significance of schools as the fulfiller and definer of the democratic way of life was central, but point to a setback of false neutrality of schools:

“In schools pupils studied the contents of subjects, albeit with no attention at all to an understanding of these contents, and they were educated in a blissful and rapidly evolving welfare state. In the country of lottery winners – winning the lottery is what Finns call being born in Finland – there was no need to educate pupils to see things differently and develop their activeness. It was a virtue to dutifully achieve learning outcomes and not, for example, talk about learning objectives and whether they were sensible.” (Rautiainen & Rähä 2012, 10.)

In recent years Finnish schools have developed a more participatory direction and stronger emphasis on working together, communication and criticality. The new curriculum of 2016 for early childhood education and comprehensive schools, emphasises participation, collaboration and democracy. The new curriculum states that pupils’ participation and being heard are at the base of all school work. Furthermore, it is stated that pupils should gain experiences of collaboration and democratic activities in their own learning groups, in the school as a whole, and also in the surrounding neighbourhood.

Along with the new curriculum, a new concept of phenomenal learning has been introduced to Finnish schools, which emphasises group work, independent thinking and critical evaluation of information. The 2016 new curriculum can be seen as a new take on school life and teaching. All of our Finnish interviewees were satisfied with the role of democracy and participation in it and hopeful for the development it would bring concerning democracy education.

“The new curricula and their mention of emphasising children’s rights point to a good direction. It’s not about the needs of children or children as customers, but of children as legal subjects with possibilities to act and be a part of their communities.” (Tomi Kiilakoski)

“The new curriculum supports democracy education on the one hand through principles and practices that strengthen participation and communality in schools, and, on the other hand, by encouraging the cooperation of schools and NGOs. Phenomenal learning models, too, enable democracy education to be handled as a broad entity. This requires effort from teachers and schools, but I do believe it will increase democracy education in schools.” (Olli Joensuu)

Teaching methods and classroom practices have evolved throughout the years and, as mentioned, each teacher has had much freedom to teach in their preferred ways – whether to rely on textbooks or create imaginative ways for teaching. However, the new curriculum, despite the fact that it does not

dictate teaching methods, leaving a lot of freedom for schools, can be seen as a strong nudge towards participatory, critical, engaging and deliberative school life. This approach it brings to learning is intended to increase the interest of young people and activate them to search for information, combine, contrast and critically assess facts and their own opinions.

3.4 Paradoxes: education cuts despite will to improve

Despite the positive trends brought about by the new curriculum and assessment methods, there are paradoxes in the education system: at the same time, cuts to education funds are being made. These are contradictory to the aims of the new curriculum and might well jeopardise the fulfilment of their goals.

Olli Luukkainen answered the question of what sort of values the Finnish school system conveys and whether something should be changed regarding the status quo by pointing to the pedagogic discourse on the one hand, and political decisions to make budget cuts, on the other hand:

“On the level of pedagogical discourse the question of democracy education has progressed considerably during the last few years, but in practice education cuts have worked in just the opposite direction. It has put into danger the development that has happened in the equality of the school system. A gap has been created between those municipalities that still invest in education, and those that don’t” (Olli Luukkainen)

In other words, the will and possibilities to create experiences of lived democracy in schools, not just learn facts and absorb information of democracy, vary. This is dependent on the decentralised model in Finland, which endorses the individuality of schools and the trust placed in the autonomy of teachers. Hence, these questions tend to be up to the teacher and further restricted by the ever-diminishing resources and precarious and ever-changing institutional context. This issue should be taken seriously and be perceived as an unequalising factor of the school system on a national level. The state of matters means that not all young people receive the same support in growing into active citizens.

Olli Luukkainen gives a concrete example of how the education cuts hinder the good will of plans and reforms. For instance, education cuts force schools (and kindergartens) to increase group sizes. This directly makes it more difficult to utilise participatory methods in teaching, which is the aim of the new curriculum. Interaction, discussion and working together are more difficult in large groups, than in smaller groups.

“Interactivity, discussions, making and doing together and so forth are all things worth pursuing, but they all require reasonable group sizes. Unfortunately, in Finland, the trend is just the opposite. This restricts and weakens the use of participatory methods in teaching, which was the well justified principle and aim of the new curriculum.” (Olli Luukkainen)

There are inequalities not only between municipalities and schools in Finland, but also among different education levels. Olli Joensuu tells us that the weakness of democracy education in vocational education is especially worrying, since the societal participation of students in vocational education is among the lowest of their age group. There is urgent need to improve democracy education in vocational teaching to diminish the polarisation of the interest, participation and skills of young people.

“Democracy education is quite well grounded in high school education. The biggest challenges are in vocational education. The democracy education in vocational schools needs more focus, especially since studies have shown that the civic participation of vocational students is overall weaker than that

of their peers in high schools.” (Olli Joensuu)

This also requires improvements in teacher education at all levels, and training for early childhood education. Raiker criticises the state of democracy education in the English teacher training: “there is no democracy education in teacher training whatsoever. It’s just a word, and no time is devoted to learning what it means and how it can be incorporated in teaching.”

4 CONCLUSION

Even though Finland seems to have a lot more freedom regarding teaching methods and content of classes, English schools have a stronger emphasis on group work, deliberation, argumentation and reflective thinking in school work. In Finland, several steps have been taken to improve the teaching methods to be more participatory and social. On the contrary, in England the obstacles of democracy education lie not in the classroom practices, but the educational system, which inherently recreates undemocratic and polarising structures in society. Alleviating the situation of deprived neighbourhoods and schools under strain should be a priority. In both Finland and England, the interest and skills of young people are polarised: the will to learn and influence fall to those who are already equipped with the interest and motivation to take part in decision making.

In this paper we concentrated mainly on schools, but it must be emphasised that for democracy education in schools to bring the best results, learning and living democracy outside of schools must be strengthened equally. The learning that happens outside the formal educational institutions must be taken into account and the awareness that the social encounters that happen outside of schools carry power and the potential to develop democracy. Also, numerous studies have shown that having meaningful pastime or free time activities is elemental in securing the membership of young people in society. Finland has seen a marked increase in immigration in recent years, and has quite probably much to learn from experiences in England in strengthening the participation and belonging of immigrant youth in society.

Overall this paper points to the need for more training on democracy to be incorporated into teacher training and also for other professionals working with children and young people. The Deweyan principle that all individuals are capable of intelligent judgement to take part in democratic life should guide all our social relations as well as those of teacher and pupil to build trust across our immediate social relations.

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