Friendship between people with and without disabilities

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses friendship between people with and without disabilities by exploring non-disabled people’s friendships with disabled people and by following a friendship of one young person classified as mentally disabled in the course of their On-Campus-programme studies. The findings revealed that a person with a disability is primarily considered a personality, that the friendship teaches skills and is it based on support and security. The findings also showed how friendships between people with and without disabilities were formed. Social services students had become friends with people with disabilities before their studies and at different stages. Clothing business students also had experiences of friendships with people with disabilities. The friendships were mostly formed through participation in the same communities and common interests. Friendliness and a fair attitude towards another are the foundation pillars of friendship. Equality and genuine approval of the other were the basis of all the friendships. In inclusive education, border-crossing friendships not only improved a disabled person’s quality of life but also the ability to participate in the community.

Key words: Inclusion, support paradigm, friendships, disabilities, natural support.

INTRODUCTION

This article studies the characteristics of friendships between people with and without disabilities as interpreted by people without disabilities, and it surveys a friendship of one young person classified as mentally disabled. The research data was collected through interviewing people without disabilities, 32 informal essays written by social services and clothing business students and through observation journals based on the observation of a young person with disabilities.

This article describes the theoretical background to the research and discusses friendship and the methodological choices for the data collection. Then, the findings will be demonstrated and the meanings of friendship and the background attached to these meanings will be analysed. By participating in the same communities, friendships between people with and without disabilities are often found when two individuals function together. Without a common community, these encounters are unlikely to happen. In inclusion education, supported by international documents (The Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994; UN’s general guidelines, 1993).

The support paradigm as a basis for inclusion

The support paradigm contains the idea that people with disabilities should participate in communal life as an individual rather than as a group (Saloviita, 1993; Bradley, 1994; AAIDD, 2010). Friends and other relationships promote learning and are the premise for functioning together (Ward, 2010). Participating in the community opens new possibilities for the social participation of people with disabilities. The principle of functioning in a community includes people with disabilities, not only those with mild disabilities. This means that a person’s rehabilitation is no longer a precondition for joining a community. According to the support paradigm everybody is welcomed into the community. However, what kind of support does one need to be able to do this? In the support paradigm, services are not graded according to their
communality; rather, the measures of support are graded (AAIDD, 2010). Furthermore, a disabled person does not shift from one service system to another as the rehabilitation progresses. Instead, he or she stays in the community and the rehabilitation process only affects the quantity and quality of the measures of support needed (Salovita, 1993).

Smull and Bellamy (1991) noted that the support paradigm originates from the pressures focused on services that arose during the programme paradigm. Then the residential units and programs were improved and institutions demolished. At the same time, the demand for services increased at a greater rate than the available resources. Changes to the paradigm (the programme paradigm) occurred when problems, anomalies, began to arise from the model (Kuhn, 1962; Smull and Bellamy, 1991). As one anomaly, Kuhn (1970) refers to contradictory facts towards normal expectations of science. Being conscious of anomalies means that nature has somehow invaded the expectations originating from the paradigm that dominate normal science (Kuhn, 1970). A theory is not rejected when it clashes with anomalies, but the accumulation of anomalies impels science into crises. Even if some side conditions were used in the paradigm, anomalies could not be avoided. The actualisation of theory, otherwise known as the articulation of paradigm, means that the paradigm has expired; that is, the paradigm has expired when the anomaly-like phenomena can be recognised as anomalies.

Central to Kuhn's (1962) thinking is that the presence of anomalies does not lead to the elimination of the 'normal science' in question. That is not case even if the anomaly could not have been eliminated by improving the side conditions and theoretical improvements. According to Kuhn (1962), the programme paradigm is a concept of 'normal science' and it is running into crises as the anomalies in relation to a specific paradigm have been charted. By way of crises, a new paradigm is entered, as if an anomaly were an irregularity that has broken the boundaries and expectations of normal science (Naukkarinen 1996). There, the support paradigm would be an anomaly breaking up the programme paradigm that represents normal science.

Riggs (1992) states that the variation of paradigms is considered a so-called scientific revolution. It seems that phenomena towards the programme paradigm that cannot be assimilated into the existing paradigm have arisen, which means the paradigm is going to change. The paradigm has expired because of the multiple anomalies. The programme paradigm and the support paradigm still exist as paradigms situated one on top of the other, because the new paradigm cannot override the previous one immediately. According to Kuhn's (1962) viewpoint, theory development in a branch of science contains the following phases: 1) A non-paradigmatic phase, 2) a multi-paradigmatic phase, 3) a normal scientific phase, 4) a phase of science in crises, originating from the anomalies, and 6) the new normal scientific phase.

Hausätter (2011) stated that Kuhn's (1970) ideas of paradigms, the revolution of science and normal science are problematic. Hausätter (2011) noted that Kuhn's (1962) definition of normal science makes researchers believe that science is narrow and often dogmatic, which may also naturally promote scientific activity and the researchers' ability to make autonomous choices. Hausätter (2011) criticised that, according to Kuhn's description, one scientific theory or discussion is chosen over the others. Kuhn's (1970) ideas of the paradigms are unable to bring a new understanding to science because they do not broaden the views of research.

**Friends as natural support**

Friends are an important form of natural support when helping a person with a disability. In discussions on inclusion education it is important to consider how people who come across impediments to learning can socially become a member of their community. This includes friendships and spontaneous relationships with other community members. Meaningful relationships with others are often important with disabilities (Ward et al., 2013).

Nisbet (1992) and Carter et al. (2009) and Carter et al. (2013) used the concept of natural support and support services to describe the operation models with which people with disabilities can be supported in addition to the provision of formal services. As natural support, Nisbet (1992) denoted both the methods and preconditions for successful integration of natural and formal support. The concept of natural support brings those using the term back to the basis of our services. The concept still demands a significant change in thought. According to Callahan (1992), the mission of natural support is to increase the abilities and skills of people with disabilities. In ordinary communities, there are plenty of possibilities and resources to support a person with a disability in many kinds of situations. Natural support is about the close networks of a person with a disability that help him to manage his daily life and it is only one form of support (Hughes and Carter, 2008).

When a person with a disability makes contacts in his community and gets help, social support is in question. Korkiamäki (2013) defined social support as containing the emotional consideration of a person, the help and support given by the network and an individual’s status as an occupier of different identities. A precondition for a good life is to be a member of the community (O’Brien and O’Brien, 1993). With the help of social contacts, a person with a disability is able to get socially appreciated roles and personal respect. Because it is hard for people with disabilities to achieve membership within the community, it often has to be directed from the outside. According to
O’Brien and O’Brien (1993), the kinds of resources offered by the community and how the membership of the community can support a disabled person must be taken into consideration. Social support includes involving disabled individual in the community and providing a network within which each person has a place and a role to provide help and support. Members of the communities can support disabled people naturally at school and at work. Through building relationships and receiving support from members of the community, a disabled person gets the opportunity to experience new things (Forest and Pearpoint, 1992). Relationships improve an individual’s quality of life and wellbeing (Strully and Strully, 1992; Bolger and Keller, 1993).

It is important to encourage the people of communities to provide reasonable natural support. Society cannot afford all the support that people with disabilities require in their communities.

Secondly, occupational support is unsuitable for every situation. In such situations, other members of the communities can try to get those with disabilities to become a part of the functioning of the group (Jorgensen, 1992).

Helping and supporting as forms of friendship

The viewpoint of helping and supporting is one of the most central phenomena in encounters and relationships between people with and without disabilities (Mokhtari, 2008; Bogdan and Taylor, 1992; Lutfiyya, 1991; Castles, 1996), appearing as one of the main themes in the research literature concerning friendship (Bogdan and Taylor, 1992; Lutfiyya, 1991; Castles, 1996). Help is usually of a practical nature given to the person with a disability to perform their daily duties. According to Kurth (1970), emotional support contains spiritual support and encouragement in situations where a person needs them. Besides, support can be material, moral and cognitive, and these forms of support can be hard to separate from one another. Help and support represent the reciprocity of relationships (Duck, 1983). Helping and supporting can enable a foundation of friendship between a student with a disability and another without disabilities (Forest and Lusthaus, 1989; Meyer and Putnam, 1988; Stainback and Stainback, 1990; Strully and Strully, 1989; Knox and Parmenter, 1993). One of the functions of support and helping is to help a person with a disability find his abilities and interests. It can also include enthusiasm, rules, agreement on social norms and enjoyment of being in the company of one another. Social interaction includes moments of pleasure (Ayres et al., 1992). Garvey and Kroese (1991) stated that helping and supporting others increases an individual's wellbeing and quality of life, whereas stigma and negative attitudes cause depression in those who have been discriminated against. Helping others is important for promoting rich relationshipships. Stainback and Stainback (1987) and Rubin (1980) considered the skill of helping and supporting another person a significant skill. Kalliopupska (1995) considered the skill to help an essential civil skill. Being together is genuine when helping and caring for another improves the mood of the helper. Giving help can be considered a moral responsibility. According to Kalliopupska (1995), a person most willing to give help has an inherent need to help and a desire to care for others. An emphatic person recognises easily when someone is in need, even if that other one would not ask for help. An innate sense of responsibility supports a desire to help. If a person internalises the principle of helping while growing up, a sense of responsibility is promotes a sense of duty and empathy. Helping supports mutuality and intimacy (Van der Klift and Kunc, 1994). It is natural to need help and be helped (Forest and Pearpoint, 1992).

Procedure

This article investigates the kind of meanings that non-disabled people give to their friendships with disabled people, and it explores the friendship between a young person, classified as mentally disabled, and her friend without disabilities. With the help of empirical research data, the aspects of friendship were observed, what makes a friendship, the special features that present themselves, especially in a friendship between people with and without disabilities, and the phenomena behind the meanings of friendship.

The study is uses a qualitative method to collect research data with a phenomenological background based on "Edmund Husserl's thoughts". The aim of the phenomenological approach is to understand experiences of people, meanings of events and interactions in specific situations (Perttula, 1996). The goal of the study is to understand the phenomenon studied bearing in mind where the experiences studied have been founded, where they come under observation and how people experience them (Giorgi, 1986; Heikkinen and Laine, 1997). Experiences are meanings that form in an individual's conscious relation to reality (Perttula, 1996).

Data

The research data consists of 1) informal essays, 2) themed interviews, and 3) observation journals. These three methods of collecting data were chosen because these methods would accomplish a wider understanding of the meanings given to friendship among people with and without disabilities. One can get close to the phenomenon studied by discussing the topic with the interviewees and by observing the studies of the young diagnosed with intellectual disabilities in the On-Campus programme. The
study is based on the Finnish Campus program, in which the Canadian "On-Campus Program" was used as a model. The study included four adult students for whom an individual curriculum in normal school environment was developed: university, social service, and vocational school. The data consists of 32 essays, which were written anonymously. Some of these essays were collected from one group of social services students when the author worked as a teacher at the participating academy. Two teachers also collected essays from their groups; one from practical nursing students and the other from students who studied clothing business at a vocational school. The essays were therefore collected from three vocational schools situated in the metropolitan area and Central Finland.

Additionally, the social networks of one young person classified as mentally disabled in the course of the On-Campus studies for over one and a half years was followed. The On-Campus studies are based on inclusive pedagogy and the young person participating in the study studied clothing business at a vocational school for a year and a half. The Finnish On-Campus programme is based on the Canadian On-Campus programme, which means inclusive further studies are provided for young people classified as mentally disabled (On Campus program 2014).

The students were asked to write essays on the topic of friendships between people with and without disabilities. The students represented the school and institute levels. As voluntary participants, they could choose to write on the topic freely or use the following subthemes to guide them: (1) What is friendship? (2) How do friendships begin? (3) What are friendships like? (4) How can one improve friendships? (5) What does friendship mean in the reciprocity between people with and without disabilities? (6) Are friendships between people with and without disabilities possible? (7) Does the writer have any personal experiences of such a friendship?

Six friends were asked to be interviewed and all of them agreed. Some method literature is averse to interviewing acquaintances, while others favour it (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). Of the interviewees, half were men and two were couples, who were interviewed together. The interviews took place at home, at the homes of the interviewees and at coffee shops. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a research assistant. A total of three interviews were held; one individual and two groups. Grönfors (1985) stated that interviewing many people together may provide fuller answers than those given in individual interviews, as one person may activate another (Eskola and Suoranta, 1998). Two of the interviewees were educated to institute level and four had Master's degrees. The interviewees included an archival accountant, a specially trained nurse, an educator, a class teacher, a social psychologist and an economy chief. Thus, two of the interviewees were representatives of commercial areas and four represented areas of social services, health and education. Those involved in the interview lived in different parts of Finland. The interviewees were aged between 28-35, worked in both the public and private sectors, and were in attendance of the state.

Maria, who was 17 years old, is classified as mentally disabled and studied clothing business at a vocational school in the Finnish On-Campus programme. Together with Maria's special educator, the networks were followed during her studies and kept observation journals. Maria's social networks were also surveyed using relationship maps and future plans meeting.

Data analyses

Inductive analyses were used in the study. To begin with, everything that was irrelevant to the research function was eliminated. All of the material was read many times without a theory-oriented approach (Patton 1990). Dimensions and details from which to form categories, concepts and summaries were searched for. I continued reading while performing data coding, meaning that I wrote my impressions, perceptions and thoughts down in the margins. After this, themes from the codes and organised data were formed based on the themes. The themes were combined into larger theme unities. The frequencies were written down so that how often a theme would be perceived. The themes were combined into broader categories. The classes founded under the research function were distributed. The classes were marked with running numbers and the number of classes classified data in section representing it. The raw material obtained from categories was summarised. The categories that represent the data required to fulfil the research aims. Based on the information obtained, an interpretation of data was formulated.

Reliability and validity

Relative to the study, the factors affecting the reliability and validity of the qualitative approach: truth-value, applicability, stability and neutrality were reflected on (Lincoln and Cuba, 1985; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Stability of the researcher varied during the course of the interviews. At the beginning, the interviews strictly followed the themes, but as the interviews progressed, the themes were adapted according to the information received. Therefore, the interviewing technique varied throughout the course of the interviews. Notes were not made during the interviews because the interaction has to be undisturbed. There was also variation in the observations during the fieldwork (Tynjälä, 1991, p. 391). As the author became more familiar with the On-Campus student and her studying environment, the author earned
not only her trust but also the trust of her schoolmates. The author made rich descriptions in observations to ensure transferability and to give the reader substitute experiences (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Cuba, 1985). The author reflected on my own preconceptions so that the author was able to avoid making assumptions (Vargo, 1992). Using data and method triangulation, the author combined and triangulated different materials to make the most of the data (Denzin, 1978; Cohen et al., 2000).

**Friendships between people with and without disabilities**

The experiences were based on friendships with people with various kinds of disabilities. In the 32 essays, friendship with a person with a disability was mentioned 18 times. The following disabilities were mentioned: intellectual disability, autism, restrictions in the ability to function visual disability, cerebral palsy, individuals with multiple disabilities, deafness and seriously disabled individuals. Individuals providing the data had become acquainted with disabled people at school, in the neighbourhood, during free time or at work. The writers included their observations of friendships between people with and without disabilities in their circle of acquaintances.

When analysing the data, three themes were found to depict the interpretations of friendships between people with and without disabilities, as viewed by people without a disability. The three themes are (1) people without disabilities saw a person with a disability primarily as a personality, (2) both learned from one another and (3) I help.

**The personality of a person with a disability as a basis for friendship**

People without disabilities saw disabled friends primarily as personalities to which they were drawn. When an individual is viewed as important, their colour, race, disability or other features are inconsequential. Diversity was described as richness in the interviews. Friendships between people with and without disabilities were considered as natural as other friendships. In the interviews, it was raised that friendships between people with and without disabilities would not deviate because the issue at stake is the shared emotional state of two human beings. However, friendship is 'trade' between two people. Only these two people can define their common story, their joint emotional state and their feelings towards one another.

According to the essays, a friend with a disability was found alike, not 'the other'. Furthermore, the idea and meaning of disability was made vacillating. Acceptance and respect forms a genuine interest in another person. However, in one of the interviews, the class teacher questioned this idea. He found a person without a disability stronger and slightly more secure than a person with a disability. Even though the juxtaposition of 'insecure' and 'stronger' arose, the formation of trust was the real criterion of friendship. Even friendships between two people without disabilities are friendships between two different personalities. These personalities may be extremely different when it comes to their features, even though some chemistry is evident in the friendship. Friendship cannot be based on professional manners if both sides do not understand exactly what creates a friendship. When getting to know each other, the features and especially the similarity of the other mattered more than the disability.

After getting to know Tina better day by day, it was noticed that she wasn’t weirder than other people. Of course, she had some different features like other people with disabilities have. Still it didn’t matter when I got to know her. Tina was funny; she made me laugh on the gloomiest of days. Sometimes when the teachers didn’t have time for her because of all the other students, then we other students helped her.

(A clothing business student, 26)

Acceptance was the notable precondition to all kinds of friendships. It arose in the interviews that friendship must not be based on pity and that the most important thing in friendship is that both parties have something to give to another that completes the other's personality. A friend with a disability was said to complete his friend because every human being was seen as imperfect. It also came up in essays that life is mysterious and no one knows his destiny - one day you could become a person with a disability. The most essential thing is that both parties are able to give something to one another, no matter whether the person in question is disabled or not.

One viewpoint was that friendship was founded and maintained based on common activities. For example, if an accident leaves an individual disabled, meaning he is no longer able to participate in a common hobby or interest with a friend, the friendship usually fails. Maria became friends with Alina who did not have any disabilities. They first met at the season’s first ice hockey game and continued to meet each other at he ice hockey stadium. They also went shopping in the city. Alina had already come of age so she was older than Maria, yet she was intensively in touch with Maria. The girls went by bus to different towns to watch ice hockey matches. The players bore the girls hanging on them at stadiums. Occasionally, they came home from the matches late. The girls’ intimate friendship was based at the beginning of Maria’s On-Campus studies. Maria did not want to speak more about her friendship with Alina illustrating that they had built a relationship with each other they did not want to analyse with outsiders. This relationship was based on similar
values, sports and matches. The two girls were joined by a strong, close and emotional bond, and both rewarded the other with respect.

The following extract demonstrates the friendship between Alina and Maria, the On-Campus student. Their friendship was based on a similar interest, watching ice hockey games at the ice stadium.

The special educator from the On-Campus programme had told me that Heli’s name was flashed in Maria’s circle of friends. Heli is Maria’s new pal at the ice stadium. Heli, Alina and Pirjo often spend time with Maria at the ice stadium. At school, Maria told the girls to put their game shirts on when at the stadium (Minna’s memos 2012).

**In friendship, one learns from another**

According to the interviewees, a friendship with a disabled person improves one’s own learning. By this, did the interviewees mean that they were able to see things from another point of view? Both sides got the opportunity to observe the other’s life and become familiar with it. People without disabilities learned to see the opportunities instead of the restrictions, they learned different values, how to deal with the variety of another human being and to understand themselves. They viewed such friendships as enriching for their lives through new experiences and emotions, life experience and memories. It was noted that their friends helped to solve different problems and indulgence increased during the friendship. Friendship with a disabled person decreased their selfishness and opened up their world views.

Friendship teaches the person with a disability how to respond to things, what’s important in the end, what’s essential, that somehow it widens the world, and that it’s not the worst thing if you happen to put the wrong colour socks on in the morning, in principal (interview/case 3).

Under the guidance of the On-Campus programme, a fellow student taught an On-Campus student who was classified with a mental disability. He was firm with his approach and behaviour. Explaining the exercise helped the On-Campus student understand the course of the situation and predict the future. On Campus-student was to operate as one of the teachers. The fellow students were able to provide support during the class, in the cafeteria or in the corridor, whenever the need arose.

**I help**

A relationship with a person with a disability seemed to be patronising and protective. He was treated as if he were a young sibling. He was nurtured, cherished and taken good care of, even though the people were the same age. In these relationships, people without disabilities were helpers and wanted to take care of ‘the weaker’ friend. Helping focused mainly on everyday tasks in which people with a disability needed to be helped and supported by another person.

A friend also functioned as natural support in the class community by helping the classmate with a disability. It also came up in interview that one could not ask for help from a disabled friend as easily as asking a friend without a disability. This was validated by statements indicating that a person with a disability was used to being helped. The relationship was not based on equality; however, a friend with a disability was helped with pleasure because it gave both parties satisfaction.

A student describes Maria as childish and his attitude towards Maria is caring. Maria is like a little sister to him. According to him, Maria’s status in the class hasn’t changed (Minna’s memos 1502).

Friendship was found to be an important support, especially to the one with a disability. According to the interviews, a friend without a disability is a remarkable help to a friend with a disability because the disabled person feels a sense of security within the community.

At my former school, there was an autistic girl. Anna was in 5th grade, and you can probably guess she was bullied and provoked to play more and more stupid tricks. But I was a sheet anchor to Anna. I tried to help her in things she wasn’t able to do herself. She still saw every one equally valuable, but she did have feelings and also a lot of initiative (A clothing business student, 30).

Friendships between people with a disability and people without a disability were based on a common emotional state, which was rarely talked about aloud, but which was present in these relationships. There was considerable talk in the interviews about how diversity should be respected. Yet, the polarity between levels of insecurity and strength was mentioned, which could clearly be questioned because when people are discussed in general, a disability as a single feature does not make an individual weaker.

**Conclusions**

The higher the status of education, the fewer friendships there were with people with disabilities. None of the interviewees had a friend classified as disabled. Their knowledge and experience came from observations of acquaintances who were friends with people with disabilities and spontaneous contact with the people with disabilities. Eleven of the social services students had experienced a friendship with a person with a disability, which is partly explained by the fact that their study field was oriented toward working with people with disabilities. The few social services students also had experiences of friendships with disabled people from when they were children. Seven of the clothing business students had experiences of a friendship with a person with a disability, some of whom had a background in special education. This may explain how they had met students
with disabilities in their school community. As they had been students of special schools, it is natural that they had become friends with disabilities. However, none of the students had become friends with a person with a mental disability.

Friendships between people with disabilities and the young people who wrote the essays were democratic. Additionally, Maria and Alina’s friendship was equal. The memos and the interviews indicated that their thinking was in agreement with the support model, in which a person with a disability is primarily considered a person with personal features (Bradley 1994). People without disabilities have accepted diversity as a value. It is easy for them to accept participation with people with disabilities because the premise is to accept other human beings as they are completely. These friendships gave something that was impossible to gain in other relationships. Nevertheless, few friendships existed between young people classified as mentally disabled and their peers without disabilities (Matheson, 2007).

A friend with a disability was described as giving and teaching others something that they could not find in their position. This improved the sense of dignity in the lives of those people without disabilities. Furthermore, it was clear that if something was a barrier to friendship, it was a person’s personality, not a disability. Pottien and Sumarah (2004) stated that friendship improves emotional and physical wellbeing. Carter et al. (2013) underlined that with the help of friends, one can learn different kinds of communication skills and understand how to settle into another person’s role. Social interaction with other people forms the base of all friendships (St. Peter et al., 1989, Avcioğlu, 2013). Many schools promote the birth process of friendship such as a positive communication style, noticing the interest areas of the other, considering, supporting and helping the other, trust, loyalty and tolerance of conflicts.

Many sides of friendship affect the development of self-concept of the both sides were brought up. Therefore, friendship is significant for quality of life and life management skills. Friendship plays an important role in life politics. Giddens (1994) saw happiness as a goal of life politics. Happiness consists of experiences of security, self-respect, self-expression and love. The building materials of the different parts of happiness were brought up in the interviews as experiences of giving away, self-confidence, respect, social skills, humour, standing up for oneself, security when moving in the community, improved self-esteem, sense of dignity, a sense of security and safety, experiences of affection, a reciprocal relationship, physicality and deep, positive emotions towards another human being.

It is essential that friends find a connective feature and participate in the same community. In the discussions about inclusion education it is important to consider how people confronting barriers could become socially involved in their community to avoid feeling lonely (Mason et al., 2013). This denotes both spontaneous social relationships with others in the community and close friendships. There are several pedagogical means for supporting friendships. In education, the video model, which promotes pupils’ skills to function in different situations, has been used to strengthen relationships (Avcioğlu, 2013). As many as 40% of for example schools nationally report offering some form of peer-mediated support program (e.g. peer puddy programs, peer tutoring, peer mentoring, Best buddies Carter et al., 2013, 16). Emerson and McVilly (2004) portrayed that different measures of activation can promote the forming of friendships among people with and without disabilities. Nevertheless, according to Emerson and McVilly’s (2004) study, people classified as mentally disabled chose other individuals with disabilities as their friends instead of individuals without disabilities.

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