INNER-CITY YOUTHS, GANGS, AND SCHOOL: CONFLICT AND RESISTANCE

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have extensively explored the relationship between delinquency and education. However, research in this area has been primarily outcome focused, with an emphasis on quantitative methods; there is a dearth of process-oriented research on delinquency and education. Little attention has been given to the significance of the school setting and social interaction within that setting. The possibility that the constitutive nature of schools may play a role in (re)producing delinquents' substandard performance in and detachment from school has been largely ignored.

This paper builds on several different perspectives for its theoretical framework. Criminological and educational theorists point to the possible significance of lower-class youths' cultural milieus and school experiences. Cohen (1955) suggests that lower-class youths may not perform well in school, an institution that functions according to middle-class standards; these youths form a delinquent subculture due in large part to their failure in the school setting. Miller (1958) posits that lower-class youths' value systems include an anti-education element. Radical education theories argue that schools function to (re)produce existent inequalities through their adherence to dominant value systems and that therefore, marginalized students may resist school authority (MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). If lower-class or gang identity is as important as research suggests (Covey, Menard, Franzese 1992; Moore 1991; Spergel 1990; Vigil 1988), it is plausible that students may resist schools that seek to eliminate this identity.

Drawing upon classroom observations of and interviews with youths and teachers, this paper examines the internal dynamics of a state community school for paroled juveniles in a large southwestern city. Teachers attempted to convey to students, many of whom were minorities and gang members, the superiority of universalized notions of community, knowledge, and identity. In contrast, students' views of these issues were more localized, tied primarily to their neighborhoods. This conflict appeared to perpetuate and exacerbate the youths' disengagement from education. While in school, students devoted much of their time and energy to resistance of teachers' messages and dictates, rather than the completion of work assignments. These findings suggest that the constitutive social processes of the school worked to (re)produce delinquents' failure in and detachment from school.

In the first section of this paper, I present an overview of delinquency and education literature, gang research findings, and sociological studies of school resistance. Next, I discuss the research setting and methods. Following this, I present observation and interview data which illustrate conflict and resistance between students and teachers. In conclusion, I discuss the theoretical, policy, and research implications of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is an important causal variable in sociological theories of delinquency (Cloward, Ohlin 1960; Cohen 1955; Hawkins, Lishner 1987; Hirschi 1969). Cohen (1955) argues that lower-class youths' experiences of failure and frustration lead them to rebel against the middle-class and its representative institutions, including schools. Lower-class youths, on some internal level, desire middle-class status; however, their working class cultural "characteristics" and "capacities" hinder school achievement. These youths are likely to favor immediate gratification, have relatively low aspirations, be emotionally irrepressible, and be less concerned with outward appearance and personality than middle-class youths. In school, they are judged according to middle-class standards such as: ambition, proper speech and manners, and control of physical aggression. Faced with school failure and an extremely unlikely ascension to middle-class membership, these youths form a delinquent subculture that rejects middle-class values and their manifestations (e.g., property) while simultaneously providing status and ego preservation. Thus, they solve their "problem of status adjustment" through the formation of a delinquent subculture.

Miller (1958) argues that the "lower-class community" has a distinctive cultural content that promotes gang delinquency. Rather than being concerned with middle-class values, lower-class youths conform to adult and cultural standards that are

completely separate and distinct from the wider society. Formal education is considered effeminate, and school knowledge is not valued in a community whose "focal concerns" include "toughness" (Miller 1958).

Encouraged by such theoretical frameworks, numerous researchers have examined the correlations between delinquency and education. Several studies report a negative relationship between school performance (e.g., grades) and delinquency (Frease 1973a, 1973b; Hirschi 1969; Kelly 1971; Kelly, Balch 1971; Lawrence 1985; Rhodes, Reiss 1969). Correlational studies present an inverse relationship between school-bonding and delinquency (Hirschi 1969; Kelly, Pink 1973; Lawrence 1985). Other research has documented that school-bonding (Cernkovich, Giordano 1992; Jenkins 1995) and school performance (Chavez, Oetting, Swain 1994) are statistically significant predictors of variation in delinquency rates; namely, low bonding and/or poor performance helps explain greater delinquency involvement. Most research finds that the inverse relationship between delinquency and education is relatively unaffected by student background characteristics (e.g., class, race, gender) (Cernkovich, Giordano 1992; Chavez et al 1994; Hawkins, Lishner 1987). Moreover, some studies show a negative correlation between the time period when students are "out-of-school" and delinquency; this leads to speculation that negative school experiences may play a role in the facilitation of delinquent behavior (Elliot 1966; Elliot, Voss 1974; Phillips, Kelly 1979).

Not all research has documented a correlation between education and delinquency. Some studies find no relationship between the variables (Cox, Davidson, Bynum 1995; Wiatrowski, Hansell, Massey, Wilson 1982); other research points to the relative importance of other factors (e.g., peer association) (Elliot, Voss 1974; Lawrence 1991). In short, the relationship between delinquency and education requires further examination. Hawkins and Lishner (1987) note that "there remain important gaps in our understanding" of the delinquency-education connection. Most of all, to the extent that there is a causal relationship between delinquency and education, the mechanisms whereby this link is accomplished remain unspecified.

There is a clear need for process-oriented research in the delinquency and education area. Ogbu (1988, 1991) suggests that lower-class minorities may lack motivation for school success due to their perception of limited future career opportunities. Faced with an uncertain and limited place in the labor market, they may consider school as irrelevant to their adult careers. Although they may value education in the abstract, inferior schools and a lack of future opportunities lead them to consider school work and commitment as wasted energy. Consequently, they may become alienated from school, and, ironically, help seal their occupational fate (Ogbu 1988, 1991 Willis 1977).

Schools, like all of social life, are constituted by social interaction. Students may not be passive recipients of school knowledge and authority; several researchers have documented the significance of social interaction and student resistance within schools (Everhar 1983; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). Willis's (1977) seminal study discusses student resistance involving dress, rules, and knowledge among working-class youth at a secondary school in England. He links their school resistance to their world view, a view which is largely a result of their working class cultural background. MacLeod (1987) and Horowitz (1983 posit that teachers may not value the local ties and identity of inner-city youths, thus fueling these youths' resistance to and failure in school However, neither MacLeod nor Horowitz elaborate on the relationship between delinquency and education. Furthermore, neither of them spent a significant amount of time observing school settings.

Research indicates that most gangs exist in urban areas and usually consist of lower class, minority teenage males (Covey et al 1992; Moore 1991; Spergel 1990; Vigil 1988) Studies of gangs suggest that their members often have strong connections to these social groups, which provide a resource for status and identity (Cohen 1955; Covey et al 1992 Miller 1958; Moore 1991; Spergel 1990; Vigil 1988). Consequently, gang members may resist an institution that attempts to negate the social importance of the gang. Researchers have not examined the possible importance of gang identities in schooling interactions.

In sum, the literature on delinquency and education is hindered by a lack of field research in and focus on the school setting. Researchers have largely ignored the internal dynamics of schools and student resistance to school authority, & the role these factors may play in reproducing the delinquency-educatic

relationship. Sociological studies of student resistance, theories of delinquency, and the relative importance of the gang to its members suggest that schools that attempt to negate local identities may be marked by conflict and resistance. This paper provides a first step in addressing this research gap. The work of Cohen (1955) and Miller (1958) points to the relative importance of lower-class/gang culture for delinquency involvement, while Willis (1977) points to the possible significance of particular bases of identity for school resistance. Through a combination of these perspectives, this paper examines local/gang identity as a basis for student resistance.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

Research Setting

The community school where this research took place sought to "provide a positive and effective learning environment for youth transitioning to the community from a secure care facility" (Mission Statement). The school was run by the state department of corrections, and was located in an office building upstairs from the juvenile parole office. It was one component of a larger "partnership" program that sought to provide services to paroled juveniles in the community. The school provided an alternative education setting for youths who had a history of failure in public schools.

At any given time, there were two full-time teachers at the school, each with his/her own classroom. The lead teacher had been with the department of corrections for fifteen years, most of that time working at the state training school for males. During the first six months of operation, a principal was present at the school one day per week. Students could work on attaining an eighth grade diploma, public school credits, or a GED; in addition, pre-employment training was offered. Most of the students were minority males, many of whom were gang members. A total of 146 youths were enrolled during the schools year of operation; on average, youths would attend sporadically for a few months before being dropped from the rolls, the vast majority due to excessive absences. The school was open from June 1994 - July 1995, when it was closed due to state budget cuts in the area of community services. During its year of operation the school suffered from a lack of staff and material resources. Although this paper is quite critical of the school, this lack of resources, as well as the organizational limits imposed upon teachers (e.g., required student work assignments, enforcement of departmental regulations), should be kept in mind. Teachers struggled to do their jobs within the context of organizational constraints.

Students were required by their parole officer to attend class for two hours per day. They came to school to attend class and left immediately afterwards; thus, this was not a "regular" school where one had recreation, lunch, etc. Daily attendance at the school averaged 10-15 students. Student assignments were individualized; in theory, students should have entered the classroom, gotten their materials, and worked quietly.

Methods

I gained access to the school as an evaluator; consequently, I was a special type of "participant as observer" (Atkinson, Hammersley 1994). As a participant-observer, I wanted to understand the "ordinary, usual, typical, [and] routine" nature of the school (Jorgensen 1989). I was an observer at the school several days per week from July 1994-June 1995, spending over 400 hours in the field. I would enter a classroom in the morning and occupy a student desk. I would write down key words while in class and write up detailed field notes during school breaks and/or at the end of the day.

In addition, I interviewed the 4 teachers who worked at the school during its year of operation. I also completed 54 individual and group interviews with 33 students (some youths were interviewed multiple times) outside of the school setting. I bought lunch for the respondents in exchange for talking with me about the school, their neighborhoods, and their everyday lives. The interview formats ranged from structured, to storytelling, to open group conversations.

CONFLICT AND RESISTANCE

The research reveals that the teachers attempted to convey to students the superiority of universalized notions of community, knowledge, and identity. Teachers disparaged and attempted to negate what was important to the students--their local community and knowledge and their gang identity. This conflict resulted in teachers struggling daily to impose their perspective and values on students. Although the school was an alternative to regular schools, the teachers' orientations were similar to those described by Cohen

(1955). The teachers' attempted imposition was met with obdurate student resistance; this resistance was often a consequence of the local basis of their lives.

The Teachers' Perspective

For the teachers, the school was a place where students had the opportunity to be "successful" and prepare to "enter the world of work." The school provided an opportunity, according to the teachers, for the youths to learn the necessary behavioral and cognitive requirements to be good workers and citizens in the future. In order to achieve these goals, teachers sought to have students dress, talk, and act in ways that did not reflect their local lives, but rather reflected a universal, objective type of identity. Students were often told that if they could learn "self-control" in school, if they could learn to dress, behave, and inter-act in appropriate ways, then they had the opportunity to leave their local environment and lead decent lives. As one teacher stated:

> Part of what I teach is behavior modification, self-discipline. When they go to the job, they got to have that, whether it's professional, sales, an assembly line. Companies said they want this, self-discipline, before they come to the job.

One way by which teachers strived to instill their perspective in students was through the enforcement of official rules. Official school rules attempted to negate the students locally based dress styles and writing forms. These rules included: shirts tucked in; all belts in loopholes, not hanging; pants pulled up to waist; no colors (rags), no hats, headbands or bandanas; and no graffiti or tagging of any type (Youth Rules and Regulations). By trying to require the students to dress and write in ways which did not signal identification with local culture and identity, teachers hoped to negate youths' manifestations of their local lives. For the teachers, gang dress styles suggested that the students were still connected to their local communities.

Through their interactions and conversations with students, teachers also attempted to disparage and curtail the local aspects of youths' existence. Students wanted and tried to talk about their activities outside the school (e.g., encounters with police, rival gangs). The teachers constantly had to direct the students to be "quiet", "focus", and "stay on task". Students were repeatedly told by teachers that they were "only concerned about what goes o in the classroom", "did not care about th extra-curricular," and "did not care what yo do once you leave here." One teacher told th students that because of their "cultural bacl ground" all they knew was the "barrio life", an therefore they were lacking knowledge abo the real world. Through such directives, teacl ers made it clear that the only importa interaction at the school was objective, educa tional discourse. Yet, although teachers trie to curtail students' discussions about the lives, they would occasionally lecture to th students about the various problems in th students' local communities. Students wer lectured to on gangs, AIDS, crime, teenag pregnancy, drive-by shootings, suicide, an youth promiscuity. According to the teacher the students' local communities were lackin any positive attributes; students should see to escape from their local environments, di avow them, and become good citizens an workers.

One particular area stands out in rega to the teachers' perspective of students' loc identity, gang membership and involvemer One teacher repeatedly referred to gang wr ing (on folders, papers, school property) a "being like a dog, leaving a scent". He blame gangs for most street crime, and told youth that "we would not have all the trouble we c if it was not for gangs". Teachers often told th students that they "had to get out of" and reje the gang life in order to make it in life. Anoth teacher, in an interview, referred to gangs a a "low level mentality" phenomena and state that she could envision the day when su criminals were forced to live in isolation fro the rest of society. Thus, as a consequence teachers' views on gangs, there was no su stantive dialogue or interaction with studen about an extremely important aspect of th lives. Student discussions and expressions gang activities and identities were express forbidden, and viewed only negatively in th classroom.

The teachers' lectures on communiti and gangs were related to views about "know edge". When students became frustrated w school work and/or called themselves "st pid", the teachers would often respond "n body is stupid, anybody can be smart, y learn through [education] experience... repe tion". This message, although positive, al implies that students who do not have star ard educational knowledge are lacking inte

gence. One teacher constantly told the students that they were "street smart *and* book dumb"; he would often tell them that the "younger generation thinks they know it all" but "they learn from their home boy/girls". The word "and" is italized above because it illustrates the teachers' view on students' knowledge. The things that students learn on the streets are invalid, what youths learn from their friends is "no good" according to the teachers. It is only through books that one can attain real, important knowledge. The students' social world on the streets is worthless, and thus, knowledge of it is meaningless and not legitimate, according to the teachers. This perspective ignored the necessity of street smarts for students' survival (especially those who were gang members). One teacher often told me that because of the students' limited knowledge, he lectured to them about the evils of their communities, hoping that a "little information would go a long way". He hoped to "teach them, make them knowledgeable [about their world]," so that they could avoid being enmeshed in their communities and future legal problems.

In sum, for the teachers, the key to the students' success was the renunciation of their local identities, community, and knowledge. By dressing, talking, learning, and writing in appropriate ways, ways that did not reflect their local lives but instead were a reflection of dominant cultural standards, the students had an opportunity to become productive, obedient workers and good citizens.

Student Resistance

Previous delinquency and education research has largely ignored the significance and meaning of student activities within the school setting. Yet, students are not necessarily passive classroom participants. They actively resist the attempted imposition of hegemonic cultural ideologies and values, drawing upon their own culture and life experiences (Cohen 1955; Giroux 1983; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). At the community school, the attempted teaching and enforcement of dominant values was met with resistance by most of the students. These youths strongly valued their local identities and life experiences, and usually did not allow teachers to curtail their expression within the school setting. Thus, an extraordinary amount of school time was spent resisting teachers' rules and dictates, rather than doing school work. Most fundamentally, the school was a place where a minuscule amount of educational work was performed by students.

Most of the students interviewed liked the school for non-educational reasons; namely, its hours were short, and it provided the opportunity to be with similar peers and meet members of the opposite sex. This is similar to Willis's (1977) documentation of the lads' schooling experiences. Other interview respondents complained about the repetitive nature of the work assignments and wished the community school was more like a "regular school" (e.g., a variety of classes). Students' belief that the school was inferior corresponds with Ogbu's (1988, 1991) argument that minorities often believe that they are offered an inferior education.

Regardless of their views about the school, however, few work assignments were completed there. Student resistance at the community school classroom took several forms. Students often refused to follow school dress and writing regulations. They would dress in ways which signified their local cultural and social identities (e.g., Cholo, gang); they would often "tag" their school work and school property (desks, bookshelves) with gang names to indicate their local identity. An example from field notes indicates the futile nature of the teachers' efforts to negate students' local identities through the enforcement of official rules that prohibited their manifestations:

> A teacher tells a student that his gang belt buckles are inappropriate, that he cannot wear them at the school. The student puts his arm out, points to his gang tattoo, and says to the teacher, what are you going to do, take this off too? When the teacher turns around the student emphatically flashes his gang sign at him.

Students resisted teachers' attempts to have them dress and write in ways that conformed. For example, they often refused to tuck in their shirts, or write in traditional cursive (non-tagging style). Thus, every day, a large portion of teachers' and students' activities and interactions centered on struggles over and resistance to compliance with school regulations.

Students also resisted the completion of their work assignments. They would often fake the completion of work; spend their time talking with peers about local people, activities,

and events; simply stare out the window; or pretend to be sleeping. They made incredibly frequent trips to the bathroom and water cooler. They would, when possible, move the teachers' clocks forward and begin to ask whether they could leave for the day prior to the completion of their hours. In fact, perhaps the best description of what students did at the school is "time." They knew they had to be there, per their parole officer's order, but they usually attempted to do their time without doing school work. An example from field notes aptly illustrates this perspective:

> Jimmy enters the classroom and goes to the teacher's desk to sign in. He signs in and asks the teacher what he should write for his sign out time. The teacher proceeds to try and have Jimmy figure it out for himself through addition- "You came in at 9:00 am, you have to stay two (2) hours, so what time would that be?" The student responds: "Don't do fuckin math, just tell me what time I leave."

In sum, students resisted the teachers' attempts to instill in them the importance of objective knowledge and an identity which negated their local life experiences. Teachers' efforts to have youths dress, write, and talk in ways that did not correspond with the youths' local bonds were usually unsuccessful. Youths' interview statements reveal the local basis of their resistance to the teachers' messages.

Students' resistance to school rules and teachers' directives was primarily rooted within the significance of the local: local knowledge, local neighborhood/community, and gang identity. The strength and importance of the local cannot be overstated. During interviews they would express shock and confusion when I asked them if they "liked their neighborhood"; for them, where they were from should be accorded loyalty and respect. Youths' ties to their neighborhood/gang are often extremely strong, providing them with love, support, and family-like ties. The following 17 year-old black male gang member noted:

> BS: Do you like your hood?
> Student: I love it.
> BS: Why?
> Student: I like it, cause when I started out in the hood, when I was young, running around, a little dirtbag, always dirty, always in trouble, the OG's [Original Gangsters] and [gang] seen me, said cut out. When I ran away from home, got in trouble with my mom, they took me in, said stay with me. Even though they were selling dope and everything, they still showed a young brother love, showed me much love. And I was like, I'm always going give love back to the hood. I'm going love the hood forever no matter what goes down.

This local identity was both a present reality and a future vision for many youths. The above youth said he would continue to be a gang member until he was "in his coffin." The following interview excerpt is from a 14 year old female Mexican gang member who started her own gang:

> BS: Why did you start it?
> Student: Cause I wanted to make my own gang, and when I get older be an OG [Original Gangster]. I wanna make it real big so everybody can know about it. Because, this is how I think, when I grow older and everything, and the gang's real big, it'll be like, the leader is me. I'll be real happy, I'll be a "veterana," sitting there in my wheelchair with my teardrop tattoo. It'll be bad.

Some youths expressed a desire to preserve their connection to and identification with the local in the future, even if they had the means by which to escape. A 15 year-old Mexican female illustrated this view:

> Student: I grew up in the projects. I always lived in the projects. My mom used to tell me, where do you want to move, an apartment or the projects? And I liked the project, there's a lot of people there. If I had money, I wouldn't go to no big house. I'd go to the projects, because I like them, I'm used to them.

Street knowledge, dismissed as irrelevant and unimportant by the teachers, was highly valued by the youths, and was essential to their survival in a dangerous environment. Many youths concurred with the following perspective of a 16 year-old black male gang member:

> BS: Who do you know that's smart?
> Student: Me.
> BS: Why?
> Student: I know I'm smart because I made it this far. Half the people in our hood didn't make it this far, you can barely make it this far. So I must be doing something right, I got street intelligence, street smarts. I'm gangbanging and I'm alive,

just to make it to 18, that's intelligence.

Students' interview statements indicate the continuing importance of local knowledge, community, and identity in their everyday lives. Thus, the teachers' attempt to negate the local basis, in order to formally educate students, was largely futile.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has illustrated the significance of the internal dynamics at a state community school for paroled juveniles. The main research finding is the students' locally-based resistance to teachers rules, directives, and values. In agreement with previous resistance research (e.g., Willis 1977), and explorations of school and street identity conflicts (Horowitz 1983; MacLeod 1987), teachers and students at the community school had different views on what constituted appropriate identities, communities, and knowledge. The unique contribution of this research is its illustration of the local basis of this resistance, and how gang membership and identity may conflict with schools' objectives. Especially in regards to the importance of gang membership and its expressions, students and teachers came into conflict. Due, at least in part, to these differences, little school work was completed by students. This resulted in a (re)production of students' failure and detachment from education. Since failure in school is often correlated with delinquency, it is plausible that students in this study were at a heightened risk to return to their delinquency involvement.

Explanations of the students' activities and failure at the community school must be placed within the general context of their everyday lives. They live in urban areas, which in their own words were marked by violence, poverty, disarray, and extreme uncertainty; many of them did not expect to live beyond their twenties. Their school resistance can be partly explained by the apparent irrelevance school success had for their futures and their belief that the school offered an inferior education (MacLeod 1987; Ogbu 1988, 1991; Willis 1977). This general context must be kept in mind, however, the fact remains that the school and its staff attempted to negate the legitimacy of youths' bonds and identities.

The community school was one correctional response to gangs; it represented special assistance to youths who had not been successful in public schools. The school rules and teachers' messages, and students' resistance to them, should be located within the general organizational context of the school (DiMaggio, Powell 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) suggest that although organizations may diversify (e.g., the community school), their functions often mirror the general organizational context. Thus, the community school's views of students and their communities can be found in the department of corrections' orientational philosophy, a philosophy that is anti-gang membership. Students expressed an extreme dislike for the "law" and "police" during interviews. As the community school represented one more control institution in their lives, it is plausible that part of their resistance was due to this factor.

The work of Cohen (1955) and Miller (1958) provides another possible explanation for the school's internal dynamics. Teachers blamed the students' communities for their failure, and thus seemed to view those communities as fundamentally inferior to and "different" from conventional society; many students also expressed a desire to remain in their particular communities, rather than join mainstream society (Miller 1958). Although we find some support for Miller's perspective, he does not consider how lower and middle-class cultures and values may come into conflict with one another in particular settings. Teachers attempted to convey to youths conventional middle-class values and beliefs, and the youths rejected this attempt (Cohen 1955). However, I have suggested that students resisted school not because they desired middle-class status (e.g., Cohen 1955), but because the school did not value their life experiences and local identities. These students *already had gang identities*, and did not form or join gangs because of school failure. This research, then, both supports & expands upon Cohen's and Miller's frameworks. Sociological studies of school resistance, which place a primary focus on social interactions, provide the framework for this expansion. These studies indicate how youths and teachers, armed with different cultural values and beliefs, may come into conflict and resist one another in the school setting. As Pfohl (1994) reminds us, "[d]eviants never exist except in relation to those who attempt to control them".

The findings of this study indicate an appropriate future direction for delinquency and education research. Perhaps most importantly, this study points to the potential of

field methods in this research area. Such methods open up the black box of schooling and can best elaborate the delinquency and education relationship. Researchers should examine whether official rules and social processes of schools reinforce and (re)produce delinquents' detachment from education, especially in relation to gang membership.

The irony is that teachers at the "community" school attempted to create an environment that silenced and repressed students' discussions about and symbolic expressions of their local lives. The ethnographic and interview data indicate how important local/gang identity is to some youths, and how they may resist institutions' attempts to negate this identity. These findings point to some important policy recommendations. It may be necessary for teachers working with special student populations to reflect upon and reconsider traditional teaching methods. School personnel working with such populations should explore ways to make school rules and teachers directives more accepting of and relevant to students' social and cultural identities. Connecting formal work assignments to the students' everyday lives outside of the classroom may also be useful.

Of course, one cannot expect school to be a panacea for the youths' lives; as the principal stated: "the kids needs are expansive, diverse, school can only offer [what it can] and try to do it well." For the most part, the teachers did try to 'do it well", and expressed a genuine concern for the well-being of the students. However, this research reveals that due to identity conflicts, the reality of youths' everyday lives, and the resistance that this created, neither teachers nor students were able to "do school" well.

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