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## THE BIG IDEA

Being a 21st Century Educator

## CLASSROOM PERSPECTIVES

On the Teaching Path

## PEOPLE

The Journey to Becoming a Lifelong Educator

# Celebrating Our Educators



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**Prof Low Ee Ling**  
 Dean,  
 Teacher Education  
 National Institute of Education,  
 Singapore

Every year, we celebrate Teachers' Day as a way of expressing our gratitude to our nation's educators. The celebration honours them and recognizes the positive impact they make—not only in the classroom, but also in their students' lives.

As a teacher educator, I believe we need to prepare future-ready teachers for future-ready learners. But what, exactly, does it mean to be “future-ready”? The term in itself poses a contradiction—how can you be future-ready when the future is so uncertain?

In an unpredictable world, teachers should be equipped with problem-solving skills that will enable them to come up with innovative solutions. More than that, teachers should also have the ability to anticipate possible new problems that are likely to confront us in the future.

To be an effective educator, we must constantly ask: *How can we improve our quality of teaching? Why is it important to continuously develop ourselves professionally as we teach? What are some of the ways in which we can help students be motivated to learn?*

On a positive note, we have just graduated our inaugural batch of teaching scholars from the Teaching Scholars Programme, with the pioneer batch of 33 students being called to the profession at the recent NIE Teachers' Investiture Ceremony in July this year.

Having completed this 4-year programme by NTU and NIE that grooms aspiring teachers to become “future leaders” of education, they exemplify our mission to groom “Future-Ready Teachers for Future-Ready Learners”. You can read a few of these teachers' motivations and hopes for the future in the “In Their Own Words” section online.

The feature article in “Classroom Perspectives” will also shed some light on the importance of teacher mentoring in every educator's early years of teaching.

Beyond just delivering content, an effective teacher also guides young people to be useful and responsible citizens of the country. One cannot over-emphasize the role of teachers in Singapore: nation-builders who shape the future of our nation, one student at a time.

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVES



### SNAPSHOT

What Makes a Great Teacher?

### TIP BITS

5 Ways to Motivate Lower Progress Learners

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

A Passion for Education

### CONTRIBUTION

Building Blocks for Inquiry: A Teacher's Perspective

### CONTRIBUTION

Student Voices: Feedback that Students Want

# Being a 21st

Besides imparting knowledge in engaging ways, it is even more important for teachers to inculcate values and develop students' characters to help them to thrive in today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Prof Low Ee Ling, Dean of Teacher Education, elaborates on what it means to be a teacher in the 21st century and why holistic development is central to today's teaching and learning.

Picture this: You see a mother and her child leisurely reading books on the train—an uncommon sight amidst widespread technology use today. Curious, you ask the mother how she encourages her child to read a book when the young today prefer *YouTube* and *Instagram*.

The mother replies, "Children don't always learn by being told what to do. They learn by *seeing* what we do."

Prof Low, who is also from the English Language & Literature Academic Group at NIE, notes that in the same way that children model their parents' behaviours after spending many hours in a day with them, students likewise model their teachers as they see them nearly every day for 6 to 8 hours.

"Such regular contact cannot be understated," says Prof Low. "After all, teachers are at the forefront of shaping the lives and minds of students. If they are to nurture students to be good individuals, they must first exemplify what it means to be a 'good' person."



# Century

## AT THE HEART OF THE TEACHER

Prof Low explains that there are many different characteristics that a “good” teacher should have. This includes having a passion to teach and the ability to adapt one’s teaching methods to suit the diverse learning needs of students.

Even then, there are also just as many terms, definitions and even perspectives that may change, evolve or be replaced.

If so, is there a constant that is able to transcend temporal factors like culture, time and language?

Prof Low has the answer: “At the heart of any good teacher is the *care for the learner*. This has always been, will continue to be and must never ever change.”

She vividly remembers how a former teacher, Mrs Cecile Tan from CHIJ St Joseph’s Convent, made a positive impact by teaching her, first and foremost, about important values that kept her grounded in life.

“She made every single moment a teachable one and taught me that success in life is about building character and having an unwavering sense of integrity,” she recalls.

Now, Prof Low exemplifies this same love and legacy in the way she teaches her student teachers, “She, and now I, have the learner at the heart of our teaching.”



# Educator

## THE EVOLVING NATURE OF TEACHING

“As professionals, teachers should constantly strive to be lifelong learners to ensure that we are always relevant to our learners.”

After all, a beginning teacher in the 1980s would be teaching an entirely different group of learners from the millennial generation today.

“We also want our 21st-century teachers to have a heart for the learner, a strong sense of identity and pride as teachers, and be committed to serving the teaching fraternity and the community,” Prof Low says.

In line with MOE’s goals for students to become confident persons, self-directed learners, active contributors to society and concerned citizens, NIE does the utmost in its teacher education programmes to ensure that every student teacher can bring out these attributes in their future students.

She adds, “At NIE, we are also committed to the lifelong growth and development of our future generations and we recognize that teachers can make all the difference.”

## SHAPING THE FUTURE OF OUR NATION

“Our society needs to have people with diverse talents to thrive, and the goal of effective teaching should thus be to nurture our young to enable them to have the best chance at succeeding in life,” shares Prof Low.

Content will provide much-needed knowledge and expand one’s mind but is just one facet of effective teaching. The other aspects include maximizing the potential of learners and nurturing them to be effective contributors to both the local and global communities.

So how can we ascertain whether a teacher has been effective and impactful?

“No matter the failures, heartaches or what seems to be an impossible undertaking, if you

can just touch *one* learner’s life by impacting him or her in a positive way, that is when you know you have succeeded as an educator,” explains Prof Low.

Ultimately, Prof Low believes that teaching is an important profession because teachers are also nation-builders. They shape the future of our nation through the students whom they teach and whose lives they have touched.

“You may not even know the extent of your impact in the betterment of the lives of your students but the *hope* that this might happen must drive you to be the best educator you can ever be,” she concludes. ■

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

Teachers should model lifelong learning by engaging in career-long professional development opportunities.

At NIE, teachers can develop themselves professionally in content, pedagogies and leadership. Some avenues include milestone leadership programmes, in-service courses, higher degree programmes (e.g., Master of Education programmes), the biennial Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference and participation in NIE’s research projects, which introduce many innovative teaching methods to schools.

NIE’s Teacher Education Model (TE<sup>21</sup>) is underpinned by a Values-driven philosophy known as the V<sup>3</sup>SK Model. It has a three-pronged set of values that is supported by the Skills and Knowledge deemed necessary for the 21st century teaching professional.

Teachers can also look to the Academy of Singapore Teachers and the various subject academies, classroom observations in schools, and professional learning communities for further professional development opportunities.

**About the Guest Editor**

**Prof Low Ee Ling** is Dean of Teacher Education at the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

# Uplifting Preschool Teachers for Quality Preschool Education



Preschool teachers are central to quality early childhood education. Their ability to be nurturing and effective educators begins with a healthy state of mind. We speak to one NIE research scientist to learn about the importance of promoting preschool teachers' well-being: a factor in enabling children to flourish.

## **PRESCHOOL TEACHERS : EDUCATORS, NOT BABYSITTERS**

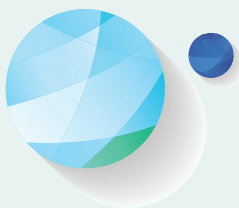
“Caring for children in their early years is not simply about feeding and cleaning up after them,” says Dr Ng Ee Lynn, a Research Scientist with NIE’s Centre for Research in Child Development.

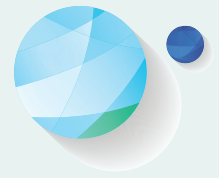
In fact, early childhood is a period in which children learn how to take turns to share, interact with others and regulate their emotions. “Children acquire these socio-emotional skills, which many of us take for granted, when they are in an environment (e.g., classroom) doing activities together with their peers,” explains Ee Lynn.

Children also pick up basic literacy and numeracy skills during their preschool years, which will equip them for primary school education.

To facilitate the academic and socio-emotional development of young children, preschool teachers have to provide a conducive learning environment and engage in quality interactions with them. “These responsibilities illustrate that preschool teachers are not actually babysitters, but educators who play a pivotal role in nurturing the young,” Ee Lynn says.

The ability of preschool teachers to provide quality early childhood education, however, rests in their well-being.





### STRESS IN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

One major factor that can undermine preschool teachers' well-being is work-related stress which, if not properly managed, can have repercussions on child development.

"Studies have shown that when teachers are stressed, they are less likely to be positive and enthusiastic in the classroom, which thus affects both the learning environment and quality of teacher-child interactions," explains Ee Lynn, whose research interests lie in stress and anxiety.

Moreover, teachers who feel stressed may unintentionally be inconsistent with their behavioral management strategies.

"For example, when feeling stressed, they may scold a child for a minor transgression whereas under circumstances when they are more composed, they may respond more constructively to the child for a similar wrongdoing," says Ee Lynn.

Such inconsistencies not only confuse children, but can also cause them to be afraid of their teachers and struggle to focus in the classroom. "This is because children would often be wondering how their teachers would respond to their actions and behavior," Ee Lynn adds. "In the long-term, these consequences are detrimental to children's learning and well-being."

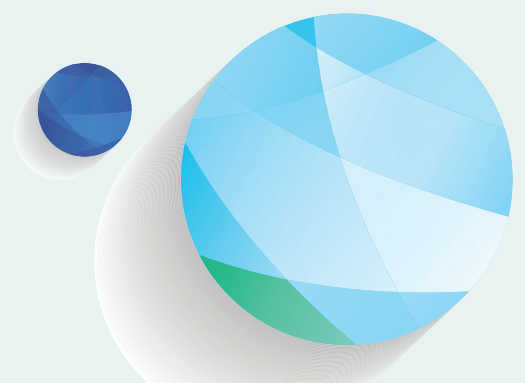
Ultimately, preschool educators are responsible for teaching children to regulate their behavior and thus have to set good examples for them. "If children observe that their teachers are not regulating their stress levels and emotions, they will not have good role models to emulate," shares Ee Lynn.

### IDENTIFYING STRESSORS

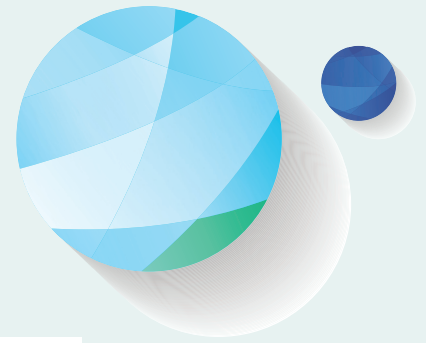
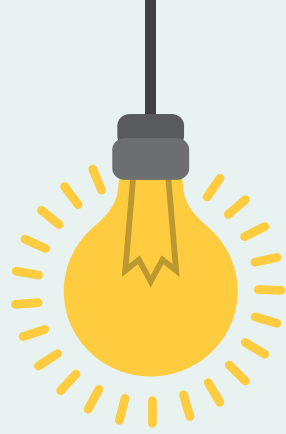
While work-related stress can undoubtedly have negative repercussions, preschool teachers cannot avoid it altogether. "Dealing with work-related stress is thus a matter of addressing the factors that contribute to it and finding effective ways to manage them," says Ee Lynn.

At present, studies on stress in local preschool teachers are scarce. Nevertheless, Ee Lynn posits that existing research conducted on primary and secondary school teachers can provide an insight into the factors that contribute to work-related stress in preschool teachers. "These include the workload, support from colleagues and school leadership, parental expectations, work-life balance as well as personal expectations," Ee Lynn adds.

For preschool teachers in particular, Ee Lynn reckons that their current lack of professional status also affects their stress levels. "Some actually regard preschool teachers as mere babysitters rather than educators, which can be demoralizing for them," shares Ee Lynn.







### UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING WORK-RELATED STRESS

So what can be done to support our early childhood educators and promote their well-being?

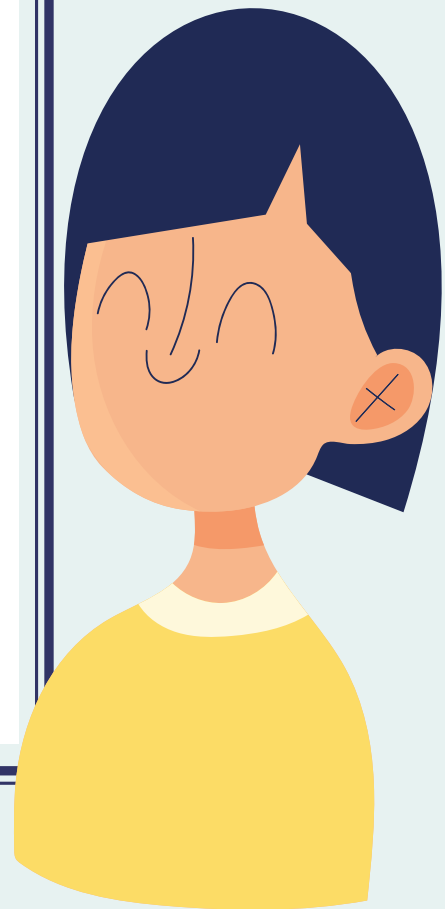
According to Ee Lynn, recognizing preschool teachers' contributions is crucial for alleviating their work-related stress and boosting their professional status.

"The establishment of the National Institute for Early Childhood Development (NIEC) is thus a good start as it shows that preschool teachers are gaining recognition as educators and will have access to opportunities for professional development," says Ee Lynn.

In addition, perceptions of preschool teachers as babysitters also have to change. "After all, they play a key role in educating young children and their job is no walk in the park," explains Ee Lynn.

On her part, Ee Lynn, who is leading an ongoing pilot study on stress in local preschool teachers, hopes that the data from her research can provide a contextualized understanding on job stress in early childhood educators. In doing so, efforts to address this issue can be more targeted.

"At the end of the day, when teachers feel valued and are able to manage their stress levels, they will be part of a happier workforce. This would positively impact both their work and personal lives," Ee Lynn adds. ■



#### About the Interviewee

**Dr Ng Ee Lynn** is a Research Scientist with the Centre for Research in Child Development. Her research interests lie in stress and anxiety in children. As a mother of a son who spends a significant amount of time at preschool than at home, she recognizes the contributions of preschool teachers and is keen to be part of efforts to uplift the profession.

ON

THE

TEACHING

PATH



Teachers wear multiple hats on any given day—they are expected to play the roles of educator, disciplinarian, and friend—sometimes all at the same time. We speak to Lee Yang Sheng, a Design & Technology (D&T) and Mathematics teacher from Woodgrove Secondary School, who reflects on his 4-year journey as a teacher.

The fear of making mistakes in the classroom is one of the challenges that many Beginning Teachers (BTs) face.

“Many BTs aim to follow their lesson plans to a tee and may not be prepared to deal with unexpected situations in the classroom,” says Yang Sheng. “Should they make mistakes, they can feel anxious and worry about how their colleagues would perceive them.”

Having gone through the BT experience, Yang Sheng has this advice for other BTs: “Focus on your students and do what is best for them. If you make mistakes, learn from them and move on.”

## MENTORSHIP FOR BTs

Having mentors to turn to during the initial years of teaching can help BTs better manage the challenges they face.

Apart from being a pillar of support, mentors can also offer new perspectives to BTs, which can help BTs refine their teaching strategies—a skill needed when teaching students from different academic streams.

“I have tried applying the same lesson plan across my Express and Normal (Academic) classes but found that this strategy did not work,” explains Yang Sheng. “While students in the Normal (Academic) stream will answer a lot of questions, those in the Express stream will simply nod to show that they understood a topic.” This shows that teachers have to adapt their teaching approaches to suit the learning needs of students.

In addition, scheduled weekly reflections with a mentor can be beneficial in the initial years of teaching. During these sessions, as BTs share and reflect on their experiences in the classroom—a process known as reflective practice—mentors can also provide advice on issues that BTs may be facing and suggest ways to improve.

“I think the reflection part is important, even after we leave the mentoring programme,” Yang Sheng adds. “Apart from playing up our positives, we also have to work on our weaknesses—that is how we can become better educators.”



## DEVELOPING POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

BTs may find it a struggle to strike a balance between curriculum coverage and building rapport with students. One way to counter this, Yang Sheng suggests, is to have casual conversations with students whenever time permits.

There is no hard and fast rule when building relationships with students as both students and teachers alike have different styles of communication. “Rather, the key is to show empathy and make an effort to know them as individuals,” he shares.

After all, rapport with students can also go a long way in helping teachers manage their classes well. “In my view, the first month of teaching a new class sets the tone for the rest of the school year. I would thus encourage teachers to invest time and effort to get to know their students and build positive relationships with them from the start,” Yang Sheng adds.

Since embarking on his teaching journey, he maintains one key practice in the classroom—setting ground rules and enforcing them strictly. In addition, knowing when to be a disciplinarian and when to be a friend to students is a useful skill to have.



## WORKING WITH LOW-ACHIEVING STUDENTS

Yang Sheng sees teaching as a rewarding career and the knowledge that he has made a difference to students motivates him to be a better educator.

He currently teaches students in the Normal (Technical) stream, many of whom are demoralized by repeated failures at examinations. To motivate them and promote a mindset shift, Yang Sheng makes it a point to help students realize that they have the potential to do better and celebrate their successes.

“Many of them could actually have scored ‘B’s or ‘C’s if not for careless mistakes, which shows that they are in fact capable of passing examinations,” explains Yang Sheng. “Once they pass, I will reward them,” he shares.

While teachers have the ability to change students for the better, Yang Sheng is also aware that not all students leave school a changed person. “Sometimes, the effect doesn’t take place during the teaching period but after students leave school. For example, when they encounter an obstacle in their working life, they may look back and reflect on the values that their teachers have once taught them,” explains Yang Sheng.

During lessons, Yang Sheng would use the example of being habitually late and point out to his students that continuing their bad habits into adult life will likely affect their employment prospects.

Ultimately, being a teacher is more than just imparting knowledge and preparing students for exams. “Our goal should be to help students grow holistically and develop values such as resilience so that they can overcome obstacles in school and beyond,” Yang Sheng concludes. ■



### **About the Interviewee**

**Lee Yang Sheng** is a Design & Technology (D&T) and Mathematics teacher at Woodgrove Secondary School. He has been a teacher for 4 years.



# THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING A Lifelong Educator

Malaysia-born Mrs Lyvenne Chong from Spectra Secondary School took 21 years to fulfil her childhood ambition of being a teacher. About to retire in 2 years' time, she talks to SingTeach about her long and rewarding journey of not just being an educator, but a lifelong learner as well.

## THE EARLY YEARS

Lyvenne shares, "to be a teacher was my childhood ambition." With a laugh, she says, "I remember very clearly—when I was in primary school, I would often role-play as a teacher at home and pretend to give books to students."

Back then in Malaysia, Lyvenne was well-known in her *kampung* (village) as a top student. When she was a Secondary 3 student, neighbors began to engage her as a tutor for their children, who were in primary school.

Thus, this childhood ambition continued to be sustained, partly as a way of earning her own keep, and because she recognized her competencies as a teacher.

She went on to teach in tuition centres and her former school as a relief teacher. Such was her passion for teaching that she not only taught children in the day, but also adults who were learning conversational English at night.

"I'm a teacher throughout the entire day," she quips with a smile.

I want to be a teacher when I grow up!



## ACCEPTED AFTER FACING SIX REJECTIONS

Lyvenne shares that she has never stopped pursuing her childhood ambition of being a teacher, whether in Malaysia or Singapore. Despite her persistence, her applications to be a teacher in both countries were repeatedly turned down over the course of 21 years.

Disappointed but not discouraged, she constantly sought out relief teaching assignments in schools.

"When you can't reach your goals, don't give up," says Lyvenne about her childhood ambition. "You must continue to learn, progress and seek alternatives. When there's an opportunity, be quick to grab it."

Finally, in 1997 at the age of 37 and with two young children, her determination was rewarded with the eventual acceptance of her seventh application as a teacher.

Never give up!



## THE CHALLENGES AND BELIEFS AS AN EDUCATOR

As with all vocations, challenges are aplenty and unavoidable. When asked about the kinds of challenges Lyvenne has faced since becoming an educator, she responds with a wry smile.

“I think the biggest challenge is dealing with students who are at-risk or come from dysfunctional families,” she shares. “These students are not motivated to learn or even come to school. Even if they do come, they seek attention by getting involved in disciplinary issues.”

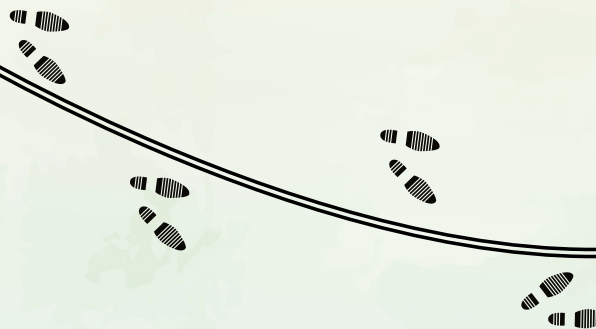
To her, it is crucial to understand the reasons behind their disciplinary problems.

“A lot of times it’s not by choice,” Lyvenne says. She explains that at-risk students tend to have complicated family backgrounds and face complex issues which are difficult to resolve.

Lyvenne believes that to reach out to a child, it is important to build positive teacher-student relationships. One way to do this, she says, is to “follow-up and follow-through”. She spends time with the students and their families even outside of school hours, and offers herself as a channel for them to confide in her.

From there, she does what she can to ensure the student turns up for school. She also has no qualms about providing one-on-one supplementary lessons to help the student pull through his or her studies.

“While it is a challenge, I think that as teachers and educators, we don’t just teach the subject, we should also strive to make a difference to a child’s life—not just in class, but for the future,” affirms Lyvenne.



### **About the Interviewee**

**Mrs Lyvenne Chong** is a School Staff Developer from Spectra Secondary School. She teaches Character and Citizenship Education, and Information Technology, and has been a teacher for the past 20 years.

## SUSTAINING THE PASSION

“I enjoy interacting with students,” Lyvenne shares. “When the kids are happy, I’m happy. I feel more motivated when they learn and respond.”

Of course, it is not always smooth-sailing. Lyvenne does experience moments of frustration when students are unresponsive.

“When I sense that the students are losing interest, I try to make the lessons more interactive and I try to bring in real-world examples,” she shares.

One perfect example of this is Spectra Secondary School’s Garden-based Service Learning (GBSL) Programme, which goes beyond textbooks to teach students Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) among many other subjects. (See story below)

After 20 years in the teaching profession, Lyvenne has some advice for aspiring and in-service educators: “Every cohort of students that crosses our path is different. We need to make an effort to understand the profile of each student,” she says.

“By understanding them and continuing to develop professionally, we are able to sharpen our tools and build our craft better.” ■



## EDIBLE LEARNING GARDEN: A GARDEN OF POSSIBILITIES

*Lyvenne did a 1-year stint at the University of Sydney in 2012. Armed with a Master of Education, she arrived at Spectra Secondary School to implement her research proposal based on her conceptualization of garden-based learning.*

*“Most schools have a garden for aesthetic purposes, and they will use it for topical science lessons such as pollination or study of insects,” shares Lyvenne.*

*“For our school, however, garden-based learning is implemented as a CCE module for the Secondary 1 cohort,” she explains. “This means learning experientially through working in the garden to serve the school community, which includes students who are receiving financial assistance.”*

*Through this 10-week GBSL programme, Lyvenne and her team developed gardening activities that cultivate the school’s three core values of Respect, Responsibility and*

*Resilience. Students, for example, are responsible for cleaning and keeping the gardening tools after use. Other skills such as water conservation and entrepreneurship are also integrated into the programme. Students are taught to collect leftover water in a pail to water the plants, and even run a farmers’ market.*

*Held three times a year, the farmers’ market is a fund-raising event held at the school’s rooftop garden, which is known as the “Edible Learning Garden”. Students sell their self-grown vegetables to the public. Through the running of this event, students can learn how to apply academic skills such as Mathematics (when calculating prices) and English (when communicating with customers) in real-life situations.*

*Lyvenne was presented with the President’s Award for Teachers in 2016 for her innovative teaching methods and commitment to her students.*

A video on how GBSL works can be viewed on the [SingTeach](#) website.

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