
Education that Leads to Nowhere: Thailand's Education Policy for Children of Migrants

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ABSTRACT: In July 2005, the Thai cabinet passed the resolution that allows migrant children access to free public education. This paper uncovers education experiences of children of migrant workers who study in Thai public schools, concentrating on the Thai government's education policy towards these children. Data are drawn from an ethnographic study conducted between 2010 and 2011 in two provinces of Thailand—Ranong Province and Pattani Province. Qualitative research methods such as interview, observation and document examination are used to obtain data. School practices such as the admission process, the placement of children into classes, classroom instruction, and supporting systems are examined. Interactions between teachers and migrant children as well as between migrant children and local children are observed. The results show that while allowing migrant children to access public education, the Thai government does not have a policy to promote or to persuade migrant parents to bring their children to schools. A policy to follow up on children of migrants who drop out also does not exist. Additionally, school practices and curricula do not match the circumstances of the children. This article argues that Thailand's current education policy allows children of migrants to access public education, but does not help them to proceed to higher levels of education.

The Study
Thailand Policy on Education of Children of Migrants
The First Hurdle
Student Placement
Curriculum and Instruction
Dropouts and Inability to Continue Education at Higher Levels
Conclusion and Recommendations
Notes
References

International migration is a common phenomenon today (Luchtenberg, 2004). Thailand is no exception. Cross-border migration into Thailand dates back to the early 20th century (Asia Pacific Migration Research Network, 2003). Migrants in Thailand can be categorized largely into refugees who flee from political unrest in their home countries and economic migrants who enter Thailand to find jobs (Chantavanich, Vungsiripaisal, & Laodumrongchai, 2007; Purkey, 2004). In recent years, numbers of economic migrants have increased tremendously (Chantavanich et al., 2007). Data from the Ministry of Labor show

that in the year 2004 there were 1,284,920 migrants in Thailand. However, if illegal and undocumented migrants were included, the number is estimated to reach two to three million (Human Rights Watch, 2010). According to the same registration record, there were 93,082 migrant children in Thailand (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005). However, similar to the number of adult migrants, some sources stated that should unregistered migrant children be included the number would be as high as 260,000 persons (*Komchadluk News*, 2011; Vungsiriphisal, 2010).

Initially, access to public education was prohibited for children of migrant workers by law (Muangmee, 2005; Kaowao News, 2007). The majority of children of migrant workers stayed at home, prematurely entered the labor market, or attended classes at learning centers provided by non-government organizations (Kalnin, 2010; Muangmee, 2005). In July 2005, access to public education for children of migrant workers was allowed for the first time through a cabinet resolution. As a result, regardless of their parents' legal status in Thailand, children of migrant workers are now permitted to receive 15 years of free public education from kindergarten to high school (Ministry of Education, 2009; Office of Education Council, 2006). This policy would seem to be a door-opening policy for hundreds of thousands of children of migrant workers, as education is believed to be the key to social and economic mobility.

Six years have passed since the landmark policy took effect. Only a small number of migrant children have enrolled in public schools (ILO, 2008; Vungsiriphisal, 2010). Some sources state that only 10 percent of registered migrant workers attend Thai public schools (Vungsiriphisal, 2010). Many factors have contributed to such low enrollment. Unawareness of the policy is one of them (Setthapanich, 2007). Economic status of the families is another reason, as many parents want their children to work to add to the families' earnings instead of going to schools (Setthapanich, 2007; ILO, 2008). Discrimination is another reason that hinders migrant children's access to education; some public schools refuse to accept migrant children for fear that it would affect the schools' reputations and academic performances (ILO, 2008).

So far, studies on education of children of migrant workers have focused on how to increase enrollment of migrant children in public schools (ILO, 2006; Muangmee, 2005). Not many studies have examined the experiences of migrant children who enroll in public schools. Nor have any studies questioned the assumption that access to public education would bring better futures to children of migrant workers and their families.

The Study

Drawing on data from ethnographic research, this paper uncovers experiences of children of migrant workers who study in Thai public schools. It concentrates on the Thai government's education policy towards children of

migrant workers and the implementation of such policy at the school and district levels. School practices such as the admission process, the placement of children into classes, classroom instruction, and support systems were examined. Interactions between teachers and migrant children as well as between migrant children and Thai children were observed.

The research was conducted from June 2010 to August 2011 in two provinces in the southern part of Thailand: Ranong Province and Pattani Province. Adjacent to Burma, Ranong Province has a large number of migrant students. In the academic year 2011, there were 1,367 migrant students enrolled in public schools in Ranong Province. Pattani Province, on the other hand, had only 59 migrant students enrolled in public schools. The two provinces were chosen in order to find the differences, if any, in policy and practices due to the different number of migrant students. In both provinces, schools with large numbers of migrant students were chosen as sites of the study.

In total, 40 interviews were conducted with the following respondents: migrant children, teachers, and administrators in two primary schools and one secondary school; officers in the Office of Education Service Areas (School Districts); migrant parents; business owners who employed migrant workers; non-government officers; and an officer in the Ministry of Education. Consent forms were obtained from all interviewees. Apart from the interviews, I observed classrooms where migrant children studied. House-visits were also conducted in four areas where migrant workers lived. In addition to interviews and observations, I examined policy documents concerning education for migrant children.

Thailand Policy on Education of Children of Migrants: Rationales and Practices

On July 5, 2005, the Thai cabinet passed the resolution proposed by the Ministry of Education to allow children of both registered and unregistered migrants access to public education (MOE, 2009). Not only access is allowed; migrant children who enroll in public schools are entitled to receive subsidies for tuition fees, school uniforms, school textbooks, learning materials, and school lunch as part of the 15-year free education policy. The government allocated the unit cost per head for every child who enrolls in public schools regardless of their nationalities. The 15-year free education extends from kindergarten to the last year of high school, including non-formal and public vocational education.

Besides subsidies stated in the above paragraph, the same resolution also approves the amendment of the 1992 regulations on application procedures and documents required for admission into public schools for children who do not have Thai nationality. Normally, for Thai students, the documents required when applying for Thai public schools are birth certificate or birth registration, household registration and personal identification. However, from July 2005

onward, schools can admit students even though they do not have any of those documents. Schools only need to record students' basic information such as their names, date of birth, places of birth, names of parents, and nationality. Then, the 13-digit personal identification number is issued at the municipal office for those who do not have Thai nationality. The stigmatizing practice of marking in red ink the names of students who are not Thai was also abolished.

In general, the resolution has opened an opportunity for children of migrants to receive public education that had been previously restricted by law. Why did the Thai government approve the policy? Besides perceiving education as the basic human rights that every child, regardless of nationality, is entitled to have, officers in the Ministry of Education and Office of Education Service Area cited education as a means for social and personal development. They elaborated in the interviews that children of migrants, if educated, would turn into strong human capital for Thailand. If left unschooled and uneducated, children of migrant workers would cause social problems and be harmful to the security of the Thai Kingdom. The cost of schooling would be lower than the cost of rectifying social problems. Respondents in this study, such as school administrators and business owners, explained that education would prevent migrant children from becoming child labor, drug dealers, and victims of human traffickers. The resolution is also in line with the 1999 National Education Act, which stipulates the provision of universal basic education to all school-aged children in Thailand. Furthermore, it is hoped that providing education to children of migrants will generate positive attitudes among migrant workers towards Thailand and will link to the nation's stability (ILO, 2006).

The First Hurdle: Access to Public Education

For children of migrants, it is undeniable that the July 2005 resolution is significant. It marks the first time that the Thai government recognized their right to education regardless of their nationalities and their parents' legal status in Thailand. The material and financial support that they receive is also similar to that provided to Thai students. Presumably, this should be enough to make migrant parents rush to school doors to enroll their children. However, things are different in reality.

The first obstacle that children of migrants meet is gaining access to public schools. Despite the approval from the Cabinet in 2005, it is evident that most children of migrants are not attending public schools (ILO, 2006; Setthapanich, 2007; UNHCR, 2009). The record of students enrolled in public schools in the 2011 academic year shows that the number of children of migrants from the countries that sent the largest number of students--Burma, Laos, and Cambodia-- was 58,687 persons (Office of Basic Education Commission, 2011). This equals only five percent of the total number of migrant children registered with the Ministry of Labor. The rest of the migrant children are either receiving education provided by private organizations and non-government organizations at learning

centers or are not receiving any form of education at all. Most of them fall into the latter category (ILO, 2006).

The regulations and guidelines of the Ministry of Education state that education offices at all levels should promote admission by surveying the number of school-age children in their areas and announcing the period of application to schools for the new academic year to all parents, including migrant parents (MOE, 2009). All public relation media such as advertisement boards, pamphlets, radio broadcasts, and electronic mail are to be used to promote school applications. However, interviews with educational officers reveal that the promotion to enroll in public schools has not been directed to migrant parents: “No, we did not promote or persuade migrant parents to send their children to schools as it is not our policy to do so. However, only if they [migrant children] apply by themselves, that we would accept them” (School administrator in Area Education Office in Pattani province—interview on August 30, 2010).

An officer who works at the Ministry of Education gave a similar answer when I interviewed her about the issue:

It is not the government policy to promote that Thailand now have free education, please come to study with us. This would increase the numbers of migrant workers in our country. The cabinet resolution means that children of migrants have the right to apply and the schools cannot refuse them access. (Ministry of Education Officer—interview on October 14, 2010)

From the above interviews, it is clear that children of migrants are allowed to enroll in public schools as stated in the cabinet resolution. However, it is also clear that there are no public relation activities to inform migrant parents about their children’s right to education. Educational officers at all levels take passive roles in promoting the policy. Public sentiment is the main obstacle that prevents officers from publicly informing migrant parents about the policy. This is not surprising. Migrant workers from neighboring countries have been the subjects of ridicule and insult for Thai people since their influx into Thailand. Entertainment media mock their accents and the way they dress. Newspapers report negative news about migrant workers: most of them are stereotyped as unregistered workers who entered Thailand illegally and who always brutalize their employers when they feel discontented. Some Thais criticized the government for spending their tax money on the education of the “other” children (Komchadluek News, 2011). The rapid increase in the numbers of migrant workers has also created the discourse about migrants invading Thailand. Officers responsible for education of children of migrants said in an interview that if migrant parents knew that they now can send their children to public schools in Thailand they would tell their friends and relatives back home to migrate to Thailand to enjoy this benefit. All of these have contributed to the reluctance to inform migrant parents about their children’s right to education. Furthermore, although it is stated that public schools cannot deny access to public education of children of migrants, in reality some famous public schools refuse to accept migrant children for fear that it will affect the schools’ reputations and academic performances (Vice Principal of

primary school A—interview on August 27, 2010). As a result, most of children of migrant workers study in neighborhood schools, which are not top-ranked in term of student academic performance.

Although the opportunity to receive public education has been granted to children of migrant workers, it does not mean that this opportunity is handed to them automatically. They have to search for and reach out to this opportunity by themselves, and many of them do not know how to.

I first entered the migrant community by following non-government officers who went there to educate migrant workers about AIDS prevention. There were some school-aged children running around. Although the community is located within the walking distance to an elementary school, none of the children go to school. None of the parents in that community know that their children are eligible to enroll in Thai public schools. (Fieldnotes of March 4, 2011)

Data in this research show that migrant parents do want their children to go to schools but do not know how to gain access. Some of those already enrolled in public schools had been informed about and helped with the application process by Thai people such as their employers, their Thai neighbors, monks, and non-government officers. In the school in which I conducted the study, a monk and the owner of the factory not only helped children of migrant workers with the application process but also sponsored the instructional materials and transportation.

The implementation of the policy by education officers at all levels is contrary to what has been written in the regulations and guidelines for school to provide education for children of migrants. This has contributed to the low enrollment rate of children of migrants in Thai public schools. If the Thai government is serious about the provision of education for migrant children, the officers in all levels in the Ministry of Education should assume more active roles. Otherwise, the policy to provide education to children of migrant workers lacks integrity.

Student Placement

Primary schools, which are the sites of this study, enroll children from kindergarten to sixth grade. The average age of Thai children enrolling in first grade is six to seven years old. However, I have met with children of migrants who are 10, 11, and 12 years old but are still in a first-grade class, as well as some 15-year-old fourth-graders. According to the interviews with teachers and school administrators, this is typical for children of migrants; they tend to be over-aged compared to Thai students.

In the 2005 landmark resolution which allows children of migrants access to public education, there is no stipulation about admission rules and criteria for schools regarding the admission of children of migrants. As a result, each school

works out its own rules. According to the interviews, in order to enroll, most schools require Thai language proficiency as a prerequisite. Many schools set out extra rules that they will only accept children of migrants who are referred to by learning centers in order to guarantee that the children are prepared. Because of these rules, children of migrants tend to be over-aged because they have to go through learning centers before entering into public schools.

Normally, most schools set out similar rules that if children are younger than seven years old they are put into a kindergarten class. Those who are older than seven and have never enrolled in Thai schools are assigned to a first grade class, no matter how old they are. I found these rules to be contradictory because while schools require children of migrants to go through learning centers to be prepared before applying to public schools, their experiences in learning centers are not counted. None of the schools in the study conduct placement tests to assess migrant children's prior knowledge and academic performance in order to assign them to appropriate classes. This seems to be the normal practice. Even though it would be in the best interest of children, placement tests are not given.

According to the teachers, migrant students who are older are more obedient and well-behaved than their Thai classmates. However, because the students are older, their physical and psychological development differs from that of their classmates; they become teenagers while their classmates are still children. The age differences among students also make it difficult for the teachers to teach and manage the class. The methods of instruction sometimes do not suit the interests of older students. To avoid these problems, some schools made clear that they would not accept migrant students who are older than nine years old. Because of such schools' requests, learning centers refrained from sending older students to public schools.

Some students are fourteen years old when they study with us [learning center]. In this case, we teach them Thai language, Burmese and some English and then send them to non-formal education centers. Because for older children, if we send them to public schools, they have to start from first grade, they become embarrassed when they grow older. Eventually they drop out while their Thai language has not been fully developed. They also began to lose their mother tongues. These would disadvantage them when they enter job market. (Non-government officer in Ranong Province—interview on May 19, 2011)

For children of migrants, these rules and criteria for admission set by public schools limit rather than facilitate their access to public education. The Ministry of Education's rule that stipulates only the right to education is not enough to guarantee that the children receive education that is appropriate to their needs and circumstances. Placement tests should be implemented in schools in order to provide education that is more appropriate to the students' academic backgrounds. Moreover, in order for learning centers to provide preparatory education for children of migrants, there should be more cooperation between schools and learning centers.

Curriculum and Instruction

In public schools, children of migrants study mathematics, science, social studies, English, Thai language, and physical education, using content stipulated in the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008). The Ministry of Education specifies the core curriculum, which schools and communities can use as a framework to formulate the school curriculum but which does not stipulate how schools should teach children of migrants. Schools in this study use the same curriculum for all children, Thais and migrants alike. Since most of migrant students are Buddhists, much of the content in the curriculum, as well as school activities such as the morning rituals, school holidays and festivals, is relevant to migrant students' cultural backgrounds. However, besides religion, other parts of the curriculum are in conflict with these students' backgrounds. In history class, for example, apart from the chronology of the Thai kingdom, lessons about Thailand being attacked by neighboring countries such as Burma and Cambodia (Osatharom, 2001) were taught as a static fact. Children of migrants from Burma and Cambodia who studied in those classes had to learn that their ancestors have been the long-term enemy of Thailand. The current border disputes between Cambodia and Thailand were also mentioned, with rage, to the whole class, irrespective of the fact that students from Cambodia were studying in that class. Interviews with the teachers and education officers reveal that they did not think that there was a need to teach differently.

They [children of migrants] are here to study with us, they have to use our curriculum the same as other Thai students. (Educational officer in Area Education Office, Ranong Province—interview on May 20, 2011)

The practices in our school are impartial. We do not alter things in favor of particular groups of students. Those who chose to study with us have to follow what we have set out to do. (Administrator in Primary School B—interview on May 19, 2011)

In all classes I observed, instruction was provided in the Thai language. Bilingual education was not available. According to the interviews, the language barrier is not a problem for migrant students; they understand the teachers well and can perform the assigned tasks. However, the nonexistence of bilingual education has made migrant students gradually forget their mother tongues; some of them can speak but cannot write. Although schools in this study did not provide bilingual education, a few schools in central Thailand provide transitional bilingual classes for migrant students who are not fluent in Thai language. These schools' initiatives are supported by schools' existing budgets. The Ministry of Education leaves it to each school's decision to provide culturally relevant instruction to migrant students but does not allocate extra funding if schools choose to do so.

There should be a curriculum that suits migrant students' needs and cultural backgrounds. The Ministry of Education might have to step in to provide some guidelines for schools as to how to provide instruction for migrant students because, if left to their own decisions, schools might not have the knowledge and resources to do so. The curriculum should also facilitate mutual understanding between Thai students and migrant students.

Dropouts and Inability to Continue Education at Higher Levels

Dropping out is another serious problem in migrant education (ILO; 2008; Muangmee, 2005; Setthapanich, 2007; Vungsiriphisal, 2010). One of the major causes for dropouts is the constant moving and changing of workplaces of migrant parents. Another root cause of dropouts has to do with the families' financial problems. Although the Thai government subsidizes for tuition fees and provides textbooks and school uniforms as well as school lunch and milk, parents do still have to provide pocket money and other expenses that their children incur in order to send them to school. The transportation fee, for instance, is one such expense.

Most migrant families work for minimum daily wages. Incomes of the families depend on the number of income-earners. Many times children are required to work in order to add to that pool. According to the teachers, it is normal for migrant students to enroll in schools for a certain period of time and then quit. For some migrant parents, schools in Thailand are only places for their children to spend time while other family members are working. Some migrant parents see school as the place for their children to spend time before they are old enough to work. If there are other things that require manpower from the children to help out, such as taking care of other members of the family or doing some petty jobs, children are pulled out of school. As a non-government officer said in the interview, "I think 60 percent of migrant parents want their children to work, to earn money. That is their purpose of coming into Thailand" (Interviewed on 19 May 2011).

This, however, differs in the case of migrant parents who have stayed in Thailand long enough to see the benefits of education. A mother of two migrant children from Cambodia (interviewed on 2 March 2011), who has lived in Thailand for 15 years, said that there were times when she was so poor that she could barely afford to send the children to school. However, she was persistent and tried every possible way to keep her children in schools. "It will give them future," she said.

Another parent, a woman from Burma who has lived and worked in Thailand for almost 20 years, expressed a similar opinion about her son's education:

I want him to continue his study as high as possible, maybe up to the level that the government allows. I also want his younger brother to study in school but I am not sure if he is allowed to or not. I want my son to attend extra class in English because it would be useful in the future. (Mother of a migrant student—interview on June 24, 2011)

Nonetheless, these parents are the minority. Most of the parents still sacrifice their children's education for income earning. Schools also do not help much when migrant students drop out. According to the guidelines which apply to all children, schools have to send letters to parents when the children are absent for seven consecutive days without contact (MOE, 2009). However, for migrant children whose parents cannot read Thai, according to the interview, schools judge that such procedures are not applicable.

Furthermore, how far migrant children can continue their education in Thai public schools is still unknown to school personnel. According to the cabinet resolution and the Ministry of Education's rules and regulations, migrant children can continue their study in public schools to the level equivalent to twelfth grade. This includes vocational schools and specialized schools. However, this is also unknown to migrant parents and some education officers.

Owing to all the factors described above, it is not surprising that only a few of migrant children complete primary school and continue their studies in secondary school. Table 1 shows the number of migrant children from the three countries sending the most migrants, namely Burma, Cambodia and Laos, in all levels of education in the academic year 2011. As seen in Table 1, number of migrant students decreases as they proceed to higher levels of education. There are only 787 students enrolling in upper secondary school, compared to 38,293 of migrant students in primary school.

Table 1. Number of Students Segregated by Nationalities in 2011 Academic Year

	Burma	Cambodia	Laos	Total number of students from the three countries	Total number of students in Thailand (all nationalities)
Kinder-garten	11,543	1,953	915	14,411	1,009,426
Primary school	32,228	3,820	2,245	38,293	3,445,679
Lower secondary school	4,247	637	300	5,184	2,016,131
Upper Secondary School	536	170	81	787	1,082,567
Vocational school	11	0	1	12	4,163
Total	48,565	6,580	3,542	58,687	7,557,966

Source: Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC) (2011)

These numbers mean that even though migrant children can access public education, most of them are weeded out early, and only a scant number of them remain to proceed to higher education.

With such a low level of education, children of migrants can apply to only a limited number of jobs. When I asked what they wanted to be in the future, migrant students expressed their hopes of becoming policemen, soldiers, teachers, athletes, nurses and doctors. Some of them insisted that they wanted to continue their studies as long as possible. None of them said that they wanted to work in construction sites, work as a maid, or work on fishery boat or in a factory like their parents. Meanwhile, adults who support the education of children of migrants such as factory owners and officers in non-government organizations might be more realistic when they said that:

I always tell these children [children of migrants—author] that now that they go to school, in the future they might not have to work in labor-intensive jobs like their parents. They can work as clerks in our factory. They can become middle-range laborers or skilled laborers. I do not dream high. I only hope that if they have education they will know the law such as traffic law and can read signs so that traffic accidents or rule-breaking incidents would be decreased. (Factory owner in Pattani Province—interview on July 26, 2011)

For these adults, the reasons that they support education for children of migrants are for the children to be able to read and write, to be accustomed to Thai culture, and to know the laws of the Thai Kingdom so that the children can live in Thailand without causing social problems. The children, however, have different perspectives about their futures once they go to school. They aspire to have professional careers such as those described above. Their dreams might not be realized, though, as few children can work against all odds and finish high school, and even if they complete tertiary education, they might not be able to work in certain jobs which, by law, are reserved for those who have Thai nationality. Education might enable children of migrants to advance from low-level laborer to middle-range laborer. However, education is unlikely to lead most of the children of migrants out of their working-class status. “They have lived in Thailand for three generations, and they are still laborers for Thai people,” a non-government officer said in an interview (Interview on May 19, 2011).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The policy to provide education for migrant children in Thailand is a goodwill policy. However the policy itself is not known to migrant parents nor to the public at large. The government still takes a passive role in making the policy known to migrant parents for fear that it would upset the Thai people. If the government and education officers are sincere about the provision of education to children of migrants, the right to receive public education should be made

known to the public and migrant communities. Leaflets in languages that migrant parents can understand should be created and disseminated to inform them about their children's rights to education.

This paper shows that school rules, practices curriculum, and instruction do not facilitate the education of migrant students. School practices such as the admission requirement and the placement of migrant students do not consider the needs and circumstances of migrant students. The current practices ignore the developmental stages of migrant students by putting them in classes intended for young children. Such practices indirectly push older migrant students out of public schools due to the mismatch between their physical and psychological development and the subject content taught in classes. Their socio-economic status also hinders them from attending schools. Older migrant students who spend only a few years in schools and drop out do not have enough knowledge to get jobs.

Contrary to the principle of multicultural education which states that the curriculum should help students look at knowledge from different perspectives (Banks, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 2003), the curriculum and instruction of the schools aim at assimilating migrant students rather than recognizing their cultural identities. One of the goals of multicultural education is to help students understand diverse cultures (Banks, 1994). However, the study reveals that the current instruction does not facilitate mutual understanding between migrant students and Thai students. Instead of leaving the issues of curriculum and instruction up to the decision of each school, the Ministry of Education might have to provide policy guidelines concerning the curriculum and instruction appropriate for migrant students. As advocated by scholars who support multicultural education, bilingual education should also be provided for culturally diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2003).

Dropping out is another big problem for migrant students. Although the number of children of migrants who enroll in schools has increased, many of them do not continue their studies. Financial problems and constant moves are the predominant reasons. In addition, follow-up and support systems to help migrant students remain in schools do not exist. As a result, migrant students rarely finish basic education. Since the socioeconomic status of migrant students is significantly different from that of Thai students, the government might have to provide additional supports to help migrant students to remain in schools longer. Otherwise, children of migrants cannot exercise the right to education granted by their Thai government because of their socioeconomic limitations.

One of the basic principles of multicultural education is equality—equal access and equal chance to succeed in education (Banks, 1994; Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Children of migrants should be allowed to access not just public education but “quality” public education, just as Thai students do. The current education that children of migrants receive seems to be intended to teach them how to behave in Thai society rather than providing them rigorous academic training. This kind of education might enable them to work as mid-level laborers and get

better salaries than their parents. However, it is unlikely to lead them out of their working status.

Note

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