



Fostering the social and emotional development of gifted children through guided viewing of film

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Abstract

Teachers of gifted elementary school students seek strategies appropriate for fostering healthy social and emotional development in children. The authors propose guided viewing of film as a strategy through which teachers and counselors may assist young gifted students in gaining helpful insights to deal with problems they face. This article presents a theoretical foundation for this approach, a variety of strategies for implementation, and a collection of films appropriate for use with gifted students.

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Ryan McCarthy, the gifted education resource teacher, had recess duty early one morning. As he sipped his strong morning coffee, he noted a familiar scene. As usual, Caitlin was sitting alone next to the school building with her head buried in a paperback book. A short distance away, the rest of the children were involved in a game of kickball. Although she was a pleasant, sensitive child, the other second graders did not seem to appreciate Caitlin. Mr. McCarthy noted that Caitlin was never invited to join in the other students' playground games.

As the father of a precocious young daughter, Mr. McCarthy could empathize with Caitlin. He had watched his own daughter struggle to find friends. Ryan McCarthy sipped his coffee and began thinking about a number of other students in the gifted education program who seemed to have difficulty developing friendships. As he blew the whistle calling the children back into school, he thought back to the film *Matilda* that he had recently rented from a video store and enjoyed with his family. He knew this would be excellent material to share with his students in the gifted resource room, including Caitlin, in order to help them reach self-understanding and consider ways of developing relationships with others.

Social and Emotional Issues Facing Gifted Children

The scenario painted above is an example of one of several social and emotional issues that many gifted children face. In Caitlin's case, she felt different from her peer group. The intellectual and creative abilities of many gifted children like Caitlin make them feel isolated from their peers. These children may feel alienated and alone in a classroom of peers with different interests. Along with feeling misunderstood by their peers, gifted children also experience difficulty being understood by adults. On one hand, adults seem to appreciate, value, and reward gifted children's talents, yet these same people sometimes ridicule the child or perhaps make the child conform to a more normal mold (Delisle, 1992). Young children may begin to question their own worth or the worth of others who are less intelligent or less creative. As a result, they experience feelings of sadness, anger, and anxiety (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982).

Another issue gifted children confront is precocity. Many intellectually advanced children experience frustration as they wait for others to catch up. Precocity may lead to boredom in school, as gifted children wait for their peers to learn skills they have mastered earlier (Clark, 1997; Gross, 1999). Many gifted children must also cope with perfectionistic tendencies. According to Adderholdt and Goldberg (1999), young children plagued with this trait avoid risk-taking activities in which failure is possible, denying themselves opportunities conducive to the development of their potential.

Gifted children also face difficulties surrounding gender role expectations. The culture, media, and schools send messages to boys and girls regarding what toys to play with, what clothes to wear, what length to wear their hair, and how to play on the playground. Going against traditional gender specific behavior may be more problematic for gifted children because of their sharp perceptual abilities and their increased sensitivity to the nuances of sexist language and culture (Silverman, 1993). One of the traits most often associated with gifted children is their heightened sensitivity, the depth and intensity of feeling with which the environment and other people affect them (Lovecky, 1991). They may experience more concerns about ethical and moral issues than their peers. Their heightened emotionality may overwhelm them, unless they are able to find appropriate outlets.

Finally, preserving their creativity is challenging for many gifted children. Children who at one time enjoyed imaginary playmates are suddenly confronted by friends on the playground who begin to laugh at the absurdity of imaginary friendships. As

they progress through school, the desire to conform and be accepted by their peers and teachers causes many of these children to leave their originality behind (Torrance & Safter, 1999).

Addressing the Issues through Guided Viewing of Film

The focus of this article is to deliver what Ryan McCarthy needed that day following his observations of Caitlin on the playground: a way to help gifted children in his resource room better understand the social and emotional issues in their lives and learn strategies to address their concerns. One strategy that elementary classroom teachers, gifted education specialists, and school counselors may consider is the use of guided viewing of film. The theory behind guided viewing parallels the rationale underlying the guided reading of literature commonly referred to as bibliotherapy. The effectiveness of literature and biography in addressing the social and emotional development of gifted students has been recognized by both researchers and teachers in gifted education (Frasier & McCannon, 1981; Halsted, 1994; Hébert & Kent, 2000). Bibliotherapy is defined as the use of reading to produce affective change and promote personality growth and development (Halsted; Lenkowsky, 1987). The therapeutic value of the experience happens when children identify with a literary character, reflect on that identification, and experience emotional growth as a result of the bibliotherapy process.

The bibliotherapeutic process involves a number of consecutive stages, initially identified by Shrodes (1949). The initial stage, *identification*, occurs when readers recognize similarities between themselves and the story's characters. In the second stage, readers experience *catharsis*, an empathetic, emotional reaction similar to what they imagine the characters were feeling. *Insight*, the third stage, involves readers reflecting on their identification with the characters and their situations. Insight may occur either while reading the book or later in follow-up discussion. In the final stage, *application*, individuals apply the insights gained from reflection and discussion to similar problems or issues in their own lives.

Films may also be therapeutic for gifted children. The most salient components of the therapeutic potential in literature — the storyline and characters — are also present in films. A film creates an understanding between the facilitator and students as well as those students who experience the film together. According to Berg-Cross, Jennings, and Baruch (1990), a film provides meaningful therapeutic metaphors that help children understand issues that may be troubling them. The film may help gifted children view their issues through a more positive lens, enabling them to appreciate humorous aspects of the situation and see alternative solutions for addressing their problems (Hébert & Speirs Neumeister, 2001).

Through empirical studies movies have been recognized for their potential to affect the emotional lives of large numbers of viewers (Adams & McGuire, 1987). Newton (1995) and Milne and Reis (2000) have proposed the use of film with gifted adolescents, and their theoretical rationale can be applied to younger gifted children as well. Newton (1995) highlighted advantages of using what he referred to as "cinematherapy" with gifted adolescents by proposing that movies may appeal to visual learners more than books because movies involve multiple senses. In addition, Newton noted that, because movies are an important component of contemporary culture, gifted adolescents may be more receptive to the notion of discussing sensitive topics through popular films. These same arguments would apply to younger gifted children.

In facilitating a guided viewing session with gifted children, Hébert and Speirs Neumeister (2001) have proposed the following guidelines. Prior to sharing or teachers should familiarize themselves with the film's content and how it reflects emotions, attitudes, and children's beliefs. Facilitators should introduce the film by making reference to any naturally occurring situations that have prompted them to use the movie at that time. The facilitator must relate the movie to the students' direct experiences and, through discussion, help them to identify with the movie's characters. An empathic counselor or teacher should try to respond to the students' comments and concerns throughout the session, recognizing their contributions and communicating an acceptance of their emotional responses.

Facilitators of a guided viewing session should consider the necessary preparation before beginning the session. Along with previewing the film, the menu of discussion questions crafted in such a way that the children involved in discussion will feel comfortable sharing their own experiences with the emotional issues presented in the movie. Facilitators must begin the discussion with nonthreatening questions to establish a comfort level before delving into follow-up questions that address more sensitive issues central to the personal lives of the students involved in the discussion. A sensitively designed menu of questions is necessary for a cathartic discussion that will lead to self-understanding. A sample menu of discussion questions centered on the film *Wide Awake* is included in Figure 1.

Educators and counselors using this strategy should note that the discussion of sensitive issues revolving around a film may trigger emotional responses within gifted children. Therefore, it is important that facilitators of guided viewing sessions design follow-up activities that allow children the opportunity to process through their feelings. These follow-up activities may include artistic expressions, writing activities, role playing, and creative problem solving (Hébert, Long, & Speirs Neumeister, 2001).



Children may also enjoy the opportunity to select their own follow-up activity to pursue individually (Hébert & Furner, 1997). These follow-up activities are enjoyable for children and provide important time for introspection. In addition, these activities also give children the opportunity to continue the discussion of the issues explored in the movie and to offer each other support and empathy. With the appropriate choice of a movie addressing critical issues for gifted children, careful planning of a healthy discussion session, and well-designed and enjoyable follow-up activities, guided viewing of film can offer gifted elementary students appropriate support in addressing social and emotional issues in their development.

Figure 1

Sample Discussion Questions for a Guided Viewing Session of *Wide Awake*

Joshua Beal has a reputation for asking too many questions. Why do you think people perceived him this way? Is this a good characteristic in fifth graders? Why or why not?

Joshua had to deal with a bully named Freddy Waltman. Why do you think Freddy behaved this way? Why did Joshua change his view of Freddy?

When Josh 's mother asks, "Why football? Give me one good reason." Josh replies, " Grandpa played football." Has there been a time when you have wanted to participate in an activity because someone else in your family did? Were you successful? How did this make you feel?

Joshua writes in his journal, "I gotta lighten up.." Do you agree with him? Why or why not? Have you ever felt that you were more intense than other kids your age? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it?

Joshua 's teacher chats with him after school one day. She asks him about his grandfather 's death and tells Josh, "Sometimes people need a chance to cry, to let go, to get things out. Maybe you never got that chance." Have there been sad times in your life when you felt like Joshua? Who helped you to feel better? What did you do?

When Josh visits a toy store with his mother he explains, "I used to think this place was magic. I'd see the toys, I'd see all kinds of magical worlds. Now all I see is plastic and paint. There's still some magic, but it gets less and less every year." As you get older, do you feel like Joshua? When have you experienced these feelings? What have you done about them?

After Joshua and the overweight Frank Bennett get stuck in a museum turnstile together during a class field trip, Joshua decides to befriend the young man who's been such a pest for so long. He realizes that Frank needs a friend. Have you ever felt like Frank? Have you ever felt like Joshua? How can you and your friends become more like Joshua?

Why do you think Joshua buries his grandfather 's flannel shirt in his front yard? Do you think this was a good thing to do? Why or why not?

Josh reflects, "One of the last things I remember about my grandpa was him standing on the finish line waiting to say goodbye." Have you had to say goodbye to someone important in your life? How did you do this? What advice would you give to other kids who have to say goodbye to someone they love?

Dave O 'Hara is Joshua 's best friend. Why do you think they are such close friends? Describe your best friend and explain why he or she is different from you. Explain how these differences help your friendship.

Joshua summarizes his fifth grade year by writing the following essay:

Fifth grade was the toughest and most rigorous year.

Before this year everything was Batman action figures and Ninja cartoons.

Now, there's family, friends, and girls.

Before this year, bullies were just bullies for no reason. Weirdos were just weird and daredevils weren't afraid of anything.

Before this year, people I loved lived forever.

I spent this year looking for something and wound up seeing everything around me.

It was like I was asleep before and finally woke up.

Know what? I'm wide awake now.

What does Joshua 's essay tell us he has learned about himself? How do you think he feels about this? What have you learned about yourself this year? How do you feel? What else would you like to learn?

Implementation of Guided Viewing With Gifted Students

Prior to facilitating a guided viewing session in an elementary classroom, teachers and counselors should be aware of copyright issues related to viewing films with students. In an elementary school setting with an educational objective determined by school counselors or educators, guided viewing of film falls within the copyright laws protecting the use of movies with groups of individuals. The Copyright Act of 1976 (amended in 1992) permits individuals to make fair use of copyrighted work for educational purposes without obtaining permission of the copyright owner (Elias, 1999). Therefore, as long as school counselors and teachers use films for educational purposes, they will not be violating copyright laws.

Whether in the regular classroom or in a gifted resource room, guided viewing of films may be used as a strategy for counseling gifted students in multiple ways. Films available for use with elementary students denote many of the affective issues such as friendships or gender and parental expectations that teachers may want to address. High quality films shared with elementary students reinforce prosocial messages embedded within the curriculum; therefore, the use of film provides a creative approach for meeting their curricular objectives. Teachers using this approach may want to consider breaking film viewing into short intervals of time over the course of a week. Each segment can be followed by discussions, culminating in a final activity with the conclusion of the movie. Facilitated in this manner, guided viewing of film is a flexible approach that can be adapted to meet the scheduling demands of teachers.

If a teacher's objective is to focus on particular issues that appear to be salient in the lives of a number of students, then the teacher may consider sharing a series of vignettes from several movies reinforcing the same message delivered in multiple contexts. For example, when examining gender expectations, a teacher might share clips of movies including young female characters involved in athletics combined with clips of young male characters struggling to succeed in sports. A series of carefully selected vignettes all revolving around a central issue would lead to healthy discussion of various facets that otherwise go unnoticed in the viewing of a single film.

Some issues facing gifted children are quite sensitive. Therefore, a guided viewing session designed to address these specific issues will be more appropriate with a select population of gifted children such as gifted/learning disabled, perfectionistic, or underachieving students, or with a self-contained or resource classroom of gifted students. For example, a movie featuring a highly gifted main character who is having difficulty identifying with his chronological peers may have more of an impact when shown to an audience of strictly gifted children. Because a sensitive discussion is likely to follow, gifted children may feel more comfortable in a homogeneous setting sharing their similar experiences.

Teachers may also want to consider using this approach with groups of parents and their gifted children. Through this strategy, teachers may succeed in opening channels of communication between parents and their gifted sons and daughters over issues faced by families of gifted children. A final approach to consider when using guided viewing would be to facilitate sessions during school days when indoor recess is required due to inclement weather. Implementing a guided viewing session could turn a restless rainy day recess into a productive experience during which children could benefit from healthy discussions that evolve from viewing carefully selected films.

Suggested Films for Guided Viewing

Realizing that classroom teachers need to consider the community's value system and would want to select films that are appropriate for use in school settings with elementary-aged children, the authors chose the following films with this consideration in mind. Each of the films were selected from a collection of family films in a video rental store. They are all rated G [General audience] or PG [Parental Guidance] and feature storylines without use of violence or obscenities.

Primary grade teachers faced with an issue similar to that highlighted in the introduction with Ryan McCarthy may also want to share the movie *Matilda* (DeVito, Shamberg, Sher, & Dahl, 1996) with their students. In this exaggerated comedy, a precocious young girl constantly experiences frustration with her anti-intellectual family who does not appreciate her love of learning. Prior to attending school, she survives by discovering the local public library where she connects with a supportive librarian and devours an extensive collection of books.

When *Matilda's* parents finally allow her to attend school, she is initially intimidated by the autocratic principal, Ms. Trunchbull, but she is enthralled with the opportunity to socialize with other children and to begin learning. Her classroom teacher, Miss Honey, recognizes *Matilda's* advanced intellect, and together the two build a close relationship. As *Matilda* continues to experience frustration with her parents' lack of support and with Ms. Trunchbull's dictatorial rule over the school, she discovers she has telekinetic powers. When *Matilda* learns that her beloved teacher Miss Honey is the niece of the horrendous Ms. Trunchbull, *Matilda* learns to apply these powers to help save Miss Honey and the other students from the tyranny of Ms. Trunchbull. The comical qualities of this film are sure to keep the complete attention of young children. Though the content of the movie is



preposterous, the film's message that children's intellectual abilities should be appreciated and nurtured is an appropriate one for guided viewing sessions. Additionally, this film would be useful in addressing gifted elementary school children's need to find friends who identify with their intellect.

The movie *The Sand Lot* (Gilmore, de la Torre, & Evans, 1993) features nine adolescent boys growing up in the 1960s at a time when boys worshipped the legendary Babe Ruth, the "Great Bambino." The main character, Scott Smalls, a gifted young man, moves to the neighborhood following his mother's remarriage to an athletically oriented man. Scott is taken under the wing of Benjamin Franklin Rodriguez, the neighborhood baseball hero and leader of the gang. "Benny" builds Scott's self-confidence by advocating for Scott's inclusion as the ninth man on their sand lot baseball team. Eventually, Scott is appreciated by the group and spends his summer learning the nuances of the sport as well as the culture of boyhood.

When the team is in need of a baseball, Scott grabs his step-father's baseball autographed by Babe Ruth. After the valued baseball is hit over the fence into the next door neighbor's backyard, the team contemplates how to retrieve it without disturbing the neighbor's vicious guard dog referred to as "The Beast." Scott and his friends attempt a number of creative approaches to retrieving the ball. When none of them work, their leader, Benny, heroically leaps over the fence and steals the ball back from the beast. A fast paced chase between the yard dog and Benny ends with the dog trapped under a fence. The sensitive Scott rescues the dog with Benny's help. Together, the teammates meet the dog's owner and discover that he is a former teammate of Babe Ruth. The boys end their summer sharing baseball stories with their newfound hero. The movie concludes with a poignant narration of what becomes of the nine best friends as they grow up to be successful adults. This coming of age film will offer third through sixth grade teachers rich material for discussing early adolescent issues facing gifted boys including father-son relationships, nonathleticism, and peer group acceptance.

Another engaging movie addressing many issues facing gifted girls in fourth through sixth grade is *My Girl* (Glazer & Zieff, 1991). This film offers a slice of life by portraying one summer's experiences in the life of Vada Sultenfuss, an eleven-year-old girl growing up in suburban Pennsylvania in the 1970s. Vada lives with her widowed father and elderly grandmother in their home attached to her father's funeral parlor. Vada spends her summer days with her best friend and soulmate, Thomas J. Sennett. A gifted student with a penchant for creative writing, Vada is excited when she learns her heartthrob, a fourth grade teacher, Mr. Bixler, is offering a summer poetry class. She enrolls in the adult class and spends her summer struggling with her school-girl crush on Mr. Bixler.

Vada's life becomes more complex when Shelly DeVoto arrives in the community and responds to a newspaper ad her father placed in the local paper for a cosmetic artist. When Shelly and Vada's father begin dating and eventually become engaged, Vada finds it difficult to accept Shelly as part of her family. Vada's mother died when Vada was born, and she struggles to understand how she can accept Shelly as a replacement for the mother she never knew. To make matters even worse, Vada faces the tragic loss of Thomas J. when he dies from an allergic response to being stung by a hive of bees. With emotional support from her family and friends, Vada concludes her summer by writing a memorial poem in honor of her beloved friend Thomas J. *My Girl* is an excellent film for teachers and counselors working with gifted elementary students in grades four through six as it provides rich material for guided viewing discussions centering on sensitive topics such as choosing friends, appreciating intelligence in young females, using one's imagination and creativity, and dealing with the loss of loved ones.

The film *Wide Awake* (Woods, Konrad, & Shyamalan, 1997) features Joshua A. Beal, a gifted fifth grader with a reputation for asking lots of questions. Joshua attends an all-boys Catholic school with his best friend, Dave O'Hara. The movie begins following the death of Joshua's grandfather, a significant role model and friend to him. Without his grandfather, Joshua feels lost, despite the fact that his parents and teachers offer emotional support. The film centers on Joshua's struggle to understand mortality and his preoccupation with knowing whether or not his grandfather is in heaven. In this poignant coming of age film, Joshua faces typical adolescent issues, such as the discovery of girls, coping with a school-yard bully, acknowledging fears, and developing empathy for boys not appreciated by their peer group.

Throughout his fifth grade year, Joshua's sensitivity emerges as he wrestles with these important concerns. With the conclusion of the film, Joshua has reached an understanding of many of the issues that troubled him. He finally believes that his grandfather is looking down upon him from heaven; he has a new appreciation for girls; he has a new friend in an overweight classmate; he understands the secret reasons why the school bully has harassed his classmates for years; he realizes all young boys have justifiable fears. As a result of this new understanding, Joshua realizes he is "wide awake" with a new awareness of life. Gifted fourth through sixth grade viewers of this film will come to appreciate the salience of these issues through the eyes of a highly sensitive, intelligent young man.

Educators interested in examining gender related issues with upper elementary school students may want to consider sharing the film, *Annie O.* (McClary, 1995). In this movie a high school Hispanic female, Annie Rojas, is noticed for her natural talent in basketball by the varsity coach, Will Cody, and is recruited to try out for the school's varsity team. Her decision to play on the

team causes Annie to experience both family and peer conflict. Mrs. Rojas, a Hispanic woman with traditional values, does not understand her daughter's passion for athletics. Annie also experiences resentment from her older brother, Freddy, who holds aspirations for being the star of the team during his senior year. In addition, Annie finds she is ostracized by a number of her female friends; they do not want to be associated with a female athlete because it may tarnish their attractiveness to potential boyfriends.

As Annie faces resistance from her family, her peer group, and her boyfriend, Coach Cody provides her constant emotional support and encouragement to continue developing her athletic talent. Throughout the season Annie emerges as a leader on the team, earning herself the nickname Annie O., reflective of the wild female Western character, Annie Oakley. As the team moves closer to the state championship, Annie finds an authentic friend in Robin who supports her passion for athletics and a new boyfriend, Bill, who is also a star on the basketball team. As a result of Annie's success on the team, her mother comes to respect her drive to excel athletically. This wholesome film addresses a number of important issues regarding female talent development and would help teachers facilitate healthy discussions with upper elementary students concerning the cultivation of nontraditional gender role behaviors.

The story of world champion chess player Bobby Fischer serves as a backdrop for an excellent movie focusing on talent development in young prodigies. In *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (Rudin, Wisniewitz, Hohnberg, & Zaillian, 1993), the protagonist, a seven-year-old named Josh Waitzman becomes intrigued with men playing chess in New York City's Washington Square. When his parents discover his fascination with the game and his natural gift for chess, his father succeeds at finding a chess teacher for his son. Under the tutelage of his mentor, Joshua becomes involved in many chess competitions, bringing home one impressive trophy after another. His father, a sports journalist, becomes enthusiastic about his son's involvement in chess and success as a competitor and accompanies him to tournaments throughout the country. Joshua's mother, recognizing that her son has a "good heart," points out to him that is what is most important in life.

When Joshua's mentor begins to build the competitive edge with his young protégé, encouraging him to "have contempt for his opponent," Josh resists, pointing out that he is not Bobby Fischer. As the tensions between his parents mount over the values instilled in the competitive culture of chess tournaments, Josh struggles with his fear of possibly disappointing his father and losing his love. Fourth through sixth grade teachers and counselors will find *Searching for Bobby Fischer* a helpful movie to address several significant issues that gifted students face, including the role of a mentor in talent development, keeping competition in perspective, dealing with parental expectations, and maintaining a healthy balance of enjoyable activities throughout childhood.

Against the historical background of the turbulent civil rights movement of the 1960s, *Selma, Lord Selma* (Seitz & Burnett, 1999) presents the story of Sheyanne Webb, a charismatic Black child. Sheyanne sneaks off from her fifth grade friends before school begins and meets Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who is engaged in a meeting in a nearby church. She is inspired to follow his leadership by becoming involved in the marches for freedom. Initially, Sheyanne finds herself the only elementary school student involved in this cause and she remains involved despite the admonitions of her teachers and parents. She finds support, however, in the friendship of a young, White seminarian, a freedom fighter from the North struggling to get the Black community members registered to vote. Sheyanne's passion for the cause inspires the Black public school teachers to take active roles as freedom fighters. Throughout the events surrounding "Bloody Sunday," Sheyanne demonstrates leadership, commitment, courage, and powerful resilience. Teachers working with youngsters experiencing adversity in their lives will find *Selma, Lord Selma* an excellent choice to use with their upper elementary school students. Sheyanne Webb's poignant story will provide students with an inspirational model to help them overcome the difficulties they face within their own lives.

Frankie and Hazel (Hockin & Williams, 2000) depicts a friendship between two middle school young women living in New Jersey. Francesca Humphreys, "Frankie," and her best friend Hazel Perez are each multitalented. Frankie is an accomplished ballerina, who is excited about trying out for the baseball team. The daughter of a world-reknown prima ballerina, Frankie has lived with her grandmother following the death of her parents. Phoebe, a dignified and cultured woman with an authoritarian parenting style, has definite plans for her granddaughter's future. She directs her granddaughter to develop her natural gift for ballet. Throughout the story, Frankie struggles with her desire to please her grandmother and follow her own interests. Meanwhile, Hazel is an honors student and community activist with aspirations to become the first teenager elected mayor in her community. Hazel's charisma and enthusiasm enable her to gain community support for her campaign to improve her hometown. Upper elementary school educators will appreciate this story of a supportive friendship between two talented young women as they confront issues of identity, gender role expectations, parental expectations, and peer group jealousy.

Summary

Gifted elementary students can benefit from guided viewing of film, a natural extension of bibliotherapy. The stages of the bibliotherapy process are also applicable for guided viewing and may result in similar therapeutic responses for gifted children. Elementary school teachers may choose to utilize this strategy with whole classes, groups of students with similar concerns, special populations, students and their parents, or as co-facilitators with school counselors. Because films are an important component of the contemporary culture of children, elementary school students should respond positively to this counseling approach; therefore educators may wish to add guided viewing of film to their repertoire of techniques to foster healthy social and emotional development in gifted students.

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