

Remaking education from below: the Chilean student movement as public pedagogy

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This article considers the Chilean student movement and its ten-year struggle for public education as an example of public pedagogy. Secondary and university students, along with the parents, teachers, workers and community members who have supported them, have engaged in the most sustained political activism seen in Chile since the democratic movement against the Pinochet military dictatorship between 1983 and 1989. The students have successfully forced a nationwide discussion on education, resulting not only in significant educational reform, but also a community rethinking of the relationship between education and social and economic inequality in a neoliberal context. Framed through Giroux's conceptual definition of public pedagogies and drawing on field research conducted throughout 2014 as well as existing literature and media sources, this article considers the role of the student movement in Chile in redefining the concept of 'public' and the implications for radical perspectives on learning and teaching.

Keywords: students, activism, Chile, public pedagogy.

Introduction

More than ever the crisis of schooling represents, at large, the crisis of democracy itself and any attempt to understand the attack on public schooling and higher education cannot be separated from the wider assault on all forms of public life not driven by the logic of the market (Giroux, 2003:7)

“Fin al lucro en educación, nuestros sueños no les pertenecen”

(end profit making in education, nobody owns our dreams¹)

(slogan of the Chilean student movement, inspired by the French student uprisings of May-June 1968)

Over the past four decades, as the economic and ideological depravity of neoliberal policy and its market-driven logic (D. W. Hursh & Henderson, 2011) has been brought to bear on every aspect of education, the very concept of ‘public’ has been negated. Characteristics such as user-pays, competition, assaults on teachers, and mass standardised-testing and rankings, are among the features of a schooling, which is now very much seen as a private rather than public good (Giroux, 2003). The question of public education as a democratic force for the radical transformation of a violently unjust society seems rarely if ever asked, and a dangerous co-option and weakening of the language and practice of progressive pedagogy has occurred to the extent that notions of inclusion and success are increasingly limited to narrowly conceived individualist and competitive measures of market advantage. As Giroux notes “the forces of neo-liberalism dissolve public issues into utterly privatised and individualistic concerns (2004:62), and despite ongoing official rhetoric “the only form of citizenship increasingly being offered to young people is consumerism” (2003:7). Neoliberal education sees students and young people as passive consumers, the emphasis of schooling on learning how to be governed rather than how to govern (Giroux, 2003:7).

In such a context the space for a public pedagogy, based on challenging the hegemony of neoliberal ideology and aligned with collective resistance, appears limited at best. And yet, every day people, teachers, students and communities do engage in political struggle, enacting pedagogies that seek to unveil rather than continue to mask the political

structures and organisation that ensures power remains in the hands of the few, and at the service of the few, at the expense of the rest of us.

Giroux characterises public pedagogies as defined by hope, struggle and a politicisation of the education process. He argues for

...a politics of resistance that extends beyond the classroom as part of a broader struggle to challenge those forces of neo-liberalism that currently wage war against all collective structures capable of defending vital social institutions as a public good (Giroux, 2003:14).

Central to Giroux's argument is the need for critical educators to look to, value, and engage in and with social movements as they emerge and develop as sites of resistance. To

...take sides, speak out, and engage in the hard work of debunking corporate culture's assault on teaching and learning, orient their teaching for social change, connect learning to public life [and] link knowledge to the operations of power (Giroux, 2004:77).

He argues that “[p]rogressive education in an age of rampant neo-liberalism requires an expanded notion of the public, pedagogy, solidarity, and democratic struggle” (Giroux, 2003:13), and that moreover, educators need to work against a “politics of certainty” and instead develop and engage in pedagogical practice that problematises the world and fosters a sense of collective resistance and hope (2003:14).

A neoliberal vision of the ‘good citizen’ and ‘good student’ presumes passivity, acceptance of the status quo and an individualistic disposition. Critical pedagogues must seek out and embrace opportunities to support and celebrate collective political action, not only because it develops a sense of social and political agency but also because it constitutes a powerful basis for authentic learning and active and critical citizenship in an unjust world (Freire, 1970).

The Chilean student movement stands as one such example of challenging and inspiring counter-practice and a reclaiming of pedagogy as political and public. For ten years students have filled Chile's streets, occupied their schools and universities, and organised conferences, public

meetings, political stunts, creative actions and protests. Students and young people have been at the centre of the largest and most sustained political action seen in Chile since the democratic movement of the 80s, which eventually forced out the Pinochet dictatorship. Despite global trends in the opposite direction, the Chilean students have fundamentally influenced a nationwide education reform program constituting significant changes to the existing system which has been described as an extreme example of market-driven policy (Valenzuela, Bellei, & Ríos, 2014:220). Most importantly, they have forced and led a nationwide dialogue on the question of education and social justice in Chile and an interrogation of the current, grossly inequitable and elitist model (Falabella, 2008).

This article begins by reviewing the experiences of the Chilean student movement to date and offering a brief explanation of the historical development of the education system it seeks to dismantle. It then considers the movement as an example of public pedagogies, concluding with a discussion of how it might inform notions of radical educational practice and a return of the student and pedagogue as authentic and critical subjects.

The students and their struggle

2006: the penguin rebellion and where it all began

The movement was born in April 2006 when thousands of secondary students took to the streets, at first with demands around better and cheaper access to public transport and free access to the university admissions exam (PSU). Spontaneous action turned into more conscious protest as the students raised broader questions of educational equity and expanded their demands to include free education for all and an end to some of the worst practices of educational discrimination (Bellei & Cabalin, 2013). Within months, angered at the slow pace and inadequate nature of the government's response, up to one million students across the country were involved in mass anti-government actions, and around 250 schools were occupied (Chovanec & Benitez, 2008; El Mercurio, 2006b). These national protests, coined by the media as 'the penguins' revolution' (a reference to students' navy and white uniforms), gained the support of tertiary students, teachers, parents, academics and the wider community and brought about the first recognised political crisis of the

social-democratic government. As the mobilisations grew in numbers and support, the students were faced with alarming levels of police repression, with tear gas and water cannons used to disperse protestors. Bachelet first joined the conservative mainstream media in condemning the students for their ‘violence’, but later denounced the police actions and was pressured to dismiss the then Head of Special Forces of the Chilean Police (El Mercurio, 2006) amidst significant community anger at the level of police aggression.

The students’ actions in 2006 resulted in some small victories however the process ultimately left the neoliberal character of education in Chile untouched and the students without voice or power in any meaningful sense (Falabella, 2008). The movement was largely demobilised after several months, but the secondary school students had successfully focused the country’s attention on the link between the market-logic of the education laws and Chile’s growing social and economic inequality.

Education in Chile: the source of the students’ anger

Since 2006 there has been almost a decade of more or less sustained struggle against what one Chilean educationalist has referred to as “educational apartheid” (Waissbluth, 2011:35). The current system is the legacy of neoliberal reforms introduced by the Pinochet dictatorship at the end of the 1980’s and, despite some tinkering, further entrenched by both ‘social democratic’ and conservative governments since (Cabalin, 2012; Cavieres, 2011). Based around minimal legislation and low taxes, the LOCE (*Ley Organica Constitucional de Enseñanza* – Organic Constitutional Act of Teaching), introduced in 1989, initiated the creation of a fully marketised system with a heavily reduced role for the state. Calls for its removal remain at the centre of the student movement’s platform.

These reforms, although couched in the language of access and choice, led to a highly segregated and deeply inequitable education system (Cabalin, 2012; Cavieres, 2011). Dramatic drops in enrolment in under-resourced public schools followed the reforms, from “78 per cent in 1981 to 53 per cent of the total enrolment in 2002” (Mizala & Torche, 2012:132), to 37.5 per cent in 2012 (Fundación Sol, 2011:4). 84 per cent of university education and 100 per cent of technical education is privatised. Most critically, a pay-per-pupil voucher system was introduced, described in one document released by a broad coalition of student organisations,

teachers, academics and educational functionaries, as a system which “has as its principal characteristic the governance of the market, relegating the concept of education to consumer good rather than social right... provoking an education system that acts as a reproducer of social inequality and hegemonic knowledge.” (“El primer Encuentro de Actores Sociales por la Educación,” 2014) Seven per cent of school students attend fully private colleges, with public and subsidised institutions competing in the ‘education market’ for the per capita education vouchers from the government. Only 10 per cent of poor and working class students use the government vouchers to attend private schools, and the majority of students attending government schools are from the poorest sections of Chilean society (Strauss, 2012). In the tertiary sector, although the market model has increased access, only 20 per cent of students who attend university are from low socio-economic backgrounds (Cabalin, 2012:223).

The secondary students’ struggle paved the way for a national discussion around the role the education system plays in reproducing Chile’s social and economic inequality. The richest 10 per cent of Chileans own almost 70 per cent of the country’s wealth (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2014). The monthly wage of the 1700 most wealthy Chileans is CLP\$460,000,000, while 53 per cent of Chilean workers earn on average less than CLP\$300,000 per month (Durán Sanhueza & Kremerman Strajilevich, 2015). Not dissimilar to Australia, a mining boom in Chile has inflated official employment and growth figures for several years, but in reality the bulk of ‘new’ jobs are short-term, underpaid and insecure. Currently Australia comes second only to Chile in terms of high numbers of temporary workers (ACTU, 2013), and Chilean youth know that they will enter a job market where it will be increasingly difficult to find secure, well-paid employment.

2011: the question of political strategy

The next significant and most decisive period for the Chilean student movement was the mass struggles of 2011 (sometimes termed the *Chilean Winter*, a reference to the Arab Spring) against the new conservative Piñera government. Again characterised by mass mobilisations and student occupations, this period also saw a conscious broadening of the nature of the protests to widen participation and sustain activity. Under the leadership of the confederation of university student unions

(CONFECH), a strong alliance has been fostered, with the aim of drawing distinct groups together in united action, and winning larger layers of public support.

Performances and creative actions including mass kiss-a-thons; a large flash mob of ‘Zombies’ performing Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*; an eight month non-stop relay marathon around the national parliament building; and the innovative use of social media to disseminate plans and ideas (Bellei, Cabalin, & Orellana, 2014) were all utilised by the movement to increase participation and build popular support. Conferences and public meetings were also held regularly in schools, on campus and in local neighbourhoods to develop community participation structures to further deepen the movement.

The mass mobilisations again faced heavy police repression, with the Piñera government attempting to evoke national security laws to demobilise the students. This move generated public opposition from both supporters and those critical of the students’ actions, with some likening the police violence to that experienced under the military dictatorship of the 1980s (Ebergenyi, 2011). Despite this, significant political gains were made. Largely as a result of the political pressure from the student movement, a ‘centre-left’ alliance again led by President Bachelet won the 2013 elections. Several high profile leaders of the student movement were also elected to parliament.

Given the political pressure it faced, the (current) Bachelet government moved very quickly on its reform program. The first phase claimed to introduce free primary and secondary education for all students, a gradual end to the public funding of private schooling and the removal of elitist selection practices in all but the ‘emblematic’ public secondary schools (Vargas, 2014). Furthermore, a recently approved corporate tax reform bill worth US\$8.2bn will ostensibly fund free higher education from 2016. Current discussion around the second wave of reforms is focusing on the teaching workforce.

To date, the students have rejected the reforms as insufficient, noting that in some cases they deepen rather than dismantle the current neoliberal system (Achtenberg, 2015). One mass protest in August 2014 highlighted what the movement saw as attempts by the government to ‘negotiate’ with the conservative side of parliament, the very actors who engineered the

existing system and have always championed it. Students have repeatedly argued that the reforms leave the fundamental nature of corporatised and competitive education untouched and as such are unable to bring about any real change in terms of equity and quality (Cooperativa.cl, 2014).

The Chilean government has claimed otherwise, and additionally some ex-student leaders, now parliamentarians, have played a key role in the consultation process, arguing widely that the reforms constituted a positive response to the student movement's demands. Given this, it seemed possible, perhaps even likely that the movement would suffer demobilisation. While there has been some realignment of leadership, and the movement has reduced in its scope and level of activity in some cases, 2014 saw a continuation of mobilisations drawing up to 100,000 students each time and a strengthening of the movement's key political demands. This has continued to date in 2015.

What are the demands of the student movement?

In 2014, the movement released five demands (Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile, n.d.) in a document undersigned by all major student unions. Student leaders argued that the demands mirrored those being discussed in schools and universities across Chile, with one student leader noting "of course there are different views, but we [have] managed to agree on this proposal we are putting forward... through which we are questioning the form of [the government's reforms] and how they have been created and implemented" (Pacheco, 2011).

The call for a serious strengthening of public education is the first of the five points and continues to be the key demand of the movement today. The students are demanding a quality public education system that would be the first and best choice for Chilean families and accessible to all, highlighting the need for a break from the current dominant emphasis on 'freedom of educational choice' to a fundamental commitment to education as a basic human right. They squarely place education as a public good, at the centre of the development of a new, more fair and equitable Chilean society, and include a call for curriculum and research to focus on national development towards a just and dignified life for all Chileans. The students' demand is completely counter posed to the present system which privileges the choice of an elite minority at the expense of the educational opportunities and aspirations of the masses of

Chilean youth (Cabalin, 2012).

The students have highlighted how the reforms essentially leave the current public system untouched, focusing instead on 'buying out' the existing subsidised semi-private schools. The likely effect, rather than improving public education, is a reduction of quality in those previously subsidised schools, as the promised government funding focuses on purchasing buildings and infrastructure with little mention of teaching and learning and associated costs (wages, conditions, professional development, resources etc.) The sharp debate about the nature and basis of Chilean public education is particularly relevant for those arguing similarly around the globe, as any 'nationalisation' that has occurred under neoliberalism has been motivated on the basis of stimulating and insuring corporate investments and profits, or the public bailing out corporate losses (Harvey, 2007).

The reform processes to date have also continued to ignore the cultural and social impacts of decades of neoliberal education. As Cavieres (2011) explained, despite the rhetoric of inclusion and equality, the reforms have continued to "...emphasize educational practices based on competition, individualism, and accountability that divide students based on academic and class lines, as well as exclude those cultural experiences of students from urban low-income neighborhoods not considered appropriate to the goals pursued by the reform. As a result, these students have been marginalized from the educational processes promoted in their schools" (Cavieres, 2011:112).

The second demand of the movement is free and fully funded education for all. The students correctly note that ending parent contributions to public education is one thing, free and fully funded education for all is quite another. Current governmental debate, already questioning the actual possibilities of reform based on the costing of recent tax changes bring this into sharp relief, and is a key driver of the students' ongoing discontent.

The third demand is an end to the corporatisation of education and education-for-profit. A student leader in 2014 emphasised the students' view that "if education is a right, then there is no place for business in education. Any reform to the education system cannot leave happy those who have profited for years from education" (Velásquez, 2014). This is

particularly difficult for the current government given its own myriad ties to the lucrative business that is education in Chile. Among those most invested in existing private education enterprises are the Catholic Church (Orellana & Guajardo, 2014) and ex-military personnel including a number of people directly involved in the former dictatorship.

The fourth demand calls for the democratisation of educational institutions and improved conditions for education workers. While the second wave of government reforms purports to address the question of teacher wages and conditions the movement is demanding much more: improvement to the working conditions of all those involved in education and an end to the sub-contraction of support services, immediate improved wages for teachers who earn well below the average professional wage, support and respect for teachers as professionals with clearly defined career opportunities and dignified retirement options. Although highly inequitable just as it is for students, current conditions for most teachers in Chile are precarious, with many on short-term contracts and working across multiple schools to reach a full working wage. Secondary school teachers in Chile teach on average 1100 hours per year, compared with the OECD average of less than 700 (OECD, 2014).

The final demand is that student debt be revoked, highlighting the indecencies of a for-profit system which leaves students without degrees (or in some cases quality degrees) but with crippling debts while owners profit enormously (Guzman-Concha, 2012:412).

Chilean student movement as public pedagogy

Chilean students have engaged in a decade of self-education and also educated the broader community through their own kind of “permanent education” (Williams, 1967:15-16, cited in Giroux, 2004:63). The experience of sustained, collective struggle, of developing a critique of society and fighting for alternatives based on a set of ideals grounded in justice, equity and inclusion, has for the young people leading and participating in the movement, arguably constituted learning far beyond anything being offered in schools. As well as developing the demands of the movement and engaging directly with the formal political process, the students have had to develop effective and sustainable means of communication, democratic structures at local, regional and national levels, efficient organisational practices and an evolving political strategy.

The movement stands as a living example of the type of transformative learning experience grounded in struggle described by Giroux, one that implies

that any viable notion of pedagogy and resistance should illustrate how knowledge, values, desire, and social relations are always implicated in relations of power, and how such an understanding can be used pedagogically and politically by students to expand further and deepen the imperatives of economic and political democracy (2003:11-12).

The students have sought to engage people in dialogue with the movement in various ways, through public artworks, music, creative acts, poetry and more. Art is understood as “a form of resistance... seek[ing] to reinterpret reality, engage it in controversy... not only a tool used as a critique, but also to glimpse into the possible future, giving us a hopeful sense of what could be” (McKenna & Darder, 2011:673) The banners, murals, community art projects, songs, drumming bands, improvisations and dances have played a critical role not just in maintaining the profile of the movement and their demands, but also in developing the collective ideas, sustaining activity and fostering courage in the face of exclusion and repression. McKenna and Darder raise the central importance of courage, noting that

...democracy requires the cultivation of civic courage in the flesh, taking protest to the streets, and the willingness to place one’s comfort in jeopardy, if counter-hegemonic ideals are to find their way into public life, and even more so, if they are to be translated into emancipatory practice” (2011:673-674).

Fundamentally, the students’ civic courage has reignited the collective sense that real social change is possible in Chile. In a country with a very painful history, and a deep and still raw political memory of state-sanctioned abuse and extreme repression of citizen resistance, the student movement has again raised hopes of a genuinely democratic and just alternative. As Giroux (2003:6-7) notes “hope [is] a crucial precondition both for a healthy pessimism and as a source of revolutionary imagination in which the strategic gap between the promise and the reality of democracy [can] be taken seriously as an object of critical learning and practical struggle”.

Redefining the 'public'

Perhaps the most important achievement of the Chilean students' public pedagogy to date is their success in redefining the very concept of 'public' to exclude profit making and commercial or market interests. The students have insisted that 'public' cannot mean government subsidisation of corporate enterprises nor government bailouts of the same. They have articulated and defended a view of 'public' that is understood as the use of taxation for the creation of non-commercial institutions for collective benefit. This insistence has pushed the entire education debate leftward, and in a global context of increased privatisation in education, where even ostensibly 'non-profit' organisations can post billions of dollars in reserve, is a significant political development.

Fully funded, quality public education for all

The Chilean students' struggle also makes explicit the need to emphasise a return to a fully publicly funded education system as central to any reform process. The students have argued for several years that this is a necessary precondition for any education system genuinely geared towards social equity and quality. Internationally there are very few examples of such systems as the global push to privatise and corporatise has relegated such a seemingly obvious and simple demand to the status of ambit claim. And yet research continues to demonstrate the absolute failing of the neoliberal education project to meet basic social justice and equity concerns, and instead reveals its role in exacerbating inequity and exclusion (Apple, 2013; D. Hursh, 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2014).

Democratisation of the public

The student movement, in working alongside and with other sectors in various alliances, has also played a leading role in developing consciousness around the need for any reform process to be based on a democratisation of the public. The student and public education movement realises that 'public' cannot simply mean a return to the old nationalised institutions that prevailed in sections of the economy where business did not want to make the initial large scale investments, for example railways, telecommunications, health etc. Instead the movement has consistently argued for a 'public' that involves community control

rather than bureaucratic-government administration and public handouts to corporations.

The many occupations of schools and universities, as embryonic examples of student and community control, are likely to have played a significant role in influencing such a perspective. Despite the conservative Chilean press' attempts to present these actions as mere vandalism and delinquency, the programs of events, student reports and media footage of the actions suggest cooperative, negotiated sites of art, culture, dialogue and cooperation. The students occupying secondary schools in Santiago held political debates and discussions about the education system and the movement's demands; organised rosters for cooking and cleaning; collaboratively painted murals and other artworks; held dance and music workshops and concerts; watched films; and drew on supportive parents and community members to provide security and other assistance.

The movement has also demonstrated how they have learnt from earlier political mistakes, highlighting throughout 2014 their rejection of government claims that the reforms had been developed through a process of participation. One student leader explained that "the reforms were made behind the backs of the students, behind the backs of the social actors... the student movement does not accept the government reforms because we understand that they were not made for us" (ADN Noticias, 2014). Such an emphasis reflects the lessons learnt from previous rounds in the struggle, and captures Giroux's understanding that "learning at its best is connected with the imperatives of social responsibility and political agency" (Giroux, 2003:9). At a rally in June 2014, one student leader stated that "students are not going to make the same mistakes, we are not willing to sit down with no guarantee to try to validate an educational reform that is already in progress" ("Miles de estudiantes chilenos marchan contra la reforma educativa de Bachelet," 2014), referencing previous student leaderships that had agreed to 'consultative' roles and mechanisms that ultimately resulted in limited reforms and co-option of the movement. In 2014 all major student unions and the teachers' union voted against participating in the government-led consultation agenda and secondary students resumed their school occupations.

Mobilised student and teacher movement

The underlying principle of democratisation has ensured that from its earliest days the student movement has emphasised that any meaningful reform is impossible without a mobilised student and teacher movement. Students and significant sections of the population have realised in practice that only mass public pressure, exerted on the streets and in workplaces through industrial and other community action is likely to have any effect on government policy. In this sense, the movement is unique internationally in its ability (and commitment) to sustain large social mobilisations over a ten-year period, and its fundamental orientation to mechanisms of struggle outside of parliamentary frameworks.

The students have learnt over the course of their struggle that the less mobilised the movement and community the more likely that governments will shape policy changes to re-weave education in the interest of business, while using the language of reform and progress. As one banner at the mass rally in August 2014 read “*the reform won’t change the education of the market – ourselves organised, we will change education.*”

Implications for radical pedagogy

In Chile, it is the students who have led the way in the struggle against neoliberal education. While there is now widespread support for the movement and there exist numerous think tanks, and social and community organisations theorising and advocating for change, the students have played a leadership role at every stage. Significant numbers of teachers and academics have become active in the process, engaging in protest themselves, and also supporting student mobilisations, occupations and other activities. Presently teachers and students are uniting in their opposition to the government’s proposed plans for the teacher workforce, with an emphasis on solidarity as well as the pedagogical nature of struggle. One popular banner seen at mass demonstrations reads “*profesores luchando, también están educando*” (“*Teachers struggling, are also educating*”).

Solidarity through joint political action not only strengthens the impact of the movement, it has the potential to reshape the existing relationships

between teachers and students and ultimately the nature of teaching and learning. Public pedagogies must provide a counter-narrative to the neoliberal idea that poor and working class students ‘fail’ due to their own lack of aspiration or motivation (Cavieres, 2011). Learning and teaching must be grounded in the lives of students and simultaneously value and investigate their own cultural and social realities and histories, which necessarily implies a critique of the ways in which neoliberalism marginalises and excludes. In turn such an approach empowers teachers to step out of their roles as agents of “control and constraint” (Grace, 1978/2014:215) and instead see themselves as critical actors in processes of change. The example of the Chilean student movement, highlights the need for teachers to reject the authoritarian and paternalistic model, and open themselves to learning from and with students as allies in the struggle for a more just and fair education system and society.

Conclusion

As Giroux has emphasised, a politicised and public understanding of learning and teaching must seek to locate schools and schooling in the broader economic, political and social framework, in order to reveal power relationships that serve to reinforce injustice and direct resources towards developing new collective and hopeful visions of alternatives. The Chilean student movement to date has offered a powerful display of youth empowerment and rebellion with significant political impact. These young people reflect the legacy of mass struggle in Chile and a growing unwillingness to accept the continuing claims that neoliberal Chile is working for everybody. They are not only worried for themselves and their futures, they are deeply concerned about the working and poor people of Chile, they are deeply affronted by Chile’s economic and social inequality, and they understand and can critique the system that perpetuates it.

This is the system defended by President Bachelet, who in May 2014, was at pains to allay right-wing fears that the students unduly influenced her, or that her government was falling prey to ‘populism’. She explained, “we’re still committed to public-private partnerships and the free market, we’re still open to foreign investment and free-trade agreements. None of that is going to change” (The Economist, 2014), ensuring that the fundamental principles of her ‘social-democratic’ government remain clear.

The future is less clear, but to date the strength of the Chilean student movement has been its focus on sustained mass mobilisations. The current leadership of the movement has stated their commitment to continuing to organise and protest around the demand for a community-centric public system for the people and by the people, that puts education at the heart of a new, socially-just Chile.

Endnotes

1. All translations are the author's and as such full responsibility for any errors is assumed

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