Curriculum control: the cost to teacher professionalism

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In recent times there have been various attempts by national and state governments to develop curriculum frameworks and guidelines, standards frameworks and other externally imposed structures, the rhetoric of which is to improve the provision and practice of school education. While there are many constituencies who see this as an appropriate practice by the State, there are others who see this as a deliberate strategy to erode teacher professionalism and trust in the teaching profession. In this paper I examine the effects of centralised curriculum control, in particular the imposition of teaching standards on teacher professionalism. I argue that the effect of these initiatives is the control of teachers’ work, and to define what constitutes professional knowledge and judgement which promotes one particular version of teacher professionalism and is eroding alternative forms of teacher professionalism.

Over twenty years ago William Boyd (1979:80) wrote “If there is one proposition about curriculum politics that is clear, it is that school curriculum becomes an issue in communities and societies that are undergoing significant social change …curriculum policy making … generally is characterised by the … mundane strategy of disjointed incrementalism.” Back then Boyd maintained that the increasing politicization of education meant that contemporary reforms will make future reform still more difficult to obtain. Armed with hindsight Boyd’s comments are as relevant today as they were more than twenty years ago. What then does this tell us about curriculum change and control? First and foremost curriculum policy is a site of struggle; professional vs bureaucratic agendas; political interests vs educational processes and outcomes; social vs political needs, and so on. Second, and emerging from the first is that the content and processes of curriculum and curriculum development is political. Third, curriculum documents are open to multiple readings and despite attempts by bureaucracies to impose a preferred reading on the curriculum text, teachers, in the privacy of their own classrooms, interpret and implement these documents on the basis of their own experience, discipline base, beliefs and philosophy of teaching and education. The attempt to control meaning may well be seen to be futile.

In developing my argument I identify five assumptions that guide and frame my thinking. First, curriculum control as a field of study or a political practice is not new, nor will it go away. Given the fundamentally political nature of education in general and curriculum in particular, there will always be attempts by the State to exert control over the content and delivery of education provision. The attempts by the Queensland government in the 1970s and 1980s to control education by banning MACOS and the SEMP materials and the failure to develop a national curriculum are two examples that come to mind.

Second, the process of curriculum development assumes a form of bureaucratic control, with its various checks and balances, consultation and discussion with
members of the profession or other relevant groups. The form these take will ensure compliance to a particular set of discourses and outcomes. This in turn encourages the development and take-up of one form of teacher professionalism and in turn the ignoring of another.

Third, there is a preferred version of teacher professionalism implicit in how the curriculum is to be interpreted and the role teachers will have in its implementation. This version of teacher professionalism sees the teacher as a compliant technician who implements policy in an acritical and instrumental way. At one level they may well be seen to be aspirational of best practice.

Fourth, standards frameworks impose a different form of control on teachers, at their worst; they reduce teachers’ professional knowledge and judgements to a set of technical capacities and attributes.

Fifth, teacher professional standards frameworks will have residual, dominant and emergent effects (Williams 1981) on teacher professionalism. The residual effects will provide the basis for arguments and perspectives about teacher professionalism that have been circulated in previous education discourses and policies. These residual effects may well take form of nostalgic romanticism and hark back to previous times when teacher professionalism was not an issue. Dominant effects of teacher professionalism are the taken for granted notions of teacher professionalism and what it means to be a teacher. These may be said to be the ‘gold’ standard’ for teacher professionalism and more often than not are not contested but rather accepted as the norm. As Williams (1981:204) argues “Those dominated by such forms usually see them as natural and necessary, rather than as specific forms, while those dominating … may be quite unevenly aware of these practical connotations, over a range from conscious control, through various kinds of displacement, to a presumed (and then dominant) autonomy of professional and aesthetic values. More interesting for my purposes here are the emergent effects, the work of a new kind. These emergent effects provide spaces for new kinds of action to emerge and new kinds of political practices to be activated. The form that arises from these emergent effects will be elaborated in the latter part of this paper.

I now turn to briefly examine how teacher professional standards may have the effect, intended or unintended, of controlling the teaching profession.

**Controlling the teaching profession through professional standards**

The idea of standards for the teaching profession has been circulating in education policy discourses and debates for much of the latter part of the 1990s. The development of standards have been part of a two pronged initiative by governments and bureaucracies in Australia, the United Kingdom, the USA and elsewhere to improve the educational performance and outcomes of education systems and the practices of teachers in classrooms. Debates and initiatives regarding teacher professional standards have been concerned with two orientations: the use of standards to improve performance or the use of standards as a basis for reforming the teaching profession. In applying these orientations to professional standards in some settings these standards have been imposed by governments and used as regulatory frameworks and bureaucratic controls over teachers, particularly as they relate to
licensing and certification procedures. In other instances they are used as an initiative for teachers to gain professional control over what constitutes professional work. Darling Hammond (1999) writing from a North American perspective argues, “Recently developed professional standards for teaching hold promise for mobilising reforms of the teaching career and helping to structure the learning opportunities that reflect the complex, reciprocal nature of teaching work” (p. 39). In terms of current initiatives there are two sets of tensions present. First, is where the initiative to develop the standards comes from and how the standards are monitored. One the one hand there are those standards developed and imposed by state mandated regulatory bodies outside of the profession and on the other hand those that are developed and monitored by the profession itself. Either way the issue of standards is not straightforward nor is it unproblematic to the teaching profession. A second, but no less important tension is a tendency to focus on standardisation of practice rather the development of standards that can have wide applicability across various contexts and settings or even of improving the level of standards achieved.

Mahony and Hextall (2000) differentiate between regulatory and developmental approaches to standards. Regulatory approaches can be used as a managerialist tool for measuring the efficiency and effectiveness of systems, institutions and individuals. Developmental approaches on the other hand provide opportunities for teachers’ further professional learning, aimed at improving the quality of their teaching throughout their careers. (p. 31)

While in the UK, Australia and US both of these approaches to standards is evident, there is an emerging trend for a drift from developmental to regulatory approaches to standards. In the UK for example, the development of the National Professional Standards (NPS) can be seen both as providing a centralised specification of ‘effective teaching’ and as the codification of relations between managers and managed. (Mahony and Hextall 2000: 32)

In the UK between 1994 and 1998 the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) developed a framework of National Standards for Teaching, which, in their words, would ‘define expertise in key roles’ (TTA 1998: 1). Furlong et al (2000) claim that policies in the late 1990s sought to exploit the new control system to begin specifying the content of professional education in detail. They claim that “two strategies were involved: first the transformation of competencies into more elaborate ‘standards’; second the development of a national curriculum for initial teacher education in English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology” (p. 149-150).

In the UK the move to standards emerged from the competencies debates. This move was to define the content of training in much more explicit detail than before. As the circular stated, ‘the standards have been written to be specific, explicit and assessable and are designed to provide a clear basis for the reliable and consistent award of Qualified Teachers Status (QTS) (DfEE 1997: 6) Millett (1997) suggests that the standards for the award of Qualified Teachers Status set out in more detail than ever before the core knowledge, understandings and skills on which effective teaching rests. These standards replace more general ‘competencies’ which have been in force previously and apply to all those assessed for QTS no matter what initial training course or route to teaching they may be on. (Quoted in Furlong et al 2000: 150)
An uncritical gaze would suggest that, like motherhood, standards are in the best interests of teachers, students and the teaching profession, and indeed this may well be the case. The need to be cautious about the limitations of standards is expressed by Darling Hammond (1999:39):

“Teaching standards are not a magic bullet. By themselves, they cannot solve the problems of dysfunctional school organizations, outmoded curricula, inequitable allocation of resources, or lack of social supports for children and youth. Standards, like all reforms, hold their own dangers. Standard setting in all professions must be vigilant against the possibilities that practice could become constrained by the codification of knowledge that does not significantly acknowledge legitimate diversity of approaches or advances in the field; that access to practice could become overly restricted on grounds not directly related to competence; or that adequate learning opportunities for candidates to meet standards may not emerge on an equitable basis.”

The examination of standards is not a simple or straightforward matter. It is worth quoting Mahony and Hextall (2000) in full to appreciate the complexity of the task.

“In examining standards it is important to examine them for their clarity, consistency and coherence, as well as the values, principles and assumptions that underpin them. They also need to be examined in terms of fitness of purpose – are they capable of doing the work they are intended to do? And is this consistent with the broader purposes of their institutional setting? Procedurally, standards can be investigated in terms of their establishment and formation, with all the questions of accountability and transparency that this entails. They can also be questioned in terms of the manner in which they are translated into practice and the consequences, both manifest and latent, which follow. More broadly, there is a set of issues to consider in relation to the culture and ideology of standards as a widespread phenomenon operating across both the private and public sectors in England and elsewhere.”

Those advocating the advantages of implementing standards regimes make various claims. Three come to mind, namely; i. the introduction of standards should improve the performance of teachers (Ingvarson, 1998a,b,c); ii. the introduction of standards will improve the standing of teachers (Chadbourne, 1999) and finally, iii. standards contribute to the on-going professional learning of teachers (Ingvarson, 1998a,b,c, 1999).

It is clear that the issue of standards has both political and professional dimensions. In the UK the change of language from ‘competencies’ to ‘standards’ represented both of these dimensions. Rather than the notion of a minimum ability as implied in the word ‘competency’, the idea of ‘standards’ of professional training crossed easily into government concerns to raise educational standards more generally. As such the change in term had political advantages, making enforcement even more difficult to resist. Who after all could be opposed to raising standards? (Furlong et al, 2000: 151)

In Australia and in the UK because the standards have been set, in the main, by administrative agencies such as Departments of Education and the Teacher Training Agency, they tacitly emphasise bureaucratic rather than professional controls over teaching. These controls are aimed at standardising procedures rather than building
knowledge that can be applied differently depending on the demands of a particular subject, the social context of a particular community, or the needs of a given child (Darling Hammond 1999). These types of standards are more likely than not to take control away from teachers thus reducing their personal autonomy.

The implementation of teaching standards does have implications for teachers’ work. Any failure to acknowledge this is naïve. Menter, Muschamp, Nicholls, Ozga and Pollard (1997: 132) note:

> It is worth remembering that constant reworking of strategies for the control of teachers’ work develops in response to the independent actions of teachers themselves, as well as in consequence of the contradictory functions of education systems. So teachers are not the mere recipients of policy, nor are they understood as endlessly manipulable ... they have strong work cultures and considerable loyalty and dedication to the education service. ... this is at once a source of strength and a characteristic which renders them vulnerable to exploitation.

As a note of caution, while in the eyes of its advocates, teacher professional standards may well enhance the status of teachers and contribute to the on-going professional learning of teachers, nevertheless, there are likely to be costs which will have some influence on teachers’ classroom performance, their professional engagement and their receptiveness to change. Hargreaves (1994) describes the ways in which work intensification occurs in teaching. He argues that intensification leads to a lack of time to retool one’s skills and keep up with one’s field. It creates chronic and persistent overload (as compared with the temporary overload that is sometimes experienced in meeting deadlines), which reduces areas of personal discretion, inhibits involvement in and control over longer term planning, and fosters dependency on externally produced materials and expertise. More recently Smyth et al (2000) in reporting on their Australian study of Appleton College report that teachers themselves have contributed to their own exploitation. For Smyth et al (2000):

> There are many problems for those teachers, which arise from the intensification of their work. They are harassed by the burdens of time with insufficient time to complete all their work tasks in ways that give satisfaction. They have to cut corners in their work by doing essential things first, including a host of administrative and other non-teaching duties, at the expense of creative work like lesson preparation. They face the potential atrophy of teaching skills through lack of opportunity for engagement with other teachers in professional development and participation in collaborative networks. (p. 144)

The mandatory application of teacher professional standards on top of teachers’ already heavy workload will make the task of teaching even more demanding. There is a danger that with teachers accepting the challenge of using a standards framework as a source of professional learning that that they become complicit in their own exploitation and the intensification of their work. Acceptance of a standards-based framework for teacher on-going learning becomes an ideological tool for teachers to do more under the rhetoric of increasing their professionalism and status. Hence professionalism under the guise of standards becomes a tool for employers demanding more of teachers. The implementation of a standards framework puts teachers in a double bind. If they do not have a set of publicly documented standards like other
‘professions’ then they are seen not to have the same professional status as those professions who do have these codified frameworks. At the same time by undertaking professional development activities as outlined by Ingvarson (1998c) they contribute to the intensification of their work. For standards to contribute to the on-going professional learning of teachers, participation in standards based professional development must be seen as an integral part of teachers’ work and time allocated for this to occur. While there have been some attempts to extend teachers’ working day in schools, or to lengthen the school year, (which have by and large not been accepted by unions or teachers) a more creative solution needs to be found. One such solution may well be to rethink how schools are organized and how teachers are to work in a more flexible environment. As many have said the current form of education provision and school organization is an artefact of the industrial revolution. What is required now is a form of education provision and delivery which takes into account flexible forms of delivery, different student needs and expectations as well as using resources, both material and intellectual in more creative and flexible ways. The challenge for those developing standards frameworks is twofold. First is how to accommodate the ambiguities and uncertainties of alternative forms of education provision and policies while at the same time providing teachers and the community with clear guidelines as to what constitutes best practice. Second is how issues of teacher professionalism are debated and developed in order to enhance the quality and status of teaching in order to facilitate and improve student learning? How these are achieved takes the development of teacher professional standards into new and perhaps highly politically charged territory. Dealing with these challenges will require resolve, courage and political and professional care.

Standards and teacher professionalism

The development of professional standards has significant implications for teacher professionalism. The implementation of a standards regime denotes a particular version of teacher professionalism, one that is more likely to be externally controlled and regulated by the government rather one that is overseen by the profession itself. There is still much discussion about the ‘old’ and ‘new’ formations of teacher professionalism, and debates regarding the concept and practice of professionalism. Given that these debates circulate around issues of power and status this is likely to continue. As Grace (1987: 195) quite rightly observes:

Ideologies of professionalism can be made to serve the interests of the state for control and containment of teachers or they can be effectively deployed by teachers to improve their terms and conditions of service and their enjoyment of social status and occupational autonomy.

For some the work of teachers is being de-professionalised (Apple, 1993) through the application of managerialist policies aimed at increasing the public accountability of teachers individually and collectively. The imposition of standards regimes is a clear example of how this is happening. Others (McCulloch, Helsby and Knight 2000: 110) argue that professions in general are changing, with teaching becoming more professional and that evidence of this can be seen across the world. They maintain that

… occupations such as teaching are becoming more professional, new skills are required, achieving good relationships with client and other stakeholders becomes more important, a more extensive knowledge base has to be mastered
and more complex decisions need to be made. Rather than being depersonalized, it could be argued that teaching is being reprofessionalized although the new professionalism is different from the mythical professionalism of forty years ago.

The differences between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ formations of teacher professionalism are many. The politics of professionalism are partly about government action that affect teachers but they are also about the ways in which teachers choose to respond and choose to publicly depict themselves. Discussion of ‘new professionalism’ as well as ‘old professionalism’ shows that there is a choice (McCulloch et al 2000).

Current orthodoxy suggests that for teachers three areas encapsulate what it means to be professional and hence professionalism: knowledge, autonomy and responsibility (Hoyle and John 1995). These three dimensions work together in complex and reciprocal ways, neither stands independently of the other. While Lortie (1975) and Jackson (1968) argued that teachers lacked a technical vocabulary nor did they hold a corpus of knowledge about their practice, more recent research has emphasised the body of knowledge that teachers possess in order to carry out their work as teachers. This knowledge has been variously described as personal practical knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly 1988), practical knowledge (Elbaz 1983) or pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987). Regardless of nomenclature these perspectives provide empirical evidence to supports claims that teachers possess a cogent body of knowledge that they apply in classrooms, working with students. This is a body of expert knowledge that enables them to make judgements about student learning and their own performance as teachers.

An on-going challenge for teachers and others involved in education is to make the knowledge base of teaching an essential part of the professional project and for teachers to claim it as their own. Once this is achieved the knowledge base may become a central resource of the profession, and will remain so as long as the profession can maintain its exclusive rights to it. (MacDonald 1995) This is a significant point because it is the acquisition and possession of this knowledge that differentiate the knowledge base of teachers from those who can best be described as working in the field of training. The knowledge base of teaching is of direct importance consisting as it does of a codified or codifiable aggregation of knowledge, skill, understanding and technology, of ethics and disposition, of collective responsibility (Shulman 1987:4)

Practitioner autonomy is another dimension that is seen to be central to a profession. According to Hoyle and John (1995:77) “as professionals work in uncertain situations in which judgement is more important than routine, it is essential to effective practice that they should be free from bureaucratic and political constraints to act on judgements made in the best interests (as they see them) of the clients”. A countervailing argument suggests that accountability often stands in contradistinction to autonomy. Hoyle and John (1995: 77) claim that “ … professional practice is more predictable and subject to evaluation than professional interest groups allow, and their claims for autonomy are, in fact, strategies for avoidance of accountability and the involvement of clients in dialogue about practice”.

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Given the increasing regimes of accountability and verification that effect all people working in the professions, it is no longer useful to place accountability and autonomy in opposition. The issue now might be what forms do the systems of accountability take, who oversees their application and what are the consequences if transgression is seen to happen. In the case of teaching in Australia currently there is no national organization to act in the role of certification of programs or registration of individual teachers. The British, Australian or American Medical Association come to mind as professional organizations that provide this function. In some states in Australia and the US there are teacher standards and registration bodies that provide guidelines and procedures for entrance and continuing membership of the profession. In the UK visits by OFSTED inspectors play a role in assuring quality at the school level so that in this instance accountability has both structural and professional dimensions. The intrusion on teachers’ personal autonomy is more likely to come from centralised and mandated curriculum and publication of students results in public exams rather than on actual intervention that aims at reducing their professional autonomy.

Responsibility and professionality go hand in hand of which there are three levels: the practical level, the exercise of sound judgement, and finally, being equipped to make sound judgements through professional development, ethics and reflection (Hoyle and John 1995). The practical level is concerned with the possession of knowledge that enables them to undertake their work in classrooms competently. The exercise of sound judgments draws on the complex body of knowledge developed by teachers and mediated through their experience in classrooms, and their understanding of content and pedagogical knowledge. The acquisition of these is dependent on teachers being involved in various forms of professional development of which taking up opportunities to be engaged in learning and dialogue with other teachers inside and outside of schools is central.

In its application the proponents of ‘old’ professionalism have an ideological commitment to the very notion of teacher professionalism. Brint (1994) suggests that: … professionalism has both a technical and moral aspect. Technically, it promised competent performance of skilled work involving the application of broad and complex knowledge, the acquisition which required formal academic study. Morally, it promised to be guided by the application of the important social ends it served. (p. 7)

The identification of technical and moral aspects of professionalism is, not surprisingly, attractive to large segments of society, especially policy-makers and members of the profession itself. Hoyle and John (1995: 7) observe that the ideological approach denotes a much more political set of activities in which the concept of profession is deployed in a deliberate attempt to influence policy. They go on to argue that “status is seen as a function of power which has accrued to a profession through increasing control of the market” (p. 7). The spheres of interest in which proponents of old professionalism operate are, in the main, concerned with the profession itself and are more inward looking and exclusive.

Spheres of interest are concerned with power and the privileges of professionals that grow out of the specific character of their market shelter. These spheres of interest operate through various strategies and structural arrangements, including knowledge
monopolies, gate keeping functions and certification (Freidson 1986). Knowledge monopolies create the basis for a great many of the powers of professionals, in particular how their work is to be accomplished. Control over their work, or technical autonomy is a fundamental aspect of professionals. Technical autonomy creates a sphere of activity in which the individual worker, not the organized hierarchy, is sovereign under normal conditions. It allows for forms of self-direction that is clearly not open to all workers (Brint 1994).

Gatekeeping ensures institutional power over resources. These resources may take a variety of forms, from entry into the profession, to the allocation of promotional positions within the profession to the allocation of grades as a measure of performance. As Brint (1994) observes, gatekeeping defines a position of interpretation and judgement between a client and a benefit a client seeks. In the case of teachers, it is only they who can give grades that measure performance and codify learning outcomes.

The major constituency of membership for those operating under an old professionalism is exclusive, mainly limited to those working in the field of school education, either in the capacity of teacher, administrator, union officers or education bureaucrats. It is unlikely that community members, even teacher educators or those working in allied education fields of practice would be included under the old professional project. Its focus is on the needs of teachers as an identifiable group, especially as these relate to the immediate and practical needs of teachers working in classrooms.

Old forms of teacher professionalism can run the risk of serving particular interests to the neglect of others. It is often self-serving and inward looking more concerned with issues that are concerned with self-interest rather than broader social and political ones. Bottery and Wright (2000:100) put it well when they suggest that

A teaching profession of limited rationality and similarly limited professionalism not only serves controversial political and economic ends. It is also limited in its ability to develop a generation that can adequately respond to the complex and changing demands of a more global environment, as well as to provide the sorts of skills and attitudes required for a more empowered and participative citizenry.

**Acting against the tide: a strategy to counter curriculum control**

Elsewhere (Sachs 2000) I have developed an argument that supports the idea of an activist teacher professionalism. This type of professionalism is rooted in generative politics and the establishment of active trust. In this section I want to develop these ideas further, to indicate how a participatory democratic model of civic action can sustain an activist and responsive teaching profession. It is my hope that such a response to curriculum control, especially as it is emerging in relationship to ways of controlling the teaching profession will provide the teaching profession with a strategy that is in the best interests of a strong and independent teaching profession. This activist form of teacher professionalism will stem the tide of technicist and instrumental forms of teacher professionalism that standards regimes are promoting.
Citizen participation is imperative for inclusive teacher professionalism. Rimmerman (2001:19) suggests

… increased citizen participation in community and workplace decision making is important if people are to recognize their roles and responsibilities as citizens within in the larger community…. In a true participatory setting, citizens do not merely act as autonomous individuals pursuing their own interests, but instead, through a process of decision, debate, and compromise, they ultimately link their concerns with the needs of the community.

For an activist teacher professionalism to be successful this is particularly relevant. The engagement and participation of various education stakeholders in important debates provides for various positions to be debated and differences resolved. The process of the debate itself may give rise to ideas and positions not previously thought of. One major advantage of this type of activity is that “not only do people develop personal competencies they also develop skills in broad based community politics and become more informed about the political process.

Participatory citizen politics is different from conventional politics in several different ways. First and foremost is how this type of political work is undertaken and resolution to issues reached. Whereas conventional politics “concentrates more of getting to solutions quickly, citizens politics concentrates on carefully defining, and if need be, redefining, problems before moving on to solutions” (Rimmerman 2001: 23). Second, is the nature of power and how it is recognised and managed. “Those who support a new kind of participatory citizens politics emphasise creating new forms of power at all levels of a community, whereas conventional politics proponents advocate using power wisely and empowering the powerless”. Third, relates to the use and acquisition of resources. “The resources associated with conventional politics are generally more financial and legislative, citizen politics uses public will as its primary political capital”(Rimmerman 2001: 22) Finally, is the domain of language. The language associated with conventional politics is rooted within advocacy and winning, whereas the language of citizen politics embraces a language of political problem solving and relationship building (Rimmerman 2001:22).

In order to engage in strategies to avert or stem the flow of curriculum control there are some simple lessons to be learnt from other areas of civic action. These basics of organizing for an activist teacher professionalism include:

- Identify future sources of support
- Talk and listen to them
- Identify important issues
- A problem solving approach
- Communicate the fundamental ideas simply and clearly
- Develop strategies to recruit new members
- Conduct meetings and communicate the outcomes of the meetings to the wider constituency
- Set goals
- Identify what success would look like
- Undertake research and collect information
- Use the media to communicate the work of the group
These basics provide a framework for teacher groups to get organised and to take the lead in developing a new form of teacher professionalism. They require collective rather than individual action, but do not necessarily require whole profession mobilisation, even though this would be preferred.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that the development of teacher professional standards has the potential to control the practice and form and of teacher professionalism. I suggest that the type of control implicit in these standards may not be in the best interests of teachers working in schools, nor may they reflect the diversity of the teaching profession itself and the contexts in which teachers work. While this sanitised, one size fits all form of teacher professionalism may be a short term strategy used by the state to control an increasingly disaffected teaching profession, it is not a strategic way to develop a strong and intelligent teaching profession. I conclude the paper with a call to action. My intention is both strategic and tactical. I suggest that lessons can be learned from the experiences of those engaged in participatory democratic politics. The strategy proposed here involves organizing an activist teaching profession that can be used to engage and enliven a teaching profession that is under increasing surveillance from externally mandated regulatory bodies.

**References**


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