UNDERREPRESENTATION OF DISADVANTAGED YOUTH IN GIFTED PROGRAMS AND OVERREPRESENTATION IN PRISONS

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ABSTRACT

The United States of America has the highest incarceration rate in the world. The probability of an individual being incarcerated is a complex combination of factors, including socio-economic status, level of education, and ethnicity. Within prison populations, the percentage of individuals identified as gifted is higher than those identified within the general population. A lack of support for gifted individuals in their academic careers, both in the school system and in extracurricular opportunities, leads to a correlation in the higher number of gifted individuals in prison. When opportunities and supports are limited or non-existent, the potential for risk taking and incarceration is increased. Once an individual is incarcerated, there are a few programs to support general education needs; although, very few programs support the needs of gifted individuals. Using contemporary research on disadvantaged gifted students and gifted rates among prison populations, this paper provide an overview of these concerns and a call for s future investigations into the link between an increased rate of servicing gifted students' needs and a possible reduced incarceration rate.

Keywords: *Underrepresentation, overrepresentation, prisons*

The United States of America has more than 2 million people in prison facilities and, consequently, the highest percentage of incarcerated individuals in the world: the U.S. has 4.45% of the world's total population and more than 20% of the world's prison population. Even more striking is the 408% rise in the U.S. prison population between 1978 and 2014 (Skala, 2014). The probability of an individual being incarcerated is a complex combination of factors, including socio-economic status, level of education, and ethnicity.

Gifted individuals are at a greater risk of being incarcerated. Within prison populations, the percentage of individuals identified as gifted is higher than those identified within the general population. A lack of support for gifted individuals in their academic careers, both in the school system and in extracurricular opportunities, leads to a correlation in the higher number of gifted individuals in prison. A complex web of connections exists between the identification and servicing of gifted students, the funding of gifted education programs, and the socio-economic status of populations. When opportunities and supports are limited or non-existent, the potential for risk taking and incarceration is increased.

Once an individual is incarcerated, there are programs to support general education needs; although, few programs support the needs of gifted individuals. Using contemporary research on disadvantaged gifted students and gifted rates among prison populations, this paper provide a map towards future investigations into the link between an increased rate of servicing gifted students' needs and a reduced incarceration rate.

The identification of gifted and talented students is a challenging and ever changing endeavor. There are debates about the number of students who qualify as gifted and/or talented and percentage ranges from 3% to 20%. Traditionally, the label of gifted was determined by an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test where the person scored at or above 130 as compared to the American average of 98 (Lynn, Vanhanen, 1998). Today, gifted has been redefined to include qualities such as extraordinary creative, leadership, or physical skills; heightened perception, sensitivity, humor, and the ability to put complex ideas together quickly are components of giftedness. The models and methods used to determine giftedness vary greatly state-by-state and even between schools and districts.

There are no national models or federal expectations for gifted education. States determine their level of involvement and support. This has lead to inconsistent implementation and support of gifted education as illustrated by the National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC) report. 42 states, the District of Columbia, and Guam—a U.S. territory—responded to the NAGC's survey about the state of gifted education. 8 states and 4 territories did not respond, or did not have procedures to respond with, to the survey regarding gifted education. Of the states that responded, 25 provided monetary support for gifted education that ranged from less than 1 million dollars to more than 40 million dollars per year (NAGC, 2014). 14 responding states provided no monetary support for gifted education. Funding and support for gifted education comes through the political process and emphasizes the importance of advocacy.

Various organizations—such as the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) or the National Society for the Gifted and Talented (NSGT)—recommend guidelines for identifying gifted and talented students however, there is no one-size-fits-all model or approach. The determination of how to identify and test gifted and talented students is left to the discretion of schools, districts, and, very often, individual teachers. The identification for initial testing is most often at the request of a parent or teacher. Parents have been shown to have the highest accuracy rates when identifying young children as gifted and/or talented (Louis, Lewis, 1992) with 77% of identification occurring by age 3 (Gogul, McCumsey, Hewett, 1985). Identification of gifted and talented children by both teachers and parents is more frequent in communities that are trained and educated about gifted education, but these communities coincide with middle and upper socio-economic areas. Adversely, the rates of identified gifted and talented students is significantly lower in highly transient and lower socio-economic populations.

Teachers in middle and upper economic areas are better trained and experienced in gifted education than teachers in lower socio-economic communities. They also have access to greater resources. Low socio-economic areas have a greater number of beginning teachers without experience, or

extensive list of resources. They also have a higher turnover rate within their staff. General education teachers can be effective at identifying and servicing the needs of gifted and talented students; however, multiple studies have shown that they improve with professional development around the identification and needs of gifted and talented students. The nature and topics of professional development are determined by the administration and are often in response to hard data in the form of standardized test scores.

Public educational spending comes from a combination of federal and state money. Private schools have their own independent funding models that vary by institution and by state. Federal money for public schools is conditionally attached to the acceptance of national testing programs such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). States may use their own assessments—the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) and the Integrated Louisiana Educational Program (iLEAP), for example—as long as they meet federal standards and expectations. If states do not meet these expectations, they stand to lose millions of dollars in federal funding (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). These tests are designed to track the growth of individual students through their academic careers and have greatly impacted the focus of instruction for school districts.

The growth models of these testing programs and the now, largely abandoned, No Child Left Behind Act expected overall test scores to show increased improvement over time with the eventual goal of 100% proficiency from all students in all subject areas. While initially well intentioned (although arguably implausible) these strategies had concrete negative consequences. English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics were the two subject areas most heavily assessed. This caused districts to pour much of their resources into improving ELA and math scores with a focus on underperforming students. Schools largely ignored social studies and sciences to make additional time for math and ELA. Underperforming students were identified as the best candidates to improve a schools overall proficient percentage. High achieving and gifted students were largely overlooked with the excuse, "they'll be fine". With no incentive for a school to help support high achieving and gifted students once they have achieved a proficient or advanced score on a state test, schools rightly identified the students in nearing proficient categories as those who could be brought into proficiency with added support and resources.

In the name of school reformation, these "high stakes" testing models were attached to teacher performance evaluations and, in some cases, teacher pay. Teachers with histories of underperformance based on these evaluations could lose their position and/or their license. Schools and districts with a history of underperformance could be taken over or loose their accreditation. The intent of this legislation was to support and improve education, but it had the effect of shifting the focus within the classroom to the lowest performing students. Gifted students did not receive any additional programs or support through this testing model. Low performing districts are often associated with disadvantaged communities. They have struggled with state takeovers, changing staff and

administrators, and lack of adequate training. The growth-testing model, therefore, furthered the problems of identifying and servicing gifted students.

The high staff turnover rate associated with disadvantaged communities contributes to the problem of unidentified gifted students. Most referrals for gifted and talented testing come from teachers. Outside of the family, teachers spend the most time with students and can identify characteristics of gifted ability.

In most cases, the burden lies on the teacher to complete the necessary paperwork in order to have the student tested. This paperwork can take anywhere from weeks to months to complete. When there is a high turnover rate, teacher-student relationships are not as well developed, which will lead to fewer initial referrals. It also leads to incomplete paperwork that will leave initially referred students without a formal identification and the supports that come with it.

A lack of support for special education directly relates to a lack of support for gifted education. In 2014, Special Education programs received 11.5 billion dollars ($11,500,000,000) in federal spending while the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program (Javits) received only 5 million dollars. Javits is the only federal gifted education program. Some states, such as New Mexico, place gifted education programs within special education where an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is required. An IEP is a legally binding contract between the parents/guardians of the identified student and the school officials that specifies the services to be provided. The IEP also describes the student's present levels and how the student's disabilities affect academic performance and lists specific accommodations and modifications (IDEA, 2004). Funding for gifted programs come from the already minority budget of special education. Students who are identified as having disabilities receive precedence over the largely unaccepted needs of gifted and talented students. Gifted programs are often left to justify their validity and find their own funding sources. Districts have to be careful not to breach the terms of the IEP or face potential legal problems.

There is a significant imbalance in the number of students identified as gifted and talented between high and low socio-economic populations. The percentage of identified gifted and talented students can be as high as 20% in high socio-economic areas and as low as 0% in low socio-economic areas. This data would wrongly lead to the conclusion that there are no gifted and talented students in low socio-economic areas, many studies have proven that not to be the case. Rather, there is a failure to identify the gifted and talented students within the population. Low socio-economic schools struggle in many areas such as graduation rates, truancy, state and federal test scores, and special education. Gifted and talented students who do not find the supports they need in school will look to other areas to fulfill their needs. Creativity can be closely associated with risk taking (Eisenman, 2001).

For students from low socio-economic backgrounds, creativity and risk taking can lead to social and economic gains. The attributed risk is perceived as acceptable in exchange for the potential gain. It is important to note that creative risk taking is often not associated with antisocial risks such as crime, however, it is more common in lower socio-economic areas.

Racial and cultural imbalances play a considerable role in the under identification of gifted students. Disadvantaged students come from racial or cultural minority groups or geographical locations such as large urban or isolated rural communities. Gifted programs are more readily available to individuals from middle and high socio-economic areas. Researchers David Card and Laura Giuliano (2015) looked at one majority-minority school where 60% of the student body was Hispanic or African American yet only 28% of third graders identified for gifted services were Hispanic or African American. This means the minority 40% Caucasian and Asian population accounted for 72% of identified gifted third graders (Card, Giuliano, 2015). Racial biases affect the number of students who are referred and identified for gifted and talented programs and lead to the imbalances.

There are fewer opportunities in school and the community and greater risks for ethnic and lower socio-economic gifted students. By 5th grade only 56% of high achievers from low-income families remain successful (Olszewski-Kubilius, Clarenbach, 2012). In middle and upper socio-economic communities, students have the opportunity to attend afterschool programs, weekend activities, and summer camps that are not available to lower socio-economic students. Attitudes within a community greatly affect support and vise versa. Communities that do not feel supported by schools will often see them as a symbol of oppression and authority. Some feel that school is a limiting factor in their lives, and this attitude is easily passed from parent to child contributing to a cycle of underachievement. Students whose parents did not attend higher education are less like themselves to go to some form of college (Gibbons, Pelchar, Cochran, 2012). There are more highly visible role models and mentors for affluent students while low socio-economic students face a crisis in the lack of appropriate role models. Many of the successful individuals within their communities are engaged in risky, yet lucrative, behaviors. This model can continue the destructive cycles within a community. With increased risk comes the increased potential for incarceration. These opportunities are not limited to school, but to careers as well.

Gifted students need different supports than regular education students. Gifted and talented students need increased challenge and engagement. There is often a need for social support such as counseling as well. When gifted and talented students do not receive these supports they are at risk of underachievement. Underachieving students are far more likely to engage in risk taking behaviors. There are many behaviors that are indicators of future incarceration. Milkman and Wanberg suggest parental psychiatric illness, family dysfunction, and substance abuse (of the parents, the juveniles, or both). Student-centered indicators exist such as learning disabilities—which often go undiagnosed—school problems, delinquent peers, or prior criminal activity. Finally are medically centered risks such as a history of serious head trauma or emotional distress. When coupled together the risk expands exponentially (Milkman, Wanberg, 2012).

The family is most often the best advocate for the gifted and talented youth. Opportunities exist both inside and outside of school for gifted enrichment. Within the school it can be a resource room or pullout class. It can include appropriate

differentiation within the general education classroom such as independent projects or advanced curriculum. Outside of school enrichment can include after school activities, weekend clubs, and summer programs. Many of these opportunities require family support and financing, but even with parental support, many of these opportunities are not available to students from low socio-economic communities. There are many reasons why gifted and talented students do not have parental support advocating on their behalf. The strong connection between community stability and the number of students in gifted and talented programs comes from many sources. In lower socio-economic communities, caretakers may work multiple jobs, which leaves little time to support academic needs. Some families are disconnected from the education system and do not see the value in supporting academic needs. Some families are so fractured that children live in foster care and do not receive the same level of support. Some students have to deal with their direct family being incarcerated. Moreover, individuals who have a direct relative incarcerated are at a greater risk of being incarcerated themselves.

There are many problems within the school that lead to under identification or complete lack of identification of gifted students. Much of the identification of gifted students is still done on the outdated IQ model, testing only for rote intelligence. Many have argued these tests to be outdated and biased towards middle and upper socio-economic students. There are more appropriate tests available such as the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) or the California Achievement Test (CAT). There are some tests such as the Scales for Rating the Behavior Characteristics of Superior Students (SRBCSS) that do take socio-economic status into consideration. Most tests do not take ethnic identity or geographical location into consideration when evaluating students, and when tests are not appropriate for the population they are assessing, it leads to an underrepresentation of gifted and talented students. Before tests can be administered, there must be teachers or administrators who are at the very least trained in gifted test facilitation. The fluency of this varies greatly from school to school.

The severe underrepresentation of disadvantaged students illustrates how already vulnerable minority students are not receiving the services that they need. This makes them even more vulnerable to negative behaviors and underachievement. The needs of gifted and talented students often do not receive mainstream attention, however, the underrepresentation of minority students has crated some media buzz. An article discussing the underrepresentation of Hispanic and African American students in gifted classrooms was published in the Atlantic in September (Nisen, 2015). There was not, nor is there ever, any immediate corrective change in the procedures to accept gifted minority students. The underrepresentation can be observed in many areas of American society except one: prison system. 40% of prison inmates are African American while African Americans make up only 13% of the population.

Educational Opportunities in Prison

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world at more than 600 individuals per 100,000 (Walmsley, 2013). The murder rate in the U.S.

has decreased by nearly half since it reached 10.2 individuals per 100,00 in 1980. As of 2014 it stands at 4.5 individuals per 100,000. (FBI Uniform Crime Report, 2014). While the murder rate has decreased by half, the number of individuals incarcerated has soared mostly for drug offenses. There are varying opinions as to why the incarceration rate has increased as much as it has. Some credit the success, or failure, of the "War on Drugs." The "War on Drugs" was a policy shift begun by President Richard Nixon in the 1970s. It was successful in adding many non-violent offenders into the prison system: 97% of federal and 66% of state inmates are incarcerated for non-violent offenses (Pelaez, 2008). Mandatory minimum sentencing, such as California's Three Strikes Law, have also contributed large numbers of individuals to prison. On a third offense, harsh mandatory sentences are enacted. Mandatory minimum sentences were a public policy decision to address "career criminals." Other theories point to the privatization of the prison industry and the fact that housing inmates is a for-profit model making hundreds of millions of dollars annually. The private corrections industry has a strong lobby to affect policy regarding incarceration. A combination of these factors has lead to the United States having the highest incarceration rate in the world.

The rate of giftedness of incarcerated individuals is higher than that in the 6.7% of the general population with some estimates as high as 20% (Streznewski, 1999). The majority of inmates are young males, often from lower socio-economic groups. White Americans make up 64% of the general population and 39% of the prison population; Hispanic Americans make up 16% of the general population and 19% of the prison population; African Americans make up just 13% of the general population but account for a staggering 40% of the prison population (Skala, 2014). These racial imbalances mirror imbalances in the school systems, including gifted and talented identification. The disproportionate level of minorities illustrates social injustices that disadvantaged gifted youth must overcome. Gifted youth who do not reach their potential are underachieving. Gifted individuals in the prison system are largely locked into a cycle of underachieving.

There are limited educational opportunities available to those incarcerated. General Education Development or General Equivalent Diploma (GED) programs are common in most prison facilities. They consist of the most basic of expectations and provide little to no challenge to the gifted. There are also numerous vocational training programs that vary from institution to institution. The Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) was begun in 1999 in the New York prison system. It is a fully accredited collegiate program that enrolls inmates in over 60 courses a semester. Higher education programs in prison vary greatly by institution and often have to procure their own funding. The BPI was begun with a private investment. It was largely unknown in mainstream media until October of 2015 when the BPI debate team beat the Harvard debate team. Besides offering inmates higher degrees, the BPI also boasts a very low 2% recidivism rate compared to the national rate of 67.8%, according to the National Institute of Justice (Durose, Cooper, Snyder, 2014). Recidivism is the measured repeated relapse into crime over a 3-year span. This is a staggering difference in statistics and points to needed educational reform within the prison system. It is important to keep in mind that the intrinsic

motivation of gifted individuals persists while incarcerated making them more likely to be engaged in learning programs and have a reduced re-incarceration rate. The prevalence of technology has created distance-learning opportunities. Many universities and colleges are willing to cooperate with prisons and operate online classes where inmates can earn associates, bachelors, and even masters degrees while serving their sentences. The availability and access to a program depends on the facility.

Funding for prison educational programs comes from a variety of sources. Much of the prison industry is funded though the federal government.

State institutions are paid for by the states, however, much of the money still comes from federal programs. The management of many prison facilities has been moved to third party "for-profit" corporations. These corporations are paid through federal and state contracts and through independent contracts with local and regional businesses. Just as there are no federal expectations for gifted education, the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) does not have educational expectations for federal facilities. State and private facilities are in charge of setting up and managing their own educational programs.

Giftedness in Prison

One indicator of potential incarceration is the highest level of education obtained. Students who drop out of high school are at a significantly higher risk of engaging in the risky behavior that can lead to incarceration. The Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that 68% of state inmates did not hold a high school diploma or equivalent (Wolf-Harlow, 2003). Minority and lower socio-economic schools have higher dropout rates than middle and upper socio-economic schools. Schools with higher dropout rates are the schools that are less likely to be servicing their gifted students. The lack of support for gifted and talented student is one factor leading to gifted students dropping out of high school. By one estimate, 18% to 25% of students who drop out of high school would qualify as gifted (Renzulli & Park, 2000). Underachieving gifted students will find ways to challenge themselves. If it is not though the educational system, it will be through other ventures carrying an increased risk. Underachievement can be over turned using strategies such as the Trifocal model (Rimm). Teenagers are good candidates to have their underachievement reversed by encouraging them towards altruistic behaviors. This adds relevance to their lives and can often encourage them to achieve in school, lowering the dropout rate (Rimm, 2003). In order to get this support the students must be identified as early as possible. Once incarcerated, these individuals lose access to many educational resources.

High school dropout rates have improved greatly in the United States. In the 1950's, 50% of African American and 60% of Hispanic American students dropped out of high school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977). By 2013, the numbers had decreased to 7% of African Americans and 12% of Hispanic American students, and Caucasian high school dropout rates decreased from 20% to 5% (Kena, Musu-Gillette, et. al., 2015). Current numbers are calculated to include students who did not finish high school but attained some form of GED. Gifted and talented individuals who have become disenfranchised with the education system are at a greater risk to dropout.

Juvenile correctional facilities operate in a similar manner to adult institutions. There are approximately 60,000 juveniles incarcerated on any given day in the United States. Education programs vary greatly by institution. Local public school districts run many juvenile detention education programs while others are run by private or charter entities. They offer students the opportunity to receive their high school diploma and obtain scholarships to community and state colleges. Most programs are multi-grade, mixed level classes. In December of 2014, the Department of Education (ED) and Department of Justice (DOJ) released a joint guiding principle for educational implementation in juvenile correctional facilities (ED, DOJ, 2014). There is nothing regarding gifted education written into the guiding principles.

By definition, prison is intended to be an isolating and limiting place. Access to educational and artistic materials is limited and heavily regulated. Gifted individuals need to be challenged in some capacity, therefore challenge in prison often comes in the form of political and physical strife. Substance abuse is high despite it's illegality. Being caught with contraband can add extra time to an existing sentence. Many prison jobs are menial tasks that offer little in the way of challenge or interest. It is a system where underachieving gifted individuals can continue their risk taking behavior. Spontaneous changing of underachievement can occur when an underachieving gifted individual changes the expectation of important others or identifies with appropriate role models (Rimm, 2003). Both of these are made more difficult in the limiting confines of incarceration.

Looking at incarceration largely involves marginalized populations and the many factors involved within. Poverty rates are higher, unemployment is higher, health care coverage is lower, and life expectancy is lower. Adverse family and social environment can retard children's mental and physical development (Skuse, 1998). Gifted students within disadvantaged populations are more likely to struggle with lack of support, under identification, or misidentification. For many these are insurmountable challenges. In many lower socio-economic areas, the term "school-to-prison-pipeline" is used to describe the educational situation. The situation is further complicated by the lack of appropriate role models for disadvantaged gifted and talented youths. For many who have lost faith in the educational system, it is not difficult to understand why they are willing to take risks for a better future even if it is involved in antisocial behavior as if these challenges were not enough, once an individual has been through the prison system the future is made even more difficult.

A Lasting Impact

Reintegration after incarceration is a complicated and difficult process and this is especially true for gifted individuals. Many opportunities that were once available are now gone. Higher education is largely limited and out of reach and most government programs are vocationally based. Vocational programs provide little in the way of challenge and offer no support for gifted and talented individuals. Once out of the school system, there are very few identifications of giftedness. Most unidentified disadvantaged gifted youth have no idea they are gifted or what it means to be gifted. There is very little to cause an underachieving

gifted individual to self-correct. Evidence shows that underachievement can be corrected even for gifted individuals in prison (Rimm, 2003).

There are many models used in gifted education to help with underachievement. It has been proven in multiple cases that underachievement can be overcome when identified and properly addressed. One example is the Trifocal Model for Reversing Underachievement (Rimm, 2003). The Trifocal model is a six-step model that addresses the child, the parents, and the school, which highlights the importance of the family and the school in supporting the gifted and talented learner. Another example is the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) model initially originated by Alex Osborn in 1963 and later expanded upon by Sidney Parnes in 1981. The CPS is a six-step model designed to help individuals become more creative problem solvers and has been very successful when used with typical gifted students. It has also shown a dramatic impact when used with marginalized adolescent populations, including high school dropouts, disenfranchised Aboriginal teens, and reduced a recidivism rate among Native Canadian inmates (McCluskey, Baker, McCluskey, 2005).

There is evidence of a cultural shift against high incarceration numbers. In October of 2015 President Barak Obama backed by a bi-partisan agreement, signed the release 6112 non-violent offenders, most of whom were incarcerated for drug related crimes. These inmates make up less than 3 thousandths (.003%) of a percent of the overall prison population. Nearly one third of those being released are foreign nationals and will be handed over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for deportation. This is a proverbial drop in the bucket in the number of individuals still incarcerated. Currently 1 in every 110 adults is incarcerated and 1 in every 35 adults is under some form of correctional control (Skala, 2014). This includes prison, jail, parole, and probation populations.

If the percentage of gifted and talented individuals incarcerated were as high as 20% then the United States would have upwards of 400,000 individuals in the prison system. Unfortunately, most of the 400,000 people were never identified as gifted and/or talented nor received any supports. It is not too late for individuals in prison to alter underachievement. Educational programs like the BPI have proven that, given the support and opportunity, people can change and making a lasting contribution to society, but they have to be allowed an opportunity first.

Whether it be the number of individuals in the American prison system or the 80 billion dollar a year price tag to keep so many people locked up, there is interest in changing the system. Properly supporting the education system, including gifted education, would benefit society two fold. First, it would prevent many individuals from going to prison effectively forever limiting their options in life. As a society, we would spend less in taxes on incarceration. Second, we would be able to share in the benefits of their accomplishments. There is no way to predict with certainty what people will do. It is important to note that there is a societal need for prisons. Violent offenders, including some gifted and talented individuals, who pose a threat to the community, need to be held in a place where they cannot hurt others.

One possible option to address this problem is to establish federal supports and guidelines for gifted education. A greater amount of money needs to be specifically allocated for the establishment of gifted and talented programs with

special emphasis on disadvantaged and low socio-economic areas. With federal funding, there would have to be increased accountability in some form. It would likely be standardized testing targeted at gifted and talented students. Well-intentioned federal programs do come with their own potential problems, as was previously addressed. Another possible option would be to alter the gifted and talented systems into an acceleration-based model that would move students at their academic pace rather than their age, but, again there has to be an emphasis on disadvantaged and low socio-economic groups to avoid underrepresentation. Both of these would require federal oversight and a shift in current educational models. It also requires a community shift in understanding and expectations of gifted education.

When we invest in general education and, specifically, gifted education early in children's academic careers, we are investing in our own future. These individuals will have the support they need to grow into the leaders, musicians, writers, scientists, doctors, mathematicians, and entrepreneurs of tomorrow.

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