Comparing sail training and landbased youth development activities: a pilot study

Luke McCarthy and Ben Kotzee

Introduction

The value of adventure and experience of the outdoors to education and general personal development has long been stressed, with some authors tracing the idea as far as Homer and Plato (Hattie et al, 1987: 43). A more obvious history of adventure education can be traced from the Victorian era – with its romantic idealisation of the experience of nature (Hopkins and Putnam, 1993: 4) – to today. Whilst some of the effect of outdoor or adventure education programmes may lie in the positive impact of such programmes on physical fitness, experiencing the outdoors environment was seen (by both classical and Victorian authors) as an important factor in general social development. This view has been supported since from the 1960s onwards through a number of empirical studies that seek to justify the effectiveness of such programmes and that sketch exactly what the benefits of such programmes are (Ewert, 1987: 14).

Using ships and the sea in adventure education also has a history that can be traced back to the mid-19th century (McCulluch, 2002: 70). By the mid-20th century "sail-training" had become more formalised, with, for instance, the establishment of the (UK) Sail Training Association (now the Tall Ships Youth Trust) and the International Sail Training Association (both in 1956). Today, there are more than 30 organisations in the UK alone providing sail training on more than 50 craft. The primary purpose of these organisations is not necessarily to teach young people to sail, but rather to develop life skills more generally through involvement with sailing. Thus, Holt holds that sail training is "less training for the sea than training through the sea" (McCulloch, 2002: 10).

The effectiveness of sail training as a youth development tool has been studied using a number of approaches: both in-depth studies of single sail-training programmes (e.g. Gordon et al. 1996, Grocott, 1999 and Finkelstein and Goodwin, 2005) and comparative studies comparing different sail training programmes against each other (e.g. McCulloch 2002 and McCulloch et al. 2010) have been conducted. All report positively on the effectiveness of sail training in the development of a wide range of social skills and attributes, ranging from self-confidence and self-esteem, to motivation, teamwork and increased social capital. (McCulloch et al. 2010) While the evidence for the effectiveness of sail training as a youth development tool is growing, sail training is only one amongst a range of possible youth development programmes that can be utilised with these goals in mind; importantly sail training is also amongst the most specialised and expensive youth development activities on offer. For example, programmes utilising football and basketball (see, for example, Hellison et al, 2008), due to the lower levels of equipment required, would be substantially more cost effective to deliver! In order to properly assess the benefits offered by sailtraining, then, one needs not only to evaluate the effectiveness of single programmes or compare the effectiveness of different programmes against each other; rather, one also needs insight into whether sail training offers benefits that other – predominantly shore-based – programmes cannot. This matter has not been adequately addressed in the literature.

In this paper, we report on the results of a pilot study that aimed to establish whether there are noticeable differences between youth development activities afloat and ashore by comparing the experiences of young people involved during one sail training expedition and one "outward bound"-type adventure camp ashore. Self-consciously of a small scale, the study used the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews to understand the learning processes taking place during two closely comparable adventure training programmes, one conducted ashore and the other afloat on a sail training vessel. The study sought to identify differences that could be attributed to the setting of the training programmes; now identified, the hope is that these differences may be quantified through larger qualitative studies in future.

Literature review

There is a range of literature covering outdoors adventure activities ashore. Many studies (see for example, Ewert, 1987) take the approach of demonstrating that participants in these activities had experienced some form of positive change as a consequence of having taken part in the activity. A number of studies report quantitative analyses of improvement in areas such as self-confidence (Allison *et al.*: 2007: 9; Rickinson et al, 1993: 27), self-esteem (Hattie *et al.*, 1997: 67; Davidson, 2001: 17), teamwork (Hopkins and Putnam: 1993: 108) and confidence in a group setting (Allison et al, 2007: 35). The work of Hattie *et al.* (1997) is particularly useful, consisting of a meta-analysis of 96 previous studies covering over 12,000 participants. Hattie *et al.*'s overall finding is that participants in outdoors adventure activity programmes undergo positive changes in many of the areas outlined above. Importantly, they also report that these changes are maintained over time, something which they state is not typically the case with other educational programmes (1997: 57).

A less developed literature exists regarding the effectiveness of sail training programmes as instruments for youth development. The field is dominated by a handful of authors (for example McCulloch, 2002, 2004, 2007) and many studies never formally published (Hayhurst, 2010; Ashbullby et al, 2010). Still, broad conclusions can be drawn from the literature that does exist. The fact that participants are required to operate outside their normal environment is seen as relevant for both sailing and other outdoors adventure projects. However, in relation to sailing, specifically, McCulloch (2007: 293) draws attention to the difficulty of 'living at sea' in relation to simply tending to what would normally be everyday activities such as eating and sleeping. He argues that this aspect of the sail training experience is unique to this activity. Furthermore, McCulloch (2002: 252; 2007) suggests that the bounded nature of the sail training vessel makes it akin to the 'total institution' as envisaged by Goffman (1961). On a sailing ship, for instance, all inhabitants sleep, work and spend their leisure time in the same place, all activities are tightly scheduled and the whole establishment operates to an overall rational plan (Goffman, 1961: 6-9).

Many authors also suggest that, for the young people involved, the opportunity to meet new people and form new friendships is an important part of the projects.

Allison *et al.* (2007: 28) state that this is the single most important factor in terms of their positive expectations before starting a sailing project. Similarly, Armour *et al.* (2005) suggest that this is an important aspect mentioned by the participants in their study of past participants. What neither of these studies addresses satisfactorily, however, is how meeting people and forming friendships necessarily leads to positive outcomes in the young person's life more generally. One suggested mechanism through which this may occur is through the young people being required to work as part of a team. This is particularly the case for sailing projects, in which the participants must take turns not only at the technical aspects such as steering the boat, working the sails and attending to other seamanship tasks, but also more practical areas such as cooking and cleaning. This requirement to work as part of a team and take into account the needs of others is seen as a particularly powerful part of the experience of a sail training voyage (McCulloch, 2002: 251; Allison et al, 2007: 28).

Finally in terms of the specific areas covered by previous literature, we have the importance of the routine to which the participants are required to keep (McCulloch, 2002: 176). This is seen as important in that it subtly imposes an element of control, but this is done through the requirements of the activity – for example, taking turns cooking and sailing the boat as outlined above. As well as this, taking part in these activities means that the young people are taken out of any routines in their normal environment which have the potential to result in negative behaviour (Hattie et al, 1997: 74).

While, as McCulloch holds, "the differences between canoeing, rock climbing, walking, mountaineering and offshore sailing as activities are profoundly significant" (2002: 90), what many of the studies mentioned above do not accomplish is to consider which of the suggested distinguishing factors between different kinds of adventure education are important in achieving the observed positive outcomes in participants' social development. This has been commented on over time by a number of authors, with Hopkins and Putnam (1993: 55) stating that "benefits were assumed to flow from such experience, and few attempts were made to assess and explain the effects systematically", and Davidson (2001: 12) suggesting that it is important to consider the "process variables" through which the observed positive changes take place (see also McCulloch, 2002: 98; Hattie et al, 1997: 74; Allison and Pomeroy, 2000: 91; Kaly and Heesacker, 2003: 98, 103).

What makes sail training *different* from other forms of adventure or outdoor education and *how* this difference contributes to positive outcomes in terms of social development is clearly a matter deserving more study.

The Pilot Study: methodology and design

Barrett and Greenaway (1995) and McCulloch *et al.* (2010: 662) notice the dominance of measurement-based approaches to studying the effectiveness of adventure programmes and, indeed, many examples exist of quantitative studies outlining positive outcomes from both sail training and other outdoors adventure activities. However (outside of the few ethnographic studies mentioned above) little investigation has been undertaken regarding the ways in which any changes might occur. This study therefore adopted a qualitative approach, using a combination of observation of the activities taking place and interviews with the young people taking

part in order to establish the differences between the learning journeys of young participants on a sail training programme and on a comparable adventure camp ashore. As outlined in the literature review, such a comparative study – comparing a sail training programme against a comparable shore-based programme – has not been undertaken before, despite many studies proposing this.

The specific areas investigated in this study were:

- 1. What are the opportunities for personal development of the participants during a residential adventure activity programme?
- 2. Are there unique characteristics of a residential sail training programme which provide different opportunities for personal development compared to a similar project ashore?

Qualitative research tools

The main research tools employed were structured observation of the activities taking place on two residential activity projects, one afloat and one ashore, and interviews with both the young people taking part and their project leaders. The intention was to observe all activities taking place during each residential activity, and to interview 5-8 participants and 1-3 leaders at each. Combining observation and interviews with both participants and leaders provided for triangulation of results.

As outlined in the literature review, many areas have been suggested as possible reasons for the observed positive outcomes from these sorts of projects, including:

- 1. meeting new people and friendships forming between the participants
- 2. the physical environment in which the projects were taking place, including the bounded nature of the boat
- 3. opportunities to work as a team
- 4. relationships between the young people taking part and adult leaders
- 5. input of the young people into decision-making
- 6. involvement of the young people with formal or informal mentoring
- 7. specific soft skills training

Observations were structured and interviews designed in order to explore all of these elements; paying attention to these issues systematically helped to link the present study to previous research and to ensure comparable data was collected in relation to the two different programmes studied.

Comparability

Given the comparative research design, it was important to ensure that the two projects to be studied were as similar as possible. There were a huge number of variables which it was important to ensure were as consistent as possible between the two projects studied so as to make any comparisons meaningful. These included personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, and also matters to do with the projects themselves such as the overall approach of the organisation delivering it.

Comparability between the sail training and the land-based activity programme was achieved by working with a youth development organisation (hereafter "the

organisation") that offers both sail training and land based programmes to the same demographic and, often, also using the same activity leaders. While exact comparability would always be hard to achieve, studying two different kinds of activities offered by the same organisation ensured that the participants, the trainers, the aims of the programmes and the general ethos of the programmes were all closely comparable. This increased the plausibility of attributing differences between the programmes to whether they were sail training or land based.

The programmes

The organisation delivering both the programmes studied in this research works with around 3,500 young people per year, helping them develop motivation, self-confidence and skills to change their lives. The participants in each programme had both been involved with the organisation for several months, and were considered by the organisation to be in the same place on their developmental journey, such that they needed a residential activity programme to aid their progression. They had all previously taken part in an initial short residential programme followed by ongoing personal support to address their needs.

The **land-based programme** took place over four days/three nights, based at a campsite in the New Forest. There were six participants (five male, one female) as well as a male and female leader.

Activities undertaken included:

- Coasteering clambering along a rocky foreshore, jumping off ledges into the sea
- Geocaching a modern-day treasure hunt involving navigating by clues
- Night walk specifically designed to see how the participants reacted to being in a challenging and unfamiliar situation
- Archery
- Numerous other informal activities such as football, rugby and small scale team games

Participants slept in tents, were involved with all the regular domestic tasks such as preparation of meals and, as well as the activities above, also regularly completed a personal journal where they were encouraged to reflect on the activities and their own behaviour.

The **sailing programme** took place over four days/three nights, on board a 90-foot sailing yacht based in the Solent. There were four participants (all male), as well as four crew (three male, one female). Normally, the yacht would have a larger number of young people on board.

Activities included:

- Basic technical sailing skills (for example, basic navigation, how engines work and knots) practised alongside
- Sailing the boat by day
- Shopping for the boat
- A trip to a museum

 A variety of activities and games designed to allow the young people to socialise or work together in a team, or to be self-reflective regarding their own behaviour.

Nights were spent alongside in harbour. Participants slept in bunks on board and were involved with all the regular domestic tasks such as preparation of meals and cleaning of the boat.

Findings

Two periods of four days were spent in the field attending residential outdoors adventure activity programmes, one afloat and one ashore. During these periods, observations were made on the activities taking place, and interviews took place with a total of ten participants and five adult leaders. Once all interviews and observations had been transcribed, a thematic analysis of all the data was undertaken to arrive at the findings below, with initial themes taken from the previous literature.

Teamwork

For both the residential activities studied, there were similar sized groups of young people, some of whom knew each other previously whilst others had not met before. Although some interesting observations were expected regarding the young people forming friendships, actually what came out was some much more insightful material on how the young people worked in teams and the extent to which individuals' behaviour impacted on the group.

For the sailing trip, there was a real requirement for all the young people to work together, for example in the laborious task of setting and handing sail (field notes 19/6/2011, 1005 and 1132). The requirement to work as a team was certainly something the young people were aware of when interviewed at the end of the trip:

E: ... you need teamwork all the time like at home and in your life, but on the ship it's mainly important to have teamwork because if there was no teamwork the boat wouldn't move (interview with E, 19/6/2011, 1908)

Similarly, participant K – who was quite disruptive at times during the sailing trip – felt that whilst he was steering the boat he really had a responsibility to look after the other crew members and the staff since their 'lives were in our hands' and that this made him feel that he had 'better do it properly and focus, concentrate' (interview with K, 20/6/2011, 0930).

During the project ashore, many of the activities had a limited requirement either for teamwork or for all the young people to be fully engaged throughout the activity. With archery, for example, the young people were actually competing against each other, with little opportunity for any sense of team spirit or mutual support (field notes, 2/6/2011, 1100). During the geocaching session, there were opportunities for the young people to take turns at reading the map or reading the clues, but it was only really possible for two of them to engage with this task at any one time (Field notes, 1/6/2011, 1707).

Not only did the formal activities on the landbased residential activity have fewer real requirements for teamwork, the emphasis on teamwork was not stressed as consistently by the staff during the informal activities. This is perhaps surprising given that the theme of the camping trip was 'responsibility and respect'. Interestingly, the young people themselves were quite aware of the fact that if they worked together then things would run a lot more smoothly. On one occasion, when one of the young people had removed a number of someone else's tent pegs, one of the participants suggested that everyone should take a peg each and 'work as a team' to rectify the problem (field notes, 2/6/2011, 1005). One of the other young people made similar comments about the value of the residential experience when interviewed at the end of the trip:

C: ... here it's like everyone, everything you do has an effect on everyone. So if you're messing around that affects everyone. You have to move together, you can't, you know go off on your own you really have to move together. You know? (interview with C, 2/6/2011, 2005)

It was surprising, therefore, that the staff did not emphasise the teamwork elements to a greater extent.

As a specific example of how the good of the group was stressed more strongly on the sailing trip, we can look at the involvement of the young people in the domestic duties. On the sailing trip, the young people were all actively involved with these, including a daily clean of the boat and preparing and cleaning up after all meals. The requirements for this were set out by the activity leader "CG" at the beginning of the trip and were linked to the requirements of keeping the boat clean (see more on this below) and ensuring that everyone in the group experienced a pleasant environment in which to live of the duration of the trip. The young people became involved with all that was required of them (field notes, 18/6/2011 0900; 19/6/2011 0907, 19/6/2011 1808). In contrast, on the camping trip it seemed easier for the participants to evade their responsibilities; the conclusion one can draw is that both the confined living space available and the inherent requirements of sailing naturally act to demand teamwork of participants.

Environment

On board the boat, there was a sense that the staff used the environment of the boat to impose a degree of control over the young people. For example, during the initial safety briefings, the staff talked about the fact that the boat was a very different environment, and seemed to reinforce this idea by talking about the distinguishing technical features of the boat – not only the rigging and sails, but also the navigation and safety systems, domestic systems and so-on – in nautical terms ('heads' for toilet, 'galley' for kitchen, 'deck' for floor and so-on) rather than terms with which the young people would be more familiar. This had the 'effect of slightly upsetting the young people's normal sense of where they are and what they're doing' (field notes 17/6/2011, 2242). This is something of which participant M seemed conscious when interviewed at the end of the sailing trip. He felt that he had been able to manage his periods of negative feelings better on the boat than he had on camping trip, which he also attended, and that this was due to the fact that the environment was so different on board:

M: the fact that you've gotta get used to the way things work on a boat, whereas at camping you had all the usual stuff, you just had to walk a little bit, on the boat you gotta work out how to use the toilet say, it's a pumping action and the same with emptying the sink, stuff like that, you've just gotta get used to it cos it's a different working mechanism.

Researcher: and you think that helped you keep a bit more of a balanced perspective as to more personal things, is that what you're saying

M: yeah

(interview with M, 20/6/11 0920)

In a similar vein, the needs of the boat were often used to explain or justify why certain activities needed to take place, for example the domestic chores outlined above. This helped ensure that the young people became involved with these activities much more than was the case on the camping trip. As CG commented during our interview at the end of the session: 'this is the harsh reality of a working boat' (interview with G, 20/6/2011 1000). Again, the environment in which the activity took place was used as a means by which the young people could be persuaded to undertake the tasks required, or which the staff felt would be beneficial for their development.

Also linked to the environment in which the activities took place was the way in which the staff were able to keep the young people together. On the camping trip, on arrival at the campsite, CL was quite explicit that the young people were not to leave the fenced boundary of the field in which we were staying, an area of some 200 metres long by 100 metres wide. Although in an interview afterwards, CL said that this was mainly for safety reasons, it did also mean that the young people were not able to go far from the group should they decide that they wanted their own space. The benefits of this boundary were explained by RM in my interview with her:

RM: On a residential they have to deal with the consequences of their actions there and then, and pick up on the effect that has on the rest of the group there and then, they can't just go home and not see those people again for another week or two weeks or whatever, they've got to work through it and they can't run away because they're in that confined area (interview with RM 3/6/2011 1342)

On the boat, the staff was similarly eager to outline the boundaries the young people had to respect, only in this case the limit was the boat itself – a space of around 20 metres by 5 metres. This was, therefore, significantly smaller than on the camping trip and much easier to define, and was something that was much more meaningful for the young people than the much larger space on the camping trip. As an example of this, at one point on board the boat, M was muttering to himself about wanting to go home and went to leave towards the way off the boat and onto the dock. He was seen to check himself, as if realising that he was not able to leave the boundary of the boat (field notes 19/6/2011 1003). M also attended the camping trip and spent quite a bit of time sitting a long way from the rest of the group and hardly engaged in the activities. The tighter boundary on the boat was something M was aware of when interviewed:

M: I think people worked better as a team, because everyone stuck around as a group whereas on camping we had, every now and again, a few people walking off, getting bored just sitting around doing nothing...[W]where we was [sic] sailing, there was really nowhere to walk off (interview with M, 20/6/11 0920)

This smaller area and tighter boundary on board the boat seemed to amplify the benefits RM outlined above for the camping trip, and ensured that the young people were more often actually engaged in either formal activities or with other members of the group or staff, rather than spending time away from the group as was often the case on the camping trip.

On board the boat, there was a large saloon area in which all the staff and young people could be seated, where meals were served and many other informal activities and games took place. As well as being significantly more communal and homely than was possible around a pub-style bench on the camping trip, this area also served as one in which the staff could again contain the young people to ensure that everyone made the most of the personal development opportunities:

Games obviously played in the saloon, which again just feels like the central hub if you like, the most important place on the boat, where it's able to contain the young people and to give them a sense of focus that makes it much easier to get them all involved and engaged. Staff are quite explicit about pulling the young people back and making sure that the young people stay there (field notes 19/6/2011 0805)

The environment on board the boat seemed much more successful both in terms of allowing the staff an element of subtle control over the young people, providing a tight boundary ensuring that the young people were always engaged with the activities and providing a communal area in which the majority of personal development activities took place.

Discussion

Many of the observations in relation to these two specific outdoors adventure activity programme link with themes covered in previous literature.

Teamwork and friendships

Teamwork was an area which was mentioned in much of the literature (Hopkins and Putnam: 1993: 108; McCulloch, 2002: 251; Allison et al, 2007: 28), but which came out much more strongly in this study than might have been expected. On board the boat, teamwork was something which was much more part of the requirements of the sailing than was the case in the activities on land. As well as being required for the actual sailing, the teamwork elements were also much more of a part of the other planned or informal activities on board the boat. This is something which is mentioned in the previous literature as being an important part of a sail training voyage, and this study certainly confirms this view.

Something which was also discussed in the literature, is the young people meeting new people and forming new friendships being an important part of outdoors adventure activity. Whilst it was certainly the case that, on both trips, the young

people did engage with peers they had not previously met, there did not seem to be an obvious difference between the camping or the sailing trip in terms of the opportunities to form effective friendships. There is obviously a link between forming friendships and the requirement to work in a team, with the key factor being the need to consider other people's needs and opinions, whether this is in a physical or emotional sense. Because of the importance placed on teamwork on board the boat, both during the actual sailing and in the other activities, the young people were almost forced to work together. This links with the position of McCulloch (2002) and Allison et al (2007) in relation to the importance of teamwork in relation to sail training. At times this was put across by the staff as being for the good of the boat – especially during the sailing and cleaning duties – but was also simply something that the staff stressed more in all their dealings with the young people.

The requirement to work in a team was, therefore, seen as the biggest differentiating factor between the two activities, both as this was required for the actual sailing, and something which the staff pushed more actively in their engagement with the young people. Further, this provides an all important explanatory variable in relation to the way in which making friends, something which is strongly covered in the previous literature (Allison et al, 2007: 28; Armour et al, 2005) but without a causal link being proposed to the personal development of the participants.

Environment

The findings of this study suggest that the environment in which the activities take place is important in terms of the opportunities for personal development. The physical environment on board the boat was seen as particularly conducive to this. and there were two reasons behind this. Firstly, in relation to the boat as defining a physical boundary in which the young people were forced to operate, which McCulloch (2002: 252; 2007) suggested could be seen as making a sail training vessel a similar to a 'total institution' as envisaged by Goffman (1961). There are certainly elements of a sail training voyage which fit in with this approach - for example, the routines and the fact that there was a 'rational plan' (Goffman, 1961: 6) regarding the development of the participants' soft skills. There are, however, a number of differences between the activities which took place on the boat in the present study and the 'total institution' thesis. For example, the fact that there was frequent communication between staff and the young people and the young people were in full knowledge of the plans for the trip are both unlike what Goffman suggests for a total institution (Goffman, 1961: 8-9). Whilst there were some elements of the sailing trip which do fit with Goffman's general description of a total institution, therefore, there are also many which do not, meaning that this reading of a sail training trip is only partially supported by this study.

There were aspects of the trip on the boat which did allow a certain amount of subtle control to be exercised by the crew. Key to this was the fact that the staff were quite strict in ensuring that the young people were on the boat itself at all times, other than when the whole group went ashore for some activities. This meant that the young people were able to be much more actively engaged with the formal or informal activities that were taking place, which required substantially more interaction with everyone else on the trip and consequently offered significantly more opportunity for personal development. An element of this control was also brought about by the staff actively stressing the novelty of the environment through the discussion of safety

systems and use of nautical language. Although the physical environment and boundary of the boat provided an element of control similar to that outlined by McCulloch (2002: 252; 2007: 293) we did not, arguably, spend long enough at sea to see the full impact of the very different environment on board the boat to be fully appreciated.

The second sense in which the environment on board the boat was effectively used for providing opportunities for personal development is the use of the saloon area. This is something which was not discussed in the literature, but which seemed to be crucial to the activities that took place on board, and there are a number of interlinked elements to this. It provided a central, communal area in which a number of activities took place. At the most basic, it allowed all the young people and staff to sit round the same table for mealtimes, during which the young people were required to interact both with each other and the staff. This is certainly very different to the situation on the camping trip, where there was much less of a communal feel to mealtimes. Given the background of many of the young people, the staff felt that often they would not have been in this environment previously, and therefore part of the personal development was simply exposing the young people to what would be considered a normal social situation, thus preparing them for life generally. The saloon also provided an area in which lots of the informal activities and games took place with, again, all young people and staff able to sit around the same table to take part in these. During both the mealtimes and games sessions the staff were quite active in ensuring that all the young people were in the saloon, and pulling them back in if they tried to disappear to other areas of the boat. The final use of the saloon was for the personal development sessions, particularly the young people filling in their workbooks. This made this a much more formalised part of the trip as a whole, and ensured that the young people took this seriously, with staff able to oversee all the young people and give input more easily.

Conclusion

Outdoors adventurous activities, on both land and sea, have been much used over the years as a tool for personal development. Previously, such activities were often seen as intrinsically beneficial, whereas more recently there have been a number of studies attempting to outline the impact of participation in these activities by young people and their impact on personal development. Many of these studies have been quantitative in nature, and have shown a positive relationship between participation in such activities and outcomes such as improved self-esteem, teamwork and confidence in a group setting. What studies have not addressed, however, is reasons behind the variation in outcomes between different types of adventure activity programme.

A comparative approach was adopted in this study, to focus on the differences between two similar youth development programmes, one on board a boat and one ashore. Through observation and interview with the participants, it was found that there were noticeable differences between the sail training and landbased activities studied, that could be attributed to the unique environment aboard the boat and the particular demands of sailing as an activity. While the study was obviously limited in terms of its scope, the fact that the differences noted above emerged both from the observations and interviews with participants and leaders mean that these should be capable of being followed up in a larger study.

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