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Four Key Ideas about Coteaching in High School Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Coteaching is becoming a common practice in secondary classrooms as a way to provide special education services to students with disabilities (SWD). Effective coteaching supports an inclusive philosophy of schooling by creating appropriate learning spaces for diverse learners, allowing learners access to general education curricula, building a community of learners, establishing collaborative relationships, and using authentic multi-level instruction to provide worthwhile and engaging learning tasks for all students. While content teachers have expertise in their subject area and special educators have expertise in adaptations and supports for SWD, efficient coteachers must coordinate their ideas and practices to maximize the learning for all students. Implementing coteaching practices in any setting may be challenging; however, conditions in high school settings are conducive to coteaching, an idea that has been overlooked in the literature on inclusive practices in secondary settings. Furthermore, the learning objectives of a given lesson and the characteristics of learners in secondary settings provide the potential for the use of varied coteaching practices within the scheduled instructional block and an opportunity for ongoing professional learning. Shared pedagogical content knowledge (shared PCK) characterizes the new knowledge base teachers develop from their unique experience of coteaching. Coteaching in high school classrooms offers the potential of equitable access to content-specific pedagogical practices as well as the specialized instruction SWD need to be successful.

Keywords: coteaching, secondary education, inclusive classroom, collaboration

Four Key Ideas about Coteaching in High School Classrooms

High school classrooms are becoming increasingly more diverse as students with a range of needs are educated in general education classrooms. Likewise, collaborative practices, such as coteaching, have become more common in high schools as a way to deliver instructional support to students with disabilities (SWD), many of whom are identified with a specific learning disability (Nierengarten, 2013; Sweigart & Landrum, 2015). The class roster in many secondary classrooms is comprised of a heterogeneous group of students with a range of needs, including SWD who receive special educational services. As outlined in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), special education services provide specialized instruction for SWD that address individualized learning priorities. The goal is to provide all students access to grade-level curriculum and opportunities to engage meaningfully with the content while delivering specialized instruction to those students with IEPs.

Coteaching is an approach to meet this goal as it aligns with an inclusive philosophy of schooling. Coteaching, for the purpose of this discussion, is defined as one general and one special education teacher sharing instructional and assessment responsibilities for at least one group of students in a single classroom setting for at least one instructional period (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Coteachers have the potential to create a classroom community that provides engaging learning tasks to help all students achieve. It is a way to deliver specialized instruction within the context of the general education classroom: the support SWD need, when they need it.

Coteaching, like many collaborative partnerships, can simultaneously be rewarding and challenging as partners develop the skills and mutual understandings needed to share instructional responsibility for their students. The vignette below, grounded in my experiences as

a special educator, researcher, and teacher educator, offers a way for secondary teachers to envision coteaching as an effective means of meeting curricular demands as well as provide the necessary supports for SWD.

Tina is a high school special education teacher with several years of teaching experience. As fourth period begins, Tina enters Beth's classroom. The students, already seated in the classroom, are ready to start their Integrated Algebra class. Beth, a certified math teacher for 11 years, directs the students to complete the review questions displayed on the interactive whiteboard while Tina picks up a clipboard from Beth's desk and begins to circulate among the students' desks to check on the completion of last night's homework assignment. Beth and Tina briefly confer at the front of the room about the material to be taught in today's lesson. This is Tina and Beth's second year coteaching together.

Unfortunately, they do not have a common planning time; however, Beth emails Tina every Friday morning with her plans for the following week. Tina reviews these during the day and responds to Beth with suggestions for adaptations to support the students with disabilities in the class.

After the students have a few minutes to work on the review problems, Beth reviews the answers quickly. Tina comes to the front of the classroom and directs the students in a mini-lesson about the order of operations, a skill necessary for completing the problem set for today's lesson. As the lesson proceeds, Beth leads the class initially, modeling problem-solving procedures on the interactive whiteboard and directing the students in guided practice. At one point, Tina re-words an explanation that Beth gives in response to a student question; Beth nods in agreement with the elaborated explanation. Throughout the lesson, both teachers encourage the students to work with a partner or to ask a peer for guidance, as needed, and monitor the students' progress as they work at their desks. Tina is especially attentive to those students who may struggle with completing the guided practice problems, frequently reminding students to look at the exemplar for guidance or to recall the pre-teaching lesson they completed with her the previous day during the academic support period. During the question – answer exchanges, Tina signals to Beth with a nod that the student she is standing near is able to correctly answer the question. Beth calls on that student to respond to the next question.

The notes and annotations that are written on the interactive whiteboard are digitally recorded and saved on a shared drive accessible to both teachers. Tina uses these archived notes to share with students during their academic support period and in preparing students for tests. Near the end of the 84-minute instructional period, Beth describes the assignment the students are to complete as homework; Tina reminds some students to record this assignment in their agendas As the students leave the classroom, Beth and Tina gather their belongings and walk down the hallway. They chat about how the lesson proceeded and students who struggled with the content; Beth indicates she will reteach a certain component during the next class and Tina comments that she will get one student started on his homework during the academic support period. Both teach in a different classroom next period.

Key Ideas

While not all coteaching partnerships will look the same as Tina and Beth's, this vignette offers insight into the complexity of coteaching at the secondary level and illustrates that high school settings, in many ways, facilitate a coteaching model to deliver special educational services to SWD. Evident in the vignette are four key ideas about coteaching in high school classrooms:

- 1. Conditions in high school settings are conducive to coteaching.
- 2. The use of various coteaching approaches depends on the learning objectives of the lesson.
- 3. Coteaching is a professional partnership.
- 4. Coteaching is a tool for ongoing professional development.

The following discussion expands these ideas and offers a basis for understanding coteaching practices in a high school setting.

High School Settings Are Conducive to Coteaching

While much has been written about the benefits and successes of coteaching in elementary classrooms and the challenges of coteaching in secondary classrooms (Dieker & Rodriguez, 2013), there may be conditions in the secondary setting that lend themselves to coteaching. For example, many secondary schools schedule core content classes in blocks, allowing for sustained engagement with the curriculum. Coteaching within a block schedule allows for more possibilities in cooperative learning groups, peer support, variety in learning tasks, and the use of multiple teaching techniques within a single instructional period. In Tina and Beth's math class, authentic and purposeful peer interactions can provide meaningful opportunities for developing socialization and collaboration skills, and creating a classroom community. Moreover, utilizing cooperative learning groups and learning stations are additional ways that all students can be leaders in the classroom. These strategies are more easily implemented with two teachers in the classroom and more instructional time (i.e., block scheduling) to implement a variety of evidence-based practices and monitor student engagement with the learning tasks.

Another characteristic of secondary schools that enhances the implementation of coteaching is the preparation process for secondary teachers. Typically, general education teachers in secondary schools are certified to teach a specific content area. The depth of knowledge a certified teacher has in both the content area and pedagogical practices best suited to teach that content, also known as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK; Gitomer & Zisk, 2015; Shulman, 1987), allows secondary teachers to facilitate students' achievement of curricular learning outcomes. As experts in the field of teaching a content area, secondary teachers are able to share with special educators the most relevant skills and knowledge

necessary for achievement in the course, as well as common misconceptions in understanding specific content related concepts.

Likewise, special educators possess a knowledge base rich in pedagogical practices that make general education curricula accessible and comprehensible to SWD. During coteaching, there is an amalgam of these two knowledge bases; a shared PCK (Willard, 2015) that is possible because of the collaborative efforts of the two teachers having a common/shared experience of teaching the same group of diverse students in one classroom. Secondary school structures may be more conducive to this. For example, Tina was able to plan and implement pre-teaching and mini-lessons on targeted skills that Beth identified as essential in achieving the objectives of the lesson and conceptual understandings. With block scheduling, the pre-teaching lessons and individual academic support can occur on days when students do not have the full math class, spreading the support SWD receive over more days of the school week. The notion of frequent and consistent interventions aligns with best practices in supporting SWD (Benedict, Brownell, Park, Bettini, & Lauterbach, 2014).

In addition, the opportunity to co-reflect on the lesson as the teachers walked to their next assigned teaching duty, a common practice in high schools, offers an opportunity for the coteachers to reflect immediately on the lesson while fresh in their minds. This reinforces the blending of their individual understandings about instructing this particular group of students. While a more in-depth discussion of the effectiveness of a particular coteaching format and instructional practice is necessary to maximize the effect of two teachers in the classroom coteaching, this initial reaction to the class can provide a starting point for subsequent reflection and dialogue.

Coteaching Approaches

The vignette illustrates coteaching in a general education classroom that allows the educators to provide content-specific pedagogical practices as well as specialized instruction. Researchers have described coteaching practices and formats with various labels. Kunkel (2012) uses labels such as mirror, flip/flop, station rotation, and station tiers while Villa, Thousand, and Nevin (2013) use the labels supportive, parallel, complementary, and team in their discussion of coteaching practices. The following six labels, utilized by Friend and Cook (2016) and in this discussion, are also frequently used in professional literature to describe coteaching: one teach—one assist, team teaching, parallel teaching, station teaching, alternative teaching, one teach—one observe. Table 1 offers a description for each of these coteaching approaches.

Table 1

Coteaching Approaches

Coteaching	Description	Possible Lesson Application
Approach		
One Teach – One Assist	One coteacher is the primary instructional leader for the class while the other teacher circulates among the	Whole group instruction with opportunities for student responses and independent practice.
	students supporting as needed.	1 1
Team Teaching	Coteachers share the instructional lead in delivering content to the class	Whole group instruction; modeling; role playing; introduction to a larger unit of instruction.
Parallel Teaching	The students are divided into two groups with both teachers simultaneously instructing one of the groups using similar instructional materials.	Hands-on learning tasks where closer supervision is needed; lessons that require more opportunities for interactions.
Station Teaching	Students are divided into small groups and learning tasks are separated into segments; each coteacher instructs one	Targeted skill practice/ review; small group conferencing.

	segment in a station; coteachers or students rotate between stations.	
Alternative Teaching	One coteacher instructs the majority of the students while a small group of students receive intensive instruction from the other teacher.	Implementing specialized interventions; pre-teaching and re-engagement lessons.
One Teach – One Observe	One partner leads instruction while the other partner observes students, teachers, and/or paraprofessionals.	Collecting data on student understandings, interactions, and behaviors.

Although scant research is available about the effectiveness of any one coteaching format over the other, it is most important to note that each coteaching format has the potential to support student learning. In choosing which approach to use, Beth and Tina focus on instructional arrangements that align with the purpose of the learning tasks, student needs, and expectations for all students. The vignette highlights Beth and Tina's use of two coteaching approaches: team teaching and one teach – one assist. As this is their second year of coteaching together, Beth and Tina have agreed that these two approaches effectively facilitate student learning and align with their teaching styles and the context of their setting. During the first year as coteaching partners, they often relied on the one teach – one assist approach. This approach gave the coteachers an opportunity to build trust and value the contributions each made to the classroom learning environment. As their partnership continued, they added more coteaching approaches to their repertoire of pedagogical practices.

Team teaching, as exemplified when Beth begins the instructional period and then Tina steps in to teach a mini-lesson, allows both teachers to have a leadership role in facilitating student learning. For some coteaching partnerships, team teaching allows the special educator to be introduced to the students as an instructional leader. With carefully structured opportunities, the special educator can gain confidence in teaching the content. Likewise, the general educator

can have the opportunity to work individually with students and observe the classroom from the "audience" perspective. As more team-teaching opportunities arise in the planning and implementation of lessons, the partners develop a complementary synergy that can be rewarding for the teachers and beneficial to students. Using a team-teaching approach required Beth and Tina to initially collaborate more intensively on the role and content each would assume during specific portions of the lesson. Because they do not have a common planning time, this collaboration took place after school or in the evenings; now that they have established a complementary synergy, less time is needed to orchestrate team teaching.

Beth and Tina schedule a face-to-face planning meeting once every 5 weeks to collaborate on the upcoming instructional unit. Using a backward design method (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), they identify the expected learning outcomes and target specific IEP goals to address for SWD, create a timeline for completion of the unit, discuss the summative assessment and other graded work to be included in the unit, and identify needed resources. From this discussion, the teachers divide up the list of things to be done, complete these tasks independently, and then share. For the most part, Beth, the general educator, gathers the content-specific resources and creates the summative assessment well before the assessment is given to the students. This allows Tina, the special educator, to make any necessary accommodations to the assessment. Tina also finds multi-media and additional resources related to the unit, which are made available to all students in the class through the school wide Learning Management System. As the teaching of the unit is underway, Beth and Tina collaborate digitally. Beth shares daily lesson plans on a shared digital platform one week in advance. Tina reviews the plans and makes any necessary revisions on the plan or materials to accommodate for the SWD. To make it

easier to prepare for multiple blocks when she teaches the same course, Beth uses the revised materials in all instructional blocks.

Tina and Beth's use of the one teach – one assist format is reflective of a common practice in many coteaching partnerships. Researchers have identified the one teach – one assist format as the most frequently used format in secondary coteaching (Bryant Davis, Dieker, Pearl, & Kirkpatrick, 2012; King-Sears, Brawand, Jenkins, & Preston-Smith, 2014; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2016). It is important to note that coteaching is not simply additional support provided to learners, but rather a viable model for delivering specialized instruction to SWD. Oftentimes, the one teach – one assist format places the special educator in a position to support only the instructional practices of the general education teacher and limits the opportunities for the special educator to provide specialized instruction for those students who require it. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) assert that this is especially evident in secondary classrooms where the curriculum requires more in-depth content knowledge. However, as we can see from the vignette, the one teach – one assist arrangement allows Tina, the special educator, to address the learning goals of students with IEPs within the context of the general education classroom. She is able to highlight the concepts she covered during a pre-teaching lesson and provide focusing prompts as needed.

In addition, Tina is able to reinforce pedagogical practices used by the general educator that align with effective teaching within the content areas. In this case, Beth sequenced several instructional examples to scaffold student understanding and foster peer collaboration, and eventually independent completion of the related problem sets, a strategy recommended by Dennis et al. (2016) as a best practice in mathematics instruction. This approach can provide a

framework for supplemental instruction to support student learning, such as the pre-teaching lesson planned and implemented by Tina.

The one teach – one assist model has the potential to improve opportunities for student participation in class discussions. Oftentimes, the pace of question-answer exchanges can inhibit participation for SWD. However, opportunities to respond increase when there is more than one adult in the classroom (Sweigart & Landrum, 2015). For Tina and Beth, monitoring students during guided practice and signaling to the lead instructor about student understanding allows more students to participate meaningfully in class discussions while fostering a learning space where all learners can contribute. The actions of Tina and Beth are supported by the assertions of King-Sears and Jenkins (2017) who suggest that the one teach – one assist model provides opportunities for behavior specific praise, formative assessments, and implementation of self-management systems. These strategies help to reduce attention seeking and other inappropriate behaviors that can be distracting in a classroom. Furthermore, a learning environment where students and teachers see each other as contributing members builds classroom community and natural supports.

The availability of two teachers within the classroom reduces the teacher: student ratio making a variety of instructional arrangements and multi-level learning activities more feasible for use with a range of learners. To capitalize on the benefits of any coteaching approach, the special educator must have an understanding of the content in order to participate meaningfully during classroom and supplemental instruction. Similarly, the general educator must have an understanding of the learning needs of SWD to support their achievement. As Tina and Beth demonstrate, coteachers who are purposeful in selecting coteaching approaches that maximize

student engagement through guided and independent practice have the potential to positively influence learning and behavioral outcomes for all students.

Professional Partnership

Effective teaching partnerships are built on mutual respect and identified roles in the classroom (Ploessl, Rock, Schoenfeld & Blanks, 2010). Coteaching relationships take time to develop in order for a synergistic flow to emerge during teaching. Although coteaching roles can change depending on contextual factors, such as the content, absence of one of the partners, and student-learning objectives for that segment of the instructional period, the partners should articulate the elements of the lesson each will be responsible for and prepare for their role. This requires targeted communication, which may include daily check-in meetings or planning sessions, conversations through digital media, or monthly planning sessions.

Coteachers should also discuss how effective classroom routines are established and enacted. For Tina and Beth, they have worked out a routine that is used consistently and seamlessly to monitor completion of homework assignments. While Beth, the general educator, immediately engaged the students in a review, Tina circulated among the students' desks to document homework completion. Establishing a routine demonstrates the organization of the classroom, efficient use of class time, and a specific action for each coteaching partner.

Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, and Shamberger (2010) suggest some key elements necessary for coteaching partnerships to develop. Among these elements are active participation for both partners, adequate planning time, and interpersonal communication skills. For Tina and Beth, there was not a common planning time scheduled; nevertheless, these teachers actively participate in utilizing targeted communication strategies that are sustainable throughout the

school year to develop their partnership. Their targeted communication includes scheduled planning meetings before the starting an instructional unit and brief conferences or tiny talks (Zoshak, 2016). The tiny talks that these teachers engaged in were at the beginning and end of the cotaught instructional block to clarify their responsibilities, decide on next steps, and confirm weekly digital conferencing. Tiny talks allow both teachers to maintain accountability for their respective roles (i.e., Beth as the expert on addressing the general education curriculum and Tina as the expert on addressing the specialized instructional needs of SWD) and co-construct their understanding of their coteaching partnership (Golombek & Johnson, 2017).

While concurrent prep periods would likely enhance the development of Tina and Beth's coteaching partnership, it is important to note that a common planning period is not always possible in a high school setting. Nonetheless, concurrent planning time is not the only forum for effective co-planning; coteachers can utilize digital platforms and other innovative techniques to co-plan, as Tina and Beth have done. Of utmost importance is that both partners agree and adhere to a purposeful system, whatever it might be, for communicating and co-planning.

Appendix 1 offers a list of resources that discuss effective communication and co-planning strategies, as well as other topics related to effective coteaching.

The coteaching partnership brings together teachers with different backgrounds and perspectives to problem-solve authentic concerns within their shared classroom. While different perspectives at times may cause tension, successful coteachers remain open-minded and solution oriented. Collaborative problem solving, in turn, empowers teachers and improves overall job satisfaction (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). Throughout the lesson, Tina and Beth spontaneously addressed minor concerns, such as student participation and understanding of content. Their brief but reflective tiny talk after the lesson led to their decision for Beth to

reteach a portion of the content during the next class meeting and for Tina to support a student in completing the homework assignment. These are instances when the collaborative and reflective nature of coteaching gave the partners an opportunity to brainstorm approaches to a concern that had the potential to become a bigger issue. While the vignette does not delve into each teacher's overall job satisfaction, Villa, Thousand, and Nevin report that coteachers have a greater sense of belonging, feel less isolated in their teaching position, and are energized by the stimulating dialogue and social interactions associated with coteaching. These factors related to job satisfaction fulfill basic needs and help to sustain educators in a challenging profession.

Coteaching partnerships, such as Tina and Beth, honor the professional expertise of each partner. Each teacher comes to the partnership with the teaching credentials and related skills essential to their role; however, coteaching allows these individual skill sets to intersect to support a heterogeneous group of learners. This makes it possible for SWD to receive the specialized instruction mandated by their IEPs within the context of a general education class.

Ongoing Professional Development

The prospect of multiple teaching strategies used in a coteaching class can capitalize on individual teacher strengths as well as provide opportunities for teachers to develop new instructional practices. By observing and implementing strategies utilized by their coteaching partner, professional development is embedded within the context of coteaching. Coteaching offers an occasion for colleagues to provide feedback and reflective analysis of teaching practices. The general educator shares content-specific pedagogical practices (such as content knowledge, effective teaching strategies, and common student misconceptions) with their coteaching partner. Likewise, the special educator shares pedagogical practices specific to

supporting students with disabilities (such as specialized teaching aligned with IEP academic and behavioral goals, strategy instruction, and techniques to increase and maintain student engagement) with their coteaching partner. Teachers sharing expertise within the context of their coteaching experiences can lead to improved and varied teaching practices for both teachers in a way that would not have been possible otherwise.

The collaborative practices and shared PCK that Beth and Tina engage in to coteach the math class are more than just talking to each other about strategies they use in class. Coteaching has the potential to augment both teachers' understanding of pedagogical practices within the context of their mutual and individual responsibilities. In turn, these new understandings are now part of the individual teacher's repertoire and can be used in every class they teach, solely or as coteachers. Beth is able to incorporate the strategies throughout the day that were utilized during the cotaught class with Tina. Similarly, Shaffer and Thomas-Brown (2015) asserted similar benefits for participants in their recent study of coteachers in a secondary social studies classroom. Considering coteaching as an embedded professional development "...enables the participating teachers to have real learning opportunities in the classroom" (p. 123) and develop pedagogical practices benefitting all students.

Furthermore, coteaching is a framework conducive for partners to reflect and dialogue about teaching practices, the field of education, and their professional development. With coteaching, partners have numerous opportunities to observe and collect data on student engagement, achievement, and response to instructional practices. This allows coteachers, such as Beth and Tina, to consider areas for their professional growth as individuals, partners, and possibly the building/district. As Nierengarten (2013) asserts, "the importance of and power of reflection to educators and their professional development cannot be overstated" (p. 80). An

approach to professional development that embeds authentic problem-solving and utilizes the expertise within a school, as coteaching has the potential to do, aligns with current initiatives in school reform for teachers to take collective responsibility for improving the learning and teaching within the school.

As noted by Chapman and Hyatt (2011), professional development should be ongoing and affect everyday teaching practices. For example, coteaching partners may choose to discuss effective instructional practices during team and department meetings, observe other coteaching pairs to learn new ideas about implementing coteaching, and share evidence based practices learned from content specific professional organizations (Brawand & King-Sears, 2017).

Coteaching can be a conduit for enduring and authentic professional development, which can sustain teachers in the profession. Empowering teachers to direct their own professional learning in meaningful ways through collaboration with a coteaching partner helps educators feel connected by a shared purpose and commitment, thus lessening feelings of isolation. The professional literature on teacher retention points to the importance of many factors that contribute to educators staying in the profession, including professional development opportunities, peer collaboration, and job-embedded learning experiences (Bennett, Brown, Kirby-Smith, & Severson, 2013). Coteaching provides the conditions for these factors to be evident in classrooms and school buildings.

Next Steps

For successful implementation of coteaching in high school classrooms, secondary personnel, teachers, and administrators alike would benefit from learning about the advantages of coteaching in high school classrooms. Such practices promote inclusive schooling and have the

potential to provide equitable access to grade level curriculum for all children. Future research on coteaching in high school classrooms may include analysis of secondary students' learning in coteaching classrooms versus other service delivery models for special educational support, the development and influence of shared PCK on the teaching practices of general and special educators, and analyses of case studies on practicing secondary coteachers to further understand effective and less than effective practices. It is important to shed a light on current coteaching practices in high school classrooms to enable the profession to continue to interrogate what coteaching and collaborative approaches are most effective for different contexts.

Conclusion

Coteaching in any setting can be challenging. However, conditions in a high school setting can actually facilitate coteaching between a general and special educator allowing the benefits for students and teachers to be realized. Content area teachers have expertise in their certification area, while special educators have expertise in the "specialized knowledge needed to provide meaningful instruction to students with learning difficulties" (Benedict et al., 2014, p. 148). To be most efficient, coteachers combine their two areas of knowledge and coordinate their ideas and practices to maximize the learning for all students and develop a shared vision for coteaching. They develop a shared PCK that enhances their coteaching practices as well as their overall teaching practice for all leaners. As demonstrated by Tina and Beth, the power of coteaching is having both content *and* specialized instruction experts facilitating student learning.

It is not necessary for the special educator to be a certified teacher in the content area since this is redundant with the expertise of the general educator, although familiarity with the

content enhances the flow of the lesson and enables accurate pre-teaching or re-engagement lessons. Successful coteaching in high school classrooms centers on four key understandings: (a) conditions in high schools are conducive to coteaching, (b) the use of various coteaching approaches depends on the learning objectives of the lesson, (c) coteaching is a professional partnership, and (d) coteaching is a tool for ongoing professional development. Coteaching offers the potential of giving SWD the support they need when and where they need it, increasing access to the general education curriculum, and providing opportunities for achieving general education learning outcomes for all learners. Students and teachers in cotaught classrooms have the opportunity to create jointly a classroom community wherein all learners have the support and conditions for authentic learning.

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Appendix 1

Resources for High School Coteachers

Books

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