

Discrimination in Education. Case Study: Southern Moldovan Schools

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Abstract

The goal of the current study is to examine the extent to which discrimination occurs in southern Moldovan schools and to identify its predominant forms in educational environments, attempting, based on the research findings, to foster recognition of discrimination and encourage the prioritisation of educational initiatives that address the most common forms of discrimination, to decrease their occurrence in schools. To that end, the article provides a theoretical framework regarding various forms, types and manifestations of discrimination and discusses a survey on the experiences of discrimination reported by secondary and high school students from different schools across Cahul District. The survey reveals that a large percentage of students, mostly girls, have been or are being subjected to discrimination in school on various grounds and at differing frequencies, although it tends to arise rarely for the majority of students. Other key findings show that physical appearance, age, and gender discrimination are the prevalent forms of discrimination encountered in southern Moldovan schools and that they are usually manifested verbally. This general overview of the incidence and nature of discrimination in the schools of Cahul district could enhance awareness among the teaching and administrative staff, guide their attention toward the most problematic areas of discrimination within their schools, and concentrate efforts on addressing these issues while promoting a more inclusive learning environment.

Keywords: discrimination, education, students, survey, southern Moldovan schools, Cahul district

1. INTRODUCTION

In modern education, there has been increased interest in individualising the learning process and making it accessible to everyone. Teachers are encouraged to differentiate their instruction, considering a range of aspects, including even students' personal preferences, to meet diverse learning needs and foster engagement as well as motivation. Undoubtedly, such a teaching-learning process is designed to mitigate educational inequalities and counteract all forms of discrimination. However, despite this general tendency in education, discrimination continues to occur in schools in various ways, acting as a barrier to learning against all the effort devoted to making learning effective and productive.

Since, in most cases, educational discrimination emerges subtly and is not immediately noticeable, it is important for teachers to be familiar with its various forms and manifestations in order to identify it early and respond appropriately, ensuring a supportive and inclusive classroom. In this regard, the first part of the article will describe the forms and types of discrimination, with special emphasis on those most often observed in school contexts, and will explore their behavioural manifestations. The second part of the article will deal with a survey carried out in Cahul district, Moldova, which reveals the perspectives and experiences of secondary and high school students regarding discrimination. By shedding light on the most common situations and triggers for discriminatory attitudes and actions in southern Moldovan schools, the survey results aim to help teachers properly address cases of discrimination that their students face.

1.1. Conceptualising Discrimination

The term ‘discrimination’ has been defined in multiple ways. The Convention on Discrimination in Education set forth a comprehensive definition of discrimination, describing it as “any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education” (UNESCO 1960). This definition, like others, references purpose or effect, suggesting that it covers both direct and indirect forms of discrimination (Clifford 2013: 438).

For a better understanding of the term, it is worth mentioning the definition developed by the European Court of Human Rights, which approaches discrimination from another perspective, stating that it “means treating differently, without an objective and reasonable justification, persons in relevantly similar situations” (2002). The definition suggests that there are three elements to consider when establishing discrimination: whether there is a difference in treatment, whether the difference in treatment can be objectively and reasonably justified and whether the individuals are subject to analogous situations in relevant respects (Clifford 2013: 438).

1.2. Forms and Types of Discrimination

Differential treatment can occur due to a range of identity-related characteristics, from which various forms of discrimination emerge. The most common forms of discrimination worldwide are on account of race, gender, age, religion and disability. These forms and others manifested in educational settings will be examined in what follows.

According to the Center for Civil Rights and Equal Access, which aims to ensure the right to education and career advancement based on merit, ability, and potential, without discrimination, *racial discrimination* refers to unequal treatment or harassment due to an individual’s colour or their actual or perceived racial identity (n.d.). In other words, it involves treating somebody unfavourably because of their traits commonly linked to race, including skin colour, hair texture or facial features (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission n.d.). Numerous sources interpret racial discrimination as referring to aspects of ethnic or national origin as well (Verhaeghe, Fernández-Reino, and Di Stasio 2004; United Nations 1965). Consequently, racial and *ethnic discrimination* are often treated as a single form of discrimination and are frequently grouped under the same category in statistical analyses (Kiersz et al. 2022; Crengle et al. 2012). However, they are not the same thing. Race typically involves classifying individuals, often according to physical traits. Ethnicity, by contrast, relates to cultural identity and expression, encompassing elements such as traditions, language, religion, and historical background associated with specific geographic regions. While race may be understood as a biologically inherited characteristic passed down through generations, ethnicity is shaped by cultural learning and social experience (Morin 2024; Bryce 2023).

A form of discrimination closely connected to ethnicity is *language-based discrimination*. It denotes discriminatory treatment directed toward an individual or a group of individuals on the grounds of their language, dialect or linguistic features such as accent (Ng 2007; Khan, Singh, and Amdhare 2019: 40). Despite the general tendency to protect and value linguistic diversity, there are instances when people experience differential treatment based on the association of their preferred language with a particular group, social class, or category. The preferred language frequently functions as a distinguishing marker of specific

ethnic groups (Khan, Singh, and Amdhare 2019: 40), given the strong connection between language or accent and a person's ethnic background, geographic origin, or ancestry (Hartman 1995: 64). Consequently, biased treatment based on accent or language often stems from the individual's ethnic origin, geographical background, or ancestry (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2024).

Age discrimination or *ageism* refers to prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination against individuals because of their age (Officer et al. 2016). Although ageism is rarely associated with younger generations, this form of discrimination is generally directed toward both older and younger people, occurring in the workplace, particularly against employees over forty, as well as in the classroom, where students of all ages may be affected (Khan, Singh, and Amdhare 2019: 40; Murphy 2015).

Religion is another factor that can lead to discrimination. *Religious discrimination* involves the unequal or prejudiced treatment of individuals due to their religious beliefs, feelings towards a specific religion, or association with someone affiliated with a particular religion or religious organisation (Khan, Singh, and Amdhare 2019: 40). The Office of Civil Rights, under the U.S. Department of Commerce, broadens the above definition by incorporating the term 'religious practices' alongside religious beliefs and by stating that religious practices "are not just those required by a church or other religious group, but include moral or ethical beliefs as to what is right and wrong that are sincerely held with the strength of traditional religious views" (n.d.). Accordingly, some beliefs may still be considered religious even if they are not shared or recognised by any religious group (U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Civil Rights n.d.). Moreover, religious discrimination may also arise when someone is unfairly treated based on their lack of religion or belief (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2020).

Gender discrimination refers to unequal or disadvantageous treatment of people on the grounds of their sex, gender identity, or gender expression, without inherently entailing any sexual aspect. It usually originates from a flawed and biased understanding of gender, including its expression and performance in social contexts (Stanford University, SHARE Title IX and Title VI Office n.d.). The Equality Act 2010 identifies three protected characteristics related to gender: gender reassignment, sex (man/woman) and sexual orientation (UK Government 2010). As far as the protected characteristic of sex is concerned, women and girls are most likely to face gender discrimination, often lacking the opportunities that men and boys commonly have in education, career and economic advancement, political influence, etc. (Khan, Singh, and Amdhare 2019: 50) and experiencing reduced autonomy in making decisions concerning their personal and family life (Fahy 2022). Regarding the other two protected characteristics, gender discrimination results in the restriction of the ways individuals define and express their identities, marginalising those who deviate from conventional views of gender (Stanford University, SHARE Title IX and Title VI Office n.d.).

Disability is another protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, which states that "a person has a disability if [s/he] has a physical or mental impairment, and [if] the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities" (UK Government 2010a). Despite the apparent narrowness of this definition, as it directly mentions only two types of impairment, it covers a broad spectrum of impairments that have significant and lasting negative effects on a person's daily life. For example, it includes visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech impairment, mobility impairment, etc., as well as hidden impairments that are not always immediately obvious, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and autism

(Hills 2017: 3). Since the term ‘disability’ is explained through the term ‘impairment,’ comprehending what ‘impairment’ means is essential. The Collins Dictionary defines ‘impairment’ as “a condition in which a part of a person’s mind or body is damaged or is not working properly” (Cambridge Dictionary 2024). Thus, impairment refers to a loss or deficiency at the organic or physiological level, a deviation from the normal bodily structure or function, which may lead to a specific type of disability, understood as a reduction or loss of ability (Khan, Singh, and Amdhare 2019: 65). For instance, when someone loses a leg because of an accident, this constitutes a physical impairment. The resulting inability to walk is the physical disability created by that impairment (ACC Institute of Human Services 2018).

People with disabilities are frequently subjected to biased treatment, discrimination and even social exclusion in various spheres of public life, including education, employment, and public services. *Disability discrimination* emerges when an individual is treated less favourably or offered fewer opportunities than others in comparable situations due to their disability (Australian Human Rights Commission n.d.). It may occur not only on account of a person’s actual physical or mental disability, known as *ordinary direct discrimination*, but also because of the perception that someone has such a disability, referred to as *direct discrimination by perception*, or because of their connection with a disabled person, called *direct discrimination by association* (Hawker 2020).

In addition to direct discrimination, there are five other main types of disability discrimination: indirect discrimination, failure to make reasonable adjustments, discrimination arising from disability, harassment, and victimisation. *Indirect discrimination* occurs when organisations, including educational institutions, implement conditions, rules, requirements, policies, or practices that apply to everyone, but which disadvantage disabled people and have a greater negative impact on them compared to individuals without disabilities (Equality and Human Rights Commission (2020a), Hills 2017: 7; Australian Human Rights Commission n.d.). *Failure to make reasonable adjustments* takes place when organisations do not fulfil their responsibility to ensure that disabled people have equal access to employment, education, and services as those without disabilities. If organisations do not make reasonable adjustments, disabled individuals can experience discrimination. *Discrimination arising from disability* refers to the unfair treatment of a person on the grounds of something related to their disability, such as the use of an assistance dog or time off for medical appointments. This is only relevant if the person who discriminated was aware of the disability or should have been aware. *Harassment* is when an individual is treated in a way that undermines their dignity and makes them feel humiliated, intimidated, offended, or degraded. For example, a disabled child is regularly subjected to verbal abuse and name-calling by peers at school as a result of their disability. *Victimisation* means treating people unjustly because they have filed a discrimination complaint or helped someone to make a discrimination claim (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2020a; Hills 2017: 8). Four of the aforementioned types of discrimination – specifically direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, harassment, and victimisation – are also applicable to other forms of discrimination, such as those based on race or gender (Hawker 2020).

1.3. Manifestations of Discrimination

The above description of the most common forms and types of discrimination primarily sheds light on the underlying causes and the circumstances in which discrimination occurs. Yet, for teachers to effectively identify discrimination among their students, it is necessary to devote careful attention to manifestations of discrimination.

Regardless of its form and type, discrimination can manifest through verbal and non-verbal hostility, avoidance of interaction or communication, aggressive approach behaviours, as well as the denial of fair access and opportunities or equal treatment. These are just a few examples; however, discriminatory behaviours can be classified into various categories:

- a) *overt* (direct) and *subtle, unconscious* (automatic), as distinguished by Ramiah et al. (2010: 85);
- b) *active* and *passive* – Cuddy (2006: 8-9) explains that active behaviours are overt, explicit, intense and confrontational, being carried out with deliberate effort to directly influence the target person (e.g., verbal harassment, active aggression, etc.), whereas passive behaviours are covert, indirect, less intense and avoidant, being conducted with less deliberate intention to discriminate against someone, but still resulting in harm to the individual affected (e.g., neglect, passive aggression, not providing service, etc.);
- c) verbal (e.g., insults, pejorative words, comments, subjective references), paraverbal (tone of voice and speech pacing can be used, either intentionally or unintentionally, to convey disapproval or dislike) and non-verbal (e.g., eye contact, gestures, avoidance), as pointed out by Corrington, Helb, and Tsang (2017). Negative verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal treatment may contribute to the creation of a hostile working or learning environment, and may therefore constitute discrimination (Ramiah et al. 2010: 94).

METHODOLOGY

To examine the level and nature of discrimination in educational institutions in southern Moldova, a survey was conducted. Data on the forms, types, and behavioural manifestations of discrimination occurring in the schools of Cahul district were collected through a sixteen-question questionnaire distributed to secondary and high school students from various schools located in the city of Cahul and the surrounding villages. For the sake of accurate results, primary school students were not required to complete the questionnaire because they might not have been familiar enough with the concept of discrimination and thus might have been unable to determine whether they had experienced it and identify its forms. The questionnaire comprises items related to the respondent's age, gender, ethnicity, and religion, as well as questions on the respondent's own experiences of being discriminated against.

105 students completed the questionnaire, and although the number is not impressive, the responses offer sufficient insight into the phenomenon of discrimination occurring in schools to increase teachers' awareness of the forms and types of discrimination manifested among their students, as well as to enable them to prevent discriminatory treatment, intervene at the appropriate moment and adopt suitable measures to address discrimination. On the other hand, the relatively small number of responses reveals that discrimination is still a sensitive subject, which is frequently avoided and not openly acknowledged.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, the questionnaire respondents are all secondary and high school students. More specifically, most of them (75%) are secondary school students. The age distribution of the students who participated in the survey is as follows: 3% are 12 years old, 38% are 13 years old, 23% are 14 years old, 10% are 15 years old, 12% are 16 years old, 5% are 17 years old, 8% are 18 years old and only 1% are 19 years old. Thus, a significant number of respondents are represented by early adolescents, who, despite being developmentally unprepared to fully understand the complexities and implications of discrimination, are often curious and open to discussing sensitive topics. Regarding gender,

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60% of the respondents are female and 40% are male, which means that the questionnaire results reflect both girls' and boys' perspectives and experiences related to discrimination in schools.

There are some more personal details that the students involved in the survey provided about themselves, which are important for interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions. One of these details is their ethnicity. 69% of respondents are Moldovan, followed by 19% who are Gagauz. Romanian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Russian ethnicities each make up 3% of the total, accounting for 12% collectively. This ethnic breakdown indicates that, although most students are Moldovans, they interact with children of various ethnic backgrounds and study in a culturally diverse environment, where ethnic and language-based discrimination may arise.

Another valuable detail for the present research refers to the students' religion. 56% of the respondents identified as Orthodox, 23% reported being Christians, without specifying a particular denomination, 3% indicated they are Seventh-Day Adventists, 3% stated they are Baptists, 1% are Jehovah's Witnesses, 5% described themselves as atheists or as not adhering to any religion, and 9% refused to answer the question. The fact that some students chose not to mention their religion can be interpreted in several ways: they may not wish to discuss their beliefs or disclose their religious affiliation, or they may lack a clear understanding of religion and thus be uncertain about their beliefs, or they might consider it an unimportant aspect of their lives. Nonetheless, the majority responded to the question, offering an overall picture of the unequal and diverse religious distribution of secondary and high school students in southern Moldova.

As far as disability is concerned, only 6 out of 105 students indicated that they have a specific disability. However, 3 of them stated that they have never faced prejudiced treatment in school. The other 3 students mentioned that they are rarely, often or always discriminated against, but only one of them is unfairly treated due to their disability. Two more respondents revealed that they experienced disability discrimination in the past, but now do not encounter such behaviour anymore.

Although discrimination on account of disability is relatively low among students, which is also attributable to the small number of disabled students, other forms of discrimination are reported by a greater number of students. According to the questionnaire results, 45% of the respondents (28% girls and 17% boys) indicated being subjected to discrimination in school at varying frequencies, ranging from occasional to constant. However, the percentage of students who are often and always discriminated against (10%) is much lower than that of the respondents who rarely face discriminatory treatment (35%). The unfavourable treatment experienced by the students occurs based on various identity-related characteristics, as illustrated in the chart below.

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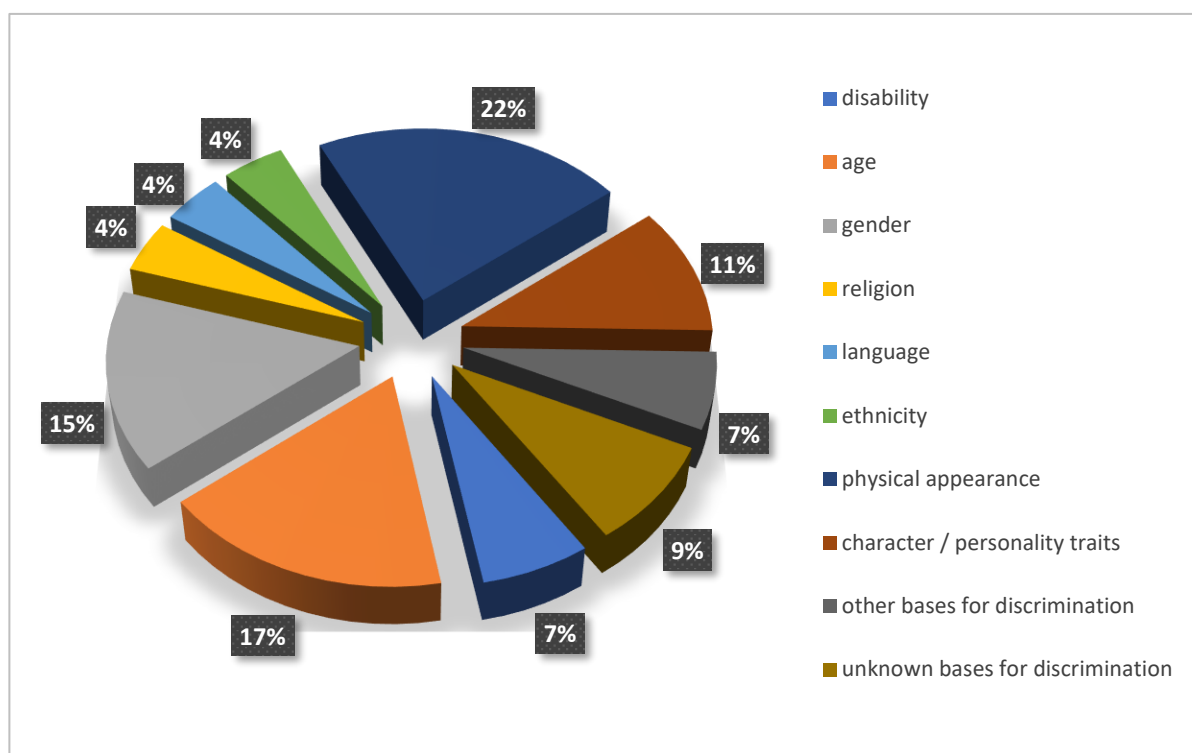


Figure 1. Identity-related characteristics that are the basis for discrimination in educational institutions in southern Moldova

Surprisingly, the largest percentage in the chart corresponds to physical appearance discrimination. 22% of the respondents (13% girls and 9% boys) acknowledged that they have been or are being discriminated against because of different physical features, particularly height and weight. Physical appearance is not one of the protected characteristics that anti-discriminatory laws or equality acts usually recognise, unless it relates to attributes such as gender, race, or disability, which are explicitly covered. Nevertheless, it is unlawful to treat someone unfairly based on their physical appearance (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission n.d.).

The next percentage is represented by age discrimination. 17% of the students, the majority of whom are girls, reported being occasionally subjected to unequal treatment on account of their age. Most of them mentioned that it is other students, not their classmates or adults they interact with, who discriminate against them. Interpreting this finding, one should consider that the age discrimination faced by the respondents is not the ageism widely experienced by most young people, who deal with various negative stereotypes because they fail to meet the high expectations of adult society (University of Northampton 2022). On the other hand, it is important to bear in mind that, as revealed by the questionnaire results, the respondents are not unfavourably treated by their peers, but rather by other students who are likely to hold common stereotypes describing younger students as less mature, naive, annoying, or overly eager to please.

Following closely behind age discrimination is gender discrimination. 15% of the students – both girls and boys, with no significant numerical difference between them – stated that they were or are discriminated against by their classmates or other students based

on their gender, with varying regularity. It is worth noting that most of them are thirteen or fourteen years old, which corresponds to early adolescence. When children enter this stage, they begin to assume new gender roles related to femininity and masculinity, typically reinforcing traditional gender norms associated with being women or men. As society imposes different expectations on girls and boys, children adopt different, unequal gender attitudes, which become more pronounced in early adolescence and manifest in various ways, including discriminatory behaviours (WHO 2017).

Other identity-related characteristics that form the basis for discrimination in the schools of Cahul district affect a smaller number of students. Among them, the highest percentage (11%), which consists predominantly of girls, is ascribed to character and personality traits. The majority of respondents did not mention the exact feature for which they are discriminated, whereas some of them attributed the prejudiced treatment to their being too friendly or outgoing.

Subsequently, a slightly lower rate (9%) is represented by unknown bases for discrimination. Four girls indicated that they do not know the underlying reason for being unequally treated. Three of them were or are rarely subjected to discrimination by their classmates. As such occurrences are infrequent, it is not surprising that they may not fully understand why they are discriminated against. Moreover, this lack of understanding may stem from the fact that the respondents under discussion are early adolescents who, confronted with the challenges of a new developmental period marked by significant changes and discoveries, have limited experience in dealing with social issues like discrimination and are in the process of learning to manage their identities and relationships.

Ethnicity, language and religion are reported to trigger discrimination by only a few students (4% each). Taking into account the previously described ethnic and religious diversity of the survey participants, who represent, to a certain degree, the secondary and high school students in southern Moldova, a low level of discrimination based on the three aforementioned grounds reveals the effectiveness of school policies and the valuable contribution of the teachers' effort aimed at promoting religious, ethnic and language-based inclusion.

In addition to the distribution of different forms of discrimination encountered in educational institutions, the information gathered from the questionnaire about how discriminatory treatment manifests among students can also be useful to teaching and administrative staff in identifying inequalities, addressing them appropriately and improving the learning environment. Regarding the nature of the discriminatory behaviours towards the respondents, 79% of them disclosed being verbally discriminated against (through name-calling, uncensored language, teasing, etc.), 25% stated being excluded from their group of friends, 21% indicated being ignored, 7% mentioned being isolated from the other students, and 6% revealed being victims of physical violence, including beating and kicking. The general overview of the manifestations of discrimination in schools provided by the questionnaire can direct teachers' attention to the most common types of discriminatory behaviours, while not overlooking the others, and raise awareness of their essential role in educating students to avoid unequal treatment of others on any basis and to value respectful, inclusive relationships.

Concerning the type of discrimination, it should be emphasised that the respondents pointed only to direct discrimination and verbal harassment. This does not necessarily mean that the other types of discrimination described in the present article are not experienced in

schools, but rather that the students are unfamiliar with certain types of discrimination and therefore do not perceive some behaviours as discriminatory.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the research findings, it can be concluded that a concerning percentage of students have experienced or are experiencing discrimination with varying regularity, most commonly at a low frequency. The study also indicates that the predominant forms of discrimination in southern Moldovan schools are based on physical appearance, age and gender. To mitigate the occurrence of these forms of discrimination, school administrators and teachers should take educational measures, such as organising anti-discrimination workshops and seminars, and using more content that addresses diversity during their lessons, including exercises where students explore real-life situations involving different forms of discrimination to build empathy and awareness. Particular attention should be devoted to the fact that girls who reported being unfairly treated on various grounds outnumber boys. Since no clear explanation for the observed disparity is evident, further research should be conducted to uncover the underlying causes.

Another conclusion drawn from the study pertains to the ways in which discrimination manifests within the educational environment. Most respondents indicated that they were subject to verbal discriminatory behaviours usually displayed by their classmates or other children. Many students overlook the detrimental impact of negative verbal treatment and apply it with little reluctance, disregarding its discriminatory nature. Consequently, students should be introduced to the entire spectrum of discrimination, encompassing all its forms and manifestations, to recognise them and take steps to avoid them. The necessity of engaging students in understanding the complexity of discrimination is even more important during early adolescence, when they have insufficient experience in confronting social issues, and are not fully aware of the far-reaching consequences of their behaviour.

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