

Review

Teaching Philosophy for Children: Inspiration from Winnetka Plan

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Received: Aug 26, 2024; **Revised:** Sep 16, 2024; **Accepted:** Sep 16, 2024; **Published:** Nov 23, 2025

Abstract: Children need to be encouraged to create and learn based on their interests and abilities. In particular, children from different backgrounds must have access to learning methods that are tailored to their distinct cultural, socioeconomic, and developmental environments. This necessity underscores the importance of adaptive teaching for children's learning. Through theoretical analysis, we examined the teaching philosophy of the Winnetka Plan to enhance the quality of adaptive teaching for children's learning. The findings indicate that the development of Winnetka's teaching philosophy was influenced by Carleton Wolsey Washburne's life experiences. This approach posits that every child is capable of autonomously engaging in adaptive teaching. This emphasizes the assessment of students' readiness to learn and supports the examination of children's learning interests through the design of personalized record cards. The principles of the Winnetka Plan underscore its adaptive teaching philosophy and offer insights for teachers implementing teaching strategies for children's learning. Hence, democratic education is essential for children.

Keywords: Adaptive learning, Carleton Wolsey Washburne, Children, Teaching philosophy, Winnetka plan

1. Introduction

Promoting teaching as a profession and expertise is a challenge in educating future teachers (Oellers, Junker, and Holodynski, 2024). Professional teachers engage in adaptive practices that respond to the diverse needs of students, recognizing that every child is a unique individual. Children from diverse backgrounds, in particular, have different cultural, socioeconomic, and developmental contexts, requiring tailored learning methods to their situations. This underscores the importance of adaptive education to provide personalized learning to foster individual potential and support self-realization. Given the diversity of learners, encompassing differences in abilities, gender, interests, experiences, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds, teachers need to adjust their instructional approaches using adaptive teaching to ensure equitable learning outcomes.

The concept of adaptive teaching originated from Confucius's philosophy of teaching students according to their aptitude. This approach emphasizes questioning, individualized feedback, and teaching strategies aligned with each student's personality and abilities. In the early 20th century, scholars, conducting educational research in Europe and America, advanced adaptive teaching through experimental models such as the Winnetka Plan and Dalton Plan (Huang and Chang, 2010; Li, 1997). Carleton Wolsey Washburne (1889–1968), a prominent American educationist, embraced reformist principles and the pedocentric revolution in schooling to overcome the limitations of traditional education. This Winnetka Plan represents a distinctive model of individualized education to create conditions under which students master curriculum content at their own pace (Yakovleva, 2024). Based on such results, we studied the teaching philosophy embedded in the Winnetka Plan to enhance adaptive teaching practices for children.

2. Background Knowledge

2.1. Teaching Philosophy

A teaching philosophy is a self-reflective statement that articulates an educator's beliefs, values, and approaches to teaching and learning. It provides insight into an instructor's motivations, goals for students, and the methods employed to achieve those goals, drawing on both theoretical understanding and practical experience (Center for Educational Innovation at University of Minnesota, 2024; Drew, 2023). A teaching philosophy serves as a framework for examining the foundations of teaching practice that includes content, objectives, challenges, limitations, methods, and the relationship between theory and practice. It describes the principles and justifications that shape instructional decisions and pedagogical thinking (Ngene, 2023). Following the principles, we examined the

teaching content, objectives, and methods of adaptive teaching articulated in the Winnetka Plan to enhance the quality of adaptive teaching for children.

2.2 Concept of Adaptive Education

Adaptive teaching refers to instructional methods and strategies tailored to the individual characteristics and differences of learners. Closely related to individualized education programs widely used in special education, adaptive teaching emphasizes personalized approaches that accommodate diverse student needs. Importantly, adaptive teaching is not limited to special education. Rather, it involves adjusted strategies and resources to meet the learning requirements of each student. In adaptive learning, teachers need to continually assess learners' strengths and needs, modifying their approaches to ensure that every student achieves expected outcomes (Wang, 2011; Washburne, 1932, 1940).

Based on the principle of focusing on individual differences, adaptive teaching is regarded as an individualized instructional strategy to foster active learning and enable students to acquire knowledge and realize their potential. One well-known adaptive teaching method is supervised learning, in which students engage in self-directed learning under teacher guidance (Kao, 2006; Washburne, 1932, 1940). Teaching occurs in the form of individual, group, or class teaching. Individual teaching effectively supports adaptive teaching, while group teaching, involving small numbers of students, partially facilitates adaptation. Class teaching, by contrast, involves large groups and poses significant challenges for adaptive education, particularly in mass or compulsory schooling. To balance efficiency and cost, class teaching becomes the dominant model, despite its limitations in addressing individual differences (Huang and Chang, 2010; Meyer, 1988; Washburne and Marland, 1963).

In class teaching, students are organized into classes, depending on subjects, and instruction is delivered in fixed timeframes. Although cost-effective, class teaching models struggle to accommodate diverse student needs. In response, early 20th-century education reform, most notably the Winnetka Plan and Dalton Plan, was initiated to seek alternatives to traditional class-based instruction. The Winnetka Plan, developed by Carleton Washburne in the 1920s, emphasizes individualized pacing, combining personal instruction in reading and mathematics with group activities in arts and physical education to foster social development. It prioritizes mastery of learning objectives and differentiated instruction based on student abilities. Similarly, the Dalton Plan, created by Helen Parkhurst, helps promote student autonomy by dividing the curriculum into monthly assignments or contracts. Students learn independently to complete tasks, while teachers act as mentors rather than instructors. In the Dalton Plan, self-regulation, independence, and collaboration are encouraged. Collectively, these reform movements reflect individualized, student-centered education (Huang and Chang, 2010; Meyer, 1988; Washburne and Marland, 1963).

3. Teaching Philosophy of Winnetka Plan

3.1. Adaptive Teaching

3.1.1 Progressive Education during Childhood

Washburne did not initially intend to pursue a career in teaching, nor did he receive formal training in the field. Nevertheless, his passion for education and formative childhood experiences prepared him for the role. Growing up in Chicago, he was educated by his mother, who taught at the School of Early Childhood Education and wrote books on child development. She was also acquainted with Francis W. Parker and John Dewey, who led progressive education. Through exposure to their discussions, Washburne developed a deep understanding of progressive educational theories, which later shaped his perspective on adaptive education (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

3.1.2 Adaptive Teaching Experiences for First-Time Teachers

During his first year in the educational profession, Washburne worked at a rural minischool, where he served as a principal and teacher for students in grades 4–8. He taught a class comprising 35 students with a wide age gap. Among these students, older boys attended school to avoid farming, and several students were recalcitrant and collaborated to expel the former principal. In addition to the challenges of misbehavior and a wide age gap, the students had a considerable learning gap. In this diverse setting, Washburne realized the ineffectiveness of adhering to the traditional grade system. Therefore, he organized the students into heterogeneous groups depending on their academic levels, allowing those at the same level to study together. In this setting, the composition of these groups was subject-specific and subject to weekly adjustments based on each student's progress (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988). Despite the aforementioned academic groupings, music classes, art classes, and story and drama performances were conducted for all students. In addition, Washburne mandated all students to participate in discussions regarding

the school's organization and norms because he believed that cultivating a self-disciplined, self-management attitude in students was superior to the authoritative management style of traditional schools. This approach to teaching and school management made the majority of children love school and learning (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

In the following year, Washburne secured a position in the small town of Tulare, California, to teach a special class of 17 students aged between 8 and 17 years old. This class comprised students who faced challenges in conventional educational environments. Several students were deaf and had cleft palate and lip, which impeded their speech and led to their exclusion from regular classrooms. The class also included students grappling with mental depression and slow learning, and those who had been expelled from regular classes because of behavioral problems (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

The Superintendent of Tulare granted Washburne complete autonomy in teaching methods and classroom management, with the stipulation that Washburne enabled the students to rejoin the regular classes within a year and prepare older students for further education. In response to the diverse needs of his students, Washburne adopted an individualized approach to teaching. Initially, he arranged for a renowned surgeon from San Francisco to perform complementary surgical procedures for students with cleft palate and lip. Subsequently, he formed specialized groups of slow learners to enable them to experience success and considerable progress. He also established a football team for the older boys to compete against other teams, and eventually to achieve great outcomes. This initiative enabled the students to understand the importance of academic diligence and comprehend that continued participation in the team was an essential component of their serious preparation for high school (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988). In his mathematics class, Washburne observed a broad spectrum of student abilities and provided additional support to slow learners (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988). Based on his experiences in teaching at a rural minischool and his initial experience of educating a group of children with special needs, Washburne gained a profound understanding of the detrimental and ineffective nature of the traditional educational system, which requires all students to progress through a grade-based curriculum with standardized teaching materials. From his early teaching experiences, Washburne gained insights that reinforced his conviction regarding the necessity of adaptive education (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

3.1.3 Effect of Innovative Teaching at San Francisco Normal School

Dr. Burk, the former president of the San Francisco Normal School, was known for his dynamic leadership, lofty ideals, and decisive nature. Under his guidance, the San Francisco Normal School gained a reputation for educational innovation and high-quality teacher training. In 1912, Dr. Burk's colleague, Mary Ward, experimented with first-grade students. She arranged elementary school educational internships for the students. She planned teaching activities with the students daily and allowed them to lead the learning process, which was followed by a teaching review after class (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

One day, students at the San Francisco Normal School identified a significant gap in the mathematics abilities of primary school children. In response, Mary Ward instructed her students to prepare differentiated teaching materials tailored to varying academic levels. After a semester of experimentation, however, wide disparities in student progress persisted. Therefore, Ward collected data on the number of days elementary students required to complete a textbook, converted the results into a graph, and presented them to Dr. Burk. Impressed by the outcomes, Dr. Burk encouraged Ward to share her results with other faculty members. He subsequently initiated a collaborative project involving professors from multiple disciplines and Normal School students to develop self-instruction manuals for each subject. These manuals enabled primary school children to learn at their own pace, fostering individualized progress. Dr. Burk later documented these innovations in his influential paper *Remedial Methods for Fixed-Pace School Education*, which attracted widespread attention and acclaim (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

After reading Burk's report, Washburne felt a strong intellectual connection to his ideas, recognizing that Burk shared similar convictions but possessed greater expertise. Motivated by this realization, Washburne contacted Burk to express his desire to learn from him. Following a series of interviews, Washburne joined the San Francisco Normal School in 1914. He apprenticed under Mary Ward for three months, studying her methods for developing self-study materials in mathematics and her strategies for supervising tutors and students. Based on this foundation and drawing from his scientific background, Washburne employed survey and interview techniques to identify the scientific knowledge required by Normal School students and the interests of school-aged children. Using these data, he compiled self-study textbooks for primary school science courses and designed diagnostic tests for each unit. These innovative efforts laid the groundwork for the development of Winnetka's adaptive education model (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

3.1.4 Educational Expectations of Residents in Winnetka

Winnetka, which is located 32 km outside of Chicago, is a small suburban town in the Lake Michigan region and is surrounded by oak trees, which makes it a picturesque place. The majority of the residents are businesspeople with high socioeconomic status or professionals commuting to Chicago, who have the desire to establish private schools near their homes for their children's education. In 1912, during a meeting convened by the residents of Winnetka to discuss the establishment of a school, Edwin Fetcher proposed the idea of reforming the existing public schools instead. He sought the support of the residents, asked everyone to help, and pledged to enhance the quality of public schools. After running for president of the local school board, William Wirt was solicited for recommendations on school improvement. In 1914, E. N. Rhodes was recruited to manage the Winnetka School (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

The Winnetka School System included primary school education for grades 1–5 and middle school education for grades 6–8, with graduating students eligible to attend the nearby New Trier Township High School. By 1918, the committee and residents were seeking a new superintendent. Edward Yeomans, a committee member familiar with Dr. Burk's work, consulted him for advice and a recommendation of a suitable candidate to assume the position (Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988). Upon hearing about the aforementioned role from Dr. Burk, Washburne was delighted because he recognized it as a great opportunity to expand his concept of adaptive education into the public school system. Many visitors to the personalized learning classrooms of the San Francisco Normal School expressed concern that individualized instruction was only feasible under highly favorable conditions. With approximately 20 students per class and two Normal School assistants, individualized teaching could be implemented effectively. However, in public school classrooms with 35–40 students and a single teacher, such instruction was considered impractical (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988). Washburne, however, was convinced that his appointment as superintendent in Winnetka offered an opportunity to demonstrate that individualized education could succeed in large-class public school settings, provided appropriate teaching materials and guidance were available. Beginning in 1919, he led the development of the renowned Winnetka Plan. Over the following 24 years, students in Winnetka public schools were able to learn and progress in ways that addressed their individual needs while meeting the broader educational expectations of the community (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne and Marland, 1963; Meyer, 1988).

3.2 *Teaching Philosophy for Children's Learning in the Winnetka Plan*

3.2.1 Right for Proficiency in Knowledge and Skills Necessary for Life

Due to diversity in intelligence, individuals differ in the time and pace required for learning. Schools must therefore provide opportunities for students to acquire essential knowledge and skills at their own pace of employing flexible timelines and differentiated teaching materials. To achieve this, Washburne, drawing inspiration from Dr. Burk's individual instruction techniques, restructured the Winnetka School curriculum. He developed teaching materials that supported self-study and self-correction and introduced diagnostic tests for each textbook unit (Washburne, 1926, 1952).

3.2.2 Comprehensive and Suitable Development of Individual

The advancement of human society depends on the adaptive development of all members in a community. Because each child possesses unique capabilities, self-expression and creativity must be developed to contribute to human advancement. At the Winnetka School, individual differences are embraced, and the cultivation of personal creativity is prioritized by offering diverse opportunities and stimuli. This approach ensures that children achieve appropriate development, thereby facilitating human advancement, which is contingent upon the comprehensive and adequate development of each individual (Washburne, 1926, 1952).

3.2.3 Spontaneous and Appropriate Learning

Childhood represents a critical stage of life during which individuals should be allowed to develop freely and holistically. Washburne endeavored to transform the Winnetka School System into a setting filled with joy and engagement for children. To encourage children to attend school, he cultivated a dynamic, comfortable, and nurturing classroom environment to help children learn spontaneously and appropriately, and execute their right to live a natural, joyful, and fulfilling life (Washburne, 1926, 1952).

3.3 *Curriculum Development in Winnetka Plan*

3.3.1 Principles of Curriculum Development

Complemented by his research and observations at the San Francisco Teachers College, Washburne's experiences in teaching made him deeply aware of the major disparities in learning abilities among children of the same age or grade across different

subjects. He argued that subjecting children with diverse capabilities to the same learning materials and assessments was excessively detrimental. Therefore, based on his experience in textbook compilation at the San Francisco Normal School, he put collaborative efforts with teachers in the Winnetka area to research and revise the curriculum of the Winnetka School on an annual basis, which resulted in the creation of tailored textbooks for each subject. Overall, the Winnetka Plan was created on the following curriculum development principles: (1) to clearly and concisely define the learning objectives that must be mastered in each subject, (2) to prepare self-study materials that facilitate self-learning and self-correction in each subject, (3) to devise diagnostic tests for each subject to gauge students' learning status, (4) to enable children to acquire essential knowledge and skills at their own pace, and (5) to allocate half the morning and half the afternoon daily for group and creative activities (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne, Vogel, and Gray, 1926).

3.3.2 Connotations of Curriculum Preparation

The Winnetka Plan is broadly categorized into two main parts: common essentials and group and creative activities. Common essentials refer to the fundamental knowledge and skills that each child must possess to navigate life. Common essentials include the ability to perform accurate calculations, to use punctuation and vocabulary correctly, to write fluently and clearly, to read level-appropriate textbooks, to spell commonly used vocabulary correctly, and to identify the names of geographical phenomena and historical people, places, and events. Those also include the ability to engage in intellectual discussions on civil, social, industrial, and other relevant topics with others.

Group and creative activities aim to foster the development of children's creativity and potential while nurturing their social awareness. These activities include gatherings, autonomous activities, physical education classes, craft projects, drama performances, topic discussions, project work, and appreciation of literature, music, and art (Washburne, 1932, 1940; Washburne, Vogel, and Gray, 1926). Knowledge of common essentials is crucial for all students. However, because each student possesses unique abilities, the knowledge needs to be acquired on an individual basis. Group and creative activities are conducted to cultivate social awareness and practical skills, and enable children to showcase their abilities. Because of the distinct purposes and nature of the aforementioned two curriculum components, the methods for preparing corresponding courses differ. The preparation methods for these two courses are described as follows (Washburne, 1932, 1940).

1. Curriculum Preparation for Common Essential Knowledge

Washburne believed that the instinct for learning is innate among children. However, he acknowledged that effective learning necessitates systematic planning in the current intricate civilized society (Washburne, 1940). Living in an era shaped by tests, efficiency management, and scientific inquiry, Washburne argued that progressive education must be grounded in scientific research and reasoning. He also stated that scientific research in education must be instrumental for identifying which teaching methodologies most effectively foster children's development (Washburne, 1952). Therefore, while compiling teaching materials for subjects such as reading, mathematics, spelling, writing, and social studies, Washburne evaluated students' learning readiness, identified children's learning interests, compiled step-by-step teaching materials, and collated essential social knowledge required for life using scientific methods. He also designed personalized record cards to carefully track students' progress and attitudes toward learning in various subjects (Washburne, 1932, 1940).

2. Evaluating Students' Learning Readiness

Washburne observed disparities in the knowledge and abilities of children of the same age across various subjects. He underscored the importance of understanding each student's starting point for learning through suitable diagnostic tests before commencing instruction. This approach is valuable because an accurate assessment of students' readiness for learning is crucial for providing them with appropriate teaching materials. For instance, in the Winnetka School, the first step in implementing individualized reading teaching is to conduct tests, with different tests across different grades. Specifically, the Burgess Picture Scale is utilized for the third and fourth grades, the Stanford Reading Test is utilized for the fifth grade, the Gates Silent Reading Test is utilized for the sixth grade, and the Stanford Reading Test and Gates Silent Reading Test are conducted for the seventh and eighth grade students. Following the tests, teachers analyze the obtained scores to identify each student's reading level. This approach enables an understanding of each student's reading level and clarifies why several students are unable to study certain subjects at their grade level, such as geography and mathematics word problems (Washburne, 1932).

3. Identifying Children's Learning Interests

During his tenure at the San Francisco Teachers College, Washburne explored the scientific topics that intrigued children. He visited primary school classrooms and invited students to ask various scientific questions. Washburne meticulously answered these

questions and documented the children's inquiries. To expand the study, he enlisted graduate students teaching in other cities to collect similar data. By analyzing the scientific principles underlying these questions, Washburne classified them and used the findings as a foundation for science textbook development (Washburne and Marland, 1963).

The Winnetka School surveyed children in 34 cities across the United States to determine their preferred reading materials. They analyzed variations in book preferences among children with differing reading abilities. The findings were compiled into 'What Books Children Like—Winnetka, What Children Like to Read' in the Winnetka Graded Book List, and Measurable Difference in Books Suitable for Different Grades, which offered the descriptions of each book's content. This compilation enabled teachers to select appropriate books for children at various reading levels (Washburne, 1926, 1952) to effectively cater to the children's learning interests.

Compiling step-by-step teaching materials posed a major challenge for teachers, particularly in creating resources that support self-study and self-correction. To address this challenge, the teachers of the Winnetka School adopted the self-study textbooks used at the San Francisco Normal School and across the United States. They used these resources to create self-study books, exercise books, and diagnostic tests for individualized learning to compile step-by-step teaching materials. However, these instructional materials were not static. Over a period of seven years, Washburne comprehensively reviewed school children's performance across various subjects from May to July every year. This process indicated the normative performance for each grade and the achievable learning standards for children. These insights were subsequently used as a reference for refining the aforementioned teaching materials (Washburne, 1926, 1952).

4. Collating Essential Social Knowledge Required for Children's Life

While editing science textbooks, Washburne extensively compiled various scientific phenomena encountered in daily life, such as why objects fall down, why balloons fly upward, why kites fly in the air, why rain falls when dark clouds are present, and why lightning appears before thunder. He classified thousands of such scientific inquiries based on scientific principles and used them as a foundation for editing science textbooks (Washburne and Marland, 1963). This approach provides a compilation of knowledge essential for children to navigate their lives effectively. Washburne also sought to transform the traditional method of teaching social sciences, which relied on the rote memorization of chronological events and historical facts. He envisioned a curriculum in which history helped children understand major life events, geography informed them about living conditions and economic development worldwide, and citizenship education imparted political knowledge and civic skills (Washburne, 1926, 1952). In editing social science textbooks, Washburne applied two criteria for content selection. First, children needed familiarity with frequently referenced names of people, places, and events to engage meaningfully in further learning. Second, knowledge had to be relevant to real-life problem-solving and participation in social life (Washburne, 1926, 1963, 1969).

5. Designing Personalized Record Cards

In the Winnetka School System, each student received a personalized goal card, distinct from traditional report cards that ranked or compared students by grades. These cards had two sides: the front listed objectives for each subject and unit along with dates of mastery, while the back documented learning attitudes every six weeks, including participation in group activities, collaboration, and overall engagement. This system emphasized individual progress and development rather than competition. It placed equal importance on attitudes toward learning as on knowledge and skills. The record cards served a dual purpose: they helped students monitor their own goals and progress, and they provided parents with a transparent overview of their child's educational status (Washburne, 1926).

4. Reflection: Democratic Education for Children

To improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching, approaches must extend beyond standard methods to foster students' initiative, positivity, and creativity (Tra, 2023). Adaptive learning provides instructional support tailored to individual characteristics and differences in learning processes. Its technical foundation lies in enabling teachers and students to achieve better outcomes through personalized learning (Li and Liu, 2024). Teaching philosophy articulates personal values, connects educators with others who share similar commitments, and informs classroom practices (Beatty, Leigh, and Dean, 2009). Children, as integral members of society, must be encouraged to develop individually and cultivate social awareness to contribute meaningfully to their communities. They must be educated on the interrelationship between individuals and groups, a concept Bobbit described as large-group consciousness.

At the Winnetka School, cooperative activities fostered this awareness while allowing children to contribute their unique talents. Drama performances, school magazines, group games, and band activities encouraged students to recognize the importance of showcasing their strengths, teamwork, and division of labor. Student assemblies further nurtured a sense of citizenship, while history and geography lessons played a vital role in cultivating social consciousness. Washburne emphasized that human well-being depends on each individual's ability to develop such awareness (Washburne, 1926).

To raise social awareness, Washburne employed adaptive teaching to enable each child to learn in ways that were spontaneous and aligned with their readiness, interests, and abilities. By assessing students' readiness, exploring their interests, and designing personalized record cards, the Winnetka School ensured that education matched individual needs. Education was conceived as a democratically oriented process, allowing children to learn about the society in which they lived.

Washburne's belief in the holistic and appropriate development of individuals underscores his philosophy that children must be encouraged to create and learn according to their unique interests and abilities. Based on this philosophy, we examined the intersections of teaching philosophy and adaptive education. The principles of the Winnetka Plan not only underpin its adaptive educational philosophy but also provide insights for teachers seeking to implement adaptive strategies. Democratic education must be implemented to ensure that children experience learning as both a personal and social endeavor (Shih, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Smithers and Mazzei, 2024; Washburne and Marland, 1963).

Author Contributions: Y.-H. Shih and J. C. Lin; methodology, Y.-H. Shih and J. C. Lin; formal analysis, Y.-H. Shih and J. C. Lin; investigation, Y.-H. Shih and J. C. Lin; writing—original draft preparation, Y.-H. Shih and J. C. Lin; writing—review and editing, Y.-H. Shih and J. C. Lin.

Funding: This research did not receive external funding.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank two anonymous (unknown) reviewers and the editor for their comments.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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