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**EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF STUDENT REFLECTIONS IN PEACE EDUCATION CLASSROOM TAUGHT WITH PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT**

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Evaluation, Quality Student Reflections, Peace Education Classroom, Pedagogy & Discomfort	<p>This study aimed to explore the depth and/or quality level of the students' responses when they responded critically in their written reflections in a peace education classroom that incorporated a pedagogy of discomfort. In this empirical study, featuring reflections from 43 undergraduate students in Sialkot, Pakistan, the authors seek to understand how reflections-based pedagogical methods that affect critical thinking ability, self-awareness, cultural sensitivity and understanding of society issues. Thus, the study uses qualitative methods to assess students' critical reflections from provocation pedagogy experience. Overall, students showed greater critical thinking and self-reflection as their perception of distinct identity were questioned. Nevertheless, the level of depth and sophistication in reflections differed across students. However, the study points to how a pedagogy of discomfort can arguably result in meaningful responses for engaging with issues such as those related above. In this regard, some discussion is presented upon the barriers &amp; limitations to implementing these approaches. The findings add to an important dialogue around what works in peace education activities globally.</p>  <p>2024 Journal of Social Research Development</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

The peace education has become an essential discipline that imparts students with knowledge, skills and attitudes for fostering the understanding, empathy and conflict resolution skills among students (Anderson & Nesterova, 2024). Living in the world that, despite its numerous points of connection, continues to be increasingly divided, calls for as much peace-mindedness and practice we can get. Quite the contrary, conventional means of peace education usually do not work well at entrenched

attitudes and prejudices that serve to intensify societal conflicts. The pursuit of peace education is aimed at providing individuals the understanding and abilities and manners through which they can mitigate conflict in a peaceful way (Ndwandwe, 2024). It includes many things from human rights, socio cultural diversity and equity (Saveljeva & Park, 2024). Over time, the field expanded to focus on both personal and structural violence, acknowledging that individual actions take part within entire system support. Megan Boler (1999), introducing concept of pedagogy of discomfort, describes a radical method to education where the students are taken out of their comfort zones on purpose. The technique is designed to challenge these entrenched modes of thinking by juxtaposing presumptions against another views. One way to arouse critical reflection & possible transformative learning experiences is to create a space of discomfort, skillfully controlled by the educator (Porto & Zembylas, 2024).

The reflection is an essential element in the deeper learning process and as well a stage of personal development (Goumaa & Anderson, 2024). Within the fields of peace education and pedagogy of discomfort, we use reflections as a way for holding student writing on complex social justice topics as they navigate through peace education and pedagogy of discomfort classrooms. Moreover, the reflection is a significant way we can make learning of students more meaningful for facilitating the personal development (Tilakaratna & Szenes, 2024). Reflections show how learners change their mind-set, feelings or practices over time (Rolfe & Freshwater, 2020). Reflection is a central tool of peace education and the pedagogy of discomfort: reflections become an opportunity for students to make sense out recent difficult encounters with community, or social justice issues (Fenton & Ross, 2020). The purpose of this study is to assess the quality of student reflections in the peace education classroom that uses the pedagogy of discomfort. In this linking, we believe that by looking at these dimensions, this study helps to improve our understanding of whether a pedagogy of discomfort is effective in peace education contexts and how students experience different kinds of challenging educational experiences. Thus, the study generally answers the following types of questions. The main research question is: How do students experience and reflect upon the provocation pedagogy? Moreover, it explores:

1. What are the patterns in student reflections about district identity?
2. How well, student reflections explain critical thinking, self-reflection & cultural sensitivity?

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Peace education has been defined as the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to donate to culture that rejects violence (Dabula, 2024; Ndwandwe, 2024; Saveljeva & Park, 2024). Central to its content is fostering of peace literacy, learning and action related to non-violent dispute resolution skills, and honing attitudes that facilitate the framework for both prizing respectfulness (non-coercive diplomatic) & robust peaceful intentions in line with the social justice goals. The peace education practices can include conflict resolution workshops, education toward understanding war and peace, and preventing wars within training of prospective political leaders through lessons on violent armed combat, and teaching youth handwork, which is the part of proper behaviour in some societies (Bajaj, 2008a; Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2010; Bajaj & Hantzopoulos, 2016; Harris & Morrison, 2013). Regarding the negative and positive peace, Reardon (2000) stresses the

importance of both the negative peace (violence prevented, achieved by arms control ostensibly underwritten by implicit threat) and positive peace (absence of social injustice). The students must be critically engaged in their analysis of social structures and power relations at play. Thus, [Bajaj \(2008b\)](#) claims that peace education must begin with studying local realities, always intertwined with global issues.

Experiential learning in peace education has emerged as an important concept from various recent studies ([Head, 2019](#)). [Kester and Cremin \(2017\)](#) show how participatory approaches can stimulate student engagement with peace concepts as well as their practical manifestations in the real world. However, challenges persist in ability to implement programs sensitive to diverse cultural contexts and measure the durable effects of peace education initiatives. As [Boyer \(1999\)](#) has articulated, the pedagogy of discomfort is based on the understanding that addressing our comfort level can be the stepping stone to transformational learning. The approach is rooted in critical pedagogy literature with a foundation in [Freire's \(1970\)](#) notion of conscientization, that involves creating awareness and understanding of factors contributing to social injustices. In addition, [Zembylas and McGlynn \(2012\)](#) suggest that using a pedagogy of discomfort is an important starting point to address issues around identity, privilege, and oppression. Challenging students with lookouts that oppose their own can, in turn, prompt process of critical self-reflection and change beliefs and attitudes. Yet critics note that care should be taken not to reify structural, unequal power relations within such “pedagogy of discomfort” is implemented and efforts must be made to avoid causing undue the emotional distress ([Zembylas, 2015](#)).

They stress the need for establishing a caring classroom community and giving students the needed scaffolding to make the sense of what's happening, or they will “have shut down long before that discussion point.” The reflection is a key piece to deep learning in higher education and is widely acknowledged. [Based on Schön's \(1983\)](#) reflective practice, pedagogical choices across disciplines have been shaped to examine experiences and assumptions critically. According to transformative learning theory, [Mezirow \(2009\)](#) explains that the critical reflection is a catalyst for the perspective transformation. The process of reflection involves questioning and potentially revising one's frame of reference—this closely aligns with the goals of the pedagogy of discomfort. While the support and assessment of student reflections have been the subject of recent studies, there are myriad ways to encourage reflective writing. For instance, [Nguyen \(2014\)](#) provide exemplifications of structured reflection prompts enabling students to deepen their reflections and thereby improve quality. [Ryan \(2013\)](#) has proposed an assessment framework of reflective writing with dimensions such as analysis, emotion, and orientation to the future which is part of proper behaviour in some societies. Pakistani education is stalled by cultural identity, subject deeply rooted in the country's complex history and multiple ethnicities.

[Durrani and Dunne \(2010\)](#) note how the national curriculum has at times served to project an idea of one type of nationality, often in ways that reflected little understanding, regard for other cultural forms found within Pakistan. In areas like Sialkot, the influence of cultural identity on education is more pronounced due to such regions having local identities that are distinguishable within larger national context. As per [Lall \(2008\)](#), education has key role in fostering cross-cultural empathy and

resisting reductive national identity. Still, it is undeniably controversial to implement pedagogies that disrupt the accepted account of culture. Tensions can arise when educational philosophies are in opposition to traditional cultural values or religious beliefs (Muhammad & Brett, 2015, 2019, 2020). It is in this light that the requirement for territorially/culturally endorsed peace teaching and pedagogy of discomfort arises. In summary, the literature suggests that peace education and pedagogy of discomfort may help to develop critical thinking and intercultural understanding. But at the same time, it underscores the complexities regarding carrying out these actions, especially under culturally diverse conditions such as in Pakistan. Therefore, the study develops insights by examining students' reflections on provocative pedagogical practices regarding cultural identity in Sialkot, Pakistan.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative case study research design, this study examines quality of student reflections in a peace education classroom which incorporated pedagogy of discomfort (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2018). The purposes of using qualitative methods in study were to identify and document the nuanced and subjective experiences of students as they interacted with these challenging pedagogical practices (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Marshall et al., 2022). While grounded in theory, this research design is interpretivist and exploratory by nature, exploring themes that emerge from the students reflective writing outputs without imposing a priori categories (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This study is based on 43 undergraduate students who took the class of peace education at a university in Sialkot. The case of Sialkot is very significant because it registers a kind of cultural "otherness" within Pakistan, which appears to open space for questions regarding district identity and cultural consciousness. Its multicultural richness and general lingual diversity that extends to its unique to Punjabi dialect strengthens the pillars of identity in this land. Similarly, the celebrated sport goods and surgical instruments industries of Sialkot evolve in a space with its own political economy that contributes to composition of local society. In this regard, these special features most assuredly affect how students see their district.

By the same notion, to understand what makes Sialkot unique sheds light on how students resonate with an interpretive framework like peace education while they wrestle through confronting these assumptions. Thus, our peace education course was crafted to utilize the pedagogy of the discomfort, encouraging the students to face/introspect uncomfortable truths about themselves as well as their relationship(s) to issues they thought they knew at a district level. The course instructor, an expert in peace education methodologies, moderated discussions & activities that were designed to provoke critical thinking and self-reflection. In this study, the primary source of data was student reflective writings. After a few class sessions of provocation pedagogy, the students were asked to complete structured reflection assignments. For our reflective assignments we used prompts based on Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988). Reflection assignments were gathered throughout the semester to allow for the longitudinal look at students' experiences with what Bolter (1999) called pedagogy of discomfort. Thus, this approach makes it easier to look at the possible developments in the students' reflective skills and comprehension over time. Activities were facilitated to allow critical reflection through small group discussion and themes emerged from the reflective comments of the individual student responsiveness.

These steps were part of the analysis process: Data were analysed for this study by using the Miles, Huberman and Saldana model of qualitative data analysis backed by NVivo software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Miles et al., 2020). The data condensation, data display and conclusion drawing/verification went on simultaneously in this process. First, student reflections (N = 43) were imported in NVivo software for the organization and coding. Second, the data reduction process consisted of reading all reflections and developing initial codes. Third, we created data displays via the use of NVivo software's visualization tools (matrices & networks) to inter-link data items among ourselves as authors. Finally, results were assembled using pattern coding. This iterative process allowed us to do deep dive into student reflections on experience with pedagogy of discomfort (Miles et al., 2020). Students were informed that they could withdraw from the study without any consequences; thus, participation in study was voluntary. All participants provided informed consent prior to starting data collection. For this, they were provided detailed description of study's purpose and how study results would be scattered (Bentele & Herzog, 2023). To protect participant data, raw material was first anonymized at analysis & after participants were given pseudonyms in presentations of study's findings (Ryen, 2021).

## RESULTS OF STUDY

A complex picture capturing a range of experiences, emotions and insights emerged from the data analysis of 43 student reflections. The students questioned their long-held beliefs about Sialkot's identity and culture while interacting with the pedagogy of discomfort incorporated in the peace education classroom in ways that ranged from superficial to critically informed and self-reflective way in the study.

### Detailed Analysis of Reflections

The students provided accounts of their personal experiences with pedagogy of discomfort. Several described particular occasions when teacher made them think deeply about Sialkot. One student wrote: "Our teacher initially used shock to teach about the district identity. He just gave us strange statistics and some anecdotes about the Sialkot and its cultural diversity during this semester long course." Still, another wrote, "The instructor sensationally pointed towards the different accents and dialects of language in Sialkot." Such descriptions tended to emphasize instructor's modus operandi, for example, deploying multimedia or asking provocative questions or mimicking local accents. The student descriptions varied in the level of detail, and some students presented more context within their answers while others provided more general overviews. The reflections highlighted a range of emotional reactions to the pedagogy of discomfort. The first responses were usually defensiveness and anger. One student wrote: "Honestly, I was so defensive in the beginning and then got angry with the provoking." Another added, "I was a bit surprised and uneasy at times as our instructor challenged us to consider new ideas." In this regard, as students worked over their reflections, many realized they were changing the way that they felt. The emotions shifted to curiosity, intrigue, and maybe even gratitude.

One student said, "I left the classroom that day torn between what I felt from the shame of my initial response to gratitude for new eyes and amazement at his method." Students had overall positive

evaluations of the provocation pedagogy but did not hesitate to critique it. The method was popular among students because it forced them to think critically and made classroom a more active instead of the passive environment. For example, a student wrote that this teacher “taught them to provoke thoughts and really challenged all their perspectives throughout classes which they found was beneficial for critical thinking skills.” The students had some ideas for how it might be improved, however. One reflection said the provocation “could have been toned down given its scale and with regards to student welfare.” Others said, “Structured debriefing may have facilitated better student reflection and discussion regarding what might or would likely happen in real situation.” The depth of critical analysis substantially varied between reflections. Some students revealed an impressive power of analysis, linking their insights to complex definitions of identity, culture, and education. One reflection that emerged was, “For me, this whole experience underscored the importance of the provocative pedagogy to shake up conformity (subversion) and think critically as well as what you are being shown.

A key value of this method is self-awareness in combating the prejudices and stereotypes about people values, landscapes & ethnicity. Many others had real difficulty in moving beyond anecdotal generalization, they tended invariably to describe events rather than analyse significance of these. However, even in these cases, there were some signs among students that assumptions were starting to be questioned. Students expressed a spectrum of reactions to experience. Some acknowledged complexity of Sialkot’s identity, while others found it needed to problematize existing assumptions. One student wrote, “All these things are connected due to history and the culture of Sialkot which makes its identity. It is not only one thing that happens!” A couple of reflections involved major changes in attitude. This stirred up feelings of one student who remarked, “This chance brought not only expanded my perspective in but instilled in me a sense of understanding to a new benevolence for all cultural awareness that will guide my future interactions and actions within my community.” One example was, “I will pursue a diversity of views through reading, discussion, and engaging with different communities. I will test my beliefs by questioning them and being open to having these discussions happen.” Other plans were less specific, with one participant stating their plan as “I will try to be open-minded in future.” This was much vaguer but still hints at trying to use information from the course.

### Themes Identified from Reflections

A major theme running through all of reflections was that Sialkot and its citizens had either lived up to or shattered expectations. Many students also commented that course challenged them in new ways to consider what they believe. A student said, “I had no idea of context in Sialkot, very little info on my part. Teacher motivated me to look at other parts of Sialkot history, economic values, and culture.” This theme crossed over with students’ conceptions of diversity in their own neighborhoods. They realized that Sialkot’s identity is perhaps less straightforward than some commentators might expect [being simplified, stereotyped]. The power of reflection in developing critical thinking skills was noticed by many. Students voiced discovering how to question information sources, understand different viewpoints & analyse intricate geopolitical matters. One student wrote, “This experience taught me to be skeptical of what information I take in and that it is important to keep open mind by incorporating different perspectives.” Critical thinking was usually noted to progress over series

of reflections by individual student, as they began with describing events and proceeded through analysis on what difference it makes to reach a conclusion after reflection a number of times. Many students wrote about becoming more self-aware of bias & other ways their own traditions color the world they experience.

In one of the reflections, a student wrote: "My understanding of how language both reaffirms and negates individual and communal identities has strengthened, as well as I learned the importance of connection to cultural inheritances." The quality and specificity of focused action plans were inconsistent across reflections. Several students suggested that specific actions to take for growth of oneself and the local community. Students frequently commented on this introspection process that educator provocations incited in them, opening up an awareness of own ways of being and thinking. In addition to seeing multiple perspectives, many reflections suggested broadened understanding of cultural dynamics more generally, both in Sialkot and more broadly. Students revealed that they found new voices in the history, economy and social life of their city. A student penned, "The way different people in my area talk (in Urdu) showed me diversity of our own little community and how varied each individual behaviour can be. This theme was tangled how students were beginning to recognize and view stereotyping. One of major themes in our data concerned the emotional journey students had been on. Most described trajectory: from discomfort, defensiveness, over curiosity into appreciation. One student remarked, "It was a tough pill to swallow in beginning but reflecting on it after she said that, I am so thankful to him doing for opportunity for growth and understanding that my teacher gave me."

### Variation in Quality of Reflection from Students

There was also ample variance in the quality of reflections from individual students. Some students exhibited high levels of critical and culturally contextual self-awareness, providing the detailed analyses of experiences, with specific examples, emotional responses, analyses linking individual experiences to social patterns, and a change in their perspectives or actionable evidence of further engagement. Thus, consider the following reflection: Through my own reflection and the supporting material, I became more conscious of our cultural background & how our beliefs about our personal & communal identity are shaped by language we speak, Cover surface-level emotions with quick analysis, show difficulty relating personal experience to broader ideas or issues, provided minimal evidence that the pedagogy worked and provided general action plans. Another straightforward reflection was, quality of reflection seemed to be affected by: Students' previous experience with critical and reflective practices, their ability to battle through pain and struggle with discomfort, challenge personal beliefs, language proficiency and ability to articulate complex thoughts and level of engagement with course materials and discussions. In this regard, those differences aside, the vast majority of reflections displayed at least some degree of the growth in understanding and perspective such that it appears as though most of concerned students did experience a meaningful pedagogy of discomfort.

### DISCUSSION

The results of this research indicate that the pedagogy of discomfort can enhance critical reflection among students in peace education. More specifically, most students exhibited signs of double-loop

learning, where they went from simply observing to questioning their district identity and culture. Such clear provocation disrupted their prior comfort, causing students to feel a cognitive dissonance that they themselves needed to resolve through the vigilant reflection, perfect for this course. This is consistent with [Boyer \(1999\)](#), who argues that disjuncture can act to set transformative learning in motion. What we are observing about emotional journey students go on, starting with defensiveness but quickly followed by curiosity and ultimately appreciation, suggests that this approach does indeed have enormous potential to shift mindsets. Yet, pedagogy affected students differently. The higher quality reflectors seemed to be far more comfortable with the uncomfortable and were much less likely to try and reinforce their own biases. In other words, the extent to which the pedagogy of discomfort affects learner outcomes may depend on idiographic factors, likewise the openness and emotional resilience. The study revealed a considerable effect on students' perceptions of district identity of Sialkot.

Many reflected a movement from shallow or stereotyped assessments of the district towards an understanding that is richer and more complete. Students said the experience had altered many of their existing ideas about the Sialkot's history and economic dynamics. This deepened conception of district identity is congruent with [Zembylas and McGlynn \(2012\)](#) contention that the pedagogy of discomfort can aid understanding about issues relating to identity and privilege. The course faces students with counter perspectives on their own community and forces them to re-evaluate things they take for granted about Sialkot and its indigenous population. Reflection has unravelled itself as a cognitive reality check for Sialkot's diversity per say. This suggested parting from monolithic conceptions of district identity, as large number of students were surprised at all diverse experience and perspectives within their own community. This enlarged perspective has important inferences for creating social cohesion and intercultural understanding among countries of Southeast Asian region. Although pedagogy of discomfort was successful in some areas, study identified numerous difficulties and constraints as well. Thus, for instance, some students were very emotional, especially earlier in the process.

This leads to ethical considerations on whether an approach of this nature may be psychologically harmful and conveys the same reservations made by [Gayle et al. \(2013\)](#) regarding the importance of careful planning to implement such approaches. In addition, the differing quality of reflections indicated that some students did not have much positive experience with this approach. For some, material may have come on a bit strong, and those with less developed critical thinking or language proficiency skills likely found it challenging to fully engage in this discussion, indicating necessity of support and layering to ensure all students are able to engage usefully with learning. Another issue is that another limitation relates to potential for reinforcing social hierarchy in classroom. If teacher is tasked with asking student beliefs, there is danger that it will lead to dominant narratives being imposed instead of resulting in genuine critical engagement. It is important to ensure that it is a genuine dialogic space and that the various perspectives that are shared do not become part of one, another grand narrative. The results of this study have several practical implications for peace education programs, above in contexts such as Pakistan where cultural identity is at the heart of many regional issues.



First, the research highlights significance of integrating provocative pedagogy in peace education curricula. By asking students to challenge their own biases and assumptions, educators can create a space for more deeply engaging with complex social challenges and give room for peace-making controversy. Second, the study reinforces that a critical pedagogical intervention requires careful preparation and support for its execution as in this case at university level. Educators also need to be trained in hard discussion and emotional management. An essential component of making critical reading possible for students is establishing safe and supported classroom environment that inspires their engagement with more challenging materials. Third, this research points towards including reflection should be made an integral part of the peace education. The use of structured reflection assignments, as demonstrated in this study, might be a way to assist students not only to engage with their experiences but potentially make explicit how such engagements change over time. Bringing this kind of reflection to a class at multiple points over the course of it can help people stay engaged and deepen their learning. Finally, the study underscores the importance of contextualizing peace education approaches.

Emphasizing district identity resonated strongly with students of Sialkot, thus indicating symbolic significance of rooting peace education in the local scenarios and further linking them to regional concerns, common social justice, and conflict resolution. Nevertheless, this study offers new insights into a Pakistani context regarding where pedagogy of discomfort is applicable, such as in district identity issues. Complex interaction found in this research of local cultural narratives and broader peace education goals resonates with [Bajaj's \(2008\)](#) calls for contextually responsive approaches to the teaching of a culture of peace. As described by many students, this emotional journey resonates with [Boyer \(1999\)](#) view of discomfort as a process leading to transformational learning. The initial resistance shifting to more openness and critical reflection is in line with findings from other studies using contentious pedagogies ([Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012](#)). The differences in quality of reflection observed are consistent with prior calls for a focus on individual features to understand why some students benefit from provoking pedagogies more than others. This is in alignment with results of [Nguyen et al. \(2014\)](#) on enhancing depth of student reflection. Even when using structured prompts, our research shows that differences in quality of reflective practice persisted, pointing to need for discerned support strategies.

The study thus adds to the literature available on cultural identity with respect to education in Pakistan. The shifting perspective of the students on Sialkot identity is understood in the context of tension between local, national, and global identities, as seen by [Durrani and Dunne \(2010\)](#). The takeaway is certainly that nuance will have to deal with very complex matters of identity should this experience ever be taught in a high school text, but our findings argue that the provocations brought by the pedagogy can assist undergraduates as they negotiate such challenges between cynicism and empathy. In conclusion, this study reveals that the pedagogy of discomfort has the potential to foster critical reflection and deepen one's cultural identity in peace education settings. Therefore, although there are challenges in the implementation of this approach that need to be further worked through both practically and ethically, including follow-up on sites where teaching provocatively occurs over an extended period to assess the learning - these findings indicate the

important insights with wide implications for understanding both the theoretical justification and pedagogical practice as vehicles supporting critical consciousness required for sustainable peace. Further research is necessary to test the effectiveness of this approach over time and in different educational settings.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the quality of student reflections through the pedagogy of discomfort in a peace education classroom in Sialkot, Pakistan. This pedagogical style generally helped students to think critically, enhanced self-awareness & broadened cultural awareness. Students demonstrated varying degrees of engagement with the pedagogy, with many showing significant growth in their ability to question preconceived notions about their district identity. This journey from discomfort to the curiosity and, ultimately, the appreciation was a familiar one throughout the sharing of these stories, showcasing how this methodology could serve as the transformational. The results presented here contribute new insights into the application of peace education and provocative pedagogies in specific cultural context. The study showcases how the pedagogy of the discomfort can uniquely contribute to unpacking questions about cultural identity and fostering intercultural respect. In this connection, the paper further underscores the role of purposeful reflection in enhancing the desired learning and development.

Limitations of study include that it was located within a single course and may not be generalizable. Using written reflections as the sole data source for all students, especially those who have less developed language skills, will likely not passably tap into the diversity of student outcomes. One concern is simply that this study may be too short to see real effects on students' perspectives and behaviours. More longitudinal research is needed to examine how challenging pedagogies in peace education influence student attitudes & behaviours beyond classroom. Cross-cultural comparative work in other contexts could be very useful to determine the generalizability of this approach. In conclusion, educators using the pedagogy of discomfort should be intentional about making sure they have established supportive learning environments while at same time support reflections and developing strategies to engage students at many different levels of critical thinking. It would also be of interest to explore ethical implications as well as the optimal strategies for handling students' emotional responses.

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