



Educational quality in rural areas during times of conflict in Colombia

Calidad educativa en las zonas rurales en época de conflicto en Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Rural education in Colombia faces structural challenges exacerbated by decades of armed conflict and centralist policies that ignore territorial particularities, generating persistent educational gaps in the most vulnerable communities. This research aimed to build a territorialised educational management model that strengthens educational quality in rural areas affected by conflict. A socio-critical approach was used with 37 participants from the municipality of Tierralta, Córdoba, including school principals, teachers, students, and public officials. The results revealed disconnects between national policies and territorial realities, a lack of monitoring mechanisms, but also valuable experiences of community participation and alignment between technical agricultural education and local vocations. A model based on two dimensions was proposed: participatory-community and pedagogical-curricular, with sustainability mechanisms that position communities as protagonists of their educational processes, demonstrating that quality rural education is a smart investment for building prosperous and peaceful territories.

Keywords: rural education; rural extension; community education. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

La educación rural en Colombia enfrenta desafíos estructurales agravados por décadas de conflicto armado y políticas centralistas que ignoran las particularidades territoriales, generando brechas educativas persistentes en las comunidades más vulnerables. Esta investigación se propuso construir un modelo de gestión educativa territorializada que fortalezca la calidad educativa en zonas rurales afectadas por el conflicto. Se utilizó un enfoque socio-crítico con 37 participantes del municipio de Tierralta, Córdoba, incluyendo rectores, docentes, estudiantes y funcionarios públicos. Los resultados evidenciaron desconexiones entre políticas nacionales y realidades territoriales, ausencia de mecanismos de seguimiento, pero también experiencias valiosas de participación comunitaria y alineación entre educación técnica agropecuaria y vocaciones locales. Se propuso un modelo basado en dos dimensiones: participativa-comunitaria y pedagógica-curricular, con mecanismos de sostenibilidad que posicionan a las comunidades como protagonistas de sus procesos educativos, demostrando que la educación rural de calidad es una inversión inteligente para construir territorios prósperos y en paz.

Descriptores: educación rural; extensión al medio rural; educación comunitaria. (Fuente: Tesoro UNESCO).

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Research articles



INTRODUCTION

Rural education in Colombia faces structural challenges exacerbated by decades of armed conflict and centralist policies that have ignored the particularities of each territory. According to a study by Cetina et al. (2024), this landscape is characterised by persistent educational gaps that particularly affect the country's most vulnerable communities.

On the other hand, the final peace agreement of 2016 recognised education as a fundamental pillar for building territorial peace, generating regulatory instruments such as the Special Plan for Rural Education (PEER) and the Territorially Focused Development Programmes (PDET). However, the implementation of these policies reveals deep tensions between the central guidelines of the State and the realities of rural territories (Pérez-Verano, 2025; González et al. 2022; Williamson-Castro et al. 2017; Mendoza-Ponce, 2024).

Consequently, the municipality of Tierralta in Córdoba is a paradigmatic case of this problem. As a PDET territory, it is characterised by structural poverty, historical state neglect and the persistent effects of armed conflict, which complicate the implementation of educational policies. This research therefore studies these challenges from a critical perspective, proposing the construct of territorialised educational management as an interpretative framework and transformative alternative.

Similarly, the relevance of this study lies in its theoretical and practical contribution to the field of rural education. From a theoretical point of view, it proposes to overcome the limitations of technical-instrumental approaches to educational management. From a practical perspective, it offers empirical evidence on the gaps between formulated policies and territorial realities, contributing elements for the design of more relevant and effective strategies.

Thus, this research aims to propose a territorialised educational management model that strengthens educational quality in rural areas of Colombia affected by armed conflict.

Theoretical framework

Initially, educational policies in Colombia had historically operated from a centralised approach that ignored territorial diversity. However, as Malagón et al. (2019) point out, this paradigm proved insufficient to address the peculiarities of each context. On the other hand, Roth (2019) conceptualises public policies as measures to evaluate government management, determining proposals and tools generated from support programmes. Despite this, this approach also shows significant limitations in rural areas, where cultural, social and economic heterogeneity requires more specialised responses.

Similarly, Barrios (2024) argues that public policies emerge from cycles of structured actions influenced by political processes that could accompany decision-making and generate impacts on the solution of institutional problems. However, in rural communities affected by conflict, this dynamic is complicated by the multiplicity of actors, interests and converging needs in each territory.

Territory as a pedagogical and political category

From another perspective, territorialised educational management proposes to overcome the instrumental conception of territory as an administrative geographical space, recognising it as a pedagogical and political subject. Along these lines, Guardamagna & Reyes (2019) argue that public policies should be oriented towards understanding converging dynamics within territories, recognising that the complexity of power is defined by social, economic and political factors in territorial planning.

Consequently, this perspective involves understanding rural schools as collective actors with capacity for agency, resistance and transformation, deeply rooted in the social, cultural and political dynamics of their environment. From this point of view, the territory is not a passive recipient of policies, but an active builder of relevant educational alternatives.



Governance and participation in rural educational contexts

In relation to this issue, Hoyos (2015) defines governance as the ability to respond to community problems, taking on the organisation of national, regional and local actors to provide responses from different state models. In rural educational contexts, this implies recognising the legitimacy and knowledge of communities as foundations for building relevant and effective educational policies.

At the same time, Avelle (2023) identifies three key elements for strengthening governance capacity through public policies: social consensus, channels for deliberation, and participation. In rural education, these elements are particularly important for overcoming extractive policy-making approaches and moving towards genuinely participatory processes that take into account the voices of all stakeholders.

Educational quality from territorialised approaches

Educational quality is a fundamental tool for building a responsible society from local perspectives, according to Pita (2021), especially in rural areas where community life projects and territorial economies are nourished by education. Malagón et al. (2019), on the other hand, argue that the constant development of educational policies allows for the understanding and implementation of pedagogical transformations capable of positively changing institutional realities. From this perspective, quality goes beyond standardised parameters to be conceived as a comprehensive process that strengthens social ties, rescues vernacular cultures and contributes to the building of peaceful territories.

METHOD

The socio-critical perspective was chosen as the research design, recognising that knowledge arises from the interactive dialogue between researchers and participants. For this reason, the choice of Tierralta, Córdoba in Colombia as a case study is justified by its status as a PDET, its representativeness of rural Córdoba and the persistent effects of internal wars.



Regarding the sample selected, it included various key actors in the implementation of rural public education policies who fulfilled different roles: two rectors who directed rural educational institutions, sixteen teachers who taught eleventh and tenth grade students, sixteen students enrolled in secondary-level technical agricultural education, as well as three public servants belonging to the Municipal and Departmental Education Secretariats and the SENA. Ultimately, the selection followed functional representative criteria, ensuring the participation of individuals with diverse responsibilities in the implementation of territorial education policies, broken down as follows:

- a) 2 principals of rural educational institutions
- b) 16 teachers in grades 10 and 11
- c) 16 students in secondary technical agricultural education
- d) 3 officials from the Municipal and Departmental Education Secretariats and SENA

Information was collected through open interviews, which were then analysed to identify key aspects that would provide essential elements for the generation of an emerging proposal in response to the research objective.

RESULTS

An initial analysis reveals a perceptual divide regarding the existence of rural public education policies. Half of the principals recognise the formulation of policies, while the other half consider that these are either non-existent or not adequately implemented. This duality reflects not only a problem of institutional communication, but also a structural disconnect between centralised creation processes and the realities of implementation on the ground.

As one of the rectors interviewed stated: "There are very well-drafted documents, but when we get to the practical application, we find that the conditions on the ground are completely different from what was imagined in Bogotá" (Rector 1, personal communication, 2024). This perception coincides with the views of

Cetina et al. (2024) on the inability of Colombian education policies to address realities due to the homogenisation and commodification promoted by the system.

On the other hand, the analysis highlights significant weaknesses in territorial educational governance mechanisms. One hundred per cent of the institutions analysed do not monitor the strategic axis "Quality education for coexistence and improvement of quality of life" of the Municipal Development Plan, revealing a lack of systematic evaluation and feedback processes.

However, valuable experiences of community participation are emerging. As one teacher pointed out: "When we manage to involve families and community leaders in the design of educational projects, the results are completely different. Students feel more motivated and see that what they learn makes sense for their lives" (Teacher 5, personal communication, 2024).

Configuration of various actors and power relations

In relation to the numerous actors involved in territorial education management, the research identifies several entities with different interests and objectives that have an impact in this area:

- a) State actors: The Ministry of Education and the departmental and municipal secretariats operate under administrative and regulatory compliance logics.
- b) Community actors: Families, social organisations and local leaders contribute territorial knowledge and specific training demands.
- c) Economic actors: The SENA, the local private sector and cooperatives seek to link education with productive needs.
- d) Educational actors: Rectors, teachers and students mediate between state guidelines and territorial realities.

As a result, the tension between these actors is expressed in the unanimous perception (100%) that SENA is ineffective in the transition from education to employment. As one official stated: "There is a lack of coordination between what



we teach in institutions, what SENA offers and what the local productive sector actually demands" (Official 2, personal communication, 2024).

Curricular relevance and territorial vocations

Despite the limitations identified, one significant result emerges: 100% of rectors consider that there is alignment between technical agricultural education and the economic vocations of the territory. This link represents an important achievement in terms of curriculum relevance, although it needs to be deepened in order to transcend instrumental technical training and move towards comprehensive education.

In this context, a notable experience comes from a teacher who implemented community production projects: "When students work in the school garden with their families, they not only learn agricultural techniques, but also strengthen bonds, recover ancestral knowledge and contribute to local food security" (Teacher 8, personal communication, 2024).

Uneven implementation of peacebuilding strategies

With regard to peacebuilding strategies, the analysis of the Citizenship, Reconciliation, Socio-Emotional Education and Climate Change (CRESE) strategies shows uneven implementation. Only a minority of institutions systematically incorporate peace education content, limiting the transformative potential of education in post-conflict contexts.

Similarly, the results show that, despite the 2016 Peace Agreement, rural educational institutions continue to face the effects of the armed conflict. As one headteacher pointed out: "We continue to see young people dropping out of school due to lack of opportunities, and others who are attracted to illegal groups because they see no future in education" (Headteacher 2, personal communication, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The results confirm the need to overcome the centralist logic that has characterised Colombian education policies. In this regard, territorialised education management proposes an alternative approach that recognises the particularities of each territory and builds responses based on and for rural communities. Each region of the country has its own history and culture, requiring solutions tailored to its needs.

Then, as Espitia (2022) points out, reconciliation after conflict requires profound processes of change, including new ways of teaching that recognise the diversity of rural realities. There is no single model applicable to all contexts, as each community forges its own identity. Therefore, the results show that the greatest advances in educational quality occur when the community actively participates. This coincides with Bustamante's (2020) statement on the importance of creating bonds based on respect and dialogue between teachers and students.

Consequently, territorialised educational management proposes building educational objectives, strategies and horizons in conjunction with local communities. This requires valuing their ancestral knowledge and allowing oneself to be enriched by their perspectives. Similarly, the results highlight the need for public policies capable of adapting to each territorial context. As Rodríguez (2024) points out, promoting peace education provides an opportunity to transform realities through mutual respect.

However, this requires overcoming standardised visions and promoting collaborative processes that emerge from each region. Territorialised educational management proposes flexible mechanisms that truly respond to local characteristics. In terms of limitations, it should be noted that this study focused on only two institutions in a specific municipality, which limits the generalisation of the findings. Similarly, the cross-sectional approach does not allow for the observation of long-term developments in policy implementation.



PROPOSAL FOR A TERRITORIAL EDUCATION PUBLIC POLICY TO IMPROVE RURAL EDUCATION QUALITY IN POST-CONFLICT CONTEXTS IN COLOMBIA

Rural education in Colombia faces structural challenges exacerbated by decades of armed conflict and centralised policies that are disconnected from territorial realities. According to a study by Cetina et al. (2024), this landscape is characterised by persistent educational gaps that particularly affect the country's most vulnerable communities.

Consequently, the municipality of Tierralta in Córdoba is a paradigmatic case of this problem. As a PDET territory, it is characterised by poverty, historical neglect by the state and the persistent effects of armed conflict, which hinder the implementation of national education policies. Therefore, this research studies these challenges from a critical perspective, proposing territorialised education management as a conceptual framework and alternative transformative implementation.

Diagnosis of the current situation

The results of this research reveal significant disconnects between policies formulated at the national level and their implementation in the territory:

Gaps in policy implementation

There is a clear division of perceptions regarding the existence of rural public education policies. Half of the rectors acknowledge the formulation of policies, while the other half consider that these are not adequately implemented or do not reach the territory. This duality reflects not only a problem of institutional communication, but also a structural disconnect between centralised creation processes and territorial realities.

Absence of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

On the other hand, the analysis reveals significant weaknesses in local education governance mechanisms. One hundred per cent of the institutions analysed do



not monitor the strategic axis "Quality education for coexistence and improvement of quality of life" of the Municipal Development Plan, revealing a lack of systematic evaluation and feedback processes.

Strengths identified

Despite the limitations noted, one significant finding was identified: all of the rectors consider that there is alignment between technical agricultural education and the economic vocations of the territory. This link represents an important advance in terms of curriculum relevance, although it needs to be deepened in order to transcend technical training and move towards a more comprehensive and inclusive education.

Theoretical foundations: contextualised educational management

From another perspective, contextualised educational management proposes going beyond the instrumental notion of the territory as a mere geographical-administrative space, recognising it as a pedagogical and political subject. Along these lines, Guardamagna & Reyes (2019) argue that public policies should be geared towards understanding the converging dynamics within territories, recognising that the complexity of power is defined by the social, economic and political configuration of land use planning.

Contextualised public policy proposal

Guiding principles

1. Contextualisation: Recognition of the territory as a pedagogical and political subject.
2. Participation: Active inclusion of communities in design and implementation.
3. Relevance: Articulation with local economic and cultural vocations.
4. Comprehensiveness: Training that goes beyond the technical to the human and civic.

Table 1. Sustainability strategies based on continuous evaluation and feedback mechanisms.

Strategic Component	Objective	Strategies	Indicators
Participatory and community dimension	Strengthen community participation as a central pillar of educational management.	- Create territorial education councils in which communities, teachers, students and local authorities participate equally, ensuring that everyone's voices are heard, especially those of the most vulnerable groups. - Promote participatory methodologies such as workshops, round tables and open consultations so that communities can contribute to curriculum design and educational decisions. - Strengthen parent schools with a territorial focus, providing them with tools to actively participate in their children's education and school life, as well as fostering community leadership.	- Percentage of educational decisions made with community participation, broken down by type of actor (community, teachers, students, authorities). - Level of community satisfaction with participatory processes, measured through simple and accessible surveys. - Number of educational projects developed collaboratively, with evidence of active participation by different actors. - Number of workshops and training sessions held to strengthen parent schools.
Pedagogical and curricular dimension	Design curricula that connect local knowledge, technical skills and citizenship training, responding to the needs of the context.	- Incorporate ancestral knowledge and local knowledge into the curriculum through practical activities, educational materials, and projects that reflect the cultural identity of each region. - Strengthen technical agricultural education with an agroecological approach, integrating sustainable practices, local productive projects and partnerships with rural organisations so that students can apply what they have learned in their communities. - Include education for peace and reconciliation in all areas of the curriculum, addressing issues such as conflict resolution, human rights, cultural diversity and historical memory, in order to	- Percentage of curricula that integrate local and ancestral knowledge, evaluated through participatory reviews. - Number of technical agricultural programmes implemented with an agroecological approach, including sustainable production projects. - Level of perception of inclusion and reconciliation in educational communities, measured through surveys and interviews with students, teachers and families. - Number of educational materials developed that include local knowledge and peace education. - Number of



		build a more just and inclusive society.	partnerships established with rural and community organisations to strengthen technical education.
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Source: Own elaboration (2025).

The proposal presented in Table 1 goes beyond what has traditionally been proposed in our country's educational policies. It is not just a matter of designing another programme to be implemented from Bogotá, but of building something different: a model where rural communities are the protagonists of their educational process, where ancestral knowledge has the same value as technical knowledge, and where sustainability does not depend solely on the will of temporary governments.

When we talk about the participatory and community dimension, we are proposing something that sounds simple but is profoundly transformative in our Colombian context. The proposed territorial education councils are not mere committees that meet occasionally to validate decisions that have already been made. They are spaces where the opinion of the community leader who knows every family in the village carries the same weight as that of the head teacher or the education secretary.

This proposal recognises something that we sometimes forget in government offices: that rural communities have survived decades of state neglect precisely because they have developed their own ways of organising themselves, solving their problems and caring for their children and young people. The indicators proposed, such as the percentage of decisions made with community participation, are not just figures in a report, but thermometers that will tell us whether we are really fulfilling the promise of giving back the leading role to those who have always been the guardians of education in rural areas: the rural families themselves.

Education transcends school walls and begins in the family unit. Empowering parents with educational tools ensures lifelong learning beyond temporary



policies. A mother educated in her role as a teacher is the most consistent source of education, more so than temporary measures.

Territorial wisdom in the curriculum

This curricular dimension touches a deep chord in our educational reality. For generations, rural children studied with materials that were foreign to their reality, with examples that were unfamiliar to their daily lives. A student in Tierralta who learns mathematics by calculating fares that are non-existent for him receives an education that is far removed from his environment.

This proposal does not folklorise education by incorporating ancestral and local knowledge, but rather recognises that farmers who are able to predict the weather by observing clouds and moon phases possess scientific knowledge that is combined with meteorology and astronomy in textbooks.

The agroecological approach to technical agricultural training represents a smart commitment to sustainability. Instead of training technicians to reproduce production models dependent on imported agrochemicals, we are talking about young people learning to produce cleanly, to care for the land they inherited from their ancestors and which they will pass on to their children. This is not romantic or idealistic; it is deeply practical and strategic for territories that have suffered the effects of intensive agriculture and extractivism.

The education for peace that is proposed as a cross-cutting theme throughout this proposal is particularly relevant in territories such as Tierralta, where the traces of armed conflict are still present in the collective memory. It is not a question of adding another lecture on peace, but rather of ensuring that the entire educational experience is permeated by respect for difference, dialogue as a method of resolving disagreements and the collective construction of alternatives for a dignified life.

Indicators

The indicators proposed in this table have something special: they are designed to be understood and used by the communities themselves. The "level of



community satisfaction with participatory processes" is not data that will be stored in some file in Bogotá, but information that the communities themselves will use to improve their processes. "Simple and accessible surveys" recognise that not everyone in rural areas has a university education, but everyone has valuable wisdom and experience to assess whether education is responding to their needs.

The "number of pedagogical projects built collaboratively" tells us about a different way of understanding progress: instead of simply counting how many plans were designed by external experts, we are measuring how many projects emerged from dialogue between teachers, students, families, and community leaders. This ensures that projects have deep local roots and, therefore, a greater chance of persisting over time.

Indicators related to the incorporation of traditional knowledge and perceptions of inclusion and reconciliation allow us to track transformations that are difficult to quantify but fundamental to long-term sustainability. When a student feels proud of their territory because they see that their ancestral knowledge is valued in school, we are creating a sense of belonging and preventing education from becoming merely a way out of the countryside.

An evolving feedback model

The most interesting thing about this approach is that it establishes a system that constantly learns from itself. The evaluation mechanisms are not designed to judge or punish, but to identify what is working well, what is not working and what needs to be adjusted. This is especially important in rural areas, where conditions can change rapidly due to climatic, economic or social factors.

The "participatory reviews" mentioned in the table are spaces where the educational community comes together to reflect collectively on progress and challenges. It is not an external expert who comes in to evaluate, but the community itself that looks back on its journey and decides what adjustments need to be made. This builds local self-assessment capacities that transcend any particular government programme.



The strengths of a model designed to last

This approach has several characteristics that make it particularly promising for contexts such as Colombia. First, it does not depend exclusively on the political will of the national or departmental government. By creating solid participatory structures at the local level, it generates dynamics that could be sustained even when administrations change.

Likewise, by incorporating the productive dimension through agroecological technical education, it is committed to the long-term economic sustainability of rural areas. This is essential, as quality education would be useless if young people did not see possibilities for building a life project in their territories.

The peacebuilding component is particularly relevant for areas that have experienced decades of armed conflict. By training citizens to resolve conflicts peacefully and collectively build alternative development paths, we are investing in long-term social stability.

Challenges to be taken into account

Of course, a proposal of this nature faces significant challenges. First, coordination between different institutions that have traditionally worked in an uncoordinated manner. Harmonious collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the secretariats of education, SENA and community organisations requires profound institutional cultural changes.

The second challenge is teacher training. The teachers who will implement these proposals need to develop skills that they may not have acquired in their university careers: participatory methodologies, incorporation of local knowledge, conflict mediation, and working with communities. This requires ongoing training programmes designed specifically for these contexts.

The third challenge is financial. Although this proposal is designed to be sustainable in the long term, it requires substantial initial investments in training, infrastructure, and technical support. This requires creativity to diversify funding



sources and to demonstrate to decision-makers that this is a smart investment, not a superfluous expense.

A commitment to real transformation

Ultimately, what this table proposes goes far beyond improving a few isolated educational indicators. It invites us to reimagine the meaning of providing public education in rural areas of Colombia. It proposes moving from a model where the state "brings" education to communities to a model where the state accompanies communities in building their own educational processes.

This is a bold and necessary commitment for a country that for decades has watched rural education reproduce inequalities rather than help overcome them. The sustainability mechanisms proposed in the table are not sophisticated planning techniques, but rather the recognition of a simple truth: the educational processes that truly transform are those that communities feel are their own and that respond to their needs, dreams and life projects.

If we succeed in implementing proposals such as this, we will not only be improving the quality of education in rural Colombia, but also contributing to the construction of peaceful territories where rural children and young people can dream of a dignified future without having to leave the land where they were born.

Sustainability strategies

The inclusion of territorialised educational projects in municipal and departmental development plans, so as to ensure their continuity over time.

Teacher and community training to generate autonomy in local education management.

Productive projects linked to education that give rise to sustainable ventures.

Coordination with national, departmental and local policies in favour of rural education.



Expected results

Short term (1-2 years).

Greater participation of parents, teachers and local authorities in educational decision-making.

Curricula tailored to the reality and needs of each region.

Teachers trained in flexible and culturally relevant teaching approaches.

Medium term (3-4 years)

Reduction in differences between the quality of education in rural and urban areas.

Indicators such as coverage, dropout rates and graduation rates similar to the national average.

Inter-institutional partnerships to coordinate actions in favour of rural education.

Long term (5+ years)

The results confirm the need to overcome the centralist logic that has characterised Colombian education policies. In this regard, territorialised education management proposes an alternative approach that recognises the particularities of each territory and builds responses based on and for rural communities. Each region of the country has its own history and culture, and therefore requires solutions tailored to its needs.

CONCLUSION

This study succeeded in developing an educational management model that places rural communities at the centre of their own teaching processes, overcoming decades of educational policies designed in offices in Bogotá without understanding the realities of rural Colombia. What we found in Tierralta, and what surely happens in hundreds of villages across the country, is that when rural families, teachers, students and community leaders sit down together to think



about what kind of education their children need, proposals emerge that are much more relevant and effective than any programme formulated by external experts. The proposed model recognises something fundamental: that the woman who knows when it is going to rain by observing the behaviour of animals has knowledge that is just as valuable as that found in textbooks, and that the young person who learns agroecological techniques by working in the school garden with his family is receiving a comprehensive education that prepares him not only to be a good technician, but also to be a citizen committed to his territory.

The great promise of this model is to demonstrate that quality rural education is not an expensive luxury, but a smart investment that creates prosperous and peaceful communities. When rural children and young people feel proud of their roots, when they see that their grandparents' knowledge is valued at school, when they connect what they learn with the needs of their communities, then education fulfils its true purpose: to shape human beings capable of transforming their realities without renouncing their identity.

The results of this proposal go beyond improving standardised tests or meeting ministerial indicators; it is about building a country where rural young people can dream of a dignified future in their own territories, where rural schools are places of encounter and reconciliation, and where every village has the opportunity to write its own educational history. Only then can we speak of a truly equitable Colombia, where education is a bridge to peace and not a ladder to escape the countryside.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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To the rural teachers of Colombia.



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