

Berry School Book Club: Engaging readers *and* writers

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This chapter reports on the work of three educators (Jan, academic partner, and class teachers: Susan & Brett) as they engage Grade 4, 5, 6 children in the two classes to learn to 'read like writers' through their involvement in the in-class run Berry School Book Club.

Background

The *Berry School Book Club* began in 2011. While the initial focus was to extend the reading experiences of a group of avid readers, from the very beginning we incorporated writing experiences. We wanted our young reader/writers to read in a particular way; we wanted them to engage in the texts they read as potential writers and to read knowing that the authors they read can teach them the craft of writing (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2007). We wanted them to learn what it means to 'read like a writer' (Smith, 1983).

Many have researched the links between reading and writing, taking up Smith's (1983) notion of the importance of 'reading like a writer.' Abadiano and Turner (2002) argue that there is 'substantial evidence to suggest that a 'mentor relationship' can develop between authors and children' (p. 1). Certainly Corden's (2007) extensive research in the UK revealed that a 'critical evaluation of literature and an examination of literary devices can help children become more reflective writers' (p. 12).

More recently, Griffith (2010) carried out an ethnographic study, observing a Grade 4 teacher as she helped her students 'read like writers' (p. 49). Guided by Smith's (1983) words, that 'it can only be through reading that writers learn all the intangibles that they know' (p. 558), the research focused on 'What role does the teacher play in helping students learning to read like writers?' (p. 50). Griffith's (2010) findings revealed that this Grade 4 teacher:

- was a writer. She understood the process and nature of writing and perceived herself to be a writer
- was able to identify the 'writer's craft' and draw this to the attention of her students
- modelled how to use 'craft writing' for her students
- gave students opportunities to try the writing technique discussed.

A strong message that emerged from Griffith's (2010) research is that:

Teachers who engage in the practice of reading like a writer themselves are better able to help students read like writers. These teachers notice well-crafted writing while reading for pleasure, while reading the writing of their students and while reading aloud to the students in their class (p. 63).

The Berry Public School Book Club

Berry Public School (enrolment 300) is located approximately two hours south of Sydney in the rural and picturesque township of Berry. The town and surrounding communities comprise farming, business and professional families. There is strong community support for the school and its many projects.

Throughout 2012–2013, Jan ran Book Club as a pullout program from 2.00–3.00pm on Mondays in the school library with twenty children who worked in four teams led by one of the four student leaders. Children who were avid passionate readers were specially chosen from Years 4, 5, 6 by their teachers. With parental permission the children came out of class for this special event, organised and facilitated by Jan, with support from teachers.

A key focus for Book Club is to engage all readers in:

- reading, reflecting and critiquing novels, poems and picture books
- exploring the writing devices of the authors they read
- reading like writers and thus improve their writing
- teaching children to get inside the author's head.

We were particularly guided by Smith's (1983) assertion that when reading:

The author becomes an unwitting collaborator [teacher] ... Bit by bit, one thing at a time, but enormous amounts of things over the passage of time, the learner learns, through reading like a writer, to write like a writer.
(p. 564)

Book Club structure¹

The one-hour pullout program was broken into three sections. Each had particular purposes and expected outcomes, which were clearly articulated to the team-leaders and their respective teams. Children purchased their own books and were expected to read their book at home or during any spare time during the school day. A set number of chapters were to be read for each week, although children could read the whole book once they had their books. Jan reminded the children at the end of each session, the number of chapters to be read (or reread) for the following week.

Setting the scene (15 mins)

Setting the scene served two main purposes. Purpose one was to provide background to the current literary focus. For instance, when we read *White Crane* by Sandy Fussell, we visited her website and listened to Sandy sharing how she chose to write the Samurai series. We were even able to organise a computer video conference with Sandy and ask her our own questions during one meeting.

Author background is important for the children to begin to ‘know’ the authors they are reading; not just know their names, but to know who these people are, what their likes and dislikes are. We wanted them to become ‘fellow writers’ to the children.

Purpose two was to share with the children the particular literary focus to be discussed during their team discussion of the book. For example, when an excerpt from Sandy Fussell’s *Owl Ninja*, (chapter 4, Hell Valley, p. 57), was read aloud, children were asked to close their eyes and listen for the words and phrases Sandy chose that helped us see, hear, feel and smell that Hell Valley. The excerpt was then shown on the Interactive White Board

¹ See Turbill, J. (2013). Berry Book Club: Engaging readers AND writers. *Literacy Learning: The middle years*. 21(3), 32–40 for a detailed explanation of the organisation with more examples.

and particular words and phrases were highlighted that 'caused' us to see, hear, and smell Hell Valley. The questions for team discussion were then designed to take this focus further.

Teams at work (30 mins)

Discussion time: Team-leaders moved with their teams to a table and posed the questions especially designed by Jan for that day's literary focus. Her role was to move around teams and 'eavesdrop' on the discussion. If needed, prompts were given to further guide the children's discussion.

An example of the questions posed is shown in Table 1.

Mahtab's Story by Libby Gleeson:

Look at p. 45. Libby begins with a short sentence; she then ends the paragraph with lots of questions. These are called rhetorical questions. How do these make you, the reader, feel? Find other examples.

Why is Mahtab's gold bracelet so important in the story? What happens to it?

Mahtab's family's journey takes them many months. How would you feel if this had been you? Find some sentences that describe how Mahtab felt.

Table 1. Example of questions to prompt discussion

Power-writing and Sharing: Power-writing is an adaptation of Macrorie's (1985) 'writing freely' (p. 18). After approximately 15 minutes of discussion, we prepared for Power-writing. Children knew they were to write freely on whatever came into their heads once the topic was given. We began with two minutes, quickly moving to four minutes of writing. Topics were usually broad and chosen to provide opportunities for the children to experiment with the literary devices that they discussed earlier. Sometimes there was a choice between several words or phrases. For example, after the discussion of *Mahtab's Story* above, the topic choice was: fear, boredom.

Instructions were simple; once ready the topic is announced, 'You have four minutes to write on the topic, "the sea". Go!' And the timer began. Silence descended as the children wrote. After four minutes children were told to complete 'that thought.' The team-leader then took over and invited individual children to share his or her writing. A child could choose not to share. Once all had shared, the team-leader negotiated with their team to choose the person who would share in the Wrap Up session.

Sharing and Wrap Up (15 mins)

The children came together as a whole group with Jan in the lead. The team-leaders indicated those chosen to share. We listened and children were asked to comment. Where appropriate Jan (and teachers who came along when possible) identified examples where the writer had used literary devices or structures 'like we read in Libby's writing'. Table 2 provides some examples of the children's writing from the Power-writing sessions.

<p><i>Fear</i></p> <p>Fear is a dreaded devil that creeps up alleyways in the night. It is innocent children having delicate sobs about secret things that terrify them. Fear knows all. Fear can come from anywhere: some from our imagination, some are real. You have to learn to fight fear. Everyone does eventually.</p> <p><i>Night</i></p> <p>The dark night fell early on the arena. Something was expected to happen. The birds fell silent and so did the surroundings. All was eerily quiet until a deathly scream shattered the leaves on the trees. Footsteps were pounding the dry earth, coming closer and closer until a figure crashed through the trees. Behind them, shadowed by the night some kind of animals emerged from the shadows into the moonlight.</p>
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Table 2. Examples of children's writing from the Power-writing sessions

Embedding Book Club into the classroom

After the success of Book Club as a pullout program, we decided to expand the concept into the normal 2014 teaching program, in order to provide not only the avid readers the experience of learning to 'read like a writer' but extend the opportunities to the wide range of readers and writers in Grades 4, 5, 6.

We had read the previous Book Club children's writing, listened to them becoming even more confident readers of a wider range of authors and reviewed the evaluations of their experiences. We were convinced that 'reading like a writer' is a concept that does and will engage our children as writers, and encourage them to read with new purposes. In particular we were excited at the increased confidence and desire to read AND write that was clearly evident in the children who had been part of the pullout program.

Thus with the support of the Principal, Bob Willetts, the organisation

began. Sue asked to teach a combined Grades 5, 6 and Brett, Grades 4, 5. They negotiated to teach in adjoining rooms so they could open up the partition and team-teach the morning literacy block each day. Book Club was scheduled to run on Monday mornings between 9.30 and 10.30 a.m. with three Clubs, each of us facilitating a Club. We met during summer holidays before school began to organise the three groups of approximately 18 children: avid readers (Jan), average readers (Brett) and those less likely to have read a complete novel (Sue). Each group had a mix of children from Grades 4, 5, 6.

We knew that Book Club as it had operated would need to be adapted, but we wanted to make sure that the same key philosophy and drivers underpinned Classroom Book Clubs. We agreed that our overall aims were for all children to develop confidence in their ability to read and write, engage in a range of reading and writing activities, learn strategies that could be transferred to new reading and writing tasks and above all, enjoy the experiences and **want** to share their opinions and writing with their peers.

It was to be quite a learning experience for us too. We knew we would need to reflect, share and learn from each other and the children in order to improve our teaching and facilitating of Classroom Book Clubs. The following questions framed our ongoing reflections and sharing:

- What skills and knowledge do I need in order to 'teach' students to 'read like a writer'?
- How do I choose the most relevant 'literary devices' and the language within the text to bring to the attention of the children?
- How do I best phrase the questions that will guide the children in their teams to explore the text closely, identify with the author's language choices used to build tension, develop characters, describe setting and so on
- How do I 'teach' the children to not only read but to 'read like writers'?
- And many more ...

The pullout program had shed a great deal of light on how Classroom Book Clubs might operate, particularly with respect to the teacher's role. Jan's reflections reminded us:

A critical part of my role as the facilitator of Book Club is to read the chosen book several times. First I read the book for the story line. I then revisit it, reading the chapters ‘as a prospective teacher of writing.’ I make notes as to the literary devices the author has used to develop characters, setting, plot, imagery, tension, fear, humour and so on. Before each meeting, I have to reread the set chapters yet again in order to design activities, and pose questions that will lead the children to begin to explore the design and construction of the text, the linguistic choices made by the author, how such choices allow them to see, smell, feel, hear what is happening in the story. In other words – to read like a teacher of writing – so I can discuss the literary devices used by the author. (Turbill, 2013, p. 35)

Classroom Book Club schedule

Book Club was scheduled for one hour each Monday and part of the two-hour literacy team-teaching block that ran from 9.30–11.30 am each day. We needed to strictly adhere to the scheduled times in Table 3 below so there was silence during Power-writing and so each Club finished at 10.30 am. Each week we had to prepare by rereading the set chapters and developing questions that would enhance team discussion and focus children on the language choices used by the author. There was no time to ‘wing it’. With three Book Clubs in the two rooms, it could be rather noisy, and while this did not seem to affect the children’s progress, some found it ‘too noisy’. In term two Sue took her group to the library. This provided more space as well and decreased noise level.

Time	What Teacher Does	What Children Do
9.30–9.40	Setting the Scene	
	Send children to their respective Clubs. Share focus or any other points. Hand out questions to team-leaders.	Get book and writing journal and move to their Clubs with Jan, Brett or Sue. Team-leaders collect questions for discussion.
9.40–9.55	Discussion	

TEACHING WRITING IN TODAY'S CLASSROOMS

	Begin team discussion on questions. Teacher roves and eavesdrops. Prompt if needed.	Listen to questions read by team-leader. Respond to questions and share ideas and opinions.
9.55–10.00	Power-writing	
	Organise children to prepare for Power-writing. Give topic. Begin timer.	Prepare books – new page with date. Sit ready for topic.
10.00–10.05	Roves	Write, write, write
10.05–10.20	Sharing Writing	
	Eavesdrop on sharing. Reminds Leaders to choose one peer to share writing during Wrap up.	Leaders choose member to share writing. Others listen carefully. Choose peer to read to whole group in Wrap Up.
10.20–10.30	Wrap up	
	Facilitate sharing of Power-writing within three Book Clubs. Prescribe chapters for following week.	Chosen writer reads writing in loud voice. Others listen to chosen person. Note what is required for following week.

Table 3. Classroom Book Club schedule and roles

Team selection and operation

Following our pullout Book Club model, we decided that within each of the three Book Clubs there would be four teams of five children, one of whom would be the team-leader. While some children had been involved in the pullout Book Club with Jan in previous year(s), for most, working in small teams led by a team-leader was a new experience for the children in both classes. Moreover teams would have a mix of children from both classes and all three grades.

Thus before Book Club officially began, Sue and Brett organised Book Club 'rehearsals' in the first three weeks of term one. Children were placed in 12 teams of five. Effective teamwork was explained to the

children, supported with a handout that explained the responsibilities of roles of leader, reporter, timer and observer. Children were grouped in 'possible teams' mostly based on their reading abilities. Over the three weeks, 'possible' team-leaders were rotated and asked to lead the team in discussion of provided questions once team members had read or viewed different multimodal texts.

These rehearsals gave Sue and Brett the opportunity to observe children, noting those who would make effective leaders when Book Club officially began. During this time children learned to operate in the larger team-teaching environment with two teachers, move to different spaces quickly, keep within the set times, listen to each other, share their opinions and, generally take ownership of their own teams' effectiveness.

By week four, teams were organised and team-leaders chosen. It was time to begin. Jan introduced Book Club to all children in both classes. She explained the Book Club concept: the hour schedule, the tasks to be carried out, the role of the team-leader and our role as facilitators (Table 3). Jan explained they would be given a novel and be required to read a set number of chapters each week from the provided novel. And while they would discuss the book's themes and story, they would particularly explore the way the author chose language in order to engage them as readers. They would 'read like writers' so they could write like writers.

Children moved off to their respective Book Club groups with their facilitator to a selected space within the two rooms. Novels were handed out with the request to read the first 3–4 chapters for the following week (they could read the whole book, but would need to revisit the set chapters each week). Team-leaders then took their respective teams to tables and the Power-writing books were given out. Finally, Jan led all the teams in the first Power-writing session. Selected children were chosen to read their writing to the whole group.

We had begun. And while it was now week four of the term, this prior background organisation and rehearsals proved to be imperative. Children were now aware of the procedures, their roles and our expectations of them. Over the year they took strong ownership of Book Club, its structure and purpose. If the leaders were absent, another child would step in and know exactly what to do and the team members followed.

Book Club text selection

Many factors needed to be considered in order to select the genre focus for each term. Sue and Brett needed to demonstrate how Book Club experiences fulfilled particular NSW English Syllabus learning outcomes for their students. School events and other happenings (such as Jan being in the US for three weeks in term two) had to be taken into account. And since the school had agreed to purchase bulk sets of books, finances were also a consideration. Taking these factors into account we decided on a novel for terms one and three. In term two, poetry was chosen and term four, picture books. An overview is provided in Table 4.

	Jan's Book Club	Brett's Book Club	Sue's Book Club
Term 1 Novel	<i>Shaolin tiger</i> Sandy Fussell	<i>White crane</i> Sandy Fussell	<i>Toppling</i> Sally Murphy
Term 2 Poetry	Poems included the following List Poems (Shel Silverstein, Kenn Nesbitt, Bruce Lanksy), Bush Ballads (Banjo Patterson), Rhyming Poems (Roald Dahl)		
Term 3 Novel	<i>The goat who sailed the world</i> Jackie French	<i>The night they stormed Eureka</i> Jackie French	<i>Matilda</i> Roald Dahl
Term 4 Picture Books	Sets of five books by following authors and illustrators: Mem Fox, Colin Thompson, Gary Crew, Jackie French & Bruce Whatley, Anthony Browne, Pamela Allan and Libby Gleeson		

Table 4. Overview of Book Club genres chosen for each term

Book Clubs in practice

From the beginning, we were thrilled at the children's enthusiasm for Book Club. We three facilitators met regularly to share our observations and concerns. It was the first time the teachers and children had participated in a team-teaching environment so children kept a *Reflective Journal* to record what 'worked' or didn't 'work' for them as learners in such a space. From time to time they specifically reflected on their views about Book Club. It was from reading these that we decided to take one Club to the library as many felt it was 'too noisy'. Otherwise comments were mostly positive. They loved Power-writing and being able to share their writing with each

other. They enjoyed providing their opinions and listening to others. Many commented how it surprised them that there were often differing views.

Not all enjoyed the novels we chose and we know that not all children read the novels from beginning to end. However, most enjoyed the books and being introduced to authors they had not read before. For instance, the Jackie French's books we chose are both historical novels. *The goat who sailed the world* is one of a series and several children went on to read all the books in that series. Brett found that his group began to get bogged down in details in Jackie French's historical novel, *The night they stormed Eureka*, so he read excerpts each week to keep the teams engaged and want to read on. Sue also found it necessary to read excerpts with her group. In doing so she was able to highlight Dahl's use of descriptive language.

We all drew on the respective novels to choose a topic for Power-writing. For instance,

The goat who sailed the world is written from both the perspective of a Goat, and a Boy (Isaac). Jan asked her group to use this device and take on the perspective of an animal – a dog, a cat or any other animal. In the following excerpt from Wendy, she uses several devices that she had seen used by Jackie French: the hyphen, and a sentence without an apparent verb.

The Worm

*It's hard being a worm in the Gold Rush – so much dirt being dug up.
So many worms losing their homes, or worse, their lives. Digging down
deeper doesn't work either, we just get caught in a mineshaft ...*

Brett often used sentence starters in Power-writing. For instance, early on in *The night they stormed Eureka*, Sam and the Puddlehams are bailed up by a bushranger while on their way to the goldfields. The bushranger yells, 'Your money or your life!' This is the beginning of Sam's experiences on the diggings and the beginning of the build up of tension for what is to follow. Brett asked his group to start Power-writing with this demand. In the following excerpt from Leanne, she uses short sharp sentences and exclamation to build up the tension and urgency of the situation.

'Your money or your life!'

The bushranger chased them up the hill. He was whipping his horse. He yelled, 'Your money or your life!' All three of them hid behind a tree. The bushranger sped past. He lost them from sight. They were safe.

Many of Sue's group of inexperienced readers were also reluctant writers. Sue's primary focus for these children was to encourage them to get their ideas down on paper and simply want to write. Power-writing enabled them to do this without being restricted by the many conventions of language, including handwriting.

When studying *Matilda*, Sue wanted the children to enjoy the magic of Roald Dahl's words. After talking about description and imagery, John attempted his own description of *The Trunchbull*.

For some reason everyone looked at the Trunchbull ...

The woman's face had turned as pale as a bookpage and her hair stood on end as if it had been zapped with a taser. She collapsed and was down for the count.

Power-writing also encouraged Sue's group to experiment and to take risks with their writing. Amy often wrote in verse. This is her response to the word *Revenge*.

Revenge

Revenge is sweet

Revenge can't be beat

Revenge is fun

Once it's all done

Revenge is punishment!

When we worked with poetry in term two, we began with List Poems. We read these to our group and gave them copies to read aloud to each other. Questions for discussion focused on rhyme and rhythm, alliteration, similes and other poetic devices. We were amazed at the list poems that the children then produced in five minutes. Anna wrote,

On my way to school
On my way to school
I see a hustle, a bustle and big swimming pool
A train, a car, a bus and a plane,
A crab, a kebab, a crane and a train,
A pub, some drugs and tennis racquet
A bag, a nag and a big warm jacket
On my way to school I see
A building, some books and a big bumble bee.

Using picture books in term four was a challenge. How were we going to have some 58 children reading and examining picture books? After a great deal of discussion, we decided to focus on five authors of picture books, some who write for young children, others for older readers; some who are author and illustrator and those whose books have various illustrators. For example, Mem Fox writes for young children and her books are illustrated by different people, whereas Anthony Browne writes *and* illustrates picture books for older readers. We gathered up five books from each of the five authors and placed these sets in respective boxes. Book Club ran only five weeks in term four so we rotated the authors around the groups (See Table 5). For example in week four, Jan’s group had Gary Crew’s books. She began by reading *Watertower* to the four teams, particularly drawing attention to the possible meanings that the illustrations provided. The team-leaders then chose one of the Gary Crew books in the box and the team either went to a table or remained seated around the book on the floor. Someone in the team was chosen to read the text as all listened and viewed the illustrations.

Week	Jan’s Book Club	Brett’s Book Club	Sue’s Book Club
4	Gary Crew	Jackie French & Bruce Whatley	Mem Fox
5	Anthony Browne	Gary Crew	Colin Thompson
6	Mem Fox	Colin Thompson	Anthony Browne
7	Colin Thompson	Mem Fox	Jackie French & Bruce Whatley
8	Jackie French & Bruce Whatley	Anthony Browne	Gary Crew

Table 5. Picture book rotation

Generic questions were designed to lead discussion each week.

- What is the book about? Who is the author? Who is the illustrator?
- What age group is the book aimed at? How do you know?
- What story are the words telling you?
- What story are the illustrations telling you?
- Are they the same or different? Talk about this.

Reflections and final comments

Throughout the year we gathered data as to the success of bringing Book Club into two classrooms across three grades. We have our reflective notes, photos and video clips, children's writing, children's reflective journal entries and survey data. When all these are examined, it is very clear that our initial broad aims were achieved. All children read and wrote and enjoyed doing so. There is strong evidence that they began to understand what it means to 'read like a writer'. They surprised themselves and us with many of the Power-writer pieces in which they used the many writing devices and language choices, the author they were reading had used. They all read (or almost read) at least one novel, wrote poetry and explored the relationship between language and visual images in picture books. In the final survey almost all children indicated they were more confident writers and enjoyed writing. And they learned to operate effectively in teams led by a student-team-leader. There is still more to try and as we move into 2015 we will continue to develop and strengthen our *Berry Classroom Book Clubs*.

There were so many magic moments that we could share. Here are just a few.

During term four when we were studying picture books Brett was amazed to see the way the children behaved when sharing the books. First the team-leader read the book to the team without allowing them to see the pictures, as one of the things we had discussed about picture books was the power of the illustrations and how much of the story they may tell that wasn't included in the written text. Each team listened intently as the story was read. However, the children weren't completely satisfied by the reading alone. On the second reading, without exception, each team huddled around their leader so they could enjoy the story *and* the pictures. It was

incredible to see a group of five Grade 6 boys gathered around *Piggybook* by Anthony Browne totally engrossed in the story and animatedly discussing the illustrations and their intended meaning. This was indeed powerful evidence of the success of Book Club. The children were reading like writers because they were aware of the messages the author was sending via the illustrations, which was adding to their enjoyment of the book at a much deeper level.

Sue was likewise delighted with the literacy learning of her inexperienced readers. Not only were they more confident when tackling new material, their verbal responses were often equal to those of their more articulate peers. One child who experiences great difficulty in both reading and writing was one of the most perceptive when unlocking multi-layered picture books. His ideas were both original and insightful. Furthermore, none of the children was intimidated by the more complex language they experienced. They supported each other and unlocked unknown words as a team. When writing, everyone was willing to produce something and to share this with the group. They were happy to give and to receive feedback on their efforts.

The atmosphere that was established early in the year had unlocked a lot of the children as writers. They now perceived themselves as writers, confident to write, share their ideas, listen to, and comment constructively about the writing of others. This is evident in the reflections below from just a few of the children.

I liked Book Club because of the leaders. They were really nice and helped us when we were stuck on a question. I also loved Power-writing. I always had good ideas. Sean had great ideas as well. He always had funny stories.

Chris²

I love doing Power-writing since there are so many things to write about.

David

2 Pseudonyms are used for all children's names

Book Club is awesome. I just love it, especially Power-writing. When I got up to read my story to everyone, I was so scared, but when I got down [from the small dais in the room] I wanted to do it again and again.

Bianca

I've learnt how to use short sharp sentences to create tension and that writing from different perspectives makes my writing more interesting.

Ziggy

Where to next?

Brett and Sue would like to see Book Club continue in their classrooms. In 2015 they are continuing their team-teaching approach with plans to extend the time. Both classes will be Grades 5/6 and a number of children will have already experienced Book Club. They want to dedicate a Book Club 'reading time' in class for children to read the prescribed novel. This will also allow an opportunity to assist some children with their reading, understanding and enjoyment of their novels. They are excited about the further development of children as writers as they build on the knowledge they now have. With continued support from Jan, they want to extend their knowledge of writers' techniques in order to further guide the children. They hope to launch Book Club with a day-long creative writing workshop. They plan to provide further time for children to choose a 'best' piece from Power-writing and develop it to publication, possibly using technology such as Pebblepad.³ This would ensure more accurate record keeping for both children and teachers.

So far it has been a successful and exciting learning journey for us all, with certainly more to come.

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3 The school plans to trial Pebblepad as an e-portfolio to be used by teachers and children (<http://www.pebblepad.co.uk/l/pebblevision.aspx>).

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