

Teacher/practitioner article

The capability approach: Enabling musical learning

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Introduction

Amartya Sen's capability approach offers a new perspective for educators throughout the curriculum. This new insight has the potential to promote a music education that is inherently tailored to the individual. In essence it asks the question: What is music education going to offer to this student? This article represents an initial enquiry into the capability approach when applied to music education. With a theoretical understanding of the capability approach its application can provide insight into pupil voice, teacher voice, growing student autonomy and differentiation.

In preparing for a teaching career trainee teachers in England are required to engage with the specialist provision for students with special educational needs (SEN), English as an additional language (EAL) and gifted and talented (G&T) students. Discussions on provision for students with particular needs centre on core curriculum subjects. Detailed insight into the impact of the particular needs of SEN, EAL and G&T students within music education is less readily available. In an attempt to address this, during my teacher training year I undertook a study into three students in a year 7 music class: a new arrival EAL student, a student with Asperger's syndrome, and a talented percussionist. The study was focused on providing for all three students simultaneously with an understanding of their needs in the context of their music education. Through research into their specific music education needs I was able to gather some information of interest but, with the exception of gifted and talented, support material specific to music education was limited. In addition, some weaknesses in my approach quickly became apparent. The three students' needs were being studied in isolation and the suggested provision for each remained separate; the purpose of the study was to understand them simultaneously. The research at this stage was couched in generalisations of each need, which in some cases clearly did not apply to the students in question. This method did not offer the personalised approach to music education that was needed. Dissatisfaction with the lack of material, isolated approach and generalisations forced me to look further afield and discover the capability approach.

The capability approach, originally developed within the field of welfare economics, was a new approach to measuring well-being. The capability approach has since been developed and applied in multiple fields including education, particularly in the context of SEN. It places students at the centre of their own education demanding a personalization of education for the individual. The capability approach addresses many issues central to education: pupil voice, teacher voice, growing student autonomy and differentiation. The capability approach has, until now, not been investigated within the context of music education. The approach has a great deal to offer in all areas of the curriculum and what follows here is a preliminary exploration of the capability approach as applied to music education.

I have given significant time to an explanation of the capability approach, as it is essential that a solid theoretical understanding of the approach is established. After discussing the varied interpretations of the capability approach there follows an assessment of how it can be, and has been, applied. These practical examples seek to supplement the theoretical explanations. Only at this stage, with a strong working understanding of the capability approach, is the issue of education and music education introduced. The capability approach becomes more complicated when the dimension of time is added. This requires a discussion of the conflict between present and future capabilities. From this springs the debate on student input and insight into their own capabilities. Finally the issue of equality of capabilities within education is addressed. Throughout this discussion I have tried to incorporate specific observations from my own teaching practice.

The capability approach

The capability approach was originally conceived by welfare economist Amartya Sen. It aimed to assess well-being from a new perspective. Sen asserts that social evaluations based on wealth or income are flawed and potentially misrepresent the reality of an individual's well-being (Robyens, 2003). For example, traditionally a higher percentage of individuals in employment equates to a better general quality of life. However, some individuals may deem their personal well-being to be greater when out of employment. By assuming that generic measures can be applied across populations the complexity of individual well-being is denied and information is potentially misconstrued.

Sen first explored the capability approach in his paper *Equality of What?* (Sen, 1979). He asserts that human diversity should not be treated as a complication, instead it is 'a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality' (cited in Robyens, 2003, p. 17). The capability approach assesses well-being by treating the individual as an end rather than an agent of a greater societal group (Nussbaum, 2000). Its basis in ethical individualism means 'that individuals, and only individuals, are the *ultimate* units of moral concern' (Robyens, 2008, p. 34).

The capability approach is based on two key concepts: (i) capabilities and (ii) functionings. The first concept addresses the range of options available to a person, the total set of possible actions from which one must choose (Klasen, 2010). When Sen (1993) refers to basic capabilities this denotes fundamental freedoms that are required to avoid poverty. Nussbaum (2000) explains that when dealing with adults the goal is to enable capabilities that offer choice and opportunities. Sen argues that there is no such thing as a bad capability (Saito, 2003). Given that capabilities are not actions themselves, but rather the freedom to act, a capability cannot in itself be bad. Many capabilities will remain hypothetical, never being realised by the person involved. It is this that separates capabilities from functionings.

Functionings are people's 'beings and doings'; they are the capabilities that come to fruition (Sen, 1992, p. 11). The distinction between capabilities and functionings is paramount: capabilities are the options available to a person, while functionings are the actions that they live out.

Social situations are often evaluated on the basis of functionings. By assessing functionings rather than capabilities the reality of the situation can easily be misconstrued or misrepresented. Two girls who fail a mathematics exam in doing so have the same

functioning. The difference between them lies in their capabilities: one is decidedly apathetic despite a broad capability set while the other is faced with adverse circumstances narrowing her capability set (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). A boxer has the capability to avoid physical harm but chooses the functioning of engaging in violent fights (Robyens, 2003). These examples illustrate that by prioritising an individual's functionings rather than their capabilities one fails to address their own life preferences (Nussbaum, 2000). The purpose and conception of the capability approach was to redress these inaccuracies; by assessing capabilities one can gain insight into the true level of well-being that a person experiences.

The capability approach is fundamentally concerned with the individual and rejects generalised assessments of well-being. The approach is centred around capabilities, the options available to the individual, and functionings, the actions that are ultimately realized. Traditional measures of well-being have focused on functionings. The capability approach is concerned with measuring well-being on the basis of capabilities.

Different interpretations of the capability approach

Upon introducing the concept Sen stated that it deserved 'a good deal more attention than it has received' (Sen, 1979, p. 197). Martha Nussbaum has adopted and modified the approach. Although Sen and Nussbaum are both advocates of the capability approach they do differ in their understanding of its details. The main discrepancy between the two arises in their methods of selecting the relevant capabilities to assess. Nussbaum (2000) established a list of central human functional capabilities that are constant and universally applicable.¹ Sen, however, deliberately left the approach incomplete in this regard, arguing that discussion and collaboration are crucial when establishing a list of capabilities (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Capabilities chosen on the basis of Sen's interpretation would vary depending on the context in which they are understood.

The concept of thresholds within the capability approach also divides Sen and Nussbaum. Sen's capability approach focuses on capability equality and is therefore not concerned with thresholds (Robyens, 2003). However, Nussbaum (2000) believes the priority is to ensure that all citizens are above a certain threshold. She argues that the implementation of full capability equality can be deferred as this initial shared threshold level is yet to be realised (Nussbaum 2000).

Both Sen and Nussbaum's interpretation of capabilities and functionings grant a degree of flexibility. The capability approach offers a way of thinking and structuring thoughts in order to address normative issues (Robyens, 2003). Although Sen has focused on the capability approach when applied in developing countries he stresses the 'plurality of purposes for which the capability approach can have relevance' (Sen, 1993, p. 49).

Sen and Nussbaum have developed the capability approach in different directions. Nussbaum introduced a list of central human functional capabilities that can be applied universally while Sen maintained that the list of capabilities must be established within a

¹Nussbaum's list of central human functional capabilities: Life; Bodily health; Bodily integrity; Senses, Imagination, and Thought; Emotions; Practical reason; Affiliation; Other species; Play; Control over one's environment.

given context. Sen asserts that the goal is capability equality while Nussbaum sets a more achievable target by establishing the concept of capability thresholds that all people should achieve.

Evaluative and prospective application of the capability approach

There are two different types of application of the capability approach: evaluative and prospective (Alkire, 2008). Alkire explains that the approach is often used in an evaluative form, assessing which capabilities exist and why (2008). Robyens' (2003) assertion that inequality can be assessed and noted without knowing how to redress these issues demonstrates the evaluative tendency of the capability approach. Alkire (2008) argues that the prospective application offering recommendations to expand capabilities is less well managed. She acknowledges that the evaluative form of the capability approach may lead to recommendations, while maintaining that it remains fundamentally different to a prospective application (Alkire, 2008). Consequently, Alkire (2008) questions whether the capability approach does provide methods for practically tackling the inequality in capabilities that it may help to identify.

The flexibility of the capability approach can be deemed problematic when attempting to apply it to a particular case. In Sen's interpretation of the approach the researcher is responsible for establishing a list of relevant capabilities. Irrespective of the researcher's intentions there is great scope for overemphasis or neglect of certain issues within a study (Alkire, 2008). The approach as an evaluative exercise is susceptible to the biases of the researcher (Robyens, 2003).

In response to the potential inconsistencies of the capability approach there have been calls for a more concrete interpretation. Lelli's (2008) attempt to operationalise the capability approach resulted in the conversion of the simple concepts that underpin it into a series of complex formulae applicable in economic analysis. Nussbaum's (2000) list of central human functional capabilities lack the detail to address specific applications of the capability approach in new contexts. It appears unavoidable that the approach must remain flexible in order to address the pertinent issues within a particular case.

The capability approach is most easily understood in its evaluative form allowing detailed assessment of a situation. However, the move to a prospective application providing recommendations is more challenging. In both forms the capability approach is susceptible to the biases of the researcher as a consequence of its flexibility. Frustration with such flexibility and evaluative tendencies has led some to attempt operationalisation of the approach. Ultimately the strength of the capability approach lies in its flexibility, but with this flexibility come pitfalls that must be avoided.

The capability approach in action

Papadopoulos and Tsakoglou (2008) led an investigation into social exclusion in the EU based on the capability approach. The investigation uses data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) and the population of 13 European countries is the subject of enquiry. The authors' assertion that 'the unit of analysis is the individual' is

in keeping with the ethos of the capability approach (Papadopoulos & Tsakloglou, 2008, pp. 246–7). However, given that the data were collected at a household level and their analysis often addresses the ‘reference person’ it is clear that each individual does not represent themselves (Papadopoulos & Tsakloglou, 2008, p. 256). Despite their intention to assess data on an individual basis, this study falls short of the principles of ethical individualism that are vital to the capability approach.

When addressing the details of their study regarding social exclusion Papadopoulos and Tsakloglou (2008) describe the problem of identifying a list of important functionings. This focuses their study on functionings rather than capabilities; precisely what the capability approach attempts to avoid (Robyens, 2003). This problem is compounded by the fact that ECHP data is generally concerned with functionings rather than capabilities (Papadopoulos & Tsakloglou, 2008). The authors appear to simultaneously acknowledge and dismiss this limitation: ‘using the information of the ECHP we cannot be sure whether the individual chose to be in this state (unlikely but not impossible) or not’ (Papadopoulos & Tsakloglou, 2008, p. 252).

In their sacrifice of true ethical individualism and capability centred assessment Papadopoulos and Tsakloglou (2008) appear to show little regard for the capability approach as understood by Sen or Nussbaum. The study is a rather distant variant of the capability approach, significantly altered by the desire for an ‘operationalisation’ of Sen’s work (Papadopoulos & Tsakloglou, 2008).

Applying the capability approach in education and music education

Having explored the theoretical underpinnings of the capability approach, identified different interpretations of the approach and considered the practicalities of applying it in different contexts the discussion can now turn to the capability approach as understood in education and music education.

Sen describes education as one of ‘a relatively small number of centrally important beings and doings that are crucial to well-being’ (cited in Walker & Underhalter, 2007, pp. 7–8). Education is widely accepted as a basic capability; the issue of capabilities within education is a more complex matter.

Capabilities in the present and future

Walker (2005) explains that if children, given their youth and consequent limited maturity, are not able to make independent choices then the capability approach may not be an appropriate method of measuring their well-being. Children are subject to the decisions that parents, guardians and teachers make, while they may appear to have a wide capability set their functionings are often dictated by others (Biggeri, 2007). Saito (2003) maintains that the capability approach is applicable to children, provided it is understood within the context of the capabilities experienced throughout their life. She reasons that it is the purpose of education to make children autonomous and in doing so to enable their future capabilities (Saito, 2003).

Adding the dimension of time to the capability approach complicates matters. Saito (2003) explains that temporary freedom in childhood may not equate to future freedom,

and similarly temporary restrictions of freedom may equate to future freedom. Sen acknowledges that the emphasis of the approach on the individual's freedom to choose which capabilities become functionings does not translate effectively into the investigation of childhood well-being (interview quoted in Saito, 2003). Compulsory schooling is an example of a choice made for children in their best interest, despite temporarily limiting their freedom (Terzi, 2007a).

Klasen (2010) explains that the capability approach within education can be understood in two ways: either childhood is treated as an end and children's capabilities are assessed in terms of the present, or childhood is perceived as a formative process which affects adult capabilities. Terzi (2007a) focuses on the latter interpretation, emphasising the future capabilities that will be enabled. Numeracy and literacy are deemed particularly important alongside other core curriculum subjects. The priority of education is believed to be enabling capabilities that 'are of central egalitarian concern' (Terzi, 2007a, p. 765). By parental, school and governmental measures core subjects are the key to the essential capability set. This vision of education is about advancement, the acquisition of skills and knowledge that are deemed important (Terzi, 2007b). The priorities of this future-focused implementation of the capability approach often centres on a basic framework of future capabilities. Literacy and numeracy are of undeniable value, but alone they are not enough.

If future capabilities are the focus of education, teachers are tasked with providing the broadest capability set for students in their adult lives. Within music education the potential capabilities in question can be divided into two categories: subject-specific capabilities and more general capabilities developed throughout the curriculum. The following is a list of subject-specific adult capabilities that music education seeks to enable was identified in collaboration with a year 8 class:

- Pursue a career in music (e.g. performing, composing, producing, teaching).
- Recreationally engage in independent and collective musical performance.
- Create musical compositions.
- Actively engage in listening to music.
- Discuss and write about music.

There are certainly more capabilities that could be added to the list created by this group of students. The process of identifying the capabilities relevant to music education is complex. A more detailed discussion about how these were identified will follow.

To secure subject-specific capabilities in adulthood work must be done during childhood. For students to have access to the capability of a professional career in music requires them to live out particular childhood functionings (playing an instrument, reading music, learning to use music software, listening to music regularly etc.). While these functionings, or at least some of them, are essential to secure the future capability they cannot legitimately be forced on all children. Particularly since each area of the curriculum has a different set of childhood functionings required to enable the subject-specific adult capabilities. The total required childhood functionings to enable maximum future capabilities throughout the curriculum would be impossible for one student to sustain.

Student input in the capability approach

While the implications of education on future capabilities cannot be denied, Klasen (2010) does not accept that this is the sole purpose of education. Instead he argues that education helps to develop freedom as the child gets older and that this allows gradual increase in student self-determination; a transition to the capability approach as understood in adulthood (Klasen, 2010). Part of this transition allows students the freedom to identify their own interests and priorities. They can narrow the impossible demands of a maximum adult capability set by selecting specific functionings that will in turn enable specific adult capabilities. At this stage we witness many students stopping instrumental tuition that they engaged with at an earlier age due to externally determined functionings. It is also during this transition that a smaller number of truly dedicated musicians emerge who show aspiration and enquiry into all areas of music. Consciously or not, these students are seeking to broaden their present and future capabilities in line with their emerging personal interests.

Allowing students freedom to make choices that will affect their future adult capability set relies on them having an understanding of the implications of these decisions. Halleröd (2010) investigated the ability of children to predict their futures. His study asked 12- and 13-year-olds to assess their own situation and on this basis predict the future implications. Upon comparing the predictions made in 1966 with the real-life outcomes, Halleröd (2010) notes high levels of accuracy. He consequently concludes that 'children at the age of 12–13 years are knowledgeable agents' (Halleröd, 2010, p. 130). If children are able to assess their own lives and show insight into their futures they are entitled to take part in the discussion of their education and their capabilities. This collaborative process is at the heart of the GCSE and A-level subject selection process. Within secondary education schools have built in steps that develop student autonomy over time and allow them to increasingly determine their present and future capabilities. Student responses to this process are varied: the responsibility of increasing independence is unnerving for some students while others relish opportunity for self-determination.

By determining childhood functionings teachers and parents may hope to enable the maximum number of future capabilities for a given child. Klasen (2010) argues that children need to be given increasing input into their own decisions and lives. By rejecting collaboration one denies the insight that students have into their own lives. However, children's autonomy remains limited and the capability approach as applied to adult populations is unsuitable; a compromise must be found. The following case study is a direct investigation into the degree to which children can be engaged in the discussion of their own capabilities.

Case study: children of varied ages from 45 different countries identify valued capabilities

Mario Biggeri (2007) explores this potential compromise by investigating the capabilities that children value themselves. In this study children of different ages from 45 different countries 'are active participants in the debate around their own well-being' (Biggeri, 2007, p. 198). The children are at the centre of the investigation in what Biggeri (2007)

calls a 'bottom-up strategy' (p. 198). Biggeri (2007) upholds the ethical individualism of the capability approach when he clarifies that the children involved 'were not assumed to be representative of all the world's children' (p. 200). He identifies three categories of children: street children, rehabilitated children, and a control group who had never experienced life on the streets (Biggeri, 2007). The initial open question: 'What are the most important opportunities a child should have during her/his life?' encouraged the true uninfluenced opinions of those involved (Biggeri, 2007, p. 204). From this starting point an ongoing collaboration produced a list of 14 capabilities that are identified by children as important.² These capabilities show regard for both their present and future lives. The importance of education was recognised by 88% of the children involved. The only group who showed concern for anything above education were the street children, who as a group placed greater emphasis on the value of life and physical health.

Biggeri's method of establishing a list of relevant capabilities with children can be applied within education. In order to establish a list of capabilities relevant to music education I worked with a group of year 8 students. Following Biggeri's model I began the process by asking the following questions:

1. What are the most important opportunities that a student should have in school?
2. What are the most important opportunities that a student should have in classroom music lessons?

The responses that students gave were varied and in some cases very specific to them individually. These students are not intended to represent all secondary school students and the responses listed below are certainly not universal or exhaustive. Some general themes emerged from the students' responses. Further discussion on these themes allowed them to be divided into musical, academic and social capabilities each understood in both the present and future. Figure 1 shows the list of capabilities that we established: they are flexible and can be understood in different terms depending on the student and the context.

It is undeniable that collaboration with children regarding capabilities can be fruitful; children are capable of engaging maturely with important capabilities including education (Biggeri, 2007).

The problem of applying the capability approach in childhood identified by Saito (2003), Walker (2005) and Terzi (2007a, 2007b) is valid. This is best solved through compromise as seen in the work of Biggeri (2007) and Klasen (2010) in which the current existence of the individual remains the central tenet of the capability approach.

Equality of capabilities in education

Promoting the capability approach within education as a means to equality has significant implications. Klasen (2010) explains that provision based on equal opportunities fails to redress the pre-existing inequalities arising from differences in luck, talent and advantage.

²Life and physical health, love and care, mental well-being, bodily integrity and safety, social relations, participation/information, education, freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation, shelter and environment, leisure activities, respect, religion and identity, time autonomy and undertaking of projects, mobility.

	Music	Academic	Social
Present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practically engage with music: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Play -Compose -Listen -Discuss -Write 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access knowledge/information of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Socialise and build friendships Collaborate with others
Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursue a career in music Continue to engage with music practically: play, compose, listen, discuss, write 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skills for employment Basis for further academic exploration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued friendships and relationships Work with others in and out of employment

Fig. 1 Capabilities enabled through music education identified in collaboration with a class of year 8 students

Walker and Unterhalter (2007) note the link between the origins and outcomes of learners, evidence that initial inequalities are often not equalized. Promoting equality in students' capabilities addresses their individual and diverse needs in order to level the playing field. This approach aims to provide children with equal access to different capabilities (Klasen, 2010).

The promotion of equality in education is evidently important, and the capability approach offers a means of effectively assessing the level of equality and identifying areas that call for change. In order to apply the capability approach in this context greater clarity regarding the desired equality is required. Terzi (2007a) makes an important distinction: 'What matters in terms of equality of capabilities is the equal opportunity that people have to secure educational functionings, rather than equality in achieved functionings' (p. 763). The promotion of equality through the capability approach does not demand equal outcomes. Instead, education should promote equality in the fundamental functionings that are required for equal participation in society (Terzi, 2007a). If the provision of basic educational capabilities is unequal this in turn leads to unequal freedom to function effectively in society (Terzi, 2007a).

For some students securing access to this basic capability equality is a challenge. A new arrival EAL student has to work hard to gain skills that will allow them to communicate effectively with people. Students with profound multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) may struggle to develop the skills required to gain employment of any type. There are multiple reasons why students may be particularly challenged when securing basic capability equality. For these students this becomes the top priority of education. When studying the development of a year 7 student with Asperger's syndrome I focused on the capabilities identified in Fig. 1. The student struggled to play in time with other members of his group and the quality of his musical contributions suffered. Although this impacted on his access to the subject-specific capabilities I naturally found myself prioritising his access to basic non-musical capability equality.

Terzi (2007a) established the concept of a 'threshold level of achieved functionings that educational institutions should promote and foster' (p. 764). The threshold level denotes the

capabilities that need to be equalised in order to enable equal functioning within society. The threshold not only secures this basic equality but also ensures that students who are more able or simply do not suffer from disadvantage will not be treated with disregard:

beyond the threshold level of fundamental capabilities guaranteed to everyone, those who can obtain the highest functionings in education should receive resources to that aim, providing that the benefits they gain from their education correspond to an equal long term prospective improvement and benefits for those least successful. (Terzi, 2007a, p. 771)

These arguments for equality in education assert that basic capabilities should be established for all students to enable equality in fundamental societal functionings. Beyond this threshold students are treated individually and their development is understood to be unique to them. This personalisation allows gifted and talented students to be appropriately challenged. When teaching a talented percussionist many of the capabilities outlined in Fig. 1 were relatively secure. The challenge as his musical educator was to facilitate as many experiences as possible to enable the broadest and most advanced set of musical capabilities in the present and future.

Robyens (2003) explains that the principle of equality that drives the capability approach can result in a distribution of resources that appears unfair. However, in the context of education equality of resources does not equate to equality of capabilities (Klasen, 2010). Terzi (2007a) argues that it is not simply a matter of 'fairness of the share' (p. 766). Instead, she perceives the provision of additional opportunities and resources for those who need them as 'requirements of justice' (Terzi, 2007a, p. 766). The additional challenges faced by those with special educational needs and disabilities are met through such redistribution of resources.

Equality of capabilities in education can go some way to redress initial inequalities and hopefully secure access for all students to basic capabilities to allow them to function equally in society. There are some students for whom this becomes the overwhelming focus of their entire education and many subject-specific capabilities may consequently be sacrificed. The concept of a threshold level helps ensure that these students have a minimum capability set that education should equip them with. For students who are more able their capability aspirations can go beyond this threshold level. In order to secure the broadest and fairest capability set for all students, resources should be allocated accordingly, even if this may in itself appear unfair.

Conclusion

Amartya Sen offered a new perspective on individual well-being through the capability approach. He reversed the traditional methods of measuring people's quality of life: rather than considering what they do he was concerned with what they *could* do. While this may seem like a small distinction the impact on the methods of study and conclusions drawn are significant.

The issue of time and changing capabilities through a lifetime complicates the approach as understood within education. These initial challenges should not discourage further application of the capability approach within education as enabling capabilities,

both present and future, is the purpose of education. The approach clearly has a great deal to offer when catering for students with particular learning needs. It offered a fresh perspective for my study on the simultaneous demands of SEN, EAL and G&T students. The application of the capability approach in this field is already making good headway. However, the approaches 'plurality of purposes' means it has a great deal more to offer in all areas of the curriculum (Sen, 1993, p. 43).

The observations of this paper in relation to music education are in their early stages. This has formed an initial enquiry into how the capability approach can be applied within music education and what this has to offer. There are areas of the capability approach as applied within music education that remain underexplored in this work. The process of selecting the capabilities that music education seeks to enable requires more comprehensive investigation. The greatest challenge, however, is that outlined by Alkire (2008): converting this evaluative investigation into a prospective application of the capability approach. It may be clear that the capability approach offers a fresh and insightful perspective on music education. The challenge is to see how it can positively affect the quality of music teaching.

Successful prospective application of the capability approach would provide educators with a single mantra focused on achieving highly personalized learning for all students. The task for music teachers would be to provide a broad set of musical capabilities for all students on the basis of the capabilities and functionings that they have and seek to have. By focusing on the skills we are enabling in students rather than the tasks that they are completing we are turning our attention to deeper, long-term learning. Applying the capability approach within education can help to remind us as teachers of our job: we are enablers.

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