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CALIFORNIA: A PICTURE OF DIVERSE LANGUAGE  
GROUPS AND ESL/BILINGUAL PROGRAMS

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**Abstract**

In this article you will hear four distinct voices of classroom teachers who teach and learn in the large Central Valley of California. Our stories are grounded in our unique personal perspective. "The stories reflect practice in classrooms which is grounded in theory. The theory is to be discovered in the practice. The stories reflect how beliefs become behaviors in the classroom, and how we can reflect on our beliefs by critically examining our behaviors" (Wink, 1996, p. 67, in press). Each story will be followed by the teacher's reflections which are fundamental in developing the multicultural perspectives required in today's multilingual classroom (Kruker, Silva, & Delgado-Larocco, 1995). As you read, keep in mind that these stories could also be told from the perspective of the student, or the perspective of the community. We encourage the readers to explore the varying perspectives as they relate to these four examples of bilingual education. The purpose of this article is to paint a picture of what is actually happening on a daily basis in four classrooms in the large Central Valley of California. It is only at the end of the article that we will ask our readers to generate a vision of what could actually happen in your own context.

## California

Demographically, the world has changed, and the United States is rapidly becoming multicultural and multilingual. Nowhere is this picture more evident than in the public schools of California where the mainstream is often multilingual. The latest California statistics (Olsen, 1994) are indicative of the demographic changes which are taking place.

- One-ninth of the children in the United States live in California.
- Nearly 7 million residents of California were born in a country outside of the United States.
- Approximately one-fifth of public school students in California were born outside of the United States.
- The number of students who speak languages other than English has more than tripled in the last decade.
- Close to one hundred language groups are represented in the public schools in California (Olsen, 1994, pp. 7-8).

The latest California Department of Education Fact Sheet (Olsen, 1994) demonstrates a changing ethnic population in public schools: 44.5% White; 35.3% Hispanic; 8.6% Black; 8% Asian; American Indian/Alaskan 0.8%; and 0.6% Pacific Islander. The number of English language learners in California schools is 1.2 million. This is a 41% increase in the last four years. The State Department has acknowledged that 27% of those students receive no special assistance. In many schools, the English learners outnumber the native English speakers (California Association of Bilingual Education, et. al., 1995).

### *The Effects of Change*

The effects of these rapid changes are felt every day in every school. "As in other eras of peak immigration, demographic ethnic change and economic recession, both the best and the worst of our national tendencies arise. In California, immigrants are being formally scapegoated at the highest level of economic woes that were decades in the making" (Olsen, 1994, p. 8). Yes, one effect of these rapid demographic changes is that Californians are experiencing a strong, and often negative, reaction from some. In the Central Valley, the editorial pages of filled with scathing attacks on bilingual education.

A second effect of these rapid societal changes is the need for bilingual teachers. For years, we in bilingual education have recognized this need. The difference we see now is that "mainstream" educators now feel the need, too. Many area school districts actively recruit teachers with bilingual credentials or language development certificates. Teacher preparation programs throughout the state have dramatically reshaped their previous programs. The bilingual credential candidates in our local state university have jobs before they finish the program; this is not true for the monolingual teacher credential candidates. Traditionally, bilingual and ESL teachers were thought to be needed for special programs only. Their assignments were on the periphery of the regular school curriculum. With the dramatic shift in demographics, bilingual and English language development teachers are central to all of California public education.

A third effect we see from these rapid changes is some serious rethinking of bilingual education. It is not uncommon in social change to have contradictory and simultaneous ideas taking place. That is exactly what is happening in the Central Valley in many schools which we know. Historically, bilingual programs in this area have been subtractive and transitional. However, the changing global realities have compelled parents and educators to reexamine their long-held beliefs and practices in the area of bilingual and multilingual education. More families and school districts are becoming aware that monolingual English students who graduate from high school are already limited in their abilities to thrive in the pluralistic society of the 21st century. Societal changes are reflected in the pedagogy of the classroom where students must be able to access and interpret information, must have access to a high level of critical literacies, and must be able to thrive in a global and multilingual society.

### **The Story Begins: California Central Valley**

As the sun rises on the rich, fertile agricultural land in this Central Valley city, many farm workers have already begun to work. Fathers are in the fields, mothers are in the canneries, and children are getting ready for school. Children ride to school on the bus or walk. Many families in the community commute long distances to work, so the

parents must leave several hours before their children leave for school. Approximately 14%-18% of the people are unemployed in this area. Many families struggle to find jobs; many work at housekeeping, others are in the service industry, and still other families make money by selling things at the flea markets. However, most people in this area earn their living (either directly or indirectly) through the agricultural industry: tomatoes, corn, beans, asparagus, onions, and strawberries and fruit and nut orchards are the heart and soul of the Central Valley of California.

Life is a struggle for many of the families who send their children to these schools. Some Mexican families hope to make enough money in California to return to their homeland. Still others plan to make California their home, to work and prosper here. The agricultural business lends itself to the hopes and dreams of many people. Sometimes the students will stay and begin to make a new life. Many times, however, the student moves to another part of the state or even out-of-state. The transfer of students in and out of schools is extremely high in many of the schools in this valley.

Numerically speaking, the minority is becoming the majority, and traditional classrooms are filled with non-traditional students. Spanish-speaking students continue to be the largest group of bilingual students in this area. However, there is a growing number of Hmong, Cambodian, Laos, and Vietnamese speakers. In specific schools, Hmong or Cambodian speakers outnumber the Spanish speakers. Although many of the larger California schools districts, such as those near the Pacific Coast, have between 50 and 75 different languages, districts in the Central Valley tend to be smaller with fewer languages present. However, it is very common for even the smaller districts, such as those in the Central Valley, to have between 10 and 20 distinct languages.

Just as there is diversity in the population of California, so is there diversity in the types of ESL and bilingual programs. Often schools will begin with some level of ESL service for bilingual students. Eventually, schools realize that ESL is just not enough to serve the academic needs of their students. It is at this point that school districts will often create a few sheltered content classes in an attempt to make the learning more comprehensible. Quite often, these schools with ESL and sheltered classes, soon come to understand that many academic concepts are

learned more effectively and rapidly when they are taught in the primary language. None of us can learn what we don't understand.

The terms ESL and sheltered content instruction are no longer used to the degree they once were. California State Department of Education has encouraged the use of English language development (ELD) instead of ESL; and specially-designed academic instruction (SDAI) has replaced the previous use of sheltered content instruction. In this article we will use the terms ESL and sheltered content instruction which has a broader base of mutual understanding.

All four schools portrayed in this article believe they are providing good bilingual education although their models are very different. The following types of bilingual programs are common in our geographical area.

### **Susan from Civic Elementary: ESL, Sheltered English, and Peer Tutors**

#### *The Students*

My classroom is filled with children from all over the world: Cambodia, Mexico, India, Russia, Vietnam, the Philippine Islands, and Laos. Many of these children have been refugees and have experienced multiple tragedies in their lives. Most of the students in my classroom are in the process of acquiring English. However, most of the classroom teachers speak only English. I am one of those teachers.

#### *The Parents*

Most of the parents in this area are responsible, hardworking people who want their children to succeed, to speak English, and to abide by the rules of the school. Many parents participate in the school community and attend parent conferences and Back-to-School-Night while supporting the school in other ways such as attending district meetings, sending food for school snacks, and helping at room parties.

#### *Community Life: Changes and Challenges*

Arriving in this country offers many challenges. Families experience changes in climate, culture, language, and values. As the

children begin to acquire English, they often become reluctant to talk with their parents in their primary language while the parents are struggling to communicate with their children in English, their second language. Our school is surrounded by the influences of drugs. Keeping all this in mind, we shall enter a day in the life of a second language child in my school.

#### *A Day at School*

"Not another one. What am I going to do with him? Why don't they put this student on the track with the other Mexicans? I don't speak Spanish, and I don't want him sitting in here with nothing to do," the teacher said to the resource teacher.

I am that resource teacher. With my very limited Spanish, I visit with the child and try to reassure him. Very soon I have to leave him with the classroom teacher and attend to another student who had just arrived from India. As an ESL resource teacher, I work with the kindergarten students 30 minutes a day in their "mainstream" classroom. Three of the five kindergarten teachers have bilingual paraprofessionals who utilize their multiple languages only to clarify concepts in the classroom. In addition, they interpret and translate for families.

The other bilingual students in my school are served with a "pull-out" ESL program. For the more advanced ESL students, instruction is linked to the curriculum through grade level texts with small groups or other materials to make the information comprehensible. Students who have a greater need for English language development receive an hour or more each day. The bilingual Spanish-speaking migrant aide also works with some students approximately 30 minutes a day five days a week.

#### *Interpreting and Translating*

The forms and letters which are sent to the students' homes are not translated into Spanish. At a recent Bilingual Advisory Committee meeting, a Spanish speaking translator was provided for by the district.

Recently, I have focused on some of the comments of my colleagues in our school. The comments, which are included here, paint a picture of negative attitudes which play a powerful role in the school culture.

Teacher A: "We help these ESL kids so much, sometimes I think: what about our own kids?" Teacher B: "There will be NO Spanish speaking in this classroom." Teacher C: "I don't want to hear any Spanish in here; you are supposed to be learning English." Teacher D: "We are spending a fortune printing things in Spanish for all those foreigners over here."

It is in this environment that the students in my classroom are to learn English, to learn academic content in a language which they don't understand, and to develop a healthy self-concept. It is very challenging to be a teacher of students who speak languages in addition to English. It must be much more challenging to be one of those students. Why doesn't the district hire bilingual teachers? The rationale is that there are none available although the local state university has a bilingual credential program, a language development certificate, and a multilingual master's degree.

### *Reflections*

Change is hard, slow, and inevitable. I have some hope for our district. Key people in the school community are beginning to implement change. Bilingual aides are being hired and Spanish materials are being purchased by the district. The district is providing inservice training in sheltering techniques. A bilingual school is in the planning stages and so is a foreign language program. The assessment methods for second language learners are being scrutinized. How this change takes place and how quickly is up to us.

In the following examples, you will meet Candy and Rosa who are monolingual English teachers who work with bilingual paraprofessionals. Candy and Rosa both have a background in the theory and practice of language acquisition. Candy and Rosa provide ESL and sheltered content instruction and serve as resources for other teachers in their schools. As you will see, the students in Candy's room receive far more primary language support than in Rosa's room.

**Rosa from Reed School:  
ESL, Sheltered, and Some Primary Language Support**

*The Students*

The students in my school represent many different language groups. The goal of our second language program is to provide a natural approach to the acquisition of English. Reed has no bilingual classrooms although we have many bilingual students. Previously, we used a pullout ESL program. We are now in our second year of assigning groups of language learners to designated classrooms with teachers who have second language acquisition theory and methods. The second language learners are placed in cooperative groups with monolingual English students. Bilingual paraprofessionals work with second language students on content instruction.

*The Staff*

Our school has 15 teachers and one bilingual Spanish-speaking instructional aide. One teacher at the school is a native Portuguese speaker. Three teachers have limited Spanish ability. I, like most of my colleagues, am a monolingual English speaker. Children in my school rarely receive primary language support.

All teachers at the school have participated in district-sponsored second language inservice training which focus on theory and methodology. Funds are available for professional development. I have a certificate in language development and a multilingual master's degree.

Bilingual students are placed at each grade level with a designated English language development teacher. In one classroom, we may have newly arrived students from Romania and Vietnam entering our classroom within days of each other. To assist these students, Total Physical Response is utilized and a silent period is understood and respected. Also, during the language arts block of time, holistic learning activities are used with the support of visuals and realia for those students needing more concrete examples of the core curriculum.



*The Families*

Bilingual parents are involved in the ESL component by participating on the Bilingual Advisory Committee. This committee provides parents with information regarding the direction we take with second language learners, with respect to assessment, curriculum, materials, etc. During these meetings a bilingual paraprofessional is available to assist with translation and also with student/teacher/parent conferences.

*Reflections*

Primary language instruction would be the most effective means of instruction for the second language learners at my school. The variety of languages in the school does not make this feasible. I feel my school has elected to provide the next best means of instruction for these students with this program.

**Candy from Middleton:  
ESL, Sheltered, and Primary Language Support**

*The Students*

I teach second grade students from many different cultures ranging from seven to nine years of age. The largest populations are Spanish, Cambodian, Hmong, Laos, Hindi, Punjab, and Afro-American. Due to a shortage of certified bilingual teachers and the diversity of our classrooms, we have resorted to a teaching style called sheltering. These classrooms are usually occupied by one dominant language group, plus students from many other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. By utilizing this methodology, the district is able to meet the minimum state compliance guidelines for teaching bilingual students.

*A Day at School*

I am a EuroAmerican woman in my fifth year of teaching, currently teaching a Cambodian sheltered second grade. A Cambodian paraprofessional is in the classroom for part of the day. A Spanish bilingual teacher operates a "pull out" program to teach and develop Spanish language proficiency in all academic areas. The

paraprofessionals are invaluable in teaching higher level concepts to the bilingual students. Students are grouped in a way that primary language use is encouraged and English role models are available.

I maintain a flexible schedule in which the Cambodian paraprofessional addresses content area instruction in a variety of subjects. Most of our units of study follow science or social studies themes that weave language development, reading, writing, and math together. During the morning hours, he pulls out Cambodian students to preview thematic concepts and work on vocabulary and language development, comprehension strategies, and writing assistance. The afternoon allows for the paraprofessional to review concept development and content area instruction. The needs of the students determine how his time is split between math, social studies, and science. This technique named "preview/review" allows for the Cambodian students to preview information that I will be giving the class in a thematic topic in their primary language. After they have previewed the information, I teach the lesson to the whole class. In the afternoon they again review the information in their primary language. This technique allows for students to obtain the necessary content information in both languages leading to academic content success and English language development.

In contrast, the Spanish speaking student relies on one hour of pullout instruction per day. This time is spent primarily on Spanish language reading and writing instruction. There is no coordination between the pullout Spanish instruction and our classwork. As a result, this Spanish dominant student has difficulty understanding and mastering many abstract concepts. The two Laos students, both female, receive no primary language assistance. They rely heavily on each other for assistance. One student is developing English language skills rapidly and is working well with her Cambodian and English language counterparts. The other student struggles through lessons trying to understand concepts and language through the use of a seven year-old translator.

Throughout the day our class works together. We consider ourselves to be a team of many cultures and languages. Teacher, paraprofessional, and students work together in a combination of teaching techniques to help make learning comprehensible to all

students. Visitors to the classroom will observe learning taking place in many languages under many different situations.

*Reflections*

Hope is on the horizon. For many years, the local state university has issued Spanish bilingual credentials. Recently the university added Hmong, Laos, and Cambodian bilingual credential programs. In addition, more and more of the teachers in our district and in the area are studying for their language development training certificate. Like children, we are at a point of taking small baby steps toward better education. These newly certified Asian bilingual teachers will help to provide primary language instruction and powerful role models for the Hmong, Laos and Cambodian students at our school.

**Irene from Montgomery Valley:  
Bilingual Instruction**

*The Community*

By the time the school busses are seen on our country roads, most of our students' fathers have been milking large herds of cows for many hours. These immigrants work in difficult conditions for a modest income. They come from many areas of Mexico looking for a better life for their families. California's Central Valley uses these immigrant families to maintain the present economic base. Unfortunately, these very same families encounter much discrimination from the prevailing racist attitudes.

*The Students*

Traditionally, our district has retained students who are dominant in languages other than English on the faulty assumption that they simply needed more time. I was hired as the first Spanish bilingual teacher when the district needed to meet state compliance guidelines.

*The Portuguese Students*

The Portuguese-dominant students have not been funded for bilingual services. Kindergarten students whose home language is Portuguese are placed with a teacher who speaks Portuguese. She uses

their first language to explain and expand the concepts. However, the reading program is in English, and content area instruction is in English. In later years, these students will be taught by English-only teachers who have not received professional development in second language acquisition.

#### *The Spanish Bilingual Program*

The kindergarten through third grade bilingual program has been funded through a Title VII Transitional grant. Therefore, the goal of this program is to have the students learn English quickly and exit them into English-only classrooms in fourth grade. Spanish dominant K-3 students receive primary language instruction, multicultural education, ESL, and sheltered content instruction. Bilingual instructional aides provide support and additional individualized or group instructional time. Once the bilingual students move on to fourth grade, they are served by an English-only ESL instructional aide. The students are pulled out and helped with additional support on content or second language acquisition.

The district staff is highly divided on the issue of bilingual education. The administration's public stance is that they support maintenance of native language, but the practice of transitional bilingual education does not reflect this. The school board has yet to be convinced that primary language instruction is the best approach for academic success. Consequently, materials and programs focus on facilitating success for English-speaking students. For example, the library has a tiny shelf of Spanish books available and the \$80,000 computer lab is operated through an English curriculum which is not reflective of maintenance bilingual education.

#### *My Classroom*

As you open the door to my first grade bilingual classroom, you find desks arranged in groups of six for interactive group activities and stations as needed. Students teach and learn together at the computer center. A listening center is available to students as they finish their work or during special centers time. Manipulatives for various language arts and math activities are available to all on shelves. Puzzles, sequencing games, and individual chalkboards are a part of the

classroom activity. Books in Spanish and English are visible and are well used. They are checked out by students weekly to read at home. Content is taught in the dominant language of the children. Students in my classroom are encouraged to generate language of the playground, the classroom, and the community.

### *Reflections*

My school comes from a tradition of ESL and sheltered classes, and now offers primary language for most Spanish-dominant students in the early grades. However, even in Montgomery Valley, all services end abruptly when the student exits third grade. All students, even those who are still dominant in languages other than English, are expected to read and write and learn at the same level as their English-only peers. Montgomery Valley perceives itself as a bilingual school; others might disagree. Even though the school may not be fully bilingual, my goal for the students in my class is bilingualism and biliteracy for all students. For example, parental involvement at this district is very high among the English-only parents, yet low among the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking families. However, the families of the children in my class are actively involved with the education of their children.

Although the students of the Title VII project and my students are supported with full bilingual education, the program is not maintained throughout the grade levels. Although the students receive support and acceptance by some of the school personnel, they have to endure negative comments from others. For example, recently Manuel and Samuel came to me and asked if there is a law which dictates English only on the playground because an Anglo, English-only teacher had walked up behind them, bent over into their faces, and said, "Speak English."

A month later, two of my students were told that everyone must speak English in the library. This same librarian has snatched English books out of Spanish-dominant readers' hands and told them that they may not check them out. She saves those books for students who can read in English. Thus, these students are denied the right to speak Spanish on the playground and check out books in English: no speaking in Spanish, and no reading in English!

### **Reflections and Recommendations: Four Schools**

In the previous four classroom examples, we have tried to demonstrate the reality of many bilingual children in the Central Valley of California from the perspective of their classroom teachers. Our intention has been to provide a realistic view of the diversity of students and programs in this geographical area.

In the Central Valley of California we see various models of bilingual programs. Although we did not provide an example, each of us is very aware of submersion model classrooms and their disastrous results. These classrooms often appear as in the following model.

#### *Model One*

- a monolingual instructor with no background in second language acquisition is working with bilingual students;
- no bilingual paraprofessionals are in the classroom;
- some cross-age tutoring occurs;
- classified staff or community resources may be involved;
- children are served by compensatory models of education.

Our reflections of the four classrooms in this article demonstrate improved, if not quality, service for bilingual students.

Susan is an example of the following model. Her school essentially provides ESL and some sheltering techniques. The teachers are all English dominant.

#### *Model Two*

- a monolingual instructor with background in second language acquisition is working with the bilingual students;
- no bilingual instructional aide is provided;
- preview review methods using sheltered English and "mainstream" English are often used;
- bilingual students in the classroom often act as peer tutors.

The classrooms of Rosa and Candy demonstrate another model of bilingual education, in that they both work with bilingual paraprofessionals. Classrooms such as these are fairly typical in the area;

the degree of ESL and sheltered instruction varies widely, as does primary language support. In Rosa's example, some students receive a little primary language support, and in Candy's class, the students received a great deal of primary language support. We call this Model Three.

*Model Three*

- a monolingual instructor with a background in second language acquisition is working with bilingual students;
- a bilingual paraprofessional works in the classroom;
- ESL and sheltered content instruction are provided;
- primary language content instruction takes place in the classroom.

Irene's classroom is fully bilingual for the Spanish-speaking students. However, as was seen, this is not provided for the students after third grade, nor is it provided for the Portuguese-speaking students. We describe this as the fourth model

*Model Four*

- a bilingual credentialed teacher with parallel materials in two languages is working with the bilingual students;
- primary language instruction, sheltered content, and ESL is combined in an interactive classroom setting;
- the goal historically has been transitional bilingual education.

All four schools in the area are experiencing rapid change. Simultaneous and contradictory voices in the four schools are reacting positively and negatively to these changes, and all four teachers are viewed as advocates for bilingual education by their colleagues on site. Each of these teachers has seen many examples of resistance to change which has had harmful effects on students. The following is just one example of the hidden racism which is a part of many schools attempting to improve the quality of service for second language students.

Recently, one of us observed a Mexican woman as she came to school to enroll her children. Before leaving the office, the woman looked at the secretary and said,

"*Gracias.*"

"I'm not impressed," the secretary replied.

"*Muchas gracias,*" the woman added.

"I mean it' I don't want to hear any of that." the secretary snapped.

As we experience global demographic shifts, we are called upon to reexamine and rethink previously-held assumptions and practices, just as this school secretary is called upon to reconsider some of her cherished beliefs about bilingual students and their families.

### **An Update of these Teachers and Classrooms**

Just as there is change in California, so is there change in the lives of these teachers; all have moved on to other professional placements. Four of the five teachers have since finished their Multilingual Master's in Education. Rosa is pursuing her administrative credential. Irene is a Title VII coordinator. Candy has taken a leadership role at her school but continues to work with students who are dominant in Laos, Cambodian, and Hmong. Susan continues to teach at a public school and is a Visiting Lecturer for multicultural preservice courses at the local state university; she has traveled extensively, and her Spanish has improved; LeAnn is pursuing her doctoral degree.

It is interesting to note that these four schools are attempting various methods and models, but none of them is seriously reflecting on the underlying sociocultural factors which are touching the lives of everyone in the community. The four schools which were described in this article are continuing in much the same manner - except for Montgomery Valley which has divided itself into two teams: the White Sox and the Brown Sox.

The school is divided, the community is divided, and all are being hurt. In the middle of this great battle is a young, beginning teacher, an ethnic minority who is being pummeled by the White Sox team. It appears to us that when the dust settles, the Board of Education will offer a contract for another year to the young teacher - a move which will outrage the White Sox and please the Brown Sox. We predict the young teacher will keep his job unless he leaves in complete discouragement which probably is the hidden objective of the White Sox



players. We watch the young teacher struggle to be courageous and defend himself; we watch him be patient with his adversaries. We can see the principal is walking a tight rope in her balance between courage and patience.

Schools do not operate in isolation, and bilingual education is not a matter of methods or models. None of the schools in this article has indicated a willingness to reflect seriously on their hidden beliefs and resulting classroom behaviors. The school/community involvement varies in degree: from a state-mandated process which must be done, to Irene who is actively involved with the parents of the children in her class.

### **Recommendations and Final Reflection**

Our recommendations involve challenging long-held assumptions and redefining educators' roles. Following the advice of Cummins (1995), we recommend:

- bilingual students' language and culture needs to be fully incorporated in the school program;
- bilingual families' participation is encouraged as an integral component of the entire educational program;
- students are encouraged to actively use language to generate their own knowledge; and
- educators of the school become active advocates whose assessment is based on the entire context of the school (Cummins, 1995).

We are aware that each of the four models presented in this article can be improved philosophically and methodologically. A model is just that; it is meant to be reshaped, retooled, reframed based on the needs of the students and the community. We are reminded of the legacy of Paulo Freire in telling us that each of us must do the best we can in our own educational spaces in order to engage in transformative education.

The question we have for ourselves and our readers is: What can we do in our own contexts to create a fifth model of bilingual education which reflects our community and the new global realities? We close with a gentle suggestion of three possible goals: bilingualism/biliteracy, high academic achievement, and positive self-concept for ALL students.

As each of you create a model for your school, we ask that you think of the following words:

For more than 15 years, educators, policy makers, and researchers in the United States have known how to create educational context that will develop fluent bilingual and biliteracy abilities among all American students, including those from both bilingual and monolingual English home backgrounds. However, only a tiny fraction of American schools even aspire to promote biliteracy. Most, in fact, are deliberately structured to minimize the possibility of biliteracy even among students who come to school already bilingual. Schools continue the tradition of eradicating students' bilingualism under the guise of helping them learn English (Cummins, 1993, p. 9).

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