

Attitudes of Primary School Pupils towards the Inclusion of Mildly Mentally-Challenged Children in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: 'Inclusivity' in education is a concept that has received widespread attention since the late 20th Century when proponents of emerging inclusive education strongly advocated for the inclusion of learners with special learning needs in mainstream classes. However, even though the inclusive model has been a positive invention and development in the education fraternity, it has had challenges including mixed attitudes by mainstream learners, teachers and society in general. This study sought to explore the attitudes of primary school mainstream pupils towards the inclusion of mildly-mentally-challenged pupils (MMCPs) in regular classes. The study, focused on determining whether primary school mainstream pupils accepted these children in regular classes. A case study design was adopted where the case of two Primary Schools was utilised and a sample of (N=50) Grade seven pupils randomly selected from the two schools was used to accomplish the study. A questionnaire was used to gather data from the participants and percentages were utilised to report research findings. The study revealed that the majority of pupils from the selected primary schools, held positive attitudes towards the inclusion of MMCPs in mainstream classes on the basis that MMCPs were their peers with whom they should be together as they needed each other during and after lessons. Accordingly, the study recommended that the education system should ensure that MMCPs are included in regular classes considering that the majority of regular learners have positive attitudes towards their inclusion in regular classes and that society; which the school mirrors, is ideally inclusive.

Keywords: attitudes, inclusive education, mainstream pupils, mildly mentally-challenged learners.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'inclusive education' or 'educational inclusion' has received widespread attention and significance since the late 20th Century when its proponents as an emerging model and paradigm shift in education strongly advocated for the inclusion of learners with special learning needs (SLNs) in mainstream classes [1, 2]. Peresuh [3] noted that even though the inclusion of children with disabilities has largely been a positive invention and development in the education fraternity, it has on the other hand been flawed with a host of operational challenges, which include inappropriate infrastructure in mainstream schools, lack of qualified teaching staff, mixed attitudes by mainstream learners, teachers and society in general.

The current study sought to unveil the attitudes of mainstream primary school pupils (MPSPs) towards the inclusion of mildly mentally-challenged pupils (MMCC) in mainstream or regular classes in Zimbabwe. While there has been rather sporadic

research on educational inclusion as noted by Mushoriwa [4]; and to the authors' knowledge, somehow limited research on inclusion in primary schools has been conducted.

Background to the Study

Heward and Orlansky [5] contend that the education of children with disabilities, whether mild to profound, presents a complex and difficult challenge considering that the issue of attitudes also comes into play and also given the current trend of inclusion in most countries. In the present study, the authors also assumed the implementation of inclusive education as a pertinent challenge considering the complexity and diversity of human attitudes, and the fact that the value that inclusive education promotes has not been adequately identified and articulated by its proponents. In non-inclusive settings, most education systems tend to emphasise academic achievements, values that cannot and should not be a major focus under inclusive settings if we are to look at the range of mental, social,

physical and other human differences as well as the diverse nature of inclusive classes [25]. The acceptance of inclusive education, therefore, becomes a challenge particularly in the developing world where infrastructure is often inappropriate and attitudes of society are often characterised by either ignorance or sheer traditionalism.

Interestingly, emerging research evidence, such as that by the Integration Education Audit Commission [6] and Florian *et al.* [7] indicate that even in the developed world, widespread fears that educational inclusion lowers the academic achievements of pupils in the mainstream school are evident. For Florian *et al.* [7]:

Many schools in most countries including the developed world still resist the pressure to become inclusive because they are concerned that to do so will have a negative effect on the academic progress of other pupils and consequently lower academic standards.

Mushoriwa and Gasva [8] note that indeed, this is quite surprising, given the fact that developed world countries like Britain are among the first to introduce inclusive education, yet are still skeptical about its appropriateness as the contemporary education system.

Research in Zimbabwe [9, 1, 3, 10, 11, 8], to the authors' knowledge regarding the acceptability of inclusive education by society in general as well as mainstream students and teachers; has also not clearly indicated a clear success or failure of the model. Thus, the foregoing may suggest inadequate research to determine the acceptability or not of inclusive education in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, hence, prompting the current study to be undertaken. It is against this background that the present study attempted to come up with valuable information that will help the education authorities in particular to assess and make informed decisions about the success of inclusion regarding MMCC and other children with SLNs.

Problem Statement

While inclusive education has been a plausible and momentous development in the education fraternity, the problem at stake is whether or not primary school mainstream pupils (PSMPs) have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special learning needs, in this case; the inclusion of mildly-mentally challenged children (MMCC) in mainstream classes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to explore the attitudes of mainstream primary school pupils (MPSPs) towards the inclusion of mildly mentally-challenged children (MMCC) in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following specific research questions:

- What do mainstream primary school pupils (MPSPs) think about the inclusion of mildly mentally challenged (MMCC) in mainstream classes?
- What specific attitudes do MPSPs have towards the inclusion of MMCC in mainstream classes?
- What are the sources of MPSPs' attitudes towards the inclusion of EMCC in mainstream classes?
- How can positive attitudes be inculcated in MPSPs towards inclusive education in order to foster its success as an educational model?

Significance of the Study

The major significance of this study is that its findings are expected to help inform appropriate decision-making by education authorities based on whether or not MPSPs accept the inclusion of MMCC in mainstream classes. As a model that is being popularized and recommended from both a social and institutional perspective (considering that society is by nature inclusive), the education system is expected to harness the findings of the current study to try and promote positive attitudes by MPSPs towards the inclusion of children with disabilities including those who are mildly mentally-challenged (MMC).

Mushoriwa and Gasva (*ibid*) are of the view that a study on the inclusion of MMCC is perhaps important in two main ways;

- First, it helps us to see whether attitudes towards disability are related to maturity, in this case considering that participants were in their last year of primary education (i.e. grade seven)
- Second, considering that mature pupils, as in the current study, are expected to know and realise the value of education in their personal lives and as such, they are in a better position to judge whether peers with disability do interfere with their learning and achievement or not.

Thus, consistent with Salisbury *et al.* (*ibid*), the researchers also anticipate that findings from the current study are also likely to shade more light on the argument often described in literature that the success of educational inclusion heavily depends on the nature and degree of disability and the maturity of mainstream pupils.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The concept of 'Attitudes'

Some synonyms of the term 'attitudes' are 'feelings', 'thoughts', 'mind-sets' and so on; while an attitude may generally be defined as 'a predisposition or a tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a certain idea, object, person, or situation'. An attitude influences an individual's thinking, choice of action,

and responses to challenges, incentives, and rewards [10]. Thus, an attitude may imply awareness, comprehension or an understanding of something; an interpretation or impression; opinions or beliefs about something. Four major components of an attitude may be discerned, namely, the ‘affective’ aspect (emotions or feelings), the ‘cognitive aspect (belief or opinions held consciously), the ‘conative’ aspect (inclination for action) and the ‘evaluative’ aspect (positive or negative response to stimuli).

Generally, attitudes influence the way individuals think and interpret issues, hence, are capable of influencing the way any programme is implemented, including its success or failure. In this study, it was assumed that MPSPs, as individuals who come from the wider society, hold certain attitudes towards the inclusion of MMCC, and that these attitudes greatly influence the extent to which

mainstream pupils are willing to learn together with MMCC in mainstream classes. In this regard, Mushoriwa [10] points out that the study of attitudes in education is critical because attitudes influence how we view and interpret issues in and consequently whether a programme is accepted or rejected by those directly or indirectly involved. Thus, the current study, therefore, finds absolute relevance in as much as it sought to interrogate the attitudes of primary school pupils towards the inclusion of MMCC in mainstream classes.

Reconceptualising ‘Mildly mentally challenged children’ (MMCC)

The concept of mildly mentally challenged children (MMCC) is perhaps best understood when we look at the different levels of mental-challenge which relate to intelligence quotient (IQ) and educational status. Below is a table that illustrates this.

Table-1: Classification of Mental Challenge based on severity of the condition

Level of Mental Challenge	IQ Score	Educational Status
Mild	55-70	Educable
Moderate	35-54	Trainable
Severe	20-34	Dependent
Profound	Less than 20	Custodial

Source: Mpofo [12]

Notably, the notion of mildly mentally-challenged children (MMCC) stems from the idea and long standing belief that some of the children with disabilities possess mild mental challenge while others possess moderate, severe and profound challenge; which presents a continuum on the nature and severity of mental challenge [12]. Bennaars *et al.* [13] view MMCC as those individuals with relatively limited intellectual functioning who may be able to make reasonable and meaningful social adjustments and would, therefore, benefit to some extent from learning in mainstream class. Thus, these children have rational social capabilities and cognitive potential to somehow meaningfully interact and learn together with their peers who have no intellectual deficits, despite the fact that they are usually slow in comprehending learning phenomena and are, therefore, often behind other learners.

According to Mushoriwa [10] mildly-mentally-challenged individuals are generally those below-average mental functions with an adult mental age between 8 and 12 years who can learn academic subjects and concepts generally up to a sixth grade level or so. The same source notes that close to this group are the moderately mental-challenged children (MMCC) who cannot effectively learn academic information but are able to learn basic self-care. According to Hardman *et al.* [14], the causes of mental retardation are many, and not all have been discovered. For them, genetic causes include mutations from x-ray exposure,

incompatibility of parental genes, and Down's syndrome. Complications during pregnancy, such as malnutrition, German measles, endocrine disorders, and infections, are also known causes of mental challenge. Problems during birth, particularly those that restrict blood flow to the brain, sometimes damage mental function and environmental factors after birth that are linked to mental challenge include severe emotional distress [5, 15].

Reporting on the characteristics of the mildly mentally challenged children (MMCC), Zindi and Makotore [16] resonate that;

In this group, it is sometimes difficult to tell exactly whether one is actually mentally challenged as such persons in most cases exhibit almost similar behavioural patterns as anybody else. It is only when signs such as learning difficulties, depression, withdrawal and general slow pace of intellectual development are observed that one begins to categorise them as mildly mentally challenged. For this group, integration with other children in the classroom is recommended as long as slight adjustments are made for their individual learning needs [1].

Thus, from the foregoing, mildly mentally-challenged children (MMCC) fall on one end of the continuum of mental challenge while the profoundly mentally challenged children (PMCC) fall on the other. Mpofo [11] further clarify that the mildly mentally-

challenged are individuals with an average IQ score of 55-70. The current study, thus, sought to explore the attitudes of MPSPs towards the inclusion of these children (mildly mentally challenged children) in mainstream classes in Hwange district.

The Concept 'Inclusive education'

The concept of 'inclusive education' is generally quite fluid in meaning; and is often used but largely misunderstood by many, including those in the field of education [17, 18]. Essentially, the concept is used by different people differently depending on the model of discussion, a point which was alluded to by Dean [19] when he pointed out that "the term inclusive education can have a variety of interpretations; depending on the perspective it is being considered'. Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by the mainstream schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school. Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programs and activities so that all students, including those with special learning needs, interact, learn and participate together [20].

The Warnock Report [21] cited in Beveridge [22] attempts to identify some basic forms of educational inclusion, namely, locational, social and functional; which may also be considered as being on a continuum from low to high level of inclusion respectively. The report views:

- '**locational inclusion**' as a situation where special units are set up in educational settings within mainstream schools or at its lowest level where special and ordinary schools share the same site or location
- '**social inclusion**' as a situation where pupils attending a special class are actively involved in school related activities with mainstream pupils; such as eating, playing and consorting with mainstream pupils and possibly share organized out-of play activities
- '**functional inclusion**' as a situation where the locational and social integration of pupils with special needs with their peers from the mainstream school and/or class leads to joint participation in educational and other programmes.

Hardman *et al.* (ibid) are of the view that "inclusion entails the effective placement of individuals with disabilities into natural settings, such as in the home, school or community alongside their mainstream peers" (p52). Inclusion has also been largely viewed as an integrative approach in which individuals with disabilities and or other special needs conditions are given equal opportunities in different social settings within the community with their mainstream peers [15]. The Integration Education Audit Commission [6]

says that inclusion in education is generally used as a collective term referring to strategic attempts to avoid the segregated and isolated education of students with special learning needs. In the school setting, inclusive education, therefore, allows children with special educational needs to be taken on board in many of similar activities and being educated in similar ways with their peers to the maximum extent possible [20].

Thus, Mushoriwa [23] further explains that the simple placement of children with special educational needs into regular schools is incomplete to warrant effective educational inclusion. He contends that such a view is somehow restricted since it ignores important issues relating to resources, facilities and acceptability which are critical for meaningful and successful inclusion. Following the above arguments, educational inclusion, thus, suggests securing appropriate opportunities for learning which result from full and effective participation and involvement of all pupils in the learning process. This view implies that educational inclusion is more than physical placement, it should also be concerned with provision of equal educational opportunities to all children thereby allowing for development and academic achievements by all children (Integration Education Audit Commission, *ibid*). From their experience with inclusive educational settings, the researchers are of the view that most inclusive schools particularly in developing countries like Zimbabwe largely fall short of this criterion if the current inclusive practices were to be objectively evaluated.

The following is an array of some of the more important factors that justify inclusive education:

- All children have equal access to educational opportunities
- All children learn alongside their same-age peers
- The focus of education is on the child's abilities, not disabilities
- Children become accepting and understanding of one another's abilities, talents, personalities, needs and differences
- Meaningful relationships and friendships develop as students spend quality time with one another
- Students develop confidence in their ability to interact with one another and the world around them
- Teachers in inclusive schools are generally highly trained and skilled at delivering appropriate, student-centered curriculum through differentiated activities according to ability level
- In addition to the classroom teacher, children with special learning needs can be supported by special education teachers, para-professionals, and specialists such as Speech/Language Therapists.
- Various resources and assistive technologies are available to students in inclusive schools in an effort to reach and teach all learners

- Inclusive schools value input and participation from the whole community, not just students; as the contribution of everyone is welcome [11].

With these and many other benefits of inclusive education in mind, the current study, therefore, sought to practically explore the attitudes of MPSPs towards the inclusion of MMCC in selected Zimbabwean schools.

A glimpse at previous findings on mainstream pupils' attitudes towards inclusive education

Previous studies including those conducted in Zimbabwe have revealed mixed attitudes by teachers, pupils and society in general towards the inclusion of children with SLNs in mainstream classes. For example, one of the major arguments against inclusive education is that not only does inclusion interfere with the learning of mainstream children; but also that inclusion accentuates or heightens the children's disabilities as some of the children will have problems in performing some of the activities set for and undertaken by mainstream classes [11]. Berge and Berge [24] found in the United States of America that children with disabilities who had been integrated in regular schools were sometimes bullied and scorned by mainstream pupils while Reezig and Jan Pul [25] cited in Booth and Ainsow [25] found in the Netherlands that many children who had been included in regular classes wanted to go back to their special schools after suffering stigmatization and isolation.

However, Peresuh [3] and Mushoriwa and Gasva [4] in related studies conducted in Zimbabwe, found that the subjects were generally accepting to the inclusion of children with mild disabilities. In the same vein, Zindi (*ibid*) also found that the majority of mainstream children in Zimbabwe did not mind being in the same class or school with peers with mild disabilities while Clark *et al.* [26] and Florian *et al.* [7] found in Britain that the majority of mainstream secondary school pupils generally had positive attitudes towards the inclusion of mildly disabled children in regular schools and classes. Perles' [27] study in some parts of Europe also revealed a more progressive view of inclusive education by concluding that "In a broader sense, students who are taught in an inclusive setting are more likely to build a society that is accepting of differences and able to respect people from diverse backgrounds in society".

Thus, the researchers noted that the issue of inclusion in education is still fraught with some controversies, hence, given these somewhat conflicting research findings in Zimbabwe, and perhaps relevant to other countries, the researchers found it pertinent to conduct the current study in order to come up with findings that will close some knowledge gap and give a better understanding of the extent to which inclusion is acceptable to primary school children who are directly

involved in inclusive classroom settings with mildly mentally challenged children.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study adopted the survey approach within the qualitative research framework in which a case study design was used. The case study was mainly considered to be appropriate on the basis that it observes phenomena in real contexts, and recognizes that context is a powerful determinant of day to day processes and activities, as well as their causes and effects [28]. In this regard; the case of two primary schools where the attitudes of selected Grade seven mainstream pupils towards the inclusion of mildly mentally challenged children (MMCC) was considered.

A population, which is 'any group of individuals that have one or more characteristics in common that are of interest to the researcher and from whom a sample will be selected for research [29, 30] comprised of grade seven pupils in two mainstream primary schools. From this population, a sample of 50 (N=50) Grade seven pupils from the two schools in Hwange District of Matabeleland North Province in Zimbabwe was used to accomplish the study. Simple random sampling technique within the probability sampling methodology was used in coming up with the participants of the study. Calsey and Kumar [30] cited in Creswell [31] note that the purpose of sampling is generally to make a research study feasible and to economize on the resources that are needed to collect and analyse research data, hence, for the current study, a sample of only 50 participants was considered; and was taken to be representative of the larger population.

A Questionnaire that was developed and used in related previous studies e.g. by [10, 3, 4] was adapted and modified before use as the research instrument to gather data from the participants. The Questionnaire was found appropriate in consistency with Punch [32] who contends that it promotes anonymity among participants, considering the sensitive and personal nature of the topic under investigation. Thus, anonymity was required so that subjects (i.e. grade seven mainstream pupils) could provide information pertaining to their attitudes freely and honestly. The use of the Questionnaire also enabled the researchers to collect data from a fairly large number of subjects within a short period of time, which was the case with mainstream pupils in this study. Data were qualitatively analysed as percentages were used to report research findings, which were then interpreted to become more meaningful to the consumers of the study.

STUDY FINDINGS

Respondents were required to indicate their attitudes by ticking Agree (A), Undecided (U) or Disagree (D) and data obtained from the study were analysed per attitude statement. The analysis of data was, therefore, done item by item, which gave the

advantage of observing the specific aspects of mainstream primary school pupils (MPSPs)' attitudes towards the inclusion of mildly mentally-challenged children (MMCC) in mainstream classes. In this regard, the respondents were, therefore, given the opportunity to express through specific attitudinal items whether they were either in favour of or against inclusive education. The agree (A) responses were taken to mean positive attitudes, while disagree (D) responses were taken to mean negative responses and the undecided (U) responses were taken to mean a neutral position regarding the problem under study. Of the 50 participants (N=50), a total 27 (54%) of them were male while 23 (46%) of them were female pupils. A total 33 (66%) of them were aged from 11-12, while 17 (34%) were aged 13-14 years. Thus, all in all, 10 attitude statements were used to explore the different attitudes of primary school pupils towards the inclusion of MMCC in Hwange district of Matabeleland north province in Zimbabwe.

Item 1 sought to find out if mainstream pupils viewed MMCC in their class just like any other peers. A total of 41 (82%) said that they did, 2 (4%) said they viewed them differently while 7 (14%) were undecided. The researchers deduced that despite intellectual differences, the majority (82%) of mainstream pupils generally had accepting attitudes towards the inclusion of MMCC as they viewed them just like any other peers.

In item 2, respondents were required to indicate whether they had no problems learning together with MMCC. Regarding this, 43 (86%) of the respondents said they had no problem, only 1 (2%) had a problem while 6 (12%) were undecided. The researchers noted that in consistency with Zindi's [1] findings, the majority (86%) of the respondents had positive attitudes as they had no problem learning together with MMCC.

Item 3 required that respondents indicate whether they had problems sharing learning resources such as textbooks and other learning materials with MMCC. As many as 45 (90%) of the respondents said that they had no problems at all while only 5 (10%) were undecided about it. Thus, the majority (90%) who had accepting attitudes towards sharing resources with MMCC argued that some of these children were capable of benefiting from learning in inclusive settings as some of them had something they could do better than mainstream pupils. This included performing better in creative subjects like Art and Craft, which the mainstream pupils could also benefit from.

Item 4 asked respondents if they mind playing with MMCC at school. All (100%) indicated that they had no problem playing with their peers with mild mental challenge; arguing that in essence, they were peers in and outside the classroom. One mainstream

pupil indicated that "*After all, we enjoy playing in large numbers so why exclude others*". This showed that children are generally not segregative on the basis of condition when playing; which the researchers noted to be consistent with findings by Mpofu's [33] of general social acceptance of individuals with mild to moderate disabilities in Zimbabwe.

Item 5 required subjects to indicate whether or not they liked assisting MMCC with their academic work. A total 47 (94%) expressed enormous acceptance, while only 3 (6%) were undecided. One mainstream pupil vehemently expressed that:

Why would I not assist any of my peers in school work when I also expect to be assisted at some point? Even those who are mildly mentally challenged and are slow; need our assistance in order to catch up with everyone in class".

This revealed to the researchers that the majority (94%) of MPSPs were generally free to assist each other in school work including assisting their peers with mild mental challenge even when they know that they are somehow slow in their academic work as noted by Zindi and Makotore [16].

In item 6, a sizeable number 33 (66%) were aware that any differential attitudes they display towards MMCC had negative effects on them, while only 5 (10%) said that they were unaware of that fact and a total 12 (24%) being undecided. The sizeable number (66%) that indicated awareness is probably in consistency with Salisbury *et al.*'s [2] findings that some of the children without disability generally feel a sense of responsibility towards their peers with disability, hence, possibly showed positive attitudes to their peers with mild mental challenge in order to promote their effective learning, growth and development.

In item 7, slightly more than half of the participants totaling 27 (54%) agreed that their attitudes towards MMCC were a result of their personal feelings towards them while the rest totaling 23 (46%) disagreed. The researchers deduced that the somehow balanced nature of these findings may be an indicator that mainstream pupils had fairly mixed attitudes on this attitude statement. The researchers considered this scenario to be possibly a result of the complexity of the issue of feelings since personal feelings are generally psychological in nature.

In item 8, as many as 44 (88%) of the mainstream pupils indicated that including a child with mild mental challenge in the mainstream class develops a stronger feeling in him or her of confidence in his or her ability, while the rest; totaling 6 (12%) were undecided. Thus, the majority (88%) of the respondents believed that feelings of confidence were possibly

because the MMCC, in essence, come to realise that they were just like anyone else in class.

In item 9, a total of 41 (82%) of the respondents indicated that including MMCC in the mainstream class helped them to adjust more rather than when they are excluded while the rest totaling only 9 (18%) of the respondents were undecided about the matter. The researchers noted that the majority (82%) were convinced that the inclusion of MMCC in the mainstream classes, therefore, helped them with regards their adjustment unlike when they are excluded.

Item 10, which basically required mainstream pupils to give their overall opinion regarding the inclusion of MMCC in mainstream classes, interestingly, had an overwhelming 48 (96%) majority indicating that they felt that their inclusion was a noble idea. The insignificant remainder 2 (4%) were undecided about the attitude statement. The researchers, therefore, deduced that the overwhelming majority (96%) were of the view that educational inclusion was quite a good idea which the education fraternity should uphold.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, the study concluded that the majority of mainstream primary school pupils (MPSPs) from the selected schools held positive attitudes towards the inclusion of mildly mentally-challenged children (MMCC) in mainstream classes. In addition, most of the mainstream pupils held positive attitudes towards inclusive education on the basis that they were essentially peers with MMCC, hence, felt they needed each other in and outside the classroom. The current findings were, therefore, closely related to the findings by Zindi [1], Peresuh [3], Mushoriwa and Gasva [8] where Zimbabwean school pupils generally showed accepting attitudes towards the inclusion of children with mild disabilities in mainstream classes. Consistent with the findings of the current study, the researchers noted that inclusive education is indeed a noble idea and positive paradigm shift in the educational fraternity considering that society in which the children live is itself inclusive in nature. Thus, the researchers found it appropriate to conclude that inclusive education is the way to go in modern educational practice.

Accordingly, the study recommended that:

- The Zimbabwean education system should ensure that mildly mentally challenged children (MMCC) as well as other children with mild disabilities are included in mainstream classes considering that the majority of mainstream learners had positive attitudes towards their inclusion;
- If these results are anything to go by and basing on research evidence from the current study which generally showed an accepting attitude towards the inclusion of MMCC in mainstream classes, then

policy makers and educationists in Zimbabwe and elsewhere have all the reason for effectively implementing the inclusive education policy in their broad national education policy framework.

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