Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care

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Abstract
Australia’s National Quality Framework identifies responsibilities for early childhood educators who work with infants to plan for and assess their learning. Educators are urged to be ‘responsive to children’s ideas and play’ and to ‘assess, anticipate and extend children’s learning’. Responsiveness in relation to infants is often couched in terms of emotional support and attention to the attachment relationship, or in detailed guidance about supporting the infant in care routines. Drawing on Levinas’s ideas of ethical encounter to frame a consideration of infants’ learning more broadly, this article suggests the possibility to see beyond traditional perceptions of infants as objects of the attachment relationship, and identifies the potential for infants to be viewed as ‘initiators’ who guide educators’ responses. Working with Levinas’s ideas of absolute responsibility in the face-to-face encounter, the notion of ‘response-ableness’ is used to examine educators’ decisions and actions as they share in learning encounters with infants. Using video footage captured during an infant’s encounter with learning, the decisions of the educator prove influential. Creating a narrative of this experience illuminates the educator’s response-ableness, and shows how an infant’s ideas and investigations might form the basis of the learning encounter. Close examination of educator response-ableness may lead to richer possibilities for infants’ encounters with learning, beyond the curriculum of care.

Keywords
Agency, curriculum, ethical encounter, infants, Levinas, mind-minded

I think the thing that struck me the most was how active babies are and how much it is ‘they’ take the initiative. They are not passive little things to whom you do things; in fact, in many ways they are the initiators of what happens to them. (Ainsworth, 1995: 5)

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**Introduction**

The roles of educators who work with infants participating in early childhood education and care programs have often been framed within discourses of maternalism (Ailwood, 2007; Bown et al., 2010) and associated notions of care and protection (Page et al., 2013; Rockel, 2009; Trevarthen, 2011). Perhaps unintentionally, these powerful ideas have situated infants as passive and the object of adults’ decisions and actions. Largely shaped by the influential ideas emerging from attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1967; Bowlby, 1969), caregiving adults have been encouraged to be responsive to infants’ cues and attentive to their care needs. Translating this guidance to those who work with infants in early childhood settings, learning relationships have often emphasised the importance of care routines, attention to emotional attachments and the provision of a safe environment (e.g. see Goldstein, 1998; Gooch and Powell, 2013; Rockel, 2009; Sims and Hutchins, 2011). In recent years, the notion of ‘care as curriculum’ (Gerber, 2005) has been heralded as a key point of difference between approaches to curriculum for children over three years and for infants and toddlers under three years (Bussey, 2013). The purpose of this article is to extend on these readings of care and protection as the foundations of curriculum for infants, and seek more expansive understandings of infants as complex learners who bring agency and intent to the learning encounter.

This article reports on a small sample within a large data source gathered as part of the Australian Research Council-funded Infants’ Lives in Childcare project (Sumsion et al., 2011). In this study, Mosaic methodology (Clark and Moss, 2001) was used as a way of listening to children, and was underpinned by a commitment to engage in participatory research methods – to capture lived experience, respectfully include infants’ perspectives and reflect their stories. Multiple data sources were gathered to build a more complex understanding of the lived experience of infants than a single data source alone might provide. To this end, a range of digital recording strategies was used, including video footage and still camera images, along with field notes, researcher journal entries, and notes taken from incidental comments and discussions with parents and educators at the setting. The data sources were combined and analysed to build narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum as a way of reflecting the complexity of infants’ learning experiences.

In an earlier article titled ‘Narratives of infants’ encounters with curriculum: The benediction as invitation to participate’, also drawing on this larger data source (see Cheeseman and Sumsion, 2016), Levinas’s idea of ‘benediction’ was introduced as a way to see infants’ invitations to their learning agendas. Looking beyond expectations for infants’ learning drawn primarily from developmental norms and the dominance of literature about infants’ emotional states, the article suggested that infants bring their own learning agendas and interests, which may be outside what educators have learned to expect. Included was a narrative of Clare, an infant of 19 months, who showed her interest in pursuing a playful learning experience using somewhat sophisticated recall, gesture and eye contact. Her ‘benediction’ (see Levinas, 1999) or invitation was powerful, as was her interest in playing with a material that developmental norms might consider beyond her physical and intellectual capabilities. In the earlier article, the focus was on noticing the motivations and behaviours of the infant, and concluded that educators may be overlooking infants’ benedictions as indicators of their agency, intents and desires for learning.

In this article, I look closely at a further example of an infant’s benediction taken from video footage, but on this occasion I examine closely the response of the educator to this benediction. While much of the early childhood literature exhorts educators to be ‘responsible’ for infants, I now work with ideas developed by Chinnery (2003), who suggests that educators seeking to engage with children’s ideas and intents might also be ‘response-able’. This article begins with an examination of Levinas’s ideas of ethical encounter as a way to consider the role of educators in the learning experiences of infants. It then reflects what contemporary discourses suggest about
‘responsiveness’, and considers this alongside thinking that educators might also be response-able. In the second part, an example of an infant’s learning encounter, identified from video footage, is examined with a focus on the educator’s ‘inaction’ as a response-able act. The article concludes by suggesting that response-able educators, who are alert to children’s learning agendas, consciously choose their responses, enabling infants to have greater agency in their own and others’ learning.

**Learning encounters**

Levinas’s thinking about the face-to-face encounter is helpful in considering the roles that educators can take in the experiences of young children participating in early childhood education and care settings. Principled on an ethic and responsibility for the ‘Other’ (Levinas, 1987), the face-to-face encounter promotes the importance of the individual and a sensitive reading of ‘responsibility’. Discouraging oversimplified, formulaic or technicist approaches to the notion of responsibility, Blanchot (1995, cited in Chinnery, 2003: 9) explains that “‘responsible’ is a term which is typically reserved for the “mature, lucid, conscientious man [sic], who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides … the successful man [sic] of action’”. Responsibility in this sense is understood in relation to an absolute knowledge of the Other, where those who are responsible know with some certainty how to respond.

Much of the infant/toddler literature exhorts educators to be the responsible adult who is guided by accepted wisdom and doctrine to know with some certainty the right way to respond. The emphasis is most often on the action of the educator – inaction is rarely discussed. Levinas, however, introduces the notion of passivity or, as Blanchot (1995, cited in Chinnery, 2003: 9) describes: ‘what I make happen by my actions and what I allow to happen by inaction’. An awareness that both action and inaction on the part of the educator are influential in the infant’s experiences calls for a more critical reading of responsibility and a challenge to the privileging of action over inaction.

Levinas’s (1987) notion of ethical encounter promotes an alternative view of responsibility, introducing the notion of susceptibility and a willingness to look and listen with less certainty. Levinas’s thinking urges wariness about the knowable and strives for deeper understandings – for more ethical and responsive encounters. In relation to working with infants, such thinking not only encourages a view of infants’ encounters with learning beyond methods grounded in observing anticipated development, but also promotes a deeper engagement with infants’ individual interests, theories and intents. By viewing attachment theory or child development as only part of the repertoire for thinking about possibilities for infants’ learning, educators working with infants must be comfortable not only with predictable knowledge, but also with that which is less certain and often unexpected. Such an approach is rarely presented in contemporary infant/toddler literature and contests the accepted wisdom that surrounds guidance for infant educators.

In contesting such notions as the known and the unknown, certainty and uncertainty, Levinas (1985) identified that texts or accepted wisdom contain both a ‘said’ and a ‘saying’. The ‘said’, representing the written form or accepted doctrine that attempts to define action, establishes expectations and provides a predictable interpretation of behaviours. The ‘saying’, on the other hand, is seen in the individual interpretation – seeking the view beyond predictability, expectations and containing definitions – to the distinct enactment of the ‘said’ (Levinas, 1985). The ‘said’ makes way for that which cannot be grasped as certain knowledge and encourages a speculative stance.

Acknowledging these dual possibilities, the ethical encounter encourages the knowledge contained in the accepted wisdom to work alongside the face-to-face individual encounter. Applying this thinking to working with infants, the educator draws on the knowledge of the ‘said’ – for example, the curriculum guidance document or the accepted doctrine of developmental theories – but, taking a susceptible stance, is open to the benediction of the ‘Other’ – the infant. The ‘saying’
does not presume to know the ‘Other’, but accepts that each encounter with the infant contains desires, intents and motives that should be sought and honoured. As Todd (2001: 69) explains, this way of working ‘compels us to reconsider … our taken for granted definitions about the Other and … review the significance of susceptibility in learning’. The notion of ‘susceptibility’, then, is pivotal to the relational pedagogies that underpin curriculum as encounter.

Close attention to infants’ expressions of interest and intent enables the infant educator not only to be responsible for the care, safety and welfare of the infant, but also to be ‘response-able’. Such an approach encourages reciprocity, where both the educator’s knowledge and the infant’s knowledge share the space for decision-making about curriculum. Such a disposition affirms the guidance of Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework, which calls for learning to promote children’s agency and the opportunity for children (including infants) to contribute to matters that affect them, including their learning (Australian Government, 2009).

**Response-ability**

Response-ability within the ethical encounter of an infant and educator is not well examined. A complex notion which cannot be easily explained or quantified, response-ability, according to Säfstrom (2003), requires an educator to adopt a stance of vulnerability, passivity and uncertainty. This is a significant shift away from the certainty of responses based on accepted wisdom, which tend to promote a more formulaic ‘I know what you need from me’ approach. Such a departure from the unquestioned reasonableness of the notion of responsibility demands an interrogation of the theoretical and moral underpinnings of the accepted doctrine, for who would question the need for educators working with infants to be responsible? An uncovering of the origins of responsibility can, however, reveal the potential for silenced and taken-for-granted traditions to limit the way in which infants are viewed and, indeed, limit the capacity to identify and enable infant agency.

Arguably, the most prominent theoretical influence in relation to working with infants is that of attachment theory and, in particular, reference to the need within the attachment relationship for adult ‘responsiveness’. Often found in the attachment literature, responsiveness has been variously described and often linked to the terms ‘sensitivity’ (Ainsworth, 1967) and ‘attunement’ (Stern, 1985). Sensitivity, as explained by Ainsworth, describes the action of the mother in response to her infant’s cues. Ainsworth (1967: 397) explains that: ‘Sensitivity of response to signals implies that signals are perceived and correctly interpreted and that the response is prompt and appropriate’. This emphasis on the response as ‘prompt and appropriate’ highlights the importance of an accurate reading of the infant’s cues, and at least implies that the response is one that fits within the scope of attachment theory. It also implies an action on behalf of the mother.

Similarly, attunement is described as ‘the sharing of affect in mutually enjoyable ways’, where the mother’s response ‘closely matches the intensity, duration and shape of her infant’s behavioural expressions’ (Rolfe, 2004: 40). This focus on imitation – or, as Stern (1985: 141) describes it, ‘a faithful rendering of the infant’s overt behaviour’ – again proposes a close match or reproduction of the infant’s initiation. The emphasis on the ‘faithful rendering’ and ‘matches[ing]’ of expressions promotes a reading of the infant’s individuality and recognises the infant’s capacity to initiate the encounter. However, in much the same way as sensitivity, the responsibility for attunement sits with the mother to accurately read and faithfully match back the infant’s cues. This guidance, in its emphasis on the matched response, somewhat discounts a more complex reading of the infant’s intent and once again privileges action over inaction.

Both sensitivity and attunement situate the adult as the knowledgeable one who is responsible for acting in an appropriate way. There is limited acknowledgement of the infant as a protagonist
or, indeed, one who might hold an independent agenda for engaging the adult. While acknowledging the importance of both sensitivity and attunement, and the significance of these behaviours in the development of secure and trusting relationships, questions remain. Does this style of responsiveness overgeneralise the infant’s motives and intents, and is there a need to think about infants’ encounters with learning beyond notions of attachment, sensitivity and attunement?

Seeking the infant’s agency

Attempting to come closer to an understanding of response-ability in an infant early childhood setting, I draw on more recent work in the area of attachment – seeking a view beyond the limitations of sensitivity and attunement. Meins (1997) has investigated how mothers’ attitudes about the capabilities of their infants, or what she terms a mother’s ‘mind-mindedness’, can influence how their infants approach learning. She defines mind-mindedness as a mother’s propensity to treat her children as ‘mental agents’ (Meins, 1997: 108), and her proclivity to pitch interactions with her children in a way that recognises both their current level of ability and their potential. Rather than viewing their infants in terms of their behaviour or physical attributes, Meins et al. (1998) noted that mind-minded mothers were ‘more likely to describe their children in terms of their mental characteristics’ (8) and had a propensity to treat their children as ‘individuals with minds’ (20).

Aligning closely with Vygotsky’s (1978) work, in particular his theory of the zone of proximal development, mind-minded mothers were found to pitch their interventions based on their understanding of their child’s areas of competence and an awareness of the challenges they faced. The children of mind-minded mothers were found at later stages of childhood to demonstrate higher levels of symbolic and mentalising abilities (Meins et al., 1998). This influence of the mother’s attitude towards her infant on the child’s later learning prompts a deeper analysis of the assumptions of sensitivity and attunement. Rather than viewing the action of the adult as the pivotal characteristic of the attachment relationship, there is perhaps a need to focus more intentionally on the more hidden and less visible role of attitudes towards infants’ capabilities, and, indeed, on what infants bring to the attachment relationship. Rather than viewing infants as the passive recipients of their mother’s responses, infants might be viewed as agents with influence over how the adult might respond.

Despite the current limitations of mind-minded research, which focuses almost exclusively on the infant–mother dyad and is silent in regard to the role of fathers, the broader notion of mind-mindedness may be helpful in focusing the attention of infant educators on the capabilities of infants, rather than exclusively on their perceived needs. Degotardi (2015) contends that the same principles of mind-mindedness apply to educators as they attempt to understand the perspectives of the infants they work with. Awareness of mind-mindedness may encourage infant educators to look with less certainty and be open to the surprising capabilities of infants – taking their lead from the infants, rather than feeling compelled to act within the boundaries of current readings of sensitivity and attunement.

Mind-mindedness situates the infant within the adult–infant relationship quite differently. Whereas sensitivity and attunement situate the adult as an expert, responsible to interpret the needs of the infant accurately, mind-mindedness positions the infant as having expertise about themselves – being capable of expressing ‘wants, feelings, interests, perceptions, knowledge and thoughts’ (Degotardi, 2015: 181). Mind-mindedness situates the educator as a partner rather than an expert, viewing the infant as having capabilities that can be acknowledged and privileged within the learning encounter. Importantly, mind-mindedness supports contemporary images of infants as holding agency, where the infant is considered capable of decision-making or, as the Early Years Learning Framework expresses, ‘able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and have
an impact on one’s world’ (Australian Government, 2009: 45). Such ideas are reflective of Levinas’s thinking of learning as an ethical encounter. Rather than the knowledgeable adult providing the appropriate learning environment based on generalised assumptions about infants’ developmental needs, notions of mind-mindedness offer infants the possibility to be leaders, collaborators and partners in learning.

Viewing infants as agents with minds requires new ways to observe and acknowledge infants’ potentials that extend beyond a confidence in developmental norms or prescribed ways of responding to anticipated needs. Seeking infants’ ideas, agendas and interests, and positioning educators as response-able, means being open to infants as protagonists – premised on a perception of them as having a point of view worth listening to. This thinking prompts questions about the possibilities of engaging in observation of infants that provides greater insight into their ideas, agendas and interests, and that better enables educators’ response-ability.

Narratives as observation

As previously mentioned, this article is part of a study situated within a larger Australian Research Council-funded project that sought to better understand the lived experience of infants in Australian early childhood settings. Using a criticalist (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005) theoretical frame, this study sought to expose hidden, silenced and taken-for-granted assumptions about infants’ childcare experiences. Levinas’s thinking about the nature of ethical encounter has offered a critical challenge to normative developmental practices and the dominance of attachment theory as a way to construct infants’ learning experiences. In seeking to get as close as possible to the perspectives of the infants themselves, this study has also drawn loosely on humanist traditions in order to consider the lived experience of infants. According to Taylor (1995), humanistic research promotes the advance of practical reason with a focus on a deeper understanding of what it is to live a human life. In seeking to gain a closer proximity to infants’ experience, I have explored the potential of narratives as a way to reflect the actions of infants while seeking to gain insight into their intents and interests. In attempting to do this, I acknowledge the theoretical and philosophical tensions between the two approaches of critical theory and humanist traditions. Inspired, however, by the thinking of Kinsella (2006), I attempt here to reflect the complexity of infants’ lived experience using both the criticalist perspectives of Levinas and the humanist potentials of narratives. Kinsella (2006: 1) suggests that qualitative inquiry and our understanding of others can be enriched through a ‘critical hermeneutics’. Such an approach considers both the lived experience that is witnessed and a critical interpretive stance which can expose otherwise neglected or overlooked events. Here, narratives are presented as a way of better understanding infants’ benedictions. The narratives aim to foreground the perspectives of infants and draw attention to perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked or discounted. In this way, narrative is suggested as a way of seeking to look beyond that which is already known, understood or expected. Van Manen (1990) suggests that narratives can make us more alert to another’s life experience. Generated based on close observation and reflexivity, the narrator does not claim to represent a singular truth or accurate representation of another’s perspective. Rather, narrative methods offer the possibility to give voice to people who lack words by reflecting as closely as possible the events of another’s life experience (Baron, 1991, cited in Booth and Booth, 2010: 59). While mindful that Baron’s claim is contested (e.g. see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009), and acknowledging that one can never claim to accurately reflect another’s life experience, narratives are perhaps one way to attempt to gain a closer proximity to the infant’s perspective and to become more alert to the infant’s agency.

With this in mind and seeking to gain closer proximity to the experience of the infant, I propose that narratives may be a way to move beyond more traditional forms of child observation, as
largely subjective task undertaken from the trained adult’s perspective (e.g. see Gerke, 2004), to a
more collaborative endeavour where the infant’s perspective, agenda and intent are actively sought.
This approach to narrative differs from more traditional forms of observation such as anecdotal
records or learning stories (see Arthur et al., 2015) as it does not attempt to analyse or categorise
the behaviours of the infant based on an assumption of expected development. Rather, this form of
narrative aims to reflect the action while seeking to wonder about the infant’s agenda. It is prem-
ised on being curious about the infant’s mind and attempting to illuminate not only what we can
know about the infant, but also what is unknown. As such, the educator is present in the narrative
and his/her decision-making or response-ability is embedded in the action. In this way, narratives
provide a way of simultaneously seeking the child’s perspective while acknowledging that the
response of the adult is both influential and influenced. Narratives, in this sense, are generated as a
way of drawing attention to the infant’s perspective – to alert educators to the possibility of being
tentative and susceptible in their knowledge of how to respond.

Narrative of Hugh’s encounter with the castle

Hugh is an infant of 15 months. He attends a long-day early childhood setting with his older sister. Hugh
has been walking for some weeks now and making the most of his ability to access more areas of the
setting. Late one afternoon, he comes upon a plastic climbing structure that is referred to by educators and
children at the setting as ‘the castle’. Hugh approaches the steps of the castle and, with no hesitation,
begins to climb the six steps, crawling on his knees and using his arms to pull himself up each step [Figure
1]. He pauses for several seconds near the top, appearing to think through how he will negotiate the top
step given that there is no further step to hold on to [Figure 2]. He looks around before finding a handhold
on the side, and pulls himself to a standing position. He takes a few moments to negotiate the top step but
soon pulls himself over onto a narrow platform in the centre of the castle. He bounces his body a few times,
perhaps expecting the platform to have the jouncing qualities of other boards he has previously played on
[Figure 3]. It has no give, so he stops bouncing. He removes his hands from the castle walls and balances
himself confidently, then regrasps the walls and attempts to step to the other side of the castle – perhaps
assuming that the platform at the top of castle extends to the other side.

He soon notices by looking and feeling with his leg that there is a deep gap and no way for him to reach
the other side of the castle. He looks over to his educator, who is in sight and watching him closely, but not
physically close enough to assist him. She feels confident that he is safe and is interested to see what he
does on the castle. He makes no gesture that indicates he is wanting assistance and does not suggest that
he is in any way afraid or wanting to be removed. Over the next few minutes, he looks around from this
new perspective and uses his body to test out the castle and how he fits within this new space. He appears
to theorise about how to move to the other side of the castle and repeatedly looks beneath him [Figure
4] and then dips his leg over the edge of the platform, seemingly testing the depth. At one point during this
testing, both legs slip off the platform, and he shows exceptional upper-body strength and coordination in
preventing a fall [Figures 5 and 6]. His exploration of the castle continues for approximately six minutes.
Other children approach him, and they appear to have brief verbal and non-verbal interactions. It is not
clear the nature of these interactions, but Hugh engages with each child happily, at times pointing and
gesturing as he looks from this new height beyond the immediate playground.

This narrative provides an insight into Hugh’s thinking and theorising. Rather than focusing on his
physical capabilities, the narrative focuses on his embodied negotiation of the space and his testing
of theories about the nature of the castle. Significant to this narrative is Hugh’s initiation of the
encounter with the castle. He alone approached and negotiated the steps, the narrative noting his
confidence, persistence and theories about the jouncing board and the gap preventing him from
moving to the other side. Showing judgement, problem-solving and tenacity, Hugh negotiates the
Seeking to understand Hugh’s intent and watching closely for his agenda provides an insight that may not be captured in an observation focusing solely on his development.

The educator becomes a part of the narrative as her role in watching and waiting is integral to the action. In this narrative, the educator demonstrates dispositions that support the notion of mind-mindedness. Tentative and susceptible, she enables Hugh to climb a piece of outdoor equipment that might traditionally be considered to be beyond his development level. The educator’s trust in his ability to make judgements and decisions about what interests him, while watching closely his facial expressions and body language for signs of distress, is evidence of her willingness to view
Figure 3. Exploring the castle – jouncing.

Figure 4. Looking to understand the gap.

Figure 5. Slipping but preventing a fall.
Hugh as a mental agent with the ability to make decisions and judgements about his learning interests and abilities. She employs a pause, wait and listen approach – she is alert to his situation and observing him closely for signs of distress or any indication that he might want assistance, but allows him to explore and investigate, on his own, his body’s response to this equipment. The educator’s decisions enable a level of investigation and learning that respects his judgement and desire to explore on his terms. In this narrative, the intentional inaction of the educator might be seen as a listening-to, enabling the infant to express his desire to investigate the castle in his own way, to not be interrupted or stopped based on a generalised assumption about the appropriateness of the equipment, and rather to share power and decision-making, and have confidence in his ability as a mental agent.

Conclusion

As Rolfe (2004) declares, it is not simply the presence of a caring adult, but the nature of the interaction that influences what infants’ experience. While notions of sensitivity and attunement, and a focus on caregiving as curriculum, have dominated much of the guidance directed at educators working with infants in early childhood settings (as noted by Degotardi and Pearson, 2014; Page et al., 2013; Sims and Hutchins, 2011; Trevarthen, 2011), Levinas’s ideas about ethical encounter invite educators to think beyond these boundaries. Inviting a shift from images of infants as having needs to images of infants as initiators and agents of their own learning suggests a broader range of pedagogies and a more expansive view of infants as learners. Emphasising a susceptible stance and acknowledging the wisdom and expertise of the infant, educators who adopt a mind-minded attitude trust infants to share their benedictions and to demonstrate their agency, desires and intents for learning.

The narrative presented in this article serves to illuminate both how this infant ably communicated his benediction – or interests, intents and learning agendas – and how the educator, in tuning into the infant’s benediction, responded in ways that afforded the infant agency. In this event, the educator’s response-ability is prompted not solely by assumed doctrine or generalised assumptions, nor is it driven by an imperative to act. Her reading of the infant as a mental agent who is
knowledgeable about himself as a learner invites her inaction – to pause, wait and listen, trusting his agency and capacity to lead the learning.

As Ainsworth (1995: 5) states: ‘They are not passive little things to whom you do things; in fact, in many ways they are the initiators of what happens to them’. A more conscious acknowledgement of enabling that views infants as thinkers and theorisers, that describes them in terms of their abilities and affords them the opportunity to take the lead, may broaden the epistemological foundations of the work of infant educators. It may require a different approach to that which much of the existing guidance for infant educators promotes. A response-able educator may be knowledgeable, drawing on evidence and theory, but all the while comfortable with the as yet unknown and open to learning from the infant. Might a more susceptible and response-able stance provide possibilities for rich and contextually relevant learning, and the foundations for a more expansive curriculum for infants?

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