

Crossing Milesviewing The Milestones:A Reflexive Inquiry Into My Teaching Journey

Santosh Gautam

PhD Scholar (TU); Lecturer,
Nesfield International College

Abstract

As a teacher involved in this profession for a decade and half I have had to deal with miscellaneous students from diverse backgrounds and having common and distinct individual and community needs. Basically, the paper to reflect different facets of my experience as a teacher regarding the cultural positionality and needs of the students. This paper attempts to explore how I have perceived, experienced and adopted/resisted culturally responsive pedagogy as a teacher. Threads of inquiry related to this paper are research/lecture based pedagogy, cultural integrity/transformation, local needs/ national priorities, teacher education, mentoring, monitoring and evaluation, decontextualization of curriculum and dis/respect to the students of different cultures. and 'Unpacking some facets of my professional molding' and 'Turning the lens towards myself' are the units under this paper. It is an auto/ethnographic study.

Keywords: cultural competence, transition, social justice, comfort zone

Unpacking my Professional Being

As a professional continuously carrying out my teaching from Gulmi to Kathmandu I have got various plots of experiences while dealing with the students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Classes in Gulmi were also full of cultural diversity but the range of diversity was not so high. As I was in the preliminary phase of my teaching career I didn't possess required knowledge, skills, caliber and maturity required for the profession. I was growing as a teacher experiencing the profession and at the same time learning to deal with the students from various cultural backgrounds, with multiple intelligences and varieties of interests. Candidly speaking I too had some biases against the students of the minorities and my focus used to be

directed towards the majority. I should admit that I was unable to differentiate my instruction according to the requirement of the diversity existing in the class.

I didn't have consciousness about the resources existing among the students or about the knowledge and skills possessed by the students but I had wrong assumption and feeling that students are empty vessels to be filled with knowledge and this responsibility is to be shouldered by the teachers. Though I wished to deal equally with the students from diverse background the culturally inherited and deeply rooted consciousness about the hierarchy of castes and teacher centered pedagogical practices with no consideration over cultural diversity, learning needs and knowledge resources of the students was my one and only teaching approach. However, with the growing maturity and after gaining more and more experiences I slowly started feeling the need to adopt student centered teaching methods and a culturally responsive pedagogy for contributing to connect education with the life of students and to bring about a sustainable change in their families, community and the whole nation. I started turning the lens towards myself to critique my 'self' as a teacher and to minimize the biases I had as a Brahmin male born in middle class family and grown up in a semi urban area. I started sensing the diversity existing in the classrooms, in the staffroom and in the society. I started feeling the need to make amicable educational response to the different aspects and levels of cultural diversity.

Teach me/ Read me

Read me, I am a rich text
 Read her, she is a rich
 text
 Read yourself you are a
 rich text
 Remove your spectacles
 you will see the best

Teach 'me'. Content
 myself will learn
 Understand 'me'. Why
 blind eyes you turn
 Am not a lifeless idol
 nor your doll, plaything
 My culture, my
 situatedness reflecting
 my being



Basically, as a teacher in Kathmandu I have to deal with the students from multifarious cultural origins and experiences.

Sometimes I have had to come across some difficulties to understand the cultural background of the students, to understand their home environment and to facilitate them as per their learning needs so as to use the cultural capital of the students to enhance their overall development. I feel the need to expedite the holistic development of students by creating creative and congenial culturally responsive environment for their learning through intercultural and intracultural sharing. As a teacher of the 21st century I don't believe that teacher is the source or tank of knowledge having the responsibility to pour knowledge in the small in the small vessels of the students. There are various sources of knowledge for today's students and students themselves are one of them. Apart from having access to sources of knowledge through educational technology they also have their lived experiences enriching their knowledge and transforming them. I feel that if we ignore these important aspects of learning we scaffold the students in wrong way, in immature and incomplete way leading towards the failure of our pedagogical approaches.

Anecdote 1

One Size fits all?

A class in my school life! I am a high school student. Teacher enters the class with same cliché, "Good Morning class". He asks us to take out our books and copies and delivers his most frequently repeated dialogue, 'Pin drop silence, all of you sit straight'. Desks and benches are arranged in a row one after the another in a traditional setting. No student dares to open the mouth because of the fear of being punished or at least being embarrassed in front of all others. It is the Social Studies class and the topic is Unity in Diversity. He goes on saying 'Nepal is the home of the people of different religions, cultures and ethnicities.' Isn't it Hari? He asks the first student? Hari responds, "Yes sir, it is." He goes on explaining in a loud voice with sweat running down his forehead. He says, "Nepal is a" and pauses.

We complete the sentence saying multicultural country and it is the first sentence of the chapter which the teacher repeats more than ten times in the same class. Similarly he continues. "In Nepal there is...." We complete the sentence saying tolerance. The class goes on. Everyone can easily notice that the teacher is getting tired because of his enormous effort. At the end of the class he asks to the whole class, "Everyone is clear?" All of us speak in a single voice, "Yes sir." "Good!" responds the teacher and asks us to complete the exercise. No one utters a single word in the class except for giving some readymade responses like yes sir, ok sir and repeating some high frequency sentences. Finally the teacher leaves the class with a sense of pride thinking that he has been able to make all the students clear. He asks us to complete the exercise and reminds us that we will be punished if we fail to complete the exercise before he leaves the class.

The flashback of this class makes me ponder over various pedagogical issues pertinent at that time and equally relevant at present. I know that our societies were and are multicultural and schools and their classrooms reflect the societies. I wonder why in the chapter dealing with unity in diversity the teacher never bothered to address the cultural and ethnic diversity in the classroom. UNICEF (2010) states that without clear understanding of the various socio-economic and cultural characteristic of diverse learners, it is difficult to evolve strategies and develop plans at classroom, school and system level to teach children from diverse backgrounds (p, 10). There were enough cultural resources in the classroom and the students from diverse cultural backgrounds would share their lived experiences of their culture and would enrich the learning of all the students. The students would better understand each other and would be prepared for a harmonious coexistence. If the students were involved in some group works they would share their cultural knowledge among one another and would truly feel the meaning of unity in diversity. Culturally responsive pedagogical approach would be worthwhile in such context. Gay(2000) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant to and effective for them; it teaches to and through strengths of these students"(pp. 28-29). Gay further posits that, "It is culturally validating,

(Voltz, Sims, & Nelson, 2010). The teacher could not notice the differences among us. He didn't try to understand our sociocultural situatedness, didn't turn the lens towards his own and merely went ahead with his own attempt to fill our empty minds with the knowledge from his own huge tank. I now feel that he didn't think about modifying and adjusting his pedagogical practices to the differences existing among us.

I have come to realize that he realized vision, insight, planning and eagerness to understand multifarious differences and to shape their teaching accordingly. In other words I have come to understand that he couldn't go for student centered pedagogical approaches like differentiated instruction required for the enhancement of the enhancement of academic performance of all the students irrespective of their culture, religion, ethnicity and social status. According to Curriculum Development Centre (2005), our classroom teaching learning practices are generally teacher centered so that individual differences in terms of students' potentialities have not been cared well. Culturally responsive pedagogy would address his pedagogical deficiencies to some extent because it encourages teachers to see himself as well as the students and their culture as the texts to study and to accept students as the co creators of knowledge and always try to address the differences existing among them. "Teachers who differentiate instruction recognize that students differ in many ways, including prior knowledge and experiences, readiness, language, culture, learning preferences, and interests" (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education [MCUE], 2008). I now sense that the unidimensional nature of class adversely affects the possibilities of growth of students with multiple potentialities and multiple shortcomings.

Anecdote: 2

Group work: A Transition from One Way Traffic

It is a cold morning of January. After coming to school in the shivering morning even without having a cup of tea I enter the class. To my surprise Mr. Sitaula is already at one corner of the class sitting like a student. I don't entertain anyone in the classroom without my permission however this time I make up my mind to let him stay thinking that I will raise this issue in the staff meeting. I start the topic as usual without any sort of change because of

her presence. After a review of the previous day's chapter I ask the students, "Do you know what is dowry system?" One of them says, " Yes sir. It is the money or things given to daughters during marriage." Some others give different answers but with same idea. I continue the lesson with my explanation of the system and its sociocultural consequences and I also state that it is better to educate the girls and if we can make them capable that will be better dowry. In the same way the class continues for about 15 minutes. Though the class is basically controlled by myself the students are not passive in my class. All of a sudden Mr. Sitaula intervenes, " Sir, May I disturb you for a while?" Though I don't feel it so good in order to avoid any tension at the moment I say, "Sure sir!"

Then he asks all the students to out for a while and we two change the sitting arrangement in five minutes. We join two desks together and keep the benches at the two sides. Now the students are asked to come inside and are kept in four groups with six students in each group. We look for terai students but as they are only three they are divided into 3 different groups and while dividing groups we try to ensure that the groups are balanced from the point of view of gender, caste, intelligence etc. I am just supporting him. He is the major planner.

Now he writes four questions related to dowry system on the board, one for each group and asks them to discuss and find answers. They are so curiously engaged in sharing their views that I get amazed to see that even the ones who used to remain passive in the class share their lived experiences with full enthusiasm, eagerness and interest. Finally each group is asked to make presentation on their findings. Other groups are asked to comment. I feel, 'Oh Yes, it is the training for peaceful co existence, group work, mutual cooperation and united effort for the sake of accomplishing a mission.' I also see that even the students from marginalized communities are expressing themselves without any hesitation. I believe the readers can imagine the remaining part of the class.

After we come out of the class Mr. Sitaula calls Bhagat B.K. and Sunita Shilpakar from the class to his room and asks me also to sit. The room is also used for students counseling.

Mr. Sitaula starts the conversation, "Bhagat, how did you feel today?"

Bhagat responds, " Pardon sir!"

Mr. Sitaula asks with insistence, "I mean how was the class in the new sitting?"

Bhagat replies, "I enjoyed the class sir. We were allowed to talk with one another in the group. It was very interesting to share our experiences in the group."

Mr. Sitaula now asks Sunita, "What about you, Sunita?"

Sunita replied, " I learnt about peculiar dowry system from Anita Praja. I was amazed to know that they give chiuri tree as dowry. "

"Me too, sir. I got surprised and even shocked to know about the evil of dowry system in Terai region. Prashant Shah shared it in our group work." Spoke Bhagat

"Did you feel any difficulty in the class?" asked Mr. Sitaula. The students didn't say anything but I spoke, "The class was a little more noisy than the traditional class." Then Mr. Sitaula instantly responded, "We need to set certain rules and keep our strict vigil on them during their group work. We must remind them when we see them disturbing others. This way slowly they will be accustomed to accomplish their tasks without disturbing others." Then he explained further, "Such discussions help to remove the negative stereotypical images of the different castes deeply rooted in the society and in the minds of the students thereby the students get to understand each other closely."

Bhagat and Sunita are standing there and Mr. Sitaula asks both of them to go to the class. I too leave the room with some questions still hovering in my mind."Can I really involve them in meaningful discussion? What if the class goes out of control? What will be its effect in the learning achievement of each of the students? "Questions are many but from the class I have been convinced that group work help to develop the interpersonal skills of the students and provide opportunities for all the students to be actively involved in learning activities." I saw the students closely interacting with one another

and I feel that this can help to remove the misunderstandings existing among them about their cultures.

Prologue: Extending the story

Now my readers may think that I am going to start the interpretation of the data. However I believe in the blurring of the demarcation between data and analysis. Data itself is the initiation of analysis. Interpretation started from the beginning of the story and further interpretation will carry on the story or it will be the extension of the story. After the class I was guided by Mr. Sitaula to carry on my teaching in student friendly and culturally responsive way. He suggested different ways like presentation of students on different topics from the life world of the students and discussion among the students on those topics, to organize visits to different places and to interact with the people of different cultures with a view to understanding their ways of living, to assign different group projects to the students, to start the class with what the students know and to build on their knowledge. In the beginning I was supported by him in my classes and later I started carrying on the class independently. Now I feel that I was not doing justice to the students of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Turning the lens towards myself

My non/facilitation in the transition of students between cultures

My teaching journey started with my job as a grade teacher at a school in Gulmi. A novice teacher with chalk and duster in hands and with a passion to prove myself knowledgeable I had a concept that my duty was to fill the empty minds of students with the knowledge from my huge (?) knowledge tank without having much consideration towards the socio cultural background of the students. After passing some years in the teaching field I, nevertheless, started sensing that home environment and culture are deeply seated in the consciousness of students and within me. This awareness germinating in me slowly inspired me to try my best to address the learning needs of every individual student from diverse socio cultural upbringing. However I feel that I have been continuously struggling to make my teaching endeavors culturally responsive. Now I have come to realize that teaching is making the students realize their potentials, it is nurturing their interests and

is making them grow with what they have but many a time I question my own efforts sensing that most of the time I try to fit the same size for all. I involve the students in different group works in the class so that they get to know each other or can understand each other and get trained to live harmoniously cooperating with each other. I see them sharing with and supporting one another. I believe it trains the students from different cultures to have a harmonious coexistence, to get united for the common goals and to accomplish the common missions together. I have found that it has been enhancing the interpersonal skills of students thereby making them more capable and apt to express themselves with the people of other cultures and to accept others as they are. However owing to the lack of enough training I still feel some problems in unlearning the previously inculcated educational approaches.

These days I feel that I have some sort of realization about the need to see the students situated in their cultural environment. This realization has taught me to adopt some ways to facilitate the students in adjusting themselves in the school environment or to boost the morale of the ones who are from the deprived sections. Through turns in presentation and division of different responsibilities among the members of the group I try to promote democratic culture among the students and to ensure that each and every student including the ones from deprived and marginalized communities will also get ample opportunities to realize their individual and cultural potentials and to go ahead with the potentials. I believe that pair work, presentation and interaction among the students can help them to learn and grow inclusively. On the one hand I focus on maintaining the sanctity and integrity of their culture and on the other hand I try to help them to come to the mainstream culture and cope with its values, assumptions and practices. The parents are regularly invited to the school in different programs in which the teachers including me interact with the parents to know about the home culture and environment of the students and for counseling the parents about the school system, culture and about what they can do for the improvement of their children in education and behavior. In spite of the above mentioned efforts the pressure to complete the course, marks oriented mentality of the parents, the

school management's pressure to be within its rigid framework have compelled me to adhere to certain approaches.

Project works on cultural and life related topics: My mis/ handling

At this stage of teaching journey I have come to realize that the teacher and the students are the co creators of knowledge. Basically after my entry to Kathmandu University School of Education as a student my concept of teaching started changing. I assign the students with different individual, pair and group project works in which the students need to carry out mini researches on different topics of the life world. They are assigned and supported to dig out the given issues closely observing and interacting with the people of their communities. After the analysis they are asked to present and interact in the class and sometimes they are asked to present in the assembly as well. This, I have seen, develops the understanding of cultural diversity and the unity in that diversity. On the other hand the students are asked to share their own family life researches among others with a belief that it develops in them a sense of pride on their own culture and encourages them to maintain some level of cultural integrity along with academic progress and also that it helps them to be important part of their culture along with their academic growth. However I feel that I have not been able to do enough justice to support in the holistic development of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Un/fair treatment to the students of different cultures

I confess that owing to the culturally inculcated sense of prejudices against the people of other castes the spectacles I wear to see them are biased. Whatever efforts I make to come out of these prejudices I feel that it is an uphill task to come out of the cultural box. Except for my very close friends I try my best to ensure that discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, language, religion or ethnicity. I try to ensure my level best that everyone's learning needs have been addressed and the students from marginalized communities or minority groups have also got ample inputs and encouragement to keep pace with the students of the mainstream culture. I have experienced that the home visit program is conducted to be informed about the home culture and environment of the students, to get updated about

the expectations of the parents about the educational needs of their wards and the difficulties they are facing in school and at home and to make them aware of the bad cultural impacts that can adversely affect the education, personality, culture and life of the students. I have come to realize that the socio economic situation of the students' family and different problems the students are facing at home affect the outcomes of the pedagogical practices at the school. A student who has to work as domestic servant in someone's home and gets regular scolding and torture along with the imposition of heavy burdens of work is not likely to perform well at the school. Until the socio cultural problem is amicably addresses the students may not do well at their studies and until the stakeholders get well informed about such socio cultural situation such problems may not be well addressed to facilitate the learning of the students.

I personally support the socio culturally needy students in education by paying special attention to them, managing peer support for them. They are encouraged and motivated more in the class. They are given more focus and are inspired to be more active in the class, to ask questions, to give answers, to take part actively in group works, to debate, discuss, cooperate with the students of different backgrounds and to develop a critical perspective to view things. I have experienced that such work assists to boost up their morale and encourages them to keep pace with other students of the mainstream culture. As there is allocation of marks for different activities the students are found to be sincere and conscious in these activities.

However I feel that my/our support is not enough to make the students from lower social status to keep pace with the other students. I also feel that our deep seated prejudiced views against them have not allowed us to support them in their academic growth to the required extent. I feel that discrimination prevails at higher or lower degree in spite of our claims of fair treatment. This has also been bolstered by the fact that some of the student participants from marginalized cultures were not ready to accept the fact that there is no discrimination. They claim that discrimination is widely prevailing in our education system. I too feel that deliberately I don't discriminate and try to treat the students of every culture equally but I cannot

deny the fact that my cultural schooling and my upbringing unknowingly affect my attitude and views towards them.

Lack of/Concern towards social justice and cultural competence

In the beginning of my teaching career I took text books as the only sources of knowledge and skills to be given to the students. I neither had knowledge about the importance and use of curriculum nor did I know about modifying the curriculum and use it according to the socioeconomic and political needs of the different sections of the society. Even after having a long experience in the teaching field I still don't feel that my teaching is doing enough justice regarding the promotion of critical aptitude of the students making them realize the ideology and power play behind their socioeconomic status in the society and in making them ready for change.

Though I have not felt the need to entirely modify the curriculum to challenge the ideology behind it or to revolutionize the deprived section of the society, I have made some changes when deemed necessary to contextualize the curriculum. In the class each and every student gets equal opportunity and care for academic progress and personality development irrespective of the social standing, level or cultural background of the students. I have come to understand that through such efforts students from poor families can be encouraged and supported to redefine their social status, to come out of the status quo and to keep pace with the higher class students. I have been trying not to limit it within the content of the book or the national curriculum but being based on the given curriculum I try to teach and encourage them to be critical of the existing social and cultural traditions and to critique the ideology behind them. For example I have encouraged them to separate the threads of social evils like child labor, superstitious healing methods, dowry system and some national and social entities and practices like marriage, caste system, governance system, budget system, and family life. I inspire them not to accept anything happening or existing in our society at its face value but to critically see it though I have come to realize that they can do it according to the caliber they possess at their level. I have tried to come out of the traditional box of teaching so as to limit my role just to a facilitator in order to encourage the students to take initiatives in learning

process with a belief that learning; deep reflection and leaping into action can contribute towards social change by challenging the vices of the society and by exposing the forces and ideologies that directly and indirectly maintain the status quo. Through such pedagogical experiences I have come to understand that culturally responsive pedagogy is a revolutionary twist of teaching learning activities that focuses on the need of culturally diverse students and to facilitate their transition to the mainstream culture for academic and professional progress while maintaining a level of cultural integrity.

On the other hand we realize that after the students become ready as workforce they may have to work in such social and cultural environment which may be entirely different from that of the place they were born, brought up and educated. The students from different religions including Hindus, Buddhists, Christians etc. except for Muslims have been admitted in the school and they belong to different ethnicities. I have observed that being parts of the school community comprising of the members from diverse socio cultural backgrounds they intermingle with one another, work with each other and maintain unity amidst diversity. At the same time I have found that they learn to maintain their cultural identity and integrity while being important part of the multicultural society. I have also felt that One act Plays, Cultural Visits, Cultural Performances etc. organized by the school and directed and facilitated by us have provided the students with diverse cultural experiences

My class and cultural situatedness: Dis/empowering me

I have been involved in teaching for a long period of time. I accept that my concepts, approaches, perspectives and dispositions are more or less affected by my upbringing in a middle class Brahmin family. For me these things influence our attitudes, views, perceptions and interpretations of different issues. I feel that my ethnic orientation makes me see certain castes or cultures in certain ways. Also my economic standing or my lived experiences of fair weathers and adversities have some influences in the way I view and take people and issues. I accept the existence of some unnoticed biases in my dealing with the students in spite of my attempts of fair dealings. I also accept that my situatedness may have some effects on how I see, take and

deal with the people and issues related to class. I feel that a teacher's delivery is more or less, in one way or the other affected by his/her cultural identity.

My approaches guided by the expectations of schools and parents

Throughout my teaching journey in private schools so far I have felt that the parents and the school administration expect results in high figures, they want the completion of course according to the national curriculum and focus on order, discipline and regularity. In whatever way one tries to address the learning needs of students of different cultures schools and parents, in general, take scores to be judging parameters for the achievements of students though their sociability, critical aptitude, analytical capacity, attitude etc. can have crucial roles in their lives. This leads towards exam centered score focused teaching learning activities giving less importance to or focus on learning requirement of the students. I feel that at present too we have accepted and tried to apply many approaches of culturally responsive pedagogy, however, I feel that marks focused teaching culture is still dominant. This is probably because the society too still judges the educational achievements in terms of exam scores.

Lack of mentoring, monitoring and evaluation of the work on culturally responsive pedagogy

Though I have been suggested by the private school authorities to follow certain codes of conduct and to teach in such a way that the students get high scores in the exams I have not been mentored on culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. I also don't remember being asked to address the diversity existing in the class. Moreover I have not been trained on the approaches of culturally responsive pedagogy. Whatever I have learnt about differentiating the contents or methods it is through my personal studies or through broader educational discourses. These days I feel the need of productive trainings to enhance my skills of facilitating the academic growth of multicultural students simultaneously and also helping them to have a pride on their own culture. I also sense that lack of monitoring and evaluation about culturally responsive approaches may also make teachers insensitive towards making their teaching culturally responsive.

My schooling and comfort zone affecting my teaching

Before I joined Kathmandu University I seldom considered seriously about using students' knowledge, experiences, skills and culture as the resources of the class. Fear of teachers and parents was the dominant motivating factor. Memorizing skill was the most appreciated skill. Owing to my schooling and initial teaching in traditional methods it has been difficult for me to adopt culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. I feel that my basic orientation was towards traditional methods, however, I realized the need to adopt culturally responsive/critical pedagogical approaches. I have experienced that coming out of the comfort zone is a difficult work in spite of the realization to change.

Prologue

I imagine how I would write it if I had to write in my childhood with less developed analytical capacity about the caste system or if I were a scholar from different caste. Now I am a teacher casting a critical view on the policies of culturally responsive pedagogy from the school level to the national level and reflecting on my own experiences as student and teacher. How would it go ahead if I were a principal or a Dalit teacher or an officer in the ministry of education? How would I see the pedagogical practices if I was from the field other than teaching or if I was a Dalit female teacher? There are many other sectors not touched upon because as envisaged by the critical theorists our perception of reality is affected by time and space constraints. Similarly I have an insider cum outsider positionality in the process of observation and analysis. I am an observer and the observed or the researcher and the researched at the same time. How would the research go ahead if I assumed a single role?

Similarly the monological methods and decontextualized education I experienced as a student and reflection of my student life make me ponder over my teaching self nurtured and brought up in the same context. It energizes me to come out of the hegemonic singularity of vision, approaches and practices. From such events I constantly remind myself of the plurality and the contextuality of the classroom and makes me aware of the disempowering pedagogies that can nip the possibilities and potentialities of

academic progress of the students of diverse backgrounds in bud. The flashback of the event at this point of time makes me see the lack of culturally contextualized, learner friendly and inclusive approaches though there may be multifarious ways to address the diversity. It was through implementing a constructivist educational philosophy, where knowledge is a construction built through learners' experiences that most culturally responsive action was able to occur in the teachers' classrooms (Villegas and Lucas, 2002).

Recapitulating

In this paper I have presented what I myself as a teacher do to address cultural diversity among the students. I have articulated my attempts to facilitate the students between cultures. Project works in cultural and life related topics, life skill based teaching, providing equal opportunities to all the students including the ones from marginalized communities, our support to the students from poverty stricken families, adoption of critical pedagogy for social justice and cultural competence are some traces of my pedagogical approaches. I realize that my efforts are still to be strengthened to make them more responsive to cultural diversity in the class but I strongly feel the importance of such kinds of pedagogical practices. Revisiting my school life and past teaching I have unpacked my lived experiences through different episodes some depicting traditional teacher centered approaches and some throwing light on the initiation of shift towards more student centered and culturally responsive approaches.

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