PLURALITY, NARRATIVES, AND POLITICS:

WHAT HANNAH ARENDT CAN OFFER CRITICAL LITERACY THEORY

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Abstract

In recent years, scholars, journalists, and citizens have turned to Hannah Arendt's writings to make sense of human plurality and resist right-wing nationalist movements around the globe. This article discusses feminist readings of Arendt's ideas of plurality, narratives, and politics and describes how these ideas can help critical literacy theory focus on both social groups and unique persons. For Arendt, the human world is a world of plurality because it includes not only diverse social groups, but also human selves living unique versions of group lives. This latter kind of plurality is difficult to see in some approaches to critical literacy. Arendt argues the plurality of unique persons becomes visible when people tell life narratives in particular ways. Given this view of plurality and narratives, the political question of who counts as members of a public is, in part, a question of whose stories are told. Arendt insists this question is not only a matter of a person telling her own story; it is also a matter of a person hearing her story told by others. These arguments can add new dimensions to critical literacy's view of diversity and the politics of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and listening.

Keywords: critical literacy; Arendt; plurality; narrative; politics

For almost 50 years, educators have grouped politically engaged forms of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and listening under the heading *critical literacy* (see, e.g., Freire, 1970/2007; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Lee, 2009, 2015; Mira, 2018; Morrell, 2007; Pandya & Avila, 2013; Pari & Shor, 1999). Critical literacy focuses especially, but not exclusively, on the ways people use texts to challenge relations of power among social groups, including groups organized around race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. From this perspective, however, it is difficult to account for human selves without (a) equating a self with its groups or (b) construing selves as mere effects of discourse, desire, or other forces. We steer a course around these two alternatives by rethinking critical literacy with Arendt's theories of plurality, narratives, and politics. Although these three concepts are discussed in critical literacy, Arendt's distinct take on plurality, narratives, and politics can open new possibilities for critical literacy and contribute to efforts to "move critical literacy forward" (Pandya & Avila, 2013, p. 1; see also Lee, 2009, 2015; Mira, 2018) by highlighting aspects of literacy, power, and sociality that often go unexamined by literacy researchers.

Below, we describe how, for Arendt (1958/1959), the human world is a world of plurality, i.e., a world in which all humans are the same because all humans are different (p. 10). Specifically, Arendt observes how the human world includes not only diverse social groups, but also human selves living unique versions of group lives. This latter kind of plurality is difficult to see in popular approaches to critical literacy. Arendt argues the plurality of unique persons becomes visible when people tell life narratives in particular ways. Given this view of plurality and narratives, we explain below, the political question of who counts as members of a public is, in part, a question of whose stories are told. Arendt insists this question is not only a matter of a person telling her own story; it is also a matter of a person hearing her story told by others. These arguments, we write, add new dimensions to critical literacy's view of diversity and the politics of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and listening.

In this conceptual article, we answer the following questions:

1. What is critical literacy and what are some of its limits?

2. What are Arendt's theories of plurality, narratives, and politics?

3. How can Arendt's theories strengthen critical literacy?

4. Using Arendt's ideas in critical literacy, what new things can people do with texts?

By answering these questions, we do not seek to throw out all other ways of defining critical literacy. Critical literacy is too open and diverse a field to ground fully in one set of theories. We seek only to introduce into critical literacy some potentially useful ways of viewing plurality, narratives, and politics.

Before we begin, a caveat is in order. We read Arendt through readings of her work made by feminist theorists including Cavarero (2004), Benhabib (1996, 2018), and Butler (2018). We focus mostly on those of Arendt's ideas important to feminist theory. Therefore, our contribution to critical literacy, shaped as it by feminist readings of Arendt, looks different from potential contributions that use Arendt's ideas on their own. We neither attempt nor wish to take up all of Arendt's arguments, which include questionable ideas about the nature of evil (Arendt, 1963) and the possibility and desirability of keeping younger students out of politics (Arendt, 1959). Despite these difficulties, feminist theorists show Arendt offers several useful ideas about plurality, narratives, and politics.

CRITICAL LITERACY

Critical literacy is not a strictly defined discipline, but an open and evolving field in which people use texts to explore and intervene in politics, broadly defined. The ideas and practices of critical literacy, writes Morrell (2008), come from diverse lineages, including: Platonic philosophy, which questions the world of appearances; the Reformation and the Enlightenment, which challenged elite control of the word and the world; Marxism; Freirean pedagogy; feminism; poststructuralism; and postcolonialism. Adapting these traditions' ideas and practices, people use texts to disrupt the commonplace, interrogate multiple viewpoints, foreground sociopolitical questions, and take action to promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002).

Of all the different strands of critical literacy, Freire's work has been particularly influential in the field. Freire sees literacies as

social practices that play out in social contexts (see Freire & Macedo, 1987). That is, Freire denies literacy is simply a matter of individuals acquiring technical skills of reading and writing. Rather, Freire argues, specific practices of literacy shape and are shaped by relations of power among socially constituted actors, such as oppressors and oppressed, bosses and workers, and teachers and students. Through literacy practices, including practices of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and listening, people ratify, acquiesce to, or challenge social relations, whether or not they are conscious of doing so. For example, in a banking model of literacy, the teacher affirms her power over students by assuming students are empty vessels to be filled with the one correct way of reading (Freire, 1970/2007, p. 72). In a more liberatory model of literacy, in contrast, students and teachers rewrite the world to change group relations (e.g., by assuming students and teachers are partners in learning) and to regroup themselves (e.g., by rejecting names such as *underclass* and adopting names such as *revolutionary working class*). Thus, Freire's influential sociopolitical account of literacy emphasizes the importance of group relations in reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and listening.

Over the past three decades, several feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theorists have broken open common binaries (e.g., oppressor-oppressed and boss-worker) to show how people use literacy to assume and remake multivalent (i.e., non-binary) social relations (see, e.g., Blackburn, Clark, & Martino, 2017; Brooks & Cueto, 2018; Richardson, 2013). For example, when a person writes a letter, she may use a non-dominant discourse of femininity occluded in a simple male-female theory of gender relations. That is, the writer may write in a way that is recognized as feminine by women belonging to a specific group (e.g., high-powered women physicians), but her way of writing in her group's specific style may not register as feminine in a binary that assumes all women write in one way and all men write in another way. Moreover, given the intersectionality of social forces (see Brochin, 2018), a person's performance of a non-dominant discourse of femininity may differ from performances of the same discourse made by people of different races, classes, regions, and sexual orientations. Notably, although many feminist, poststructuralist,

and postcolonial theorists break with binary thinking, some still focus on the constitution of people as members of social groups. Below, we contrast this group-focused view with Arendt's view of people as both members of groups *and* as unique selves.

Lather (1991) warns researchers against overemphasizing social categories—even non-binary categories—lest researchers let those categories occlude the flux and flow of social life. Rather than accenting the agentive function of group or individual identities, posthumanist writers emphasize the reductive and destructive potential within the act of recognizing living beings as fixed and "sovereign subject[s]" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 81). These writers stress, with Butler (2004), the performativity of subject identities—not subjects asserting their will to act on the world but rather the worldly assemblage of intensities of all sorts—discursive, material, cultural, natural—out of which human subjects emerge. Thus, posthumanist literacy theorists such as Ehret and D'Amico (2019) and Mazzei (2016) make arguments for detaching stories and voice from the human subject in order for readers to be affected or *moved* by the materiality of text.

Ehret and D'Amico (2019), for example, while relaying the writings of a 12-year-old girl who had survived imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, resisted reducing her experience into an object of their analysis as literacy researchers:

> We wrote instead in a subject-subject-subject (…) relationship desiring to express what moves in the process of writing about writing with each other…how [our] writing moves through [the girl's] stories [as] part of our own struggle to live while remembering our fragility, our own limitations as always posthuman beings. (p. 166)

Similarly, Mazzei (2016) cautions literacy researchers against objectifying human subjectivity. From a posthuman ontology, she argues, "the voices of participants cannot be thought as emanating from an essentialist subject nor…separated from the enactment in which they are produced, an enactment among researcher-data-

participants-theory-analysis" (Mazzei, 2016, p. 732). Elaborating on this ontological shift, she explains the posthuman being is

> …an assemblage, an entanglement, a knot of forces and intensities that operate on a plane of immanence and that produce a voice that does not emanate from a singular subject but is produced, as noted above, in an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis. (Mazzei, 2016, 733)

Again, Ehret and Leander (2019) take up the posthumanist task of "eschewing the epistemological subject who is somehow separate from experience" (p. 9) when they ask:

> How can we know the ways in which literacy affects our becoming different without making appeals to the a priori identities and unitary structures upon which postmodern representational logic rests? How can we live in and express experiences of literacy that feel like *some*thing without making those moments into some*thing*? (emphases in original; p. 9)

Our purpose is not to try to undo the promising work of affect theorists or posthumanist writers. Rather, we ask: What about plural human selves? If at least one chief aim of literacy studies is to hear the voices of diverse human beings, how can researchers and educators address unique persons without essentializing and reifying identities (see Ahmed's (2007) ways of posing and answering similar questions about racial identities)? Clearly, human selves *matter*. Literacy scholars must navigate between opposing and seemingly irreconcilable needs: To hear the voices of unique persons and to resist reductive representation. For us, Arendt provides one way around this impasse.

ARENDT

BACKGROUND

Over the past several years, people around the world have turned to Arendt's writings to try to understand the rise of right-wing nationalist movements in Hungary, Germany, Brazil, Turkey, the USA, the UK, and beyond (see Stonebridge, 2019). Having fled the Nazis and lived years of her life as a refugee, Arendt experienced firsthand the dangers of right-wing movements and analyzed these dangers in

widely read books including *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). Across her writings, Arendt focused on the fact of human plurality and investigated people's efforts, through political action, to try to make plurality work or to try to eradicate it.

PLURALITY

In her political writing, Arendt takes plurality as her point of departure (on the importance of plurality in Arendt's work, see Benhabib, 1996, 2018; Butler, 2018). "Plurality," she writes, "is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Arendt, 1958/1959, p. 10). Crucially, Arendt argues human plurality is a matter not only of *whats*, i.e., types or groups of people (e.g., all humans, the working class, or women), but also of *whos*, i.e., unique people living as *whats* in ways that are not identical to other lives in the past, present, or future. On this view, *whats* and *whos* are bound together: Social groups are made up of unique human beings who regenerate groups and, conversely, each human being is unique because she lives new versions of group lives.

Consider, for example, Woodson's (2014) popular young adult memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming*. In this book, Woodson uses poems, photographs, and family trees to tell her story of growing up as an African American girl. In Arendt's terms, Woodson tells the unique story of her life (*who*) as an African American girl (*what*) and remakes the categories African American and girl (*whats*) by telling her story (*who*). Thus, *Brown Girl Dreaming* is not only a unique story of one life nor only an illustration of groups' ways of being in the world; it is both at the same time.

To see *whats* but not *whos* is to miss much of the plurality of human life. This mistake, Arendt writes, is typical of mainstream Western philosophy and social science. These intellectual streams run through critical literacy, bringing into the latter a tendency to focus on *whats* more than *whos*. From Plato to Locke to Marx, writes Arendt (1958/1959), much Western thought hits a limit at

the well-known philosophic impossibility to arrive at a definition of man [*sic*], all definitions being determinations or interpretations of *what* man is, of qualities, therefore, which he could possibly share with other living beings, whereas his specific difference would be found in a determination of what kind of a *who* he is. (emphases in original, p. 161)

On a reading of *Brown Girl Dreaming* that focuses on *whats* to the exclusion of *whos*, one can only see details that can be read as typical of the lives of all humans, children, African-Americans, or girls. The details that make Woodson Woodson, and not just a representative of social groups, fall out of the frame.

The opposite mistake, seeing *whos* but not *whats*, is also common in Western thought. Arendt (1958/1959) rejects individualistic views that assume each person is born with a core essence that is later cultivated or suppressed by social groups. Thus, Arendt would reject the idea that *Brown Girl Dreaming* is a story of an individual trying to express her core essence through the social categories *African American* and *girl*. On an Arendtian view, *who* Woodson is emerges through her life history, her unique ways of living her *whats*. That is, Woodson's unique self emerges as a story of the particular ways she adapts her groups' ideas and practices to negotiate the forces of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation that work through her and her environment. Cavarero (2004) writes that if one's self, one's *who*, is a kind of design, then "[T]he design is what that life, without ever being able to predict or even imagine it, leaves behind" (p. 1). A self is thus a work in progress.

We argue below that despite its emphasis on diversity, critical literacy has trouble registering diverse *whos-as-whats*. By failing to account for plural *whos-as-whats*, critical literacy undercuts its politics of inclusion. This problem in critical literacy is, in part, a problem of understanding narratives.

NARRATIVES

Arendt (1958/1959) argues that because *who* a person is emerges over time, accounts of a life require narratives, whether linear, cyclical, or otherwise. Thus, writes Cavarero (1997/2000) in response to

Arendt, the human self is a "narratable self" (p. 109). To ask, "Who is she?" is to ask for a story. Crucially, Cavarero writes of a narrat-*able* self, not a narrat-*ed* self because the latter term implies a life story can be told conclusively. However, because people can initiate new actions with unforeseen outcomes—a capacity Arendt (1958/1959) calls human "natality" (p. 10-11)—human lives should be seen as narratable, that is, full of events in the past, present, and future which people may or may not draw into ongoing stories of who they are becoming. Thus, the narrative—really, the set of narratives—Woodson presents in *Brown Girl Dreaming* is not *the* story of her life, but a provisional story that will change as Woodson experiences more of life and reimagines her past in light of new experiences. To say Woodson's life or any life is narrated, or readable within the bounds of one coherent story, is to miss the twists and turns of a life that do not fit an established narrative frame.

Throughout a person's life and even before she can speak, others tell stories about her, about the unique *who-as-what* she is becoming. For instance, the narrative of *Brown Girl Dreaming* includes stories others told Woodson about her early childhood. Given their early and ongoing exposure to others' stories, humans come to desire hearing their stories told by others. Here, Arendt (1958/1959) notes the ancient Greek term for a flourishing life, *eudaimonia*, "means literally something like well-being of the *daimon* [daemon] who accompanies each man throughout life, who is his distinct identity, but appears and is visible only to others" (p. 172). Thus, for the ancient Greeks and Arendt, to know what kind of life one is leading—what kind of *who-as-what* one is becoming—requires listening to others tell the story of one's life. Illustrating Arendt's point through a discussion of Oedipus' story of self-discovery, Cavarero (1997/2000) writes,

> [W]hat Man is, is said by a definitory knowledge of philosophical assonance—who Oedipus is, is said by the narration of his story. To complete the thesis, however, we must add a qualification: it is *others* who tell *his* story.

> Indeed, for Oedipus, *who* he is, is the result of the life-story that others tell him. This is a polyphonic tale, as it comes from the narrative fragments that Iocasta, the pastor, and the messenger

from Corinth recite on stage in a dramatic assembly. (emphases
in original, p. 12)

At the heart of the narratable self, then, are relationships or desires for
relationships to others who can tell one's story.

Arendt's theory of narrative differs from, but does not necessarily
contradict, theories of narrative popular in education studies (e.g.,
Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Gomez, Walker, & Page, 2000; Rossiter
& Clark, 2010). The latter theories emphasize how people construct
their lives and others' lives through storytelling. People take up stories
from their groups' repertoires and adapt those stories to organize
human experience. Arendt does not deny how people attempt to
construe and organize lives with stories. Rather, she focuses on a
different aspect of storytelling, namely, the necessity of storytelling—
and especially others' telling of one's story—for working out who one
uniquely is, how one is becoming a unique *who-as-what*.

Below, we argue that although critical literacy addresses
storytelling, it misses some of the ways storytelling drives the co-
creation of subjects. Therefore, critical literacy does not see some
important dynamics in people's efforts to build lives in common. In
short, critical literacy misses an important dimension of politics.

POLITICS

Arendt (1958/1959) sees politics as a scene in which people co-
create *who* and *what* they are in the public life they share. Because the
question, "Who is she?" elicits a narrative, politics crucially involves
people telling stories about themselves and others, exposing to public
view *who* and *what* they are becoming. Thus, for Arendt, storytelling
does not belong to a realm of culture separate from a realm of politics.
Rather, in an important sense, storytelling *is* politics.

Arendt's account of politics raises the question, *How should people
create conditions to enable the public telling of certain kinds of stories
and the public living of certain kinds of lives?* In a world of limited
resources and plural forms of life, people cannot create conditions for
narrating and living all lives in public. Arendt, for example, worked
to create public spaces where the telling and living of fascist lives
would be strongly contested (because, among other reasons, fascism

opposes plurality as such). Politics, then, involves people deciding which stories and lives should be made public (i.e., brought to public attention and given public support) and which stories and lives should be made private (i.e., deprived of public attention and support; see Arendt, 1958/1959, p. 35; see also Fraser, 1990).

Using Arendt's lens, one can see the politics of public libraries' and public schools' decisions to promote some books and not others. For public libraries and public schools to promote *Brown Girl Dreaming*, for example, is to say the life of an African American girl is worth public concern and support. Or, in terms used by writers and teachers of children's literature, to promote *Brown Girl Dreaming* is to say a public should include people who might see themselves "mirrored" in *Brown Girl Dreaming* (e.g., women and girls of color) as well as people who can look through the "window" of the book and see a life of public note (see Sims Bishop, 1990; see also Gangi, 2008). Extending this argument in Arendt's direction, Myers (2014), an artist and author of children's books, argues books are not just mirrors and windows, but also "maps" of political geographies that show which stories and lives matter and where different stories and lives stand in relation to one another. Similar to maps, books show possibilities for where one might go (possibilities for living new kinds of narratable lives), versus routes one must travel (ways lives must be narrated). On Myers' account, then, it is important for public libraries and public schools to promote books like *Brown Girl Dreaming* to prompt young people to think, "These characters lived unique lives in different communities and we are reading and retelling their stories. Their lives and stories matter. I am living a unique life, as well, and the public sphere should make room for others to hear and tell my story."

Furthermore, Arendt's approach to narratives and politics offers distinct ways of critiquing texts. In a common form of critique, one (a) asks how a text represents social groups (*whats*) and (b) points out how the text's misrepresentations of social groups extend patterns of inequality. Here, the critic objects, "That's not what my/that group is really like!" Taking a more Arendtian tack, one asks how a text does or does not address or at least make room for one's own and others' unique stories as *whos-as-whats*. Here, the critic objects, "That's not

my story or the stories of other people I know! This text tries to shut down possibilities for telling our stories of who we are becoming!" As Kottman (2004) writes,

> [T]he pain of hate-speech comes not solely from *what* one is being called, but from the fact that one's singularity, a singularity that exceeds any 'what,' is utterly and violently ignored, excluded from these semantics. Put quite simply, it is the total disregard for *who* one is that makes hate-speech so painful. (emphases in original, p. xix-xx)

Notably, even anti-hate-speech, including texts produced through critical literacy, can disregard *who* people are, for instance by grouping people into monolithic categories of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (for more of this critique, see Ellsworth, 1989; Fobes & Kaufman, 2008; Neumann, 2013). In Arendtian textual criticism, then, the critic asks not only how a text construes *whats*, but also how a text does or does not address or makes room for plural stories of *whos-as-whats*.

CRITICAL LITERACY REVISED

An Arendtian revision of critical literacy does not require abandoning all of the field's established ideas and practices; it requires, instead, seeing new dimensions of language and politics and taking up new ways of working with narratives. Therefore, Arendtian critical literacy still involves students disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, foregrounding sociopolitical questions, and acting to promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). Through all of these actions, as students ask how texts construe and relate social groups—an established move in critical literacy—they also ask how texts open and close spaces for people to tell their stories and others' stories of becoming unique *whos-as-whats*, i.e., unique members of social groups. For example, when reading *Brown Girl Dreaming*, students can note Woodson's portrayal of diversity within the categories *African American* and *girl:* She shows how she and her sisters live different lives and became different people. In this way, Woodson opens the categories *African American* and *girl* to new and different ways of becoming. Taking an Arendtian

approach, then, students can see and expand forms of plurality difficult to register in traditional approaches to critical literacy. With broader views of human plurality, students can develop more expansive politics with more possibilities for narrating and living different kinds of lives.

A LESSON IN ARENDTIAN CRITICAL LITERACY

OVERVIEW

To teach Arendtian critical literacy would mean to teach forms of literacy in which students focus on *whos-as-whats*, tell each others' stories, go public with their stories, and ask how texts do or do not address or make room for plural stories of *whos-as-whats*. The following plan for a secondary school English class illustrates what one lesson in Arendtian critical literacy might look like.

I AM THIS AND NOT THAT: A CUT-UP POEM

1. Each student reviews newspapers, magazines, and political websites and identifies one text (e.g., an article, Op-Ed column, or letter to the editor) that (a) discusses at least one of their groups and (b) ignores or closes space for the telling of the student's story as a unique member of their groups. Call this text the *media text*. Put the media text aside until Step 6.

2. Each student interviews two people who are family members and/or old friends who have known the student for years. Each student asks their interviewees to tell one or two stories that reveal who the student is.

3. Each student transcribes their interviews.

4. Drawing from transcribed interviews, each student identifies 20 vivid words and short phrases that say something about who the student is. Each student writes each word or short phrase on a two-inch-by-two-inch square of paper.

5. Each student spreads her 20 squares of paper in front of her and plays refrigerator magnet poetry: She arranges and rearranges squares into an impressionistic poem that reveals something of who she is. When creating her poem, the student may add short

words (e.g., definite and indefinite articles) and make small adjustments to the words on her squares (e.g., she may change tenses of verbs).

6. On a sheet of paper with images important to the student (e.g., pictures of family members, their home, favorite places), each student makes two columns:

7. The first column features objectionable lines from the media text the student found in Step 1. These lines should communicate ideas refuted, even if indirectly, by the student's poem.

8. The second column features the student's poem

9. Students post their new texts (i.e., texts created in Step 6) on a wall in the school library or in a public library

10. At the library's student poetry night, before parents, friends, and community members, pairs of students read other students' texts. Trading lines:

11. The first student reads the first column, i.e., lines from the media text

12. The second student reads the poem

13. After students read their texts, the whole group discusses whose stories matter in the public lives they build together.

By working through this lesson in Arendtian critical literacy, students do not focus only on the *whats* they are. Instead, by asking others for stories about themselves, students focus on how they are becoming *whos-as-whats*, or unique people living as members of groups. As Arendt (1958/1959) argues, it is especially in hearing one's story from another that one sees who one is becoming as a social being. By rearranging others' words, students participate in the social process of forming themselves as people in the world. Also, through juxtaposing their poems with lines from objectionable texts circulated in the media, students critique media not only for misconstruing social groups, but also for narrowing possibilities for becoming unique *whos-as-whats*. Finally, by hearing others read their texts and by discussing

their texts with parents, friends, and community members, students can clarify their standing as valuable members of diverse publics.

LOOKING AHEAD

Although Arendt's ideas have recently been taken back up by philosophers (see, e.g., Benhabib, 2018; Butler, 2018) and journalists and everyday readers (see, e.g., Stonebridge, 2019), few critical scholars of literacy and education have explored her work. Beyond Arendt's theories of narratives and *whos* and *whats*, critical scholars of literacy and education might explore her argument that plurality is the condition of thinking and learning to think. Similar to Bakhtin, Arendt (1965, 1978) argues thought becomes impoverished or fails to get off the ground when people are limited or limit themselves to just one idea. Researchers might develop and complicate this argument by investigating diverse forms of literacy through which pluralistic thought becomes possible and teachable (see, e.g., Higgins, 2011). Critical scholars of literacy and education might also engage Arendt's (1943, 1951) writings on refugees to analyze and shape interventions in current refugee crises around the world. Questions about refugees, argues Arendt (1943, 1951), always raise questions about whose stories can be told and heard in which publics. These ideas, as well as many others in Arendt's work, might be developed, adapted, and challenged by critical scholars of literacy and education.

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