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# Cultivating Critical Consciousness:

## Building an EdD-Activist Identity

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**ABSTRACT**

I began my higher academic journey as a student of political science and history, aiming to engage with and improve my communities. However, by 2016, I became disillusioned with my work in politics and left to pursue a career in education, focusing on developing civic education for my students. The University of South Carolina's EdD program, with its emphasis on social justice and dedication to teacher activism, transformed my view of the teacher's role as an educator. Surprisingly, USC's doctoral program helped bridge the gap between my academic disciplines, offering opportunities to explore how political science, history, and education intersect to foster educational activism. This article reflects on my ongoing journey of becoming an EdD activist through the University of South Carolina's EdD program and discusses how we can continue supporting teachers involved in EdD activism after completing the dissertation in practice, from a program graduate's perspective.

**KEYWORDS**

*educator activism, dissertation in practice (DiP), Doctor of Education (EdD program), social justice*

If asked to conjure images of activism in action, most people would likely visualize events like protest movements, boycotts, petitions, or campaigns—some of the most tangible forms of activism. In this sense, activism is an *active* effort to cultivate change in a community, such as protesting social injustices on the street, petitioning companies and environmental policy groups to stop building in state parks, or boycotting companies to allow their employees to unionize. That is how I viewed activism until I became a teacher.

A love for social studies has always been at the heart of my identity. From historic-themed road trips as a child to being a high school sophomore carrying around a copy of Jeff Shaara's Pulitzer-winning Civil War novel, *Gods and Generals*, I unsurprisingly took to college as a political science and history student, seeking to engage and improve the communities to which I belonged. I did not make the connection then, but looking back on the topics or historical events I enjoyed studying, I gravitated to conversations surrounding social inequities. In my history courses, I was fascinated with the changing politics during U.S. Reconstruction and the revolutionary potential of activism in this antebellum era. In political science, I could not wait to dive into Supreme Court opinions on the topic of individual liberties and expansions of civil rights, like the series of cases that finally resulted in the Obergefell v. Hodges (2015) decision guaranteeing marriage equality.

My passion for the discipline continued outside the classroom, where I participated in local political campaigns and was reasonably active in related events on my college campus and in the surrounding community. I continued working in the field, even landing a job after graduation, but by 2016, I was disillusioned with my political work. I would meet other activists at campaign events, disheartened by the reality of political engagement: some of the most active members in communities were among the least informed. The 2016 presidential election ushered in a climate of rampant distrust and extreme partisanship for which I was not prepared. I was increasingly frustrated and could not stomach what was quickly becoming the new normal in U.S. politics. The claims of fake news, the rise of nationalism, sentiments of anti-intellectualism, and the election's exposure of our deep cultural and racial divides took their toll.

As time passed, I believed education could remedy this growing problem, a solution to the issues I saw manifesting in our society. I understood education as a powerful vehicle for change, but I needed to recognize that all teaching philosophies are not created equal in manifesting those changes. I left politics to pursue a career in education, focusing on building civic education and involvement among my students. My goal was to create a classroom experience that fostered the growth of civic education and action for my government students, giving them the tools to transform the societies they were about to enter. I sought to guide students in developing their attitudes and desires toward activism, but never identified myself or my role as an educator as an activist in nature. My work in politics was activism, not teaching, and that career chapter was behind me, or so I thought, until my acceptance into the University of South Carolina's (USC) Doctor of Education (EdD) program in 2020.

Before I entered the program, I had no model for being an educator activist or what it could look like. At the time, the roles of educator and activist existed in separate spaces, operating independently as parts of my identity. Expanding my teaching and learning knowledge throughout my EdD program allowed me to reconstruct this version of myself, dissolving the divisions between teacher and civic identities and transforming my approaches to my instructional practice. This article reflects on the continuous journey of developing my identity as an EdD activist through the USC EdD program and beyond, then expands on how organizations can continue supporting teachers involved in EdD activism after submitting the dissertation in practice, since the work continues even



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after successfully defending our dissertations and walking across the stage at graduation.

When I started reviewing EdD programs, I considered myself a relatively new teacher. I was just finishing my fourth-year teaching in the very same classroom where I had learned government less than a decade earlier. I had only taken a few education courses to complete my professional teacher certifications. Intended to fill in my knowledge gaps in the field, these educator preparation courses mainly taught me to manage a classroom, align my curriculum to standards, and plan the typical day-to-day activities I would employ as a teacher. Since my higher education background was grounded in political science and history, not education, I expected something similar for my doctoral courses, just up to the graduate research level. I did not have a clear career trajectory after completing my EdD. Still, I was passionate about social studies education, and being a lifelong learner, as most teachers tend to be, I decided to pursue an additional degree program. The more I researched, the EdD. seemed like the perfect fit, a professional doctorate designed to equip me with the "theoretical, pedagogical, and research expertise" I needed to tackle problems of practice within my classroom and institution (Adams et al., 2014, p. 366). A program like this would allow me to stay in the classroom while expanding the impact I could have, uplifting my students, and the institution. I expected that by the end of the 3 years, I would have a shiny new diploma and foundational knowledge I could carry throughout my career. However, nothing could have prepared me for the transformative educational experience I was about to undertake.

It is not hyperbole to say that from the outset of the program, the courses were some of the richest and most authentic academic experiences I have ever had, completely altering my perceptions of what educational classes could be. Can you remember the syllabus from your first course in college? Probably not, but if you had to guess, it included information on the course, the professor's office hours, and an outline of the content you would expect to cover over the semester. Sound accurate? To quote my Principles of Curriculum Construction class syllabus, "This syllabus might be unlike most syllabi you encounter in grad school," which was a dramatic understatement. Instead of the usual outline of course content, our professor provided us with a series of weekly musings to kick-start the conversations we would be having throughout the class. Each week's themes and readings were embedded in a series of stories, metaphors, and questions intentionally designed to allow us as students to carve our own paths and construct our knowledge of the curriculum using the varied backgrounds that got us to the class in the first place. For our class discussions, we were encouraged to bring in relevant outside sources to enhance the conversations and make our learning applicable to our specific teaching situations and areas of expertise. The design of this class allowed me to bring my background knowledge of history and political science into the discussion, providing me with a way to connect to the content where I might have been lacking due to my limited background in educational theories. One of the weekly discussions prompted us to explore the educational and conflicting theories of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Of course, as a history student, I was familiar with the now-famous encounters between Washington and Du Bois over issues of civil and political rights, as well as the education of Black Americans in the post-Civil War United States (McSwine, 1998). Reexploring these men and their stories through the lens of educational theories was a very enlightening experience for me. I was not breaking down Washington's argument, emphasizing industrial training for the masses, or Du Bois's insistence on developing liberal arts education for African American leaders, but redefining the purpose of education and my place in it. Was the role of education about cultivating success in our society through college admissions and careers, or was it about creating the tools our students could use to fashion freedom? Washington and Du Bois sought to promote a more inclusive vision of a society free from racial and cultural divides, although their paths to achieving that goal differed slightly. Rereading their work has shown me how much my educational philosophy has changed; their narratives can challenge us and, through that challenge, transform us to consider how we will approach training students to enter the discourse that is our society. While this experience was just one example, it was not an isolated incident. As I continued through the series of courses for my doctorate, these revelations would persist, reinforced with each text I read or every time I reflected on my instructional practice.

Reflecting on my teaching prior to being accepted to USC's EdD program, I was guilty of a few things, mainly underestimating my potential as an educator activist. When I entered the classroom, I aimed to have my government students exit prepared for college and active citizenship in a democratic society. To achieve these goals, we read and discussed theoretical works from renowned political scientists and primary documents, like the Federalist papers and influential Supreme Court opinions. They engaged in hands-on activities like mock congress sessions and presidential situation room simulations. My students left my classroom knowing the material and being involved with civics education in a fun way, which seemed enough then.

However, during these first few years in the classroom, my view on education depended heavily on a teacher-centered model that assumed education was enough to create social equity and liberation. I was teaching under the assumption that knowledge of government would be the catalyst to turn students into active and engaged citizens in a democracy. The literature I encountered in those early EdD classes was reinforced throughout the program and shifted my philosophy on education, revealing how critical it is to view education as a path to developing critical thinkers rather than just transmitting information. I was naïve to think a primary civic education was enough for my students to make real-world connections and strive for transformative justice in society. Yes, the educational system has the potential to be a tool of liberation, but it requires conscious effort on the part of those in positions of power and authority. If I had not recognized these truths after my high school, college, and graduate school experiences, how could I expect my students to do so in a single semester of high school government?

I was educating students in the same ways I had been socialized, without considering the deliberate intention required for transformative education. I needed to look inward to respond to my changing philosophies on education. As a White educator, I was aware of my position of privilege. I grew up in a middle-class family; I was fortunate enough to attend college and private schooling, and I knew that being a White person afforded me social, political, and economic benefits due to the color of my skin. However, I did not analyze my identity beyond that, especially regarding my role in the classroom.

As I continued through my doctoral program, I kept returning to the words of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who advanced the essential concept of consciousness. As an educational pedagogy, the development of consciousness has the potential to liberate "the

masses from systemic inequity" (Jemal & Bussey, 2018, p. 38). According to Freire (2020), if people are unaware of inequity and do not take steps to resist the status quo, we will continue to uphold those oppressive systems. I was who Freire was describing. Failing to grasp my identity as a White woman in education meant perpetuating a system of inequality around me. It was not intentional, deliberate, or malicious, but my lack of awareness fortified it. Schools need to address topics such as racism, immigration, civil rights, gender equality, gender violence, and the current situations plaguing our country in order to transform our reality. The EdD journey I was embarking on would be an exercise in constructing and deconstructing my identity as an educator and, ultimately, an educator activist to provide that transformative educational experience for my students.

The USC EdD program's focus on social justice and commitment to teacher activism changed how I saw myself and the role of teachers as educators, researchers, and activists all rolled into one. What was unexpected was how much USC's doctoral program bridged that gap between my academic disciplines, providing opportunities to explore how political science, history, and education combine to help me drive educational activism in my classroom and school community. The program website emphasized "concerns for equity and social justice, self-knowledge, cultural issues, and human growth and development" through the study of theory and practical application, and the Curriculum Studies concentration specifically promoted "an in-depth understanding of the theory, history, concepts, current techniques, strategies, and issues of diversity in schools" for engaging in social justice education (University of South Carolina, n.d., para. 2). At the time, I did not overthink the emphasis on social justice in the program's mission statement; by 2020, it was increasingly commonplace for companies, and especially higher education institutions, to commit to a stance of creating spaces for diversity and inclusion. In a 2023 study on incorporating social justice in higher education mission statements, Devies et al. (2023) isolated 40 higher education institutions that had adopted the inclusion of "social justice" in their mission statements and concluded that most schools "believe in and support social justice, but may not necessarily want to actively engage in the pursuit of social justice from the language used in their mission statements" (p. 147). I did not realize how much the USC program prioritized taking action in creating an environment to assist their students in genuinely engaging with social justice practices in their capacity as educators. Their curriculum is situated in a way that helps "students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action" (Giroux, 2010, para. 1), providing an outlet for that action in the form of an action research dissertation.

My first semester of the EdD program also coincided with the May 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minnesota Police Department Officer Derek Chauvin after kneeling on his neck for nearly 8 minutes. The event sparked months of nationwide protests against police brutality and racial injustice. With bated breath and unease in my stomach, I spent my nights glued to the television, watching the coverage of the over "7,750 demonstrations linked to the BLM [Black Lives Matter] movement" across the country (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, 2020, para. 5). The footage from the protests in the nation's capital continues to stick out in my mind to this day due to the sheer scope of deployed law enforcement involving at least 5,800 troops, agents, and unbadged officers equipped with assault rifles, shields, tear gas, and battle helmets (Alvarez & Kaufman, 2020). The use of force directed at the protesters by the police made the news coverage challenging to watch. However, I refused to turn away, recognizing how significant this movement would likely become in U.S. political history. National news coverage of the civil rights movement arguably transformed the United States by showing the violence of segregation (Southern Spaces, 2004), and in those moments, watching the Black Lives Matter protests, I felt a similar effect. Watching the protest coverage became a tangible representation of the inequities I was studying in my classes. From that moment, I could no longer ignore the structural racism, disparities, and biases as they existed and worked to deconstruct the unconscious state of whiteness I perpetuated as a White teacher. The social movement became my call to action, fueling my desire to continue educating myself and identifying ways to combat the inequalities inside and beyond my classroom. I was no longer going to be a White educator who was complacent in reinforcing the systemic racism that exists in our classrooms and curriculum. With this event clear in my mind, I deeply embraced the social justice and equity mindset reinforced by my EdD program, which motivated me to put in the work as an educator committed to doing my part in the shared responsibility of changing the structural inequalities all around us.

As teachers, we cannot afford to censor difficult topics of conversation in schools. We cannot let individual discomfort or lack of knowledge allow us to be negligent in responding to these conversations. Students have a right to know about the complicated history of the United States, especially if they are expected to exist and perform in a society where the legacy of that painful history is still prevalent. Learning about our country's history of slavery and white supremacy is essential for us to "bridge the racial [and cultural] differences that continue to divide our nation" (Shuster, 2018, p. 20), and there is still so much more work to do. After watching the protests in the summer of 2020, I committed to applying my insights in the 2020–2021 school year, becoming more conscious of the discussions that needed to occur and how I could support those conversations through my curriculum.

The 2020–2021 school year started virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but from behind our computer screens, my students and I navigated those hard discussions. I did not shy away from spending weeks of the semester providing context for what they saw on the news over the summer, everything from the BLM movement to the calls to remove Confederate statues. The reflective process I was undertaking en route to an EdD. prompted a transition from a lack of agency, a place where I was not actively addressing systemic inequality, to taking critical action, altering my behavior in a way to confront those inequalities (Jemal & Bussey, 2018). It was a significant first step toward aligning my classroom practices with this new vision of education I was constructing, but I still had more work to do.

Contemplating my view of teaching before the program, I was guilty of failing to see teaching as an inherently political act. I aimed to keep politics out of the classroom when I started teaching government." I appreciated the political science professors I had in college who so expertly navigated political issues, explaining the nuances to both sides of the argument, never revealing where their allegiances stood. That was a classroom experience I wanted to replicate for my students. I kept them guessing all semester about my political affiliations, believing that they had no place in the classroom, and to some extent, I still believed that to be true. My time in the EdD program reinforced the notion that the classroom

should not be partisan, but it taught me how, no matter how neutral we intend to be, the classroom will always be a political space. Educational scholars such as Freire (2020) expressed how the education system is a form of politics and can never be neutral, despite our efforts to make it seem so. Education is inherently political because of educators' role in disrupting the norms, biases, and status quo that dictate society. As a teacher, I always make decisions about the learning occurring in my classroom. I select textbooks, plan lessons, add supplemental resources, and omit others. Each of these processes in the classroom involves elements of bias, which can impact how my students construct knowledge and ultimately learn. For example, the decision to incorporate a primary document such as a Federalist paper over another primary source is political—something I had not recognized before.

Upon entering the teaching profession, I did not realize that I was silencing knowledge from additional perspectives by selecting specific materials for my class. Our educational systems, curriculum, and supplemental resources continue to center on Eurocentric knowledge and theories of teaching and learning, leaving out the diverse knowledge of Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities. As a result, the students at my school did not typically encounter primary and secondary source material from various political, social, and economic backgrounds in their social studies classes, mine included. I embodied Greene's (1977) description of passivity, creating an environment that reinforced my students' current worldview of political and social culture instead of expanding it. The curriculum I developed challenged my students academically but failed to challenge them to think critically about issues of inequality (Wright, 2022). As I progressed through my EdD classes, I recognized how essential it would be to deconstruct whiteness as it applied to my students, my curriculum, and, ultimately, me.

Exercises in reflecting on my practice, along with the literature from my classes, exposed the tangible ways whiteness shapes how White people view themselves, but also places them in a place of structural advantage where white cultural norms and practices go unnamed and unquestioned (Frankenberg, 1993). This invisible force reinforced whiteness as the universal condition (Henry & Tator, 2006). Until my education classes, I had not had the opportunity to develop this type of racial analysis. As a result, I was not necessarily aware of the depth of this problem, and I even failed to recognize how embedded it was in my own curriculum. Where before I saw my curriculum reflective of "foundational" literature of political science, now I saw an overwhelming distribution of White, male, heteronormative voices. The transformation of my practice depended on silenced voices, so I also needed to ensure that voices outside the dominant narrative guided my students' exposure to societal problems.

Educational change toward social justice "hinges on leveraging, extending, and sharing the expert knowledge of teachers" (Bell, 2019, p. 681). My time in the program redefined my philosophy education and empowered me to take on a role as a teacher-researcher. When I started my EdD journey in 2020, I never expected to be where I am today. I am just under 2 years from graduation and have been committed to contributing to educational research, especially from a practitioner standpoint. I have written about my research, experiences, and insights in multiple educational book projects similar to this one. I even presented a condensed version of my dissertation study at the American Educational Research Association annual conference, one of the world's largest gatherings of educational researchers. To be able to continue developing my role within educational research following graduation was wholly unexpected. Teachers like me tend to feel more comfortable reading rather than generating research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Corey, 1952). Teachers digest all types of educational research in their capacity, from what is presented in their professional development sessions to district data reports. However, producing research can be challenging for several reasons. I was one of those teachers prior to the EdD program. I lacked confidence in the research skills necessary to produce such work and did not believe my classroom's "minor" problems warranted publication. I did not believe my experience in the classroom was relevant as a form of research, and I needed to be more confident in my abilities to contribute to educational scholarship. Continuing with the significant theme of this article, my EdD program and the exposure to action research shifted my mindset regarding my identity as a teacher-researcher and how I can incorporate that identity into facilitating activism.

Before my doctoral program, I was unfamiliar with the concept of action research. Creswell (2013) defined it as a form of applied research seeking to explore "a practical problem with an aim toward developing a solution" (p. 449). As a significant component of the EdD. degree, action research shifted how I viewed research and educational reform. Action research situates teachers "to examine their own beliefs, explore their understandings of practice, foster critical reflection, and develop decision-making capabilities that would enhance their teaching and help them assume control over their respective situation" (Ginns et al., 2001, p. 129). The main product of a certain EdD program is a dissertation in practice (DiP), designed to be the culmination of practitioner learning and, for USC students, a demonstration of their responsibilities "as scholarly practitioners to pursue social justice" (Currin et al., 2023, p. 49). While working on my EdD. at USC, I had colleagues doing the same at various universities nationwide. When comparing our programs, I noticed South Carolina had a unique approach to embedding our DiPs deeper into our courses of study than I observed from my colleagues' institutions. My colleagues' programs were what I would have typically expected from a doctoral program: a set plan of study including a variety of courses followed by a period of dissertation work, usually a couple of semesters long. The course of study and the dissertation hours were separate, whereas with USC, I started my action research courses during my first semester, and the main goal at the end of that course was to produce a prospectus that could potentially evolve into a DiP. As a result, I worked on my dissertation over the 3 years I was in the program rather than just a year or so at the end of my courses. I believe approaching the DiP in this way not only reinforced my skills in research design but was also influential in deepening my commitment to developing practitioner research as a form of activism.

Teachers are uniquely positioned to provide an insider's view of instructional practice that "makes visible the way that students and teachers together construct knowledge and curriculum" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 43). The value of action research comes from engaging teachers as active partners in education research, creating a tangible way for teachers to improve their practice and increase their understanding of their educational situations. Conducting and formally writing research provides the practitioner-researcher the opportunity to, as Krall (1988) described, become more "consciously intentional of our actions and more thoughtful and reflective of their consequences" (p. 474). After doing action research, I find Krall's description remarkably accurate. The entire process took conscious,

reflective action, from considering my problem of practice (PoP), grounding my research in theory, laying out the research methodology, and presenting my findings.

My PoP for my dissertation arose from the initial identity work I started at the beginning of the program. Within my action research study, "I facilitated and evaluated student exposure to politically, socially, and economically diverse source material" within my United States Government classroom because, as I had noted, "the supplemental material I had chosen for my government classes failed to provide opposing narratives" that would help my students understand the inequality around them (Wright, 2022, p. 5). Reflections on my teaching and instructional practice, alongside my observations of my student population, were a call to action to work out a solution to this problem. Without that conscious recognition of the problem, I would not have been prompted to act. For me and my students, the benefits of my study extend well beyond the scope of the original study in 2022. Because action research is cyclical, the outcomes from one cycle are the basis for continued exploration of practice in the following cycle, continuously enriching the classroom in which these changes occur. Engaging in action research has significantly informed my instructional practice, allowing me to address complex problems of practice continually.

Reflecting on my three years in the EdD program, I believe that to empower teachers to engage in activist practices, EdD programs should consider their institutions' role in reinforcing and constructing teacher-activist identities, providing space for the multitude of avenues teachers can take in approaching activism. Teacher activism should be inclusive for all teachers and how they view activism. For example, Becton et al. (2020) constructed a framework of attributes, actions, and characteristics common to EdD-activists. Rather than one definition, four themes emerged that could encompass the identity of an activist, including:

1. The coalition builder, whose work "focuses on bringing people together for a common cause."
2. The vocal risk-taker, "who gives voice to critical issues and topics and also possesses the courage necessary for activism."
3. The visionary leader, who thinks about "how to cultivate a more progressive future."
4. The social justice champion, who "can quickly and readily identify the inequalities and injustices that may go unnoticed" in work environments. (Becton et al., 2020, p. 47)

The identity work I undertook as a part of my EdD program was essential in defining my current educational philosophy and prompting me to take critical action toward the problems I observed in my classroom. Not every student comes into an educational program with the same background, experiences, or goals. However, if institutions of higher learning can carve out space for their students to develop their attitudes toward educator activism, we can all move toward a transformative future.

Another suggestion to encourage educator activism would be cultivating an environment that empowers practitioner research. Educational research suggests that there continues to be a shortage of teacher voice in education (Gozali et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 1996; Ingersoll, 2007; Llorens, 1994). K–12 practitioners provide on-the-ground insight into the situations plaguing classrooms and educational practices; their stories are valuable and must be part of the research narrative. Conversely, a lack of teacher voice can contribute to the de-professionalization of educators and reinforce the status quo, discouraging educators from sharing their classroom stories. The EdD program fortified my confidence in my research skills as I progressed through my course of study and continued cultivating it beyond my graduation.

Aside from my individual transformation, the cohort model provided a built-in community of educators who all share similar educational experiences, interests, and goals. My cohort offered encouragement during my time in the program and continues to support each other's endeavors. Thanks to social media, we have stayed connected, met up at educational conferences, and discussed our current projects and contributions to the field. In this same vein, the commitment to strengthening practitioner research is evident in the community and supported by our EdD faculty. I would not have written this article without the continued support of my EdD faculty, even as an alumnus of the program. Navigating educational research is a daunting task, and one of the primary reasons most teachers feel uncomfortable publishing their stories or sharing their experiences. Following graduation, there was an evident effort from the faculty to assist and facilitate graduates in producing or engaging with educational research. My professors have been with me for the last two years of my educational research journey since graduation. Their expertise and content knowledge helped me as I applied for calls for papers and encouraged me to present my work. If we want to transform our educational spaces, we need to engage and support EdD graduates even after completing their program of study.

Something happened to me during my time in South Carolina's EdD program. I discovered a way to combine my interests in politics, history, and education, constructing a new identity. My identities as an educator, a political scientist, a historian, a researcher, and an activist did not have to exist separately in my psyche. They could all work together, reinforcing my work in the classroom and providing an avenue to help engage others. Once I could recognize the oppressive forces responsible for shaping our society, I could develop a plan to take action against them to advance the rights of the marginalized. This work does not happen exclusively by waving signs out in front of our state legislatures or giving a forum speech to our school board members, but by engaging the activist potential of teachers. My identity as an educator-activist revolves around identifying the inequities and injustices still present in my instructional practice, engaging in the methods I can use to rectify those inequities, and cultivating a better future by reflecting on and sharing the story of my classroom. My journey and experiences in this EdD program are unique, but the outcomes of higher education do not have to be if we continue positioning the stories of activist education. I am an activist, whether I am frantically writing letters to my state legislators or when I am educating 30 high school seniors on the Declaration of Independence.

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