



Lesson planning challenges and best practices among multigrade teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by novice multigrade (MG) teachers and to examine the lesson-planning practices of highly proficient MG teachers in the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte. To gather comprehensive data, the researcher employed a total enumeration approach in administering survey questionnaires to all 78 novice MG teachers, ensuring that every teacher's experiences and perspectives were captured. In addition, purposive sampling was used to conduct unstructured interviews with 11 highly proficient MG teachers, allowing the researcher to gain in-depth insights into effective teaching practices and strategies in multigrade classrooms. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive analysis for the quantitative survey results and thematic analysis for the qualitative interview responses. Through this process, key themes emerged that characterize the practices of highly proficient MG teachers, including strategic lesson integration, differentiated and learner-centered instruction, integration of subjects and skills, effective time and resource management, utilization of multigrade instructional frameworks, and mentoring. These findings provide a detailed understanding of both the challenges confronting MG teachers and the evidence-based strategies employed by experienced educators to promote effective and inclusive learning across multiple grade levels.

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Introduction

Novice teachers in multigrade (MG) classrooms face a complex set of challenges that stem from teaching multiple grade levels simultaneously. These challenges are further intensified by insufficient training in multigrade pedagogy, reliance on outdated instructional methods, and the necessity to adapt lessons and curricula to accommodate varying student abilities and learning preferences (Reyes, 2024)

Internationally, many countries around the world implement multigrade (MG) teaching as a strategy to address challenges such as teacher shortages, insufficient school facilities, an inadequate number of

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teaching and learning resources, and low student enrollment (Sahin et al., 2022) Moreover, in the article of UNESCO (2021) the stated that MG educators continue to face substantial obstacles, including the need to adapt mongroade curricula to accommodate varying learner abilities and interests, insufficient training specific to MG pedagogy, reliance on outdated instructional methods, and the burden of excessive workloads that contribute to elevated stress levels.

In the Philippines, lesson planning remains a significant challenge for teachers handling multigrade classes, as they must simultaneously prepare lessons for multiple grade levels (Rondero & Casupanan, 2023). In addition, Borja et al. (2020) also stated that multigrade teachers must curate a wide range of instructional resources. Furthermore, lesson planning is a critical challenge for multigrade teachers, as they must adapt lessons and employ differentiated instruction to meet the needs of learners across multiple grade levels (Jimenez, 2025).

Based on the researcher's observations, lesson planning in multigrade (MG) classrooms poses substantial challenges, particularly because teachers must manage multiple grade levels simultaneously while addressing diverse learning needs and curriculum requirements.

Existing literature has emphasized the challenges faced by multigrade teachers and the complexity of instructing learners across multiple grade levels simultaneously. However, few studies examine the challenges of teachers alongside the effective practices of highly proficient educators, limiting understanding of how lesson-planning skills develop in multigrade contexts. Investigating both perspectives can inform targeted support systems and professional development programs that enhance teacher preparedness and improve learning outcomes in multigrade classrooms.

This study aimed to identify the challenges novice multigrade teachers encounter in lesson planning and in managing instruction across multiple grade levels. It further examined the practices of highly proficient MG teachers to understand strategies that promote effective and inclusive learning. The study also sought to generate insights that could inform the design of targeted support and professional development initiatives to enhance teaching competence and improve student learning outcomes in multigrade classrooms.

Literature review

This section presents related literature on multigrade instructional planning, the challenges encountered by multigrade teachers, and the practices of highly proficient multigrade teachers in lesson planning.

Multigrade instructional planning

According to Bunga, Olano, & Morga (2025), instructional planning in MG classrooms involves the systematic preparation of differentiated lesson plans aligned with the K to 12 Curriculum, requiring teachers to identify objectives and design learning activities that address individual needs.

Challenges of multigrade teachers in lesson planning

Teaching in multigrade (MG) classrooms presents a unique set of challenges that require both skill and adaptability. Recla and Potane (2023) noted that insufficient time allocation, combined with limited access to instructional and planning resources, significantly constrains teachers' ability to develop coherent and effective lesson plans for multiple grade levels. Aligning lessons with the curriculum poses a constant difficulty, as MG teachers must implement strategies such as differentiated instruction and real-life integration (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021).

In addition, Kalender and Erdem (2021) observed that many MG classrooms are under-resourced in terms of infrastructure and essential amenities. Oluwatoyin and Adebayo (2021) emphasized that the absence of appropriate instructional materials makes it even harder for teachers to design lessons that meet students' needs.

Moreover, Onde (2023) noted that many teachers lack adequate training in multigrade-specific strategies, leading them to rely on improvisation. Daga (2021) reported that even after attending workshops or seminars, teachers still struggle to apply MG teaching strategies effectively. Dacanay & Perez (2023) observed that teachers often face the need to constantly adjust to students' varying abilities and the dynamic nature of the classroom.

Finally, Bunga (2025) explained that balancing independent work for one group while providing guided instruction for another significantly increases teachers' workload, particularly in designing scaffolded activities that keep all students productive and engaged.

Practices of highly proficient multigrade teachers in lesson planning

Highly proficient multigrade (MG) teachers employ a range of strategies to effectively manage the complexities of teaching multiple grade levels. Curriculum mapping allows seasoned MG teachers to design shared activities where appropriate, set distinct expectations for each grade, and identify common entry points for whole-class instruction (UNESCO, 2015). Gray (2023) emphasized that integrated lesson planning is a key strategy in MG classrooms, where a central theme or topic connects multiple learning areas. Differentiated instruction is strategically employed by MG teachers, who often begin lessons with concise whole-class mini-lessons and progress into staggered or 'peel-off' activities (Ferreiros, Piñeiro & Gonzalez, 2025).

Likewise, cooperative learning is carefully incorporated, as Van Wyk (2019) highlighted, requiring teachers to design tasks aligned with curriculum goals and structure heterogeneous groups. Zou (2023) observed that peer tutoring leverages the natural diversity of age and developmental levels in MG classrooms, providing opportunities for collaborative learning and reciprocal teaching. Independent learning is emphasized through the deliberate design of self-explanatory tasks and learning centers, complete with clear instructions, rubrics, exemplars, and self-check tools to foster autonomy (Naparan & Alinsug, 2021).

Finally, Recla and Potane (2024) noted that highly proficient MG teachers embed scaffolded resources and multi-level learning materials, anticipating learner misconceptions and accommodating varied readiness levels.

Theoretical framework

This study is guided by key educational theories that provide a foundation for understanding and improving instructional planning in multigrade (MG) classrooms.

Differentiated instruction theory. One of the key theories relevant to MG lesson planning is Differentiated Instruction (DI), advanced by Carol Ann Tomlinson. Tomlinson explains that differentiated instruction is an approach that adapts teaching to address students' varying levels of readiness, interests, and learning profiles. She emphasizes that differentiation involves adjusting the content, process, product, and learning environment.

Constructivist learning theory. Constructivist Learning Theory, as developed by Piaget and Vygotsky, is an educational approach that emphasizes that learners actively construct their own understanding and knowledge through experience, rather than passively receiving information.

Experiential learning theory. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory presents learning as a cyclical process consisting of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of the study is visually represented in the research diagram, which illustrates the relationships among the key variables, theoretical foundations, and the processes involved in multigrade instructional planning, challenges encountered, and strategies employed by highly proficient teachers.

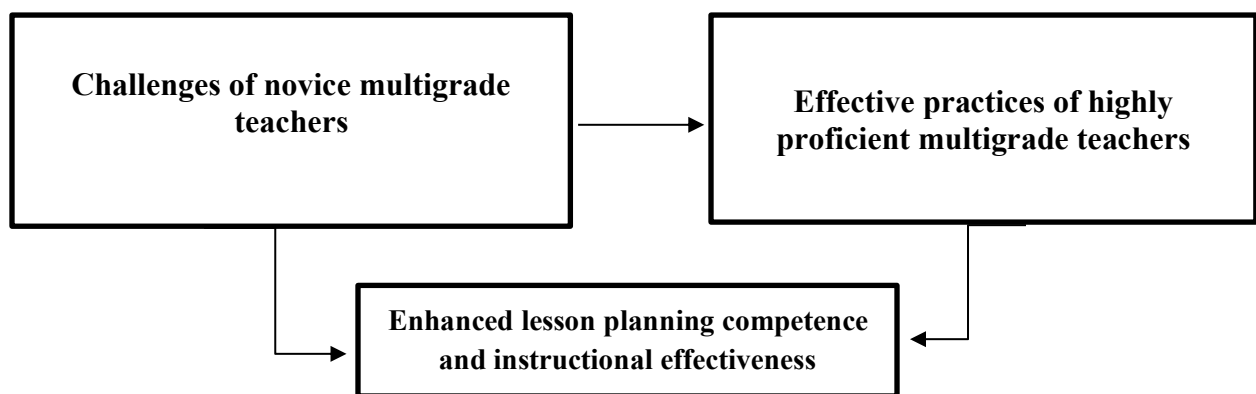


Figure 1: The Research Paradigm

Statement of the problem

This study was conducted to investigate and understand the challenges faced by novice multigrade teachers and the lesson-planning practices of highly proficient teachers.

Specifically, it sought answers to the question:

1. What challenges do novice multigrade teachers encounter in lesson planning?
2. What are the practices of highly proficient multigrade teachers in lesson planning?

Research methodology

Research design

This study used a mixed-methods descriptive research design to examine the challenges novice teachers encountered and the lesson-planning practices of highly proficient teachers. Creswell and Creswell (2021) emphasized that mixed-methods research is essential when researchers aim to measure observable trends while also understanding the deeper experiences behind those trends, making it highly relevant to multigrade lesson planning where teachers face complex and varied challenges.

Locale of the study

The study was conducted within the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte, focusing specifically on multigrade schools across the division. The research covered schools in four geographic units: the North Unit, which includes Pagudpud, Burgos, Bangui, and Pasuquin; the Central Unit, encompassing Bacarra, Vintar, San Nicolas, and Sarrat; the East Unit, consisting of Piddig, Solsona, Marcos, Banna, and Nueva Era; and the South Unit, which comprises Paoay, Pinili, Badoc, and Currimao. This selection ensured representation of multigrade classrooms across different districts.

Population and sampling

The study population consisted of novice and highly proficient multigrade (MG) teachers within the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte. To gather data on the challenges encountered by novice teachers, the researcher employed total enumeration, which involved including all 78 novice MG teachers in the study. This approach ensured that the experiences and perspectives of every novice teacher were captured, providing a comprehensive view of the challenges in multigrade instructional planning. In contrast, to explore the lesson-planning practices of highly proficient MG teachers, the researcher used purposive sampling to select 11 experienced teachers who demonstrated exemplary skills and strategies for managing multigrade classrooms. These teachers were chosen for their expertise and proven effectiveness, enabling in-depth insights through unstructured interviews.

Data gathering instruments

The researcher employed a survey questionnaire to systematically identify and quantify the challenges faced by novice multigrade teachers, ensuring that data were collected consistently and comprehensively from all participants. In addition, unstructured interviews were conducted with highly proficient teachers to gain deeper insights into their lesson planning practices, allowing participants to share detailed experiences, strategies, and perspectives in their own words. Together, these instruments provided both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a thorough understanding of the challenges and best practices in multigrade instruction.

Ethical considerations

This study adhered to established ethical standards to ensure the protection, respect, and confidentiality of all participants. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were fully informed about the study’s purpose and procedures before providing informed consent. Participant privacy was safeguarded through anonymization and coded responses, and all data collected from surveys and interviews were treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for this research. The study also complied with ethical guidelines for educational research by obtaining approval from school authorities and the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte. Data collection tools were designed to be respectful and non-intrusive, allowing participants to share their experiences freely. Throughout the research process, the researcher-maintained integrity and transparency by accurately and responsibly reporting all findings.

Data presentation and analysis

This chapter presents an analysis of data on the challenges novice multigrade (MG) teachers encounter in lesson planning. It examines the effective lesson-planning practices of highly proficient MG master teachers and provides evidence-based insights to inform targeted professional development for novice teachers.

Problem 1: What challenges do novice multigrade teachers encounter in lesson planning?

Challenges Encountered by novice multigrade teachers in lesson planning

To identify these concerns, the study identified 15 indicators describing the challenges novice MG teachers face in lesson planning.

The data presented in the table reveal that novice MG teachers often encounter challenges in lesson planning, as indicated by an overall mean of 4.44, which corresponds to “*Often Experienced (OE)*”.

Table 1: Challenges encountered by novice multigrade teachers in lesson planning (n=78)

Indicators	Mean	DI
1. Allocating more time to prepare adequate lesson plans for multigrade teaching.	4.59	SE
2. Aligning lessons with the curriculum across different grade levels.	4.46	OE
3. Needing suitable teaching materials or facilities to execute planned multigrade lessons effectively.	4.53	SE
4. Accessing teaching guides and resources for multigrade Planning	4.51	SE
5. Designing activities that suit the varied learning abilities of pupils.	4.49	OE
6. Adjusting lesson pacing to accommodate both fast and slow learners.	4.56	SE
7. Integrating subjects effectively when teaching combined classes.	4.38	OE
8. Managing classroom time between preparation and actual teaching.	4.40	OE

9. Having knowledge and training in multigrade-specific lesson planning strategies.	4.23	OE
10. Preparing assessments aligned with multigrade lesson plans.	4.37	OE
11. Creating a lesson plan that incorporates effective classroom management strategies for a wide age range of students	4.50	OE
12. Formulating clear, measurable, and achievable objectives for each grade level within a single lesson plan.	4.40	OE
13. Following the procedure of the lesson proficiently.	4.36	OE
14. Balancing independent work for one group with guided instruction.	4.44	OE
15. Accessing mentors or experienced Multigrade teachers who can guide lesson planning.	4.33	OE
Overall Mean	4.44	OE

Source: Gano, (2026)

Legend:

<i>Range of Means</i>	<i>Descriptive Interpretation</i>
4.51 – 5.00	<i>Severely Experienced (SE)</i>
3.51 – 4.50	<i>Often Experienced (OE)</i>
2.51 – 3.50	<i>Sometimes Experienced (StE)</i>
1.51 – 2.50	<i>Rarely Experienced (RE)</i>
1.00 – 1.50	<i>Never Experienced (NE)</i>

The survey was adopted from: Bua, J. D., & Martin, M. D. M. (2020). *Handling multi-grade teaching: Its educational implications for teachers' competence. Management Research Journal*, 9(2), 1-12.
 Reyes, K. V. (2024). *Key resources for multigrade teachers. Divine Word College of Laoag, Graduate School of Education.*

The survey was conducted at the Schools Division of Ilocos with seventy-eight (78) novice multigrade teachers.

The results indicate that, among the indicators, the item “Allocating more time to prepare adequate lesson plans for multigrade teaching” had the highest mean of 4.59, which falls under the descriptive interpretation “*Severely Experienced (SE)*”. This finding implies that novice teachers often struggle to balance instructional preparation with other teaching responsibilities, leading to increased stress and reduced instructional efficiency.

Similarly, high mean scores were recorded for challenges such as “*Adjusting lesson pacing to accommodate both fast and slow learners*” (M = 4.56, SE) and “*Needing suitable teaching materials or facilities to execute planned multigrade lessons effectively*” (M = 4.53, SE). These results suggest that differentiating instruction and the lack of appropriate resources remain significant barriers to effective multigrade teaching. Teachers find it difficult to maintain instructional balance when learners have varied learning paces, which may affect student engagement and learning outcomes.

Conversely, the lowest-rated challenge was “Having knowledge and training in multigrade-specific lesson planning strategies, with a mean of 4.23, interpreted as “Often Experienced (OE)”. Although this still indicates frequent difficulty, it suggests that teachers may already possess a foundational understanding of lesson planning but lack specialized training tailored to multigrade settings.

Problem 2: What practices do highly proficient multigrade teachers use in lesson planning?

Practices used by highly proficient multigrade master teachers in lesson planning

Effective lesson planning is essential for ensuring quality instruction in MG classrooms, where teachers must skillfully integrate multiple grade levels and learning competencies. To gain deeper insights into effective lesson-planning strategies, the researcher conducted unstructured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with eleven seasoned and highly proficient MG master teachers in the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte. Their responses regarding the most effective practices in lesson planning were analyzed and organized into themes and categories to identify common strategies that contribute to successful MG teaching.

Table 2: Practices used by highly proficient multigrade master teachers in lesson planning (n=11)

Theme	Category	Responses from highly proficient multigrade master teachers
1. Strategic lesson integration	Clustering competencies	<p>Teacher A: Clustered related competencies across grade levels; mentored novice teachers on aligning competencies and creating shared activities.</p> <p>Teacher I: Identified common competencies for joint instruction; designed extension tasks; encouraged peer-sharing and team planning.</p>
	Thematic and integrated planning	<p>Teacher C: Used thematic integration so all grade levels explored one central topic at different depths; mentored teachers through coaching and plan review.</p>
2. Differentiated and learner-centered instruction	Differentiated activities for mixed abilities	<p>Teacher B: Designed learner-centered, tiered, and differentiated tasks; modeled how to combine mastery and remediation.</p> <p>Teacher K: Considered learner diversity; used group and individual activities; mentored through coaching and digital resource sharing.</p>
	Balancing independent and guided work	<p>Teacher D: Balanced independent tasks and guided instruction; developed activity sheets for group rotations; shared exemplars during LAC sessions.</p>

3. Subject and skill integration	Interdisciplinary lesson design	Teacher E: <i>Integrated subjects to reduce overlap and enhance meaning; co-planned and demonstrated integration techniques for new teachers.</i>
	Contextualization in lesson planning	Teacher J: <i>Contextualized lessons using community-related activities; mentored new teachers through one-on-one guidance and localized exemplars.</i>
4. Effective time and resource management	Structured scheduling and transitions	Teacher F: <i>Planned lessons with clear time allocations and smooth transitions; mentored peers by sharing time-saving and management strategies.</i>
	Learning stations and resource use	Teacher G: <i>Used learning stations for grade-level task rotations; developed multigrade templates; mentored through demo teaching and feedback.</i>
5. Utilization of multigrade frameworks and mentoring	Application of MG-BOW	Teacher H: <i>Used MG-BOW for planning, alignment, and coverage; served as resource speaker; conducted workshops on lesson alignment.</i>

Source: The unstructured interview questions were adopted from: Reyes, K. V. (2024). *Key resources for multigrade teachers*. Divine Word College of Laoag, Graduate School of Education.

The data for this part of the study were obtained from unstructured interviews conducted with eleven (11) highly proficient multigrade (MG) master teachers in the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte.

The insights gathered from highly proficient multigrade master teachers provide important guidance for enhancing lesson planning in MG classrooms. The first theme, *Strategic Lesson Integration*, which encompasses competency clustering and thematic planning, emphasizes the need for efficiency and coherence in lesson design. Next, *Differentiated and Learner-Centered Instruction* emphasizes tailoring activities to students' diverse abilities and learning needs. Moreover, *Subject and Skill Integration* demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary planning and contextualization. By connecting lessons across subjects and relating them to students' everyday experiences, teachers can make learning more meaningful while reducing redundancy across grade levels. *Effective Time and Resource Management* shows that skilled teachers carefully plan transitions, use learning stations, and employ practical strategies to manage classroom time and materials efficiently. Finally, the theme *Utilization of Multigrade Frameworks and Mentoring* highlights the use of structured planning tools, such as the Multigrade Budget of Work (MG-BOW), as well as collaborative mentoring practices.

These findings align with the study by Bagay (2025), which emphasized that multigrade teachers are required to systematically adapt instructional strategies to meet diverse learning needs, including meticulous lesson planning, preparation of differentiated instructional materials, and implementation of effective classroom management practices to facilitate optimal learning outcomes for all pupils. Pedroches (2025) emphasized that effective lesson planning in differentiated instruction should be

responsive to learner diversity, regardless of teachers' backgrounds, while acknowledging that certain content areas pose greater challenges for instructional adaptation. Furthermore, Jimenez (2025) underscored that the use of structured routines, integrated subject matter, and deliberate time allocation enables teachers to deliver both group and individualized instruction more efficiently.

Results and discussion

The indicator *“Allocating more time to prepare adequate lesson plans for multigrade teaching”* is consistent with the study by Potane and Recla (2024), which emphasized that teachers working in MG settings consistently encountered difficulties with lesson planning and individualized instruction, compounded by recurring time constraints and workload. Likewise, Jimenez (2025) underscored the importance of refining time management and developing tailored lessons for multi-level learners, observing that structured planning periods and systematic weekly planning routines enabled teachers to manage the heightened demands of multigrade lesson preparation effectively. *A high mean score is also recorded in the indicator “Adjusting lesson pacing to accommodate both fast and slow learners.”* This is evident in the study by Castro and Hernandez (2025), who asserted that MG teaching required deliberate and sophisticated planning to align content and objectives across different grade-level curricula. Likewise, *“Needing suitable teaching materials or facilities to execute planned multigrade lessons effectively”* is evident and supported by Marin, Peñafiel, & Simo-Gil (2024), who highlighted that MG teachers often lacked guides and lesson exemplars specifically designed for multi-level classrooms, which required them to create or modify resources on their own. This finding reinforced the importance of careful planning, resourcefulness, and initiative in delivering effective instruction. This was corroborated by Naparan and Alinsug (2021), who emphasized the value of employing differentiated teaching strategies, such as flexible grouping, tiered activities, and anchoring tasks, to address the varied learning abilities of pupils.

Reyes (2024) found that adapting curriculum content and instructional strategies to accommodate students' diverse ability levels through modified learning activities, varied task difficulty, and individualized or group-based approaches ensured that slower learners received appropriate support while advanced learners engaged in enrichment opportunities. This illustrated the central role of differentiated instruction in effectively meeting the needs of all learners in MG settings. Vasquez-Martinez et al. (2021) emphasized the adoption of strategies to minimize waiting time between learner activities. Proper training and the effective use of lesson plans were critical for aligning instruction with curriculum standards and implementing differentiated instruction (Reyes, 2024).

The findings of this study reinforce and extend existing theories on differentiated instruction and multigrade pedagogy. MG teachers consistently faced challenges such as lesson planning, time management, and adjusting lesson pacing for learners of varying abilities, accentuating the importance of systematic planning, resourcefulness, and instructional adaptation. The results support theoretical frameworks that emphasize learner-centered approaches, in which instruction is deliberately tailored to meet diverse student needs. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the practical application of constructivist principles, as teachers design scaffolding strategies and differentiated tasks to provide equitable learning opportunities for both slower and advanced learners.

From a management and policy perspective, the findings emphasized the need for targeted professional development programs that strengthen multigrade lesson planning, time management, and differentiated instruction. Educational authorities should also provide adequate teaching materials, structured planning periods, and mentoring opportunities to support teachers and promote collaboration with highly proficient educators. Additionally, curricula should allow flexibility to accommodate differentiated learning activities, enabling teachers to offer both remedial support and enrichment opportunities in multigrade classrooms.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by multigrade (MG) teachers and the effective lesson-planning practices of highly proficient MG teachers in the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte. Preparing multiple lesson plans and integrating various learning competencies significantly increases teachers' workload, while the lack of suitable materials and facilities limits effective instruction. Novice teachers demonstrated a basic understanding of lesson planning, stressing the need for specialized professional development in MG pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and curriculum integration. In contrast, highly proficient MG teachers employed strategic lesson integration, learner-centered and interdisciplinary instruction, effective time and resource management, and established MG frameworks such as the Multigrade Budget of Work (MG-BOW), and engaged in mentoring and peer collaboration.

Strengthening MG education requires continuous professional training, provision of contextualized resources, supportive mentoring, and policy interventions that address the unique realities of MG teaching. Such measures can empower novice teachers to enhance their lesson planning and classroom effectiveness, ultimately improving learning outcomes and advancing access, equity, and quality in education. Future research may examine the long-term impact of targeted professional development and investigate innovative strategies and resource models to further support differentiated instruction and curriculum integration in multigrade classrooms.

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