CSE CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC EDUCATION
Leading educational thinking and practice

What is PISA 2018 telling Australia? And are we listening?

Peter Adams

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(*The Centre for Strategic Education (CSE) is the business name adopted in 2006 for the Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria (IARTV). Therefore, publications which were previously published in the name of IARTV are now published in the name of CSE.)

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Introduction

Should Australia's declining scores on the world's largest assessment of reading literacy, mathematics and science be sending shock waves through our education community? Or do we simply need to become better listeners to what the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is telling us?

Germany experienced the so-called 'PISA shock' in 2000[1] when, contrary to expectations, its scores were not only below the OECD average but – in a country which at the time prided itself on its egalitarianism – the results revealed a strong link between socioeconomic status and student performance. That is, disadvantaged and immigrant students did poorly when compared to others. The nation's self-perception of a high-performing and equitable system was seriously shaken. In response, Germany listened closely to the messages from PISA and then doubled education spending, with much greater support to disadvantaged and immigrant students, and early childhood education was massively expanded. Germany had the commitment, good sense and the will to heed and respond to what PISA was telling it.

To begin with, however, what is PISA all about?

About PISA

PISA is the OECD's[2] international snapshot of education, measuring how well students can apply their knowledge and skills to answer questions set in unfamiliar contexts. It is administered every three years. In addition to testing 15 year-olds' performance in reading literacy, mathematics and science,[3] PISA also explores students' knowledge and skills in what the OECD calls the 'Innovative Domain'. Innovative domains have included 'Collaborative Problem Solving' (see OECD, 2017, re PISA 2015 results) and 'Global Competence' (see OECD, 2020, re PISA 2018 results). PISA is described by the OECD as testing student 'knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges'.[4] It is this link to the expected demands on students in their work and life after school that makes PISA so important.

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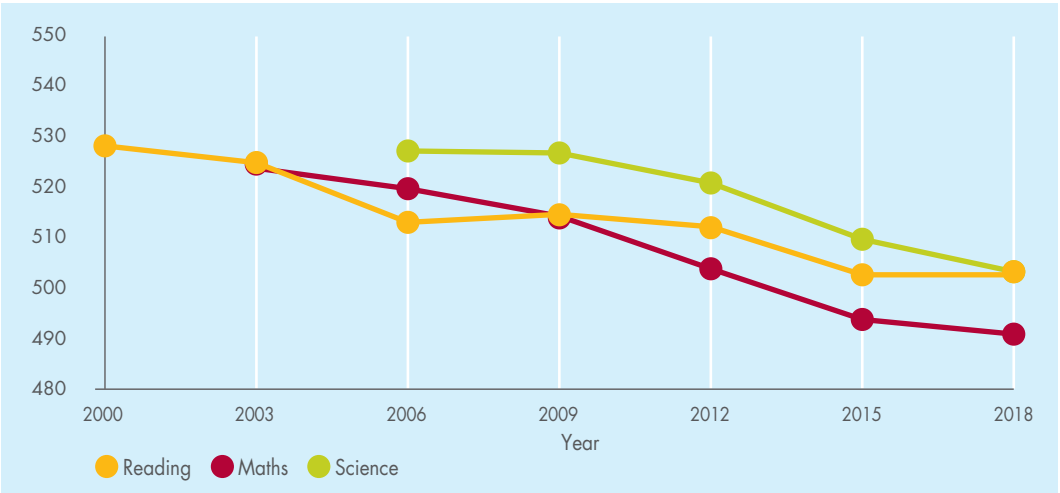
The PISA 2018 results[5] for approximately 600,000 students from 79 participating countries and economies have yet again shown that Australia's performance continues to decline (see Figure 1). The average performance of Australian students in PISA in reading literacy declined 26 points between 2000[6] and 2018. Between 2003[7] and 2018, our scores fell by 33 points in mathematics, and in science scores fell 24 points in the period 2006[8] to 2018. For the reader who is less familiar with PISA scoring, it can be helpful to express score points as years of schooling. Thus, over the nearly twenty years of PISA testing (2000 to 2018), Australian reading scores have fallen the equivalent of three-quarters of a year of schooling, mathematics the equivalent of one year of schooling, and science almost one year of schooling.

Also, in PISA 2018, twenty per cent of Australian students did not reach Proficiency Level 2 in Reading – the level considered necessary to be a competent student and citizen. From every viewpoint, these constitute a bad set of numbers because they keep heading in the wrong direction. Most importantly, they are bad numbers because they highlight an absolute decline over time in the scores Australian students are achieving as measured on the PISA scale. They are not showing a relative decline that can be explained away by changes to the rank order of countries on the scale. So, should we be in 'PISA shock'?

Figure 1. Australian achievement trends



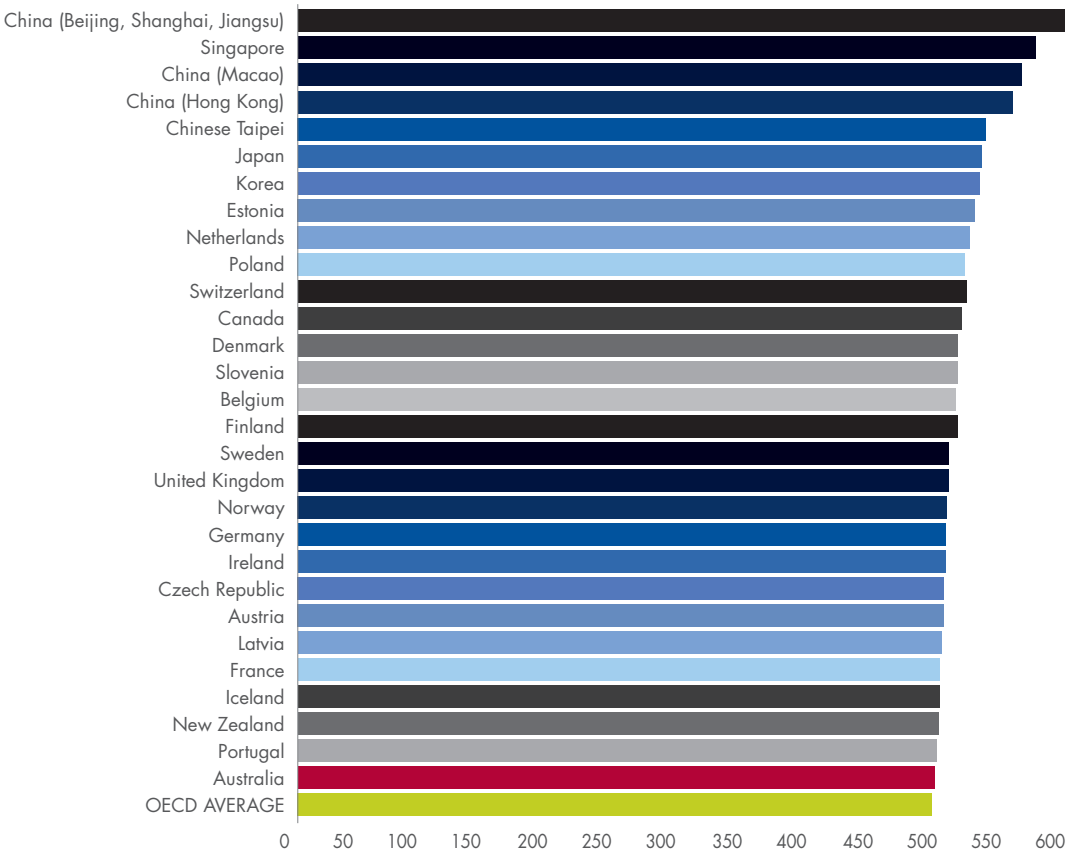
Source: pivotal.acer.edu.au/gb/pisa/key-findings-2018.

Shock? No – mainly because this downward trend has been continuing for nearly 20 years, so is not new, but also, the decline notwithstanding, Australia still achieves respectable scores and rankings in PISA; so, we are not yet in crisis mode. However, we need to understand what's going on, because Australian educators everywhere and at every level can benefit from listening carefully to what PISA findings can tell us. While it is true that researchers in both government and non-government organisations across the country analyse PISA data extensively, and produce many high-quality reports and commentaries about the results,[9] what impact are they having? Are the important messages from PISA finding their way into our national, state and territory education systems, schools, and classrooms?

National and international perspectives

To begin with, we certainly need to analyse what I call the 'macro' dimensions of PISA. These relate to Australia's performance as a nation. We should start by interrogating all of the 2018 PISA data, so we can genuinely and extensively learn from it. To better understand what is going on we need to be outward looking. 2018 in many ways is similar to previous PISA cycles, insofar as we see many of the same countries rising to the top of the rankings[10] (see Figure 2). We must understand why Singapore, for example, continues to perform so well, and investigate what underlies Estonia's ongoing success. That is, we need to revisit Singapore's excellence in educational

Figure 2. Rankings of mean test scores, by country, in PISA 2018



Source: Mean test scores by subject in PISA testing 2018, ACER 2019.

organisation and practice. Singapore once learned much from other countries; we can now learn from her.

Some obvious successful Singaporean policies and practices include

- 100 hours per year per teacher of professional learning and development;
- close integration and collaboration between teacher training (via the National Institute for Education, or NIE) and the Ministry of Education and principals and schools;[11]
- formal and extensive mentoring and support for teachers;
- collaboration in planning as well as execution of lessons;
- the inclusion of research work as part and parcel of training and teaching;
- heavy investment in the quality of the teaching force;
- competitive pay rates for teachers that match those of other professionals; and, overall,
- a view of education as an 'ecosystem' where all the parts influence each other and the whole.[12]

What features should we be looking at in Estonia?[13]

For one, high-quality early years education has been made a priority. Most children commence kindergarten at age three. This tender age is met with predominantly play activities interspersed with more formal instruction, gradually introduced over many years. There is an emphasis on children being physically and emotionally ready to learn.

- Estonia has acknowledged the risks of streaming students according to ability, and consequently it is not an Estonian practice. Students study in mixed ability groups.
- While there is a national curriculum, there is a good deal of teacher autonomy in relation to organising teaching and learning.
- Formal, summative assessments do not feature in the way they do in many countries, although that may be changing somewhat.
- Most importantly, student wellbeing seems to be in good shape as well. '89 per cent of Estonian students feel happy and cheerful always or most of the time'.[14]
- Estonian students also experience fear of failure less than their peers in other countries.

Australia might also consider how, like Finland,[15] we might facilitate more frequent early intervention in classes for students demonstrating difficulties. We might more formally and frequently acknowledge that many students require special assistance. To wit, 'special education in Finland is for all students, based on the assumption that at some points of our lives all of us need support and help to move forward' (Sahlberg, 2015, p 65).

We know, also, that East Asian countries, similarly to Estonia, Finland and Canada,[16] have teachers, parents and a general public who 'tend to share the belief that all students are capable of high achievement' (Schleicher, 2018, p 68). Asian teachers are not only helping students succeed, they are also helping them to believe it is their own ability and effort that are the basis for their success. Students, teachers and parents believe success is closely linked to hard work. In pursuit of increased equity, could we even emulate high-performing nations like Singapore who have their best teachers teaching their most disadvantaged students?

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Exploring the findings more deeply

For better understanding, we should compare the PISA assessment frameworks to our national curriculum, to explore if any differences in our PISA performance are related to differences in student content knowledge. While Australia, like all PISA-participating countries and economies, can influence the content that is selected for inclusion in the tests, research (such as that by Associate Professor Margaret Wu of Melbourne University) has shown that variations in content and emphases in mathematics curriculums, for example, might play a part in affecting student performance given the national cohort follows an Australian national curriculum.[17]

Australia should analyse its own national assessment program's data (NAPLAN data) against PISA results to see what that tells us. PISA is not based on any one curriculum, NAPLAN is. Both are high-quality and robust assessment regimes, but they have a different focus and emphasis. It is important to see NAPLAN and PISA data as complementary rather than, as some think, a duplication in assessment. We must also be more discerning with some of our education spending. A clear OECD PISA message is that more money does not necessarily buy better education. When beyond meeting the necessary minimum, additional spending needs to be particularly well targeted if it is to be effective. In terms of resourcing, of critical importance are possible links between our PISA performance and the ever-present shortage of maths and science teachers in this country. The shortage of qualified teachers in these disciplines is chronic and alarming.

We must, of course, address the continuing performance divide between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and between indigenous and non-indigenous students. This latter gap remains measured by score differences in the magnitude of many years of schooling. In the major PISA domains, indigenous students perform approximately two to three years of schooling lower than non-indigenous students.

The percentage of our students with a 'growth mind set' (receptive to learning and personal development) is only slightly above the OECD average. We must learn more about what motivates and engages students. We need to explore resilience because it is an important lesson to learn from PISA findings which, in every round, identify students who exceed expectations, given their socioeconomic circumstances. These are students who 'punch above their weight' and send a message to everyone that disadvantage does not have to become destiny.

Unfortunately, in Australia, ... it seems that the impact of PISA lessons on classroom practice generally is weak.

PISA messages for systems, schools and classrooms

Turning now to the more 'micro' features of PISA and its findings – are PISA messages influencing schools? And classrooms? Are they bearing on what is happening at teacher training institutes? Are they affecting the quality of teaching and learning? Unfortunately, in Australia, the answer in most places is probably no, because it seems that the impact of PISA lessons on classroom practice generally is weak. Some readers might disagree. However, this impression has been frequently and powerfully reinforced for me when so many teachers tell me they

are unaware of PISA, both what it is and its purpose. While certainly not intended in any sense as a criticism of teachers, this fact strongly suggests to me that schools and teachers generally are not engaging with PISA findings. If this is true, then there are many lost opportunities.

So, for schools, teachers and students why does PISA matter? The answer to this relates to broader questions about the purposes and content of PISA. What exactly do PISA findings have to offer education at system, school and classroom level? Well, I have for a long time argued that if PISA is taken as a whole, not just piecemeal as a set of test performance scores and associated rankings, then in aggregate there is a wealth of expert PISA-related knowledge, information and advice that can be very legitimately and effectively linked to what happens in schools and classrooms. The OECD is very clear what is in focus for PISA and its relevance to schools and students:

> *The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses the extent to which 15 year old students near the end of their compulsory education have acquired the knowledge and skills that are* ***essential for full participation in modern societies.*** *The assessment does not just ascertain whether students can reproduce knowledge; it also examines how well students can* ***extrapolate from what they have learned and can apply that knowledge in unfamiliar settings, both in and outside of school.*** *This approach reflects the fact that modern economies reward individuals not for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know.* (Emphasis added.)
>
> (OECD, 2019a, p 3)

Expressed in another way, by Andreas Schleicher[18]

> *To do well in PISA, students have to be able to extrapolate from what they know, think across the boundaries of subject-matter disciplines, apply their knowledge creatively in novel situations and demonstrate effective learning strategies.*
>
> (OECD, 2019b)

Given the focus and purpose of PISA, it is difficult to argue that PISA is marginal to teaching and learning. In fact, the report volumes, the data sets, the vast analyses and commentaries that comprise the full PISA package contain an abundance of high-value content. Unfortunately, it seems (with the exception of the short-term global media hype around the launch of results[19]) what PISA as a whole offers is not reaching sufficient numbers among those who are directly responsible for the education of our young people. What's more, excessive publicity is given to 'league tables' to the detriment of critical and enduring PISA lessons. In fact, in total, tables depicting rankings comprise about 1 per cent of all PISA reporting. The foundational and explanatory content is where the real value lies for schools and teachers.

excessive publicity is given to 'league tables' to the detriment of critical and enduring PISA lessons. In fact, in total, tables depicting rankings comprise about 1 per cent of all PISA reporting. The foundational and explanatory content is where the real value lies for schools and teachers.

An example of the potential value of PISA's work for improved teaching and learning

One example of the potential value of PISA's work for improved teaching and learning can be found in its Assessment and Analytical Frameworks.[20] These documents contain essential and important insights and understandings on each of the domains. A prime example is the PISA Reading Framework, which was revised for 2018 'to reflect the changing definition of reading literacy as well as

the changing contexts in which reading is used in citizens' lives.'[21] The framework (freely available to all via the OECD's website) thus provides comprehensive and authoritative information and advice on contemporary theories of reading literacy, and how students acquire and use information in a variety of contexts. English faculties and teachers stand to gain a great deal from exploring the extensive work undertaken by OECD expert groups who, for example, explain how in the latter years of schooling the focus must be 'on reading literacy skills that include finding, selecting, interpreting, integrating and evaluating information from the full range of texts associated with situations that extend beyond the classroom.'[22] In particular, the framework considers the significance of more integrated information technologies as digital communication is investigated and contextualised. The framework explains how it is no longer sufficient to assess student reading proficiency on the basis of a single text. It explains the importance of skills such as: 'the deployment of complex information-processing strategies, including the analysis, synthesis, integration and interpretation of relevant information from multiple text (or information) sources'[23]

The document continues to explore, expansively:

- changing definitions of reading literacy;
- major text types;
- the nature of understanding;
- processes of evaluating and reflecting;
- intrinsic motivation and interest in reading; and
- reporting reading proficiency.

PISA frameworks for mathematics, science and the innovative domains[24] provide equally expert and comprehensive information and direction for the professional educator. They are a perfect example of the circular bond between curriculum (including instruction), assessment and reporting. In 2018, as in previous series, important information and advice was provided to educators. One expert commentary declares that

> *(PISA) gives us regular information on educational outcomes within and across countries. We can form insights into the range of skills and competencies in reading, mathematics and science that are considered essential to a person's ability to participate in and contribute fully to society, particularly one that is experiencing rapid technological change … PISA lets us observe the similarities and differences between educational policies and practices. It lets researchers and others observe what is possible for students to achieve and what environments are most likely to help student learning.*
> (Thomson et al, 2019, p1)

Beyond the scores and rankings

The extensive volumes reporting PISA results that accompany and follow on from the public release of the findings[25] are much more than data and ranking tables. If we take a representative sample of the diversity and importance of PISA analyses from 2018 in Volumes I, II and III, we can discover what are typical PISA topics that contain expert advice and insights, such as

- how PISA and the OECD are helping countries build national systems for monitoring learning goals;
- what resources are available and invested in education;

The extensive volumes reporting PISA results that accompany and follow on from the public release of the findings are much more than data and ranking tables.

- the challenges of student and language diversity;
- variations in students' socioeconomic status and in their performance;
- factors related to academic resilience;
- the use of digital devices;
- trends in students' exposure to bullying at school;
- how bullying is related to school climate; and
- how teacher enthusiasm is related to student behaviour and motivation.

These are characteristic examples of critical PISA content that can effectively support research and decision making, at the system, school and classroom level.

I would like to conclude with two final reflections. The first is from Andreas Schleicher, who commented in 2018, that

> *The most amazing lesson from PISA is that, despite their many differences, high-performing schools and education systems share certain features that transcend cultural, national and linguistic borders. That's why it is worthwhile studying education from a global perspective.*
>
> (p 39–40)

it is incumbent on us to extract from PISA anything that has the potential to benefit and support the provision of quality education in Australia – at system, school and classroom level.

The second is from President Emeritus of the NCEE.[26] While expertly explaining why Shanghai's PISA scores are credible and are to be 'believed', Tucker (2020) makes the following forceful observation in response to those seeking to detract from Shanghai's remarkable PISA performance, rather than learning from it.

> *There is no evidence that American education research has made any difference at all in the achievement of our high school graduates in all that time.* ***Maybe a little humility is in order. Maybe it is time to admit that we have something to learn from other countries.*** (Emphasis added)

The OECD and associated countries created PISA to enable comparisons in educational performance between participating countries worldwide. It was also designed to help school systems globally better understand what other systems are doing and achieving in their policies, programs and practices. Accordingly, it is incumbent on us to extract from PISA anything that has the potential to benefit and support the provision of quality education in Australia – at system, school and classroom level.

Endnotes

1. The first PISA international survey.
2. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, headquartered in Paris.
3. The OECD rotates these three domains every cycle, where one domain will become the 'major' domain and the other two become the minor domains. For example, science literacy was the major domain and focus for PISA 2015. Mathematics and reading in that assessment were minor domains.
4. oecd.org/pisa/.
5. Released in Paris, December 2019, and see references for OECD 2019a and b.
6. 2000 was the commencement date of PISA testing, with the major domain being reading.
7. 2003 was the first year with mathematics as the major domain.
8. 2006 was the first year with science literacy as the major domain.
9. Most prominent is the work of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).
10. Notwithstanding some notable changes in position of some countries and economies.
11. Noting the key role played by the Principals Academy, Singapore.
12. Recommended reading on Singapore's educational accomplishments includes: (1) Goodwin, A L, Low, E and Darling-Hammond, L (2017) *Empowered Educators in Singapore*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA; (2) Ng, P K (2017) *Learning from Singapore: The Power of Paradoxes*, Routledge, New York; and (3) Tucker, M (2019) *Leading High-Performance School Systems, Lessons from the World's Best,* ASCD/NCEE, Washington DC.
13. In the 2015 PISA results, Estonia came third in science and in reading was ranked sixth.
14. www.hm.ee/en/activities/statistics-and-analysis/pisa.
15. Despite Finland's more recent decline in PISA performance, it remains an important model to support considered thought and reflection on how things might be done differently.
16. All high-performing countries on PISA.
17. And even prior to the advent of the Australian Curriculum, state and territory curriculums were very similar in content for mathematics.
18. Director for Education and Skills Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General.
19. Coverage, interest and hype on an international scale difficult to match with any other education 'event'.
20. See oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-assessment-and-analytical-framework_5c07e4f1-en.
21. See oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-assessment-and-analytical-framework_5c07e4f1-en p 22.
22. See oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-assessment-and-analytical-framework_5c07e4f1-en p 22.
23. See oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2018-assessment-and-analytical-framework_5c07e4f1-en p 23.
24. When each of mathematics, science and reading, in turn, becomes the major domain in the PISA assessment cycle.
25. Typically, Volumes I and II are published at the time of the release of PISA results, and up to four additional volumes will follow in succession.
26. National Centre for Education and the Economy, Washington DC.

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About the Author

Peter Adams is the Melbourne-based Global Director for The Balanced Scorecard for Schools Program at Marshall Cavendish Education, Singapore. The program focuses on school evaluation and school improvement utilising the findings of international research on policies, programs and practice that have been conspicuously successful. Peter is currently also an expert advisor to His Excellency Dr Ahmad bin Abdullah Humaid Belhoul Al Falasi, Minister of State for Higher Education, United Arab Emirates, and is a former advisor to His Excellency Dr Ahmed Al aessa, Minister of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Peter was Senior Manager, PISA, at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, with overall responsibility for the management of the 2018 PISA assessment globally. He was also Project Director for the National Assessment Program in Saudi Arabia, and the inaugural General Manager, Assessment and Reporting at the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) responsible for: NAPLAN, the NAP Sample Assessments; the My School website; and the NAPLAN Online Program. Prior to that he was General Manager, Assessment for Schools at the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), General Manager at Education Services Australia (ESA), National Manager Education and Assessment at Pearson, and VCE Examinations Manager at the VCAA. Peter is also the author of *The Balanced Scorecard for Schools* (MCE, Singapore), has 18 years' experience in teaching and is married with four children.

About the Paper

The author explores Australia's declining performance in the OECD's PISA program, then considers how government, education systems and schools across Australia might make better use of the extensive body of knowledge and advice provided with each PISA round of testing. He argues educators must go well beyond just international comparisons of PISA scores and country rankings, and utilise the expert advice the OECD offers, based upon the work of its analysts, authors and expert advisory groups. He argues there is much to learn and benefit from in PISA, at both the 'macro' and 'micro' level, provided we look and listen carefully, and are sufficiently humble to accept authoritative and wise advice.

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