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Exploring Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions on Social Inclusion Practices in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the findings from a contemporary study on the development of social inclusion practices in primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Recent inclusive education policy in Malaysia has increased schools' accountability for the inclusion of students with SEN into mainstream schools. This article draws on recent empirical evidence related to social interaction development among students with special educational needs and their typically developing peers thus providing an insight into Malaysia's efforts in developing an inclusive education system. The research findings will provide contemporary information on the social interaction development among SEN and mainstream pupils, as perceived by teachers and parents in the country. The article also highlights what is required to enhance the social interaction development of students with SEN and their more abled peers.

Keywords: Inclusive education, social inclusion, social interaction

INTRODUCTION

Developed and developing nations are progressing at different rates in their implementation of inclusive education

(Toran et al., 2016; Schwab et al., 2015; Schwab et al., 2013; Helldin et al., 2011; Lee, 2010). Inclusion for students with special needs into the mainstream classroom has become an international agenda since the 1990s (UNESCO, 1994; 1999; Smeets, 2007; Yeo & Teng, 2015).

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Malaysia advocated an inclusive education for all students as it is a signatory of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The Ministry of Education of Malaysia decided to integrate students with SEN into the national schools as part of a reform initiative to educate the community and increase awareness on the educational rights of children with SEN (Ali et al., 2006; Jelas & Ali, 2012). Schools now are responsible to accept students with SEN, and provide the facilities and support needed to meet their demands (Adams et al., 2016; Lee, 2010).

Inclusive education is seen as vital in assisting students with SEN to build self-confidence, social interaction and gaining greater social acceptance (Yasin et al., 2014). According to Allen and Cowdery (2005), the benefits of inclusive education are as follows: firstly; it is the fundamental right of students no matter what their abilities and disabilities are to equal education; secondly, the opportunity to develop students' social skills (Koegel et al., 2011) and thirdly; the access to quality education (Ruijs et al., 2010). Despite emerging inclusion policies and innovative implementation methods, Malaysia and other developing countries still face challenges in making all classrooms inclusive. For some time, it was assumed students with SEN were a better fit in special education schools. Consequently, many countries began to develop an education system consisting of different types of special schools catering to specific special needs. These special education schools were viewed as possessing various advantages such as trained special education teachers,

individualised instructions in classrooms, lower teacher-student ratio, and a curricular based on social and vocational development (Kavale & Forness, 2000). However, many of the presumed advantages came to be questioned as students with SEN were segregated from their typically developing peers.

There is relatively little evidence on inclusion in developing nations such as Malaysia (Lee, 2010). Successful inclusion means the student with special needs feels a part of the mainstream education classroom (Obiakor et al., 2012). *'Inclusive education relies heavily in theory and practise on successful social interactions among students across ability levels'* (Wilkerson et al., 2014; pg. 3). It is important, therefore, to focus on one factor that could influence the functioning of students with SEN, the presence of other able students in the same class. This factor could influence the effect of inclusive education. The involvement of the students' able peers may bring a whole new dimension of acceptance in classroom learning. Social inclusion of students with SEN remains an important aim in current times (Koster et al., 2007). An understanding of the social and communication process is a key factor in the inclusion of students with SEN.

As a contribution to building a more substantial knowledge base on social interaction development among SEN and mainstream pupils, as perceived by teachers and parents in Malaysia, this article reports the findings from a small-scale empirical inquiry of social inclusion practices in

Malaysia. The goals of this research study were:

1. Illuminate the extent students' social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils exist, as perceived by teachers.
2. Illuminate the extent students' social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils exist, as perceived by parents.

The article is structured as follows. Initially, key findings from the research literature on social inclusion will be outlined, explanation of the research methods follows before the findings are analysed and discussed. The findings from this research highlights the important role of students' able peers in further enhancing the social interaction development of the students with SEN.

SOCIAL INCLUSION MATTERS

Initiatives to increase social inclusion for students with SEN are a major step towards total inclusion rather than just complying with the rights of these students to be educated alongside their typical peers in mainstream schools. 'It is critical to understand teacher perceptions about social inclusion because these perceptions influence the quality of instruction, teacher efficacy in the inclusive setting, and attitudes toward students with SEN in the classroom (Gotshall & Stefanou, 2011). Teachers' perceptions on working with students with SEN in an inclusive classroom are complex (Berry, 2010). Teachers with a positive view often have confidence in their teaching ability and its effectiveness with SEN students, while those with a less favourable

perception tend to feel that inclusion is too demanding, and that students with SEN should be taught separately, where they can receive individual instruction (Berry, 2010). In understanding teachers' perceptions of social inclusion, schools can better provide teachers with training and support them when they implement inclusive teaching practices (Damore & Murray, 2009)'.

Parents often view social inclusion as the primary motive for placing children with SEN in a regular mainstream school (Koster et al., 2009, 2010). They hope that the physical presence of their children will lead to social inclusion and build positive relationships with their peers. Parents have expectation that an inclusion process for SEN children can increase opportunities for contact with peers, more social situations and friends, and better integration with the local community (de Boer et al., 2010). In view of the emphasis of social inclusion by parents, it is important to investigate if this aspect of social inclusion can really be achieved in Malaysia.

Generally, the term "students with special needs" refers to students with various (combinations of) impairments and/or difficulties in participating in education (Pijl et al., 2008). Currently, only 6% of students with special needs are in inclusive programs. 89% attend integrated programs, and the remaining 5% attend special education schools (Ministry of Education, 2013). Initiatives are being taken to harness the positive influence of able peers on inclusion of students with SEN (Ruijs et al., 2010). The introduction of the "Malaysia Education

Blueprint 2013–2025” in 2012 highlights the Malaysian Ministry of Education commitment towards an inclusive education model based on current national policy and international best practices. Among the 11 Key Shifts in the Education Blueprint for transformation and change is that by 2021 to 2025, 75% of students with SEN will be enrolled in inclusive programs, and every child with SEN will be provided with high-quality education by teachers equipped with basic understanding and knowledge of SEN.

The literature has consistently shown that inclusion of students with SEN in a mainstream school does not spontaneously lead to friendship and positive contacts with their typical counterparts (Guralnick et al., 2006; Guralnick et al., 2007). Research shows students with SEN in regular mainstream schools often find it difficult to participate socially. They are often neglected by their peers, low acceptance by their peers, have relatively few friendship circles compared to their typically developing peers (Pijl et al. 2008). Students with SEN often face an obstacle with social interaction (Louis & Isaac, 2016; Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). These students are often incapable to express their thoughts and feelings leading to hindered social interaction development (Wendelborg & Tøssebro, 2011). Physical integration of students with SEN is an important first step however, difficulties with peer relationship and a low social position at school among students with SEN might lead to maladjustment in the future (Rubin

& Fox, 2005).

A combination of (reciprocal) friendships with social interactions and peer acceptance are important strategies to facilitate social inclusion of students with SEN (Williams et al., 2005). Friendship is an important element to evaluate the success of a social inclusion process for students with SEN and their typically developing peers (Koster et al., 2009). De Monchy et al. (2004) does not define social inclusion but in terms of the social position of students with SEN in terms of the number of friends, being liked and performing a task together, and the degree to which they are bullied by classmates. Vaughn et al. (1998) describe the social interaction development for students with and without SEN by focusing on the friendship and friendship quality. Fryxell and Kennedy (1995) found students with SEN within a friendship network received more social support and had more social contacts with their able peers. Students without SEN are willing to form friendships with their peers with SEN (Hendrickson et al., 1996), as inclusion increased their personal growth, acceptance of others (Wiener & Tardif, 2004) and helped them find companionship (Staub et al., 1994).

Social interactions between students with SEN and their able peers is an essential part of a social inclusion process (Bossaert et al., 2013; Lambert & Frederickson, 2015). Students’ social interaction in this study means students with SEN acquiring sufficient sets of social skills close to their age group. These social skills may

be learned by copying others or with a guided instruction from able people. King et al. (1997) describes students with SEN as being particularly at risk since some of them are not physically, sensorial or intellectually capable to learn the social skills needed. Young children are relatively comfortable being in the same classroom with children who have special needs, although this may change as they get older. Questions frequently arise if students with SEN do have frequent interaction and forms friendships with their able peers (Frostdad et al., 2011). Social interaction among students with SEN and their able peers needs to be a guided process as these students often lack the knowledge how to interact and join in activities effectively (Wilkerson et al. 2014; pg. 55). A variety of classroom grouping arrangements such as teacher-centred or peer-mediated group instruction will help students with SEN join in classroom activities and assist in developing social interaction with their able peers.

Maximizing social interaction between able peers and students with SEN is a crucial aspect of inclusion as it might have a positive effect on the social-emotional development of the students with SEN (Koster et al., 2009). Hunt et al. (2003) found students with SEN improved their engagement in classroom activities and their academic skills due to their participation in conversations and interactions with their able peers. Ring and Travers (2005) revealed students without SEN also benefit from social inclusion as they have learned great patience, great tolerance and

great understanding. They also revealed interactions to ask for assistance, the use of verbal and non-verbal gestures with able peers were predominantly initiated by the students with SEN.

Peer acceptance is a frequently used term among researchers and of great importance for an inclusive education system (Doll et al., 2003). Pijl et al. (2008) emphasized the importance of peers' acceptance to the continued process of social inclusion. This includes students with SEN being able to connect and relate with their typically developing peers, make friends and ultimately be accepted by their peers. An important essence in the process of social inclusion is social acceptance or 'peer group socialisation' (Cambra & Silvestre, 2003). Considering the literature on the possible low social position of students with SEN if they face peer rejection and the risks involved if intervention are not made, acceptance by classmates of students with SEN is an important aim for this research.

The empirical evidence about social interaction patterns of students with SEN and their able peers in primary and secondary schools in Malaysia, and indeed any contemporary, independent evidence about social inclusion in Malaysia remains limited. The 'missing link' in the local literature is the development of social inclusion in three major themes – 1) students' friendship, 2) students' interaction and 3) students' acceptance by classmates. This study aims to provide an important link in Malaysia's effort towards developing an inclusive education system. The research findings

provide contemporary information of the extent social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils as perceived by teachers and parents in Malaysia.

METHOD

Study Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) where quantitative approach was supported by a qualitative approach to support the data. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 11). Collins et al. (2006) reasoned that mixed-methods research may enrich the research data by the interpretation of participant's experiences. The data collection process was done in two major phases. In the first phase, questionnaires were distributed to teachers and parents followed by the next phase where interviews with teachers and parents were conducted to gather their experiences.

Population and Sample

Ten Malaysian, government funded inclusive education primary and secondary schools located in the Klang Valley, Malaysia were selected for this study. The criteria for selection was based on the active running and implementation of inclusive education practices. Students in these schools are from the Learning Disabilities category which includes Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Minimal Retardation, Dyslexic, Down's Syndrome and Autistic students.

A survey instrument was administered

to 95 teachers and 104 parents. Only 68 parents' responses were selected for further data analysis based on their frequency of attending the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings with the teachers.

Instrumentation

The instrument used for this study consists of three major constructs concerning the extent social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils exists, as perceived by teachers and parents in: (i) students' friendship; (ii) students' interaction; (iii) students' acceptance by classmates. The instrument consists of 16 items using a five Point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Based on the teachers' and parents' responses, semi-structured interviews sessions were carried out on a later date with a sub sample of 6 teachers and 5 parents to explore further their experiences concerning social inclusion development in their schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaires were distributed to all selected teachers and parents. The questionnaires consist of a series of Likert-type questions which measures a particular trait, thus creating a Likert scale (Boone & Boone, 2012). Descriptive statistics consisting of mean scores were used to analyse data relating to the constructs concerning the extent social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils exists, as perceived by teachers and parents in: (i) students' friendship; (ii) students'

interaction; (iii) students' acceptance by classmates. The interpretation of the level of social inclusion was based on the following set of descriptors: 1.00–2.40 (low level of interaction); 2.41–3.80 (moderate); and 3.81–5.00 (high level of interaction). Data were analysed descriptively (i.e. they were ranked from the highest level to the lowest level) before proceeding with the interview data.

Semi-structured interviews was carried out with a sub sample of 6 teachers and 5 parents to explore further their experiences concerning social inclusion development in their schools. Teachers' and parents' response were coded Teacher 1 (T1) to Teacher 6 (T6) and Parent 1 (P1) to Parent 5 (P5) to address the issue of respondent confidentiality.

Research data from both the quantitative and qualitative methods were integrated (Creswell, 2003). Specific quotes from the interview were highlighted to support the

questionnaire data, adding more depth and richness to the study. The combination of two types of data provides a robust analysis required for a mixed methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

RESULTS

This section of the article outlines the extent social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils as perceived by teachers and parents in: (i) students' friendship; (ii) students' interaction; (iii) students' acceptance by classmates. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 depicting 95 teachers who completed the questionnaire.

As shown in Table 1, it is interesting to note from this table that majority of the teachers had a Bachelor Degree academic qualification, and teachers in this study were largely very experience with 30.5% had 6 to 8 years of experience working in the special education field.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of parents'

Table 1
Teachers' demographic information

Demographic	Variables	Percentage (%)	Total Respondents
Highest academic qualification	None	0	95
	Diploma	9.5	
	Bachelor Degree	78.9	
	Master Degree	9.5	
	Doctorate Degree	0	
	Others	11	
Worked in the special education field	Less than 3 years	21.1	95
	3 to 5 years	24.2	
	6 to 8 years	30.5	
	9 to 11 years	10.5	
	More than 12 years	13.7	
	Non-Applicable	0	

demographic information, in percentage. It is interesting to note from this table that the percentage of mothers (52.9%) and fathers (47.1%) that responded to the study were almost equal, their child has been studying

in this school for at least 1 to 4 years and parents were generally active attending their child’s IEP meeting / discussion in the school.

Table 2
Parents’ demographic information

Demographic	Variables	Percentage (%)	Total Respondents
Gender	Male	47.1	68
	Female	52.9	
Child been studying in this school	Less than 1 year	7.4	68
	1 to 2 years	32.4	
	3 to 4 years	39.7	
	5 to 6 years	20.6	
	None	0	
Attended the IEP meeting / discussion in the school	1 to 2 times	48.5	68
	3 to 4 times	29.4	
	5 to 6 times	7.3	
	More than 7 times	14.7	

Students’ Social Interaction among SEN and Mainstream Pupils as Perceived by Teachers

Table 3 below indicates which of the three students’ social interaction constructs was the most prevalent among teachers. Based on the overall mean, it can be observed that teachers (n=95) rated themselves highest on students’ “acceptance by classmates” (M= 3.76, SD= 0.25), followed by students’ “friendship” (M= 3.56, SD= 0.29), and students’ “interactions” (M= 3.55, SD= 0.23), respectively.

The mean score for students’ “acceptance by classmates” had the highest rating from teachers as it expressed acceptance between

mainstream students and SEN students during school recess time. This is reflected in item 11 (the student with special needs eats together with their classmates) of the questionnaire with a high mean of 3.96. Teachers also stated that there was close cooperation between mainstream students and SEN students in classroom activities as supported in item 10 (the student with special needs works together with their classmates on tasks) with a high mean 3.78. SEN students were also seen to enjoy schooling and this is reflected in item 16 (the student with special needs is happy attending school) with a high mean of 4.06

Table 3
Level of students' social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils as perceived by teachers

Construct	Mean	SD
Friendship	3.56	0.29
Interactions	3.55	0.23
Acceptance by classmates	3.76	0.25

Six teachers were further interviewed in order to determine teachers' perception on students' acceptance. Excerpts from the interview with four teachers 2 (T2), 3 (T3), 5 (T5) and 6 (T6) supports the quantitative data findings. These teachers confirm that there is a sense of acceptance between mainstream students and the SEN students as active interaction also happens during school recess time. Teachers also stated that there was close cooperation between mainstream students and SEN students in classroom activities.

"The mainstream students can accept the SEN students. They've become close, communicates with one another. Even during recess, they talk." (T2)

"A mainstream student helped to tie the shoelace of the SEN student who can't do it. Meaning the student can accept the SEN student wholeheartedly. If they can accept each other, it's easy for them to mingle." (T3)

"Mainstream students don't look down on the SEN students anymore." (T5)

"We also see a close cooperation in class." (T6)

Interestingly, two teachers (T4) and (T6) emphasized that mainstream students and their SEN peers are now comfortable within each other's company. They further elaborated:

"They've become friends. So, the SEN student that joins the inclusive class will not feel isolated because they have friends, they can mingle easily and talk. They are more comfortable in their friendship." (T4)

"Within themselves when we're training together at the field, they are cheerful and mingling with each other. Mainstream students started socializing with the SEN kids." (T6)

To summarize, the interviews with these teachers revealed teachers' perception that students with SEN are well accepted by their able peers in the schools studied.

Students' Social Interaction among SEN and mainstream Pupils as perceived by Parents

Based on the perceptions and responses provided by parents, the level of students'

social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils are presented in Table 4. Parents (n=68) rated themselves highest on the students' "acceptance by classmates" (M= 3.92, SD= 0.29), followed by students' "interactions" (M= 3.81, SD= 0.17), and students' "friendship" (M= 3.70, SD=0.20), respectively.

The mean score for students' "acceptance by classmates" had the highest rating among parents, who were happy that their child was being accepted by their peers. A positive indicator of this trend can be seen from the fact that their children now look forward to school every morning as reflected in item 15 (My child is happy attending school) in the questionnaire with a high mean of 4.24. Parents also stated that their children received assistance in classroom activities as shown in item 5 (my child are assisted by their classmates in lessons) with a high mean of 3.84 and item 12 (my child eats together with their classmates) with a high mean of 4.04.

Table 4
Level of students' social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils as perceived by parents

Construct	Mean	SD
Friendship	3.70	0.20
Interactions	3.81	0.17
Acceptance by classmates	3.92	0.29

Five parents were further interviewed in order to determine whether parents' perceived students' acceptance by classmates as the most vital element in the social inclusion process. Excerpts from the interview with

parents 2 (P2), 4 (P4), and 5 (P5) supports the quantitative data findings. Two parents expressed their joy in their child now being accepted by their peers. A positive sign about this aspect from every parent was the fact that their children now look forward to school every morning. Parent 4 (P4), and Parent 5 (P5) mentioned:

"He likes the school, he won't cry. Every day he goes to school." (P4)

"She feels comfortable and happy to go to school. Morning she gets up to go to school very fast. It's not difficult to wake her up. When she comes back home also she's happy. She always says her teacher and friends is good Mom." (P5)

In addition, a parent (P2) shared the fact that their child gets invitation to birthday parties by her mainstream peers:

"There was once her friend invited for a birthday party, it was a normal child. She was telling us about this normal friend that she had who was so nice to call her to come for a birthday function."

To conclude, parents expressed joy that their child with SEN are accepted by their able peers in school. Evidence of students' acceptance by classmates was clearly supported by the interviews above. They emphasise that their child's ability to connect with their peers constitutes an important index of social inclusion.

DISCUSSION

This study was directed to examining the extent of social interaction among SEN and mainstream pupils exists, as perceived by teachers and parents in Malaysia in three major areas: 1) students' friendship; 2) students' interaction; and 3) students' acceptance by classmates. The study further highlights what is required for this goal to be practically achieved.

The data from the descriptive analysis showed that teachers believed there is a sense of acceptance between mainstream students and the SEN students as active interaction also happens during school recess time. Close cooperation between mainstream students and SEN students in classroom activities was also evident. This finding is contrary to research on social acceptance where results consistently showed that students with special needs are less accepted than classmates without special needs (Wiener & Tardif, 2004). An inclusive approach towards SEN provided students with major social inclusion benefits. Hwang and Evans (2011) similarly revealed teachers indicated that students without disabilities learned to accept and understand people who were different from them. They also indicated that teachers too understood the difference between integrating and truly including students with disability. Pijl et al. (2008) also asserted that part of pupils' social development is influenced by their peer groups.

They emphasise the importance of peer acceptance for social inclusion, and define peer acceptance as the ability to interact

with peers, make friends with peers and be accepted by peers. According to Cambra and Silvestre (2003), one of the factors that plays an important role in social inclusion is 'peer group socialisation'. They consider social acceptance to be the essence of social inclusion. The approach presents both a challenge and opportunity for many educators (Ali et al., 2006).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The effect of inclusion classes on social interaction and academic achievement for students with SEN continues to produce positive results (Lampton, Graves & Ward, 2012). One of the components of successful inclusion is the degree to which the students with SEN feel a part of the mainstream classroom. The feeling of belonging has a positive effect on students' self-image and self-esteem, motivation to achieve, speed of adjustment to the larger classroom and new demands, general behaviour, and general level of achievement. The impact of the inclusion of students with SEN on the mainstream classroom is a major consideration for inclusion planners. Fostering positive social relationships between students with SEN and their able peers requires the preparation of able peers so that they understand the needs of their new classmates. Teachers may use many strategies to help students with SEN achieve a sense of belonging to the inclusive class.

A study by Calabrese, Patterson, Liu, Goodvin, and Hummel (2008) found

that the peer intervention program Circle of Friends Program (COFP) was very beneficial in increasing social interactions both inside and outside the classroom. The COFP paired students with SEN with able buddy. The COFP is not only a model for successful inclusion of students with SEN in and outside the classroom but has the potential to serve as a vehicle for facilitating school-wide inclusive educational practices. It was evident that the COFP helps foster a culture of acceptance through encouraging relationships between students with SEN and their able peers. Further research studies on social inclusion in Malaysia could explore the effect of peer intervention programs as a platform for effective inclusion processes. The involvement of more able peers may bring a whole new dimension of social inclusion and acceptance in classroom learning which is worth researching in more depth.

CONCLUSION

'Inclusive education obviously attempts to provide equal access to academic instruction and social opportunities for all students, regardless of ability levels' (Smith et al., 2015; pg. 18). This notion is supported by educators (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009) who assert that it is the human rights of students with special needs to attend mainstream schools and receive quality support. The goal is not to erase differences but to enable all students to learn within an educational community that validates and values individuality (Lusthaus et al., 1990).

This study revealed that placing students with SEN in an inclusion classroom was positively received by their able peers. They believed that inclusion benefits them in terms of increased acceptance, understanding, and tolerance of individual differences; a greater awareness and sensitivity to the needs of others; greater opportunities to have friendships with students with SEN; and an improved ability to deal with disability in their own lives (Salend, & Duhaney, 1999). Furthermore, successful social inclusion brings benefits with SEN students who begin to feel they are not secluded, that their peers do not view them differently, and thus feel more comfortable when relating to others in their age group, thereby increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence.

The sample of teachers and parents in this study is not representative but indicative and serve as a point of reference for educators and policy-makers interested in enhancing inclusive education practices in Malaysia. This study on the development of social inclusion attempts to fill a gap in knowledge. The views of teachers, parents provide interesting insights into how social inclusion development had taken place at the selected sample schools.

The MOE in Malaysia aspires to Wave 3 of its education blueprint so that by year 2021 to 2025, 75% of students with SEN will be enrolled in inclusive programs. However, policy makers in the pursuit of better education performance, largely fail to consider exactly how policy implementation influences student outcomes (Harris &

Jones, 2015). A policy with a sustained process of monitoring, assessment, and regulation (Harris et al., 2014) can result in an exceptional education system (Harris et al., 2014).

This study highlights how this goal maybe achieved and points towards the importance of social interactions between students with SEN and their able peers. An inclusive classroom cannot be successfully created without positive social inclusion outcome. The establishment of peer relationships between students with special needs and those without disabilities is viewed as an important outcome of school integration efforts (Frostad & Pijl, 2007). The main aim now is to make this happen.

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