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Exploring Critical Thinking Dispositions in Primary School Children

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event that shocked the entire world. The virus's infectious and transmissible nature compelled the world to stand still. The world shifted to online mode, and schools were no exception. In this mode, teachers were supposed to teach using electronic devices and the internet. The shift from offline to online learning was challenging for adolescent students, as it required them to stay home with their families and forgo face-to-face interactions with peers. This study seeks to examine the multiple impacts of online learning on secondary school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study intends to identify the different concerns of secondary school students in the Gajapati district of Odisha regarding the teaching-learning process through an online mode.

Furthermore, the study intends to examine the socio-cultural inequalities that surfaced after the introduction of online education during Covid-19. I interviewed secondary-class students, their teachers, and parents from two types of schools (Rural and urban) to collect data. Students' responses were rated using a 5-point Likert scale. The study concluded that existing social inequality increased during the pandemic and that there is a digital divide among learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. It was also found that due to staying closed at home and being unable to socialise with their peers for many days, adolescent students experienced anxiety, depression, and irritation.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, Online Education, Digital divide, Anxiety, Depression, Socio-economic inequalities*

Introduction

The school provides an environment for formal teaching. The formal educational procedures that schools provide can lead to new ways of seeing and connecting with the world (NCF, 2005). This school environment helps foster attitudes and a tendency to learn among students, which are necessary for a progressive life in society. That is why school acts as an active instrument for social change and progress. Learning can occur everywhere. It is active and social. Learning helps modify behaviour. The school acts as a vehicle in bringing about the modification of behaviour through its daily activities and teaching-learning practices. It also plays a vital role in bringing about changes in students' behaviour by giving them a platform to gain diverse experiences. The school provides a space for students to learn collaboratively with their peers, teachers, and others. School helps raise students' social skills and awareness, in addition to their fun and curricular activities. With both formal and informal interactions between teachers and students, learning occurs within a network of social relationships. Hence, the quote "School is the miniature of society" (Dewey, 1899) fits here. Thus, school plays an important role in every child's life.

High school is an important period of time in an adolescent's life. Adolescence is the gap between childhood and adulthood. It is an important time for the formation of one's self-identity. Developing a sense of self is associated with both learning to cope with the social and psychological pressures of young adulthood and with physiological changes (NCF, 2005). During this stage, students love spending time with peers and growing with them. That is why Erikson categorised adolescence as the event of 'peer relationships' (Woolfolk, 2016). School is the place where students can form different cliques, each with unique norms and beliefs. With peers, students share their values and ideas. They actively participate and do the work collaboratively. According to Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development, adolescence to

adulthood comes under the 'Formal operational stage'. At this stage, their thinking becomes more critical. They solve abstract problems logically. They can consider multiple perspectives and develop concerns about social issues, personal identity, and justice. They can think hypothetically and deductively (Mukunda, 2012). To better understand concepts and abstract things, there is a need for procedural, conceptual, and activity-based learning (Woolfolk, 2016). This is better practised in schools with appropriate infrastructure, equipment, and teaching methods, such as practical, hands-on activities and discussions. The classroom allows students and teachers to discuss, share ideas, and debate various topics, enhancing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Active participation involves enquiry, exploration, debate, questioning, application, and reflection, which help build theories and generate ideas. Thus, classroom and school activities are the most important factors in enhancing learners' learning.

The outbreak of the deadly disease COVID-19 suddenly threatened the world. The world is locked inside the four walls of home. Globally, 'hundreds of millions of students' are said to have been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020). This situation challenged the education system worldwide and forced educators to shift to online teaching overnight. Consequently, catering to the needs of all stages of education from pre-primary to university level, online learning has emerged as an alternative to ordinary/regular face-to-face classes. Relying on and adapting to online learning during a pandemic may lead educators to adopt more online elements in teaching. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the Government of India stated that it was "actively promoting online education" through internet-based digital platforms and broadcasting educational content on TV through dedicated education channels (Prasad, 2021, p. 4). The new paradigm that is 'fully' online was new for teachers as well as students. Sitting in confined spaces and attending online classes for long hours left children exhausted. One cannot assume that all students, as well as educators, would have access to internet connectivity and powerful devices outside their school to communicate. The COVID-19 crisis could mark a momentous shift in social and political structures and processes, much like past humanitarian crises have done. This scenario prompted the researcher to study the psychosocial impact of online learning on secondary-grade students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship is available on various aspects of COVID-19. Various positionalities inform this scholarship. Many scholars have highlighted the increasing importance of technology and technological tools. They seem to be thrilled with the outreach and impact of technological devices on human life. They are amused by the sharp rise in the scope of technology, which has now captured the domain of education, from Early childhood care education to higher education. In contrast, there is an abundance of literature that tends to examine the entire venture of technologization of education through a sociological/socio-scientific lens and investigate its various facets critically.

The literature has highlighted a basic framework for understanding students' perceptions of online education. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a major shift in communication. Advancements in technology played a central role in facilitating this shift. Many studies have discussed the psychological impacts on students' learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Irawan et al., 2020; Nazmul et al., 2020). These results indicate that practical and robust social support is needed during public health emergencies. According to AlAzzam et al. (2021), Adnan (2020), and Mahapatra & Sharma (2021), during the COVID-19 pandemic, senior high school students experienced depression and anxiety that were impacted by their parents' level of education and problems with online education. They talked about various psychological issues that have emerged, leading to academic stress among adolescents and their potential to lead to shootings and long-term psychological morbidity. This study contributes to the understanding of adolescents' mental health problems and related factors during the pandemic (Yu et al., 2022). The study presented evidence that, despite some challenges, undergraduate students could adapt to the new learning methods of distance learning and agreed that distance learning was more efficient than classroom learning (Amir et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020). According to Burns (2020), this transition mobilises the technological utopian imagination

that digital technologies can rescue populations from disease. It also raises the risk of deepening neoliberal educational reforms and, by extension, poses a threat to democracy itself.

The other side of the COVID-19 pandemic was the emergence of layered inequalities in society. Vertical class inequality already existed in Indian society, but these two years of the pandemic made it more multi-layered in socio-economic scenarios. When education shifted from offline to online, social inequality was reflected in digital inequality among students. This type of inequality is termed the digital divide. Oxfam's 2022 India Inequality Report: Digital Divide provides some insight into how the digital divide affected inequality in India during the pandemic. It examines how one of the main features of the divide is the lack of access to ICTs, pointing out that almost 70% of people in India have inadequate or no connectivity to digital services. This report identifies education, healthcare, and finance as sectors that underwent rapid digitisation during the pandemic (India Inequality Report - 2022). More important drivers of the digital divide during the Covid-19 pandemic are students' ICT skills, which are strongly related to their socioeconomic background (Werfhorst et al., 2022). In the Gajapati districts of Odisha, only 15.34% of students were able to use mobile phones for their online classes. There were higher dropout rates among SC and ST students in Odisha (Sahani, 2023). It has been inferred that the digital divide is not only an issue in the teaching and learning process during Covid-19. Still, it is also intrinsically embedded in many social, psychological, economic, and political issues.

Research Gap

After reviewing the related literature, the researcher found gaps in the study that needed to be researched. They are as follows:

1. Many of the reviews discussed the problems faced during online classes, as well as the availability of internet and devices, but hardly any discussed the psychological impact on students. Hence, the researcher wanted to study the psychological impact on school students by attending online classes.
2. Although very few researchers have studied the psychological impact on students, many have focused on graduate students, especially medical students, and most are from foreign countries. So, the researcher wants to study the psycho-social impact of secondary school students in the Indian context.
3. Very few of the reviewed studies discussed the sociocultural factors behind online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, no relevant studies have been conducted on schools in the Gajapati district of Odisha. So, the researcher sought to examine the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic among secondary school students from different schools in the Gajapati district of Odisha.

Research Questions

A cursory glance at the available scholarship on the two strands above raises the following research questions.

1. To what extent are the students satisfied with online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak?
2. How do online classes impact the change of moods of secondary school students?
3. How does the use of technology socio-economically affect secondary school students?
4. What are the possible reasons behind the increase or decrease in interest towards learning through technology?
5. What is students' perception of online classes, and of those who are exempted from them due to inaccessibility of infrastructure, such as network connectivity and technological devices?

Research Objective

The purpose of the study is to examine the perspectives on online classes among secondary school students and to study changes in students' moods resulting from daily online classes. Another purpose is to study the socio-cultural inequalities among students resulting from the inaccessibility of the network and technological devices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The design of the study is a convergent parallel mixed-method type. Both quantitative and qualitative data are collected in parallel by using the necessary tools. Here, because the data were collected during the COVID-19 period, it

became difficult to obtain additional data from students and parents. Hence, the researcher used percentages to analyse quantitative data and triangulated them with qualitative data. The researcher used stratified random sampling and surveyed 90 individuals, of whom 60 were secondary school students (Classes 9 and 10) from various institutes such as Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Eklavya Model Residential School, and Centurion Public School in Gajapati District, Odisha. The remaining 20 respondents were parents, and 10 were their subject teachers. Here, 'online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic' is the independent variable, and the 'psychosocial impact on secondary school students' is dependent upon the online learning during Covid-19. The Researcher went to the schools to collect the data. There, she distributed the printed 5-point Likert scale for students to complete. At that time, some schools were closed, so the researcher prepared a Google Form and sent it to the students through online mode. The researcher also visited some of the students' homes to meet their parents and interview them. After collecting the data, the researcher transcribed and then translated them for analysis. Quantitative data were obtained from a 5-point Likert scale. The data were analysed to provide a contextual framework for the students' views on online learning. This data was analysed alongside the qualitative data gathered through the semi-structured interview questionnaires of students, parents, and teachers. Pseudonyms were employed during analysis and reporting to safeguard the participants' identities. Analysis and interpretation of the collected data were conducted using percentages, appropriate statistical techniques, and descriptive elaboration. The data obtained has been analysed thematically, and the findings are drawn and discussed.

In the present study, the conceptual delimitation concerns the psychosocial impacts of irritation, anxiety, mood swings, and socio-cultural inequalities among secondary school students attending online classes. The sample comprises secondary school students in Gajapati District, Odisha. Gajapati district is located in southern Odisha. Most of the people belong to tribal and backward communities. With these considerations in mind, the researcher selected two types of schools. Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Model Residential School are residential schools where most of the children are from rural areas. The second type comprises urban schools such as Kendriya Vidyalaya and Centurion Public School. Kendriya Vidyalaya is especially for the children of transferable employees of the Government of India. Centurion Public School is a famous private English medium school in the only municipality of the district

Findings and Discussion

After analysing the data, the researcher presents the findings thematically and discusses them below.

Theme 1: Online classes possibilities and/ versus realities

Online education is no longer an option; it has become a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This became one of the hopes for everyone to continue the classes as much as possible. Some parents were somewhat relaxed because their children were safe and reading during the pandemic, but some parents from JNV and EMRS were worried about how to manage their families. As for JNV and EMRS, which are residential schools, all needs were met by the government, but this was stopped for a period as students returned home. When students were asked about their interest in online classes, 15% said online classes are never interesting, 68.3% said they are often interesting, and 16.7% said they are always interesting. 66.7% of total students said online classes are never better than offline classes, and 33.3% said online classes are sometimes better as per Covid-19 guidelines.

Teachers from Kendriya Vidyalaya and Centurion Public School reported that initially, students attended classes enthusiastically, but their numbers gradually declined. They neither submitted their homework nor participated in class. They have been acting strangely, and we have had to ask them repeatedly to submit the assignments. Psychological dynamics reveal the background of boredom among students, caused by various social conditions in their environment. Research subjects experienced emotional disturbances due to homework and also staying inside the four walls of the home. They did not have their peer circle to talk and spend some time with. This brought a drastic change in their attitude and behaviour. M. Chaitanya, a student from class 10th said,

"Classes were boring online. I wanted offline classes soon. I was irritated by having to attend classes at home. I used to miss my hostel, classroom, friends, playground and my school."

Adding to this, Rachana from class 10th mentioned in her form that,

"Yes, I do often want to watch TV instead of online classes, only when I get bored with online classes." She also mentioned that, "I want to play with friends outside the home because there was no one at home to play with us."

From these observations, it is clear that the students are gradually becoming bored and irritated with attending online classes for longer periods. The same is also quoted by Irawan, Dwisona, & Lestari (2020). That is, "Online learning that makes students communicate through gadget intermediaries makes the interaction between one individual and other individuals lack the meaning of non-verbal communication. The absence of these interactions, coupled with restrictions on physical meetings, makes students bored in classes." Prolonged screen time became a cause of headaches among students. One of the mothers said,

"After attending 2 to 3 classes, my son gets irritated and behaves differently. Most of the time, he says I have a slight headache. I want to take a nap."

Many subjects of the study experienced emotional disturbances like irritation and mood swings because of staying inside the four walls of the home and attending online classes for a longer period of time. When they were asked how they felt about attending online classes during COVID-19, 63.3% of the students said that most of the time they felt angry for no reason, 8.3% always felt angry and irritated, and 28.3% said they were not angry or irritated. They were complaining about a lack of social support from their peer circle. According to a mother, Mrs B. Laxmi,

"Most of the time, my daughter, who is in class 9th, is always engaged in mobile games. Sometimes she gets angry without any reason, behaves weirdly and yells at us."

Online education among high school students has increased the level of stress and pressure among students and increased their vulnerability to psychological problems. In this period, 70% of students reported that most of the time they lose interest in studying, 18.3% always lose interest, and 11.7% never lose interest. The results indicated that both anxiety and depression are prevalent among adolescents and are associated with higher risks of psychological distress. Such situations, before the COVID-19 pandemic, were considered serious and exacerbated the pandemic's psychosocial consequences. This is the reflection of students who were able to attend online classes. However, those who were exempted from classes due to the unavailability of gadgets and a proper internet connection were depressed about being unable to attend their regular classes, which might cause them to lag behind others. Thus, it is ironic that both sets of students were virtually reduced to embracing anxiety and depression, though altogether for different reasons. High school students are increasingly vulnerable to social and psychological disturbances due to developmental and academic requirements. Online education among adolescents has increased the level of stress and pressure among students and increased their vulnerability to psychological problems. The results indicated that both anxiety and depression are prevalent among adolescents and are associated with higher risks of suicide and disease prevalence. (AlAzzam M., Abuhammad, Abdalrahim, & Hamdan-Mansour, 2021)

The surge in telecommunications has led people to spend more time looking at screens on their smartphones. Previously, increased exposure to smart devices and screens has been reported to increase stress and burnout levels. Stress is an emotional, physical, or mental reaction that causes tension. The major factors contributing to burnout are overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment. In addition, a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment may result. In the reflection form, one of the students, Akanksha, mentioned that,

"I feel discouraged because I cannot understand anything during classes."

This implies that due to less clarity in online classes, students lose self-confidence and feel discouraged because they are not grasping the concepts. This might be a reason to feel discouraged.

According to Mrs Das, mother of a 9th-class student from KV,

"For a few months, I have been observing that my son is getting depressed. Often, after attending classes, he gets angry and shouts at us. He became so silent. Mobile became his world. Nowadays, he refuses to go outside."

When the researcher asked further about his reactions towards his study and behaviour, she said,

"The whole lockdown is gone, but he never touched (read or wrote) his textbooks. Gradually, he lost his interest towards his passion and hobbies."

Angelina, a student from KV, added,

"Dancing is my passion. I am learning Odissi at a coaching centre. Because of COVID-19, I am neither able to go to my coaching centre nor learn well at home. I am losing my self-motivation for my further courses."

The above responses imply that, due to the pandemic, students are forced to forgo their hobbies, passions, and interesting work. This made them more vulnerable and forced them to stay at home. In response, they reacted with anger and irritation.

Theme 2: School as a site of learning

The researcher found that many students across all schools expressed concern that the online learning environment was not effective for them. They were missing the face-to-face teaching-learning method. The remaining students who had attended the classes initially gradually lost interest in class and started bunking. Attendance decreased along with their participation in online classes. When the researcher interviewed the teachers of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, the teachers said that "only 35 to 45% of students of class 10th were able to attend the online classes. The others were unable to attend due to the unavailability of electronic gadgets and the accessibility of the network." According to the teacher of the Odia language,

Initially, students attended classes regularly, but gradually their attendance dropped. Their participation level has also decreased. She used to reinforce students again and again to interact in class and also to submit the assignments."

The mathematics teacher added to it that,

"When the online classes were initiated, most of the boys joined the classes. Gradually, girl students joined when their mobile phones were arranged, and they continued to attend daily..."

Again, he said that

"But after a few days, the boys did not join. Maybe this is because boys are saving their mobile data for mobile games and other uses. They get a chance to go outside and to coaching centres, but girls are not allowed to go outside as boys are. During exam time, both boys and girls join the class and ask their queries."

Some students even assume that teachers are not wise in determining useful learning patterns. It's inferred that, due to online classes, students are unable to grasp many abstract and procedural concepts and skills. Their doubts remained unsolved. Many students expressed concern that the online learning environment was ineffective for them. Sonny explained,

"I understand information best during face-to-face conversations. Subjects like Mathematics and science are not very clear in online classes."

He added,

"I crave a learning environment where I can connect with others face-to-face." Sometimes this made them feel worthless, and their self-motivation got lost.

Many individuals wrote in their reflections that they are facing problems understanding physics, chemistry, mathematics, and other practical-based topics. This led to a problem in understanding the next topic. So, when they read them in books, they did not get the concepts properly. This decreases their interest in studies. When some classmates do answer in class and s/he cannot, they feel worthless. According to Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development, adolescence to adulthood comes under the 'Formal operational stage'. At this stage, their thinking becomes more scientific and curious, with a desire to learn by doing. They solve abstract problems logically, and are able to grasp abstract concepts easily. They can think hypothetically and deductively. (Woolfolk, 2016) To better understand the concepts and abstract things, there is a need for procedural and skill-based learning. So, by attending online classes, students have trouble grasping procedural and skill-based learning. Although they were promoted to higher classes, those doubts remained unaddressed, leading to further misconceptions about related concepts.

Regarding this, another student, Titikhya from class 9th, said,

"Due to poor network connection, most of the time the teacher is not audible. So, I am unable to grasp the contents. Gradually, those topics are left misunderstood only."

Most of the teachers said that, at first, it took a lot of time for them to become acquainted with using gadgets and taking classes online. Again and again, students used to ask us when the schools would reopen so that we could meet our friends and teachers in person and enjoy hostel life. This shows that there is an urgent need for a school environment for students during this pandemic. Especially during adolescence, school is an important place for students to be with their friends and socialise.

Theme 3: Digital divide- Social divide

There is a vast "digital inequality" that exists in society. This new type of inequality is also known as 'digital divide'. As defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the digital divide refers to "the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels about both their opportunity to access information and communication technologies and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities. (India Inequality Report, 2022) Affordability is another factor limiting access to online learning, with students from economically weaker sections facing a greater burden. Economic inequality is a key driver of the digital divide. Accessibility and affordability can have serious implications for students in the education system.

Many parents mentioned that the gradual implementation of the learning process at home led to a loss of interest in their kids' studies. Their children used to get angry at small things. Parents from Kendriya Vidyalaya and Centurion Public School were more or less conscious of their children's mental health. Some of them tried to substitute their daily routine and engage with their children in activities. As Mrs Das, a parent of a student from Kendriya Vidyalaya, said,

"We felt that he needed a change, so we booked a cab and took him to the beach, so that a trip might refresh him."

Whereas parents from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Model Residential Schools were not conscious of their children's mental health. They were already tense, as some had lost their jobs during COVID-19, and others were, as usual, at work. A parent of a student from EMRS said that,

"Maám, due to this pandemic, I have already lost my work, and I am disturbed. How could I bother about the mental situation of my kids when I am already stressed?"

Learners from KV and CPS rarely faced any internet connection issues, as they live in well-organised municipal towns, whereas children from JNV and EMRS faced many network issues. Some of the boys used to go to the tops of small mountains where they grew vegetables and cereals (bagada in the local language) to connect to the network and attend online classes, unless the weather was good. On rainy days, they are forced to miss classes. Rajat from class 10th of JNV said that,

"I used to go to Bagada, at the top of the mountain, for network connectivity and attend the classes, but when it was raining, I could not. I was bothered by my studies as I am in class 10th."

Another thing is that only boys were allowed to go to network-connected places, whereas girls were not allowed for safety reasons. So, the girls from remote villages were exempted from attending online classes. At that time, teachers from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Residential Model Schools said that very few students initially enrolled in the classes because most lacked reliable internet access and devices. After a couple of months, the number increased as children began buying mobile phones. Still, the number was not satisfactory. Some teachers also shared their experiences of how they faced problems adopting the technologies to deliver daily classes all of a sudden. (Nambissan, 2024, pp 62-63) writes that, "Digital inequality and lack of teacher preparedness in relation to online learning have been raised as key issues during the pandemic in India and are concerns that will have to be addressed in the short run."

Most students from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Residential Model School disrupted their academic lives due to reduced family income, limited access to digital resources, lack of internet access, and the high

cost of internet connectivity. Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Residential Model School are located in rural areas and primarily serve underprivileged, socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The children from urban areas attended classes with their personal devices and reliable internet connectivity. On the other hand, many children did not get a chance to attend class at all. Either they do not have gadgets, or they have an unavailable internet connection. Some children from JNV and EMRS used to go to work outside as daily wage workers to feed

themselves as well as their families. In this scenario, how could we expect them to attend classes instead of working to survive? It is more than just the haves and have-nots; it is not only about those with access and those without. It concerns the development of knowers and know-nots, doers and do-nots, and those with and without the ability to communicate with the outside world. Students from KV and CPS also attended their classes at school, and some enrolled in private online coaching platforms. Whereas students from rural areas did not have a chance to attend any. The researcher found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant digital divide emerged in the education system. This gap transparently reflects the presence of multilayered inequalities within our society. This pandemic recreated many new sublayers within the multilayered class system of our country. Another major issue was the availability of proper internet connections. According to NCF,2005, "Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should be used in such a way that it becomes an opportunity equaliser by providing information, communication and computing resources in remote areas." Now, it is the need of the hour to recognise that ICT is not accessible to a large section of rural students, especially during the COVID-19 period. Similarly, ASER (2021) also found that, among both reopened and not reopened schools, COVID caused financial distress; free facilities provided by government schools and classes not being held in private schools were cited as the major reasons for this increase in the digital divide.

Conclusion

The study concludes that online education among high school students has increased stress and pressure and heightened their vulnerability to psychological problems. Students' mental health is highly affected when faced with this pandemic, and they need attention, help, and support from the community, family, and educational institutions. In addition to the psychological impact, the study highlighted significant digital divides and multilayered socioeconomic inequalities in our society. The study emphasises that school is a learning site that has a greater role in our society. There is a need for a deep and complex understanding of online education during Covid-19 for the deprivations and disadvantages suffered by people experiencing poverty. We can imagine the future of digital teaching-learning practice, which is proposed to continue in the future.

Further suggestions

The study covered only 9th- and 10th-class students; it warrants further study. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic period. So, the sample size is limited. It can be further studied using large amounts of data for quantitative analysis or qualitatively through in-depth research. The researcher delimited the study to the psycho-social impacts of COVID-19 on adolescents. Further, it can be studied through other lenses, such as socio-economic and gender differences.

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