The implementation of character education during the COVID-19 pandemic in state islamic senior high schools in Indonesia

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Abstract Character education is one of the focuses of national education programs, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research aimed to investigate the implementation of character education during COVID-19 in Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (State Islamic Senior High School) in Indonesia. The study used a qualitative method with 65 people as the subject, consisting of 5 madrasah (Islamic school) principals and 60 teachers of 5 madrasahs in four districts of North Sumatra and Aceh Province, Indonesia. The subjects of the study were chosen purposively. The data collection techniques were interviews, observations, and documentation. The results indicated that the strategy of implementing character education during the pandemic at madrasahs in North Sumatra Province and Aceh Province involved integrating the online learning and modelling approach and internalizing the values of the nation's character in the learning and self-development activities in madrasahs. This study also found some obstacles to the implementation of character education during the pandemic, including teachers' lack of ability to use the online learning system and poor internet connections. The solution is to develop teacher skills for online learning systems and improve internet connections and technological facilities in schools.

Keywords: character education; strategy; value; obstacle

1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which hit the world community in the last two years, significantly impacted various aspects, namely, the economy, politics, society, and education in Indonesia. The virus caused by the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was first reported as an outbreak in Wuhan, China. The virus outbreak develops rapidly to infect humans through the mouth, eyes, and inhalation (Intania and Sutut, 2020).

After Indonesia was declared a country infected with COVID-19, the impact on education and the implementation of teaching and learning activities started (Mithhar et al 2021). The government regulated policies for the learning process in schools and madrasahs (Islamic schools) through distance learning or online systems, so the face-to-face learning process was limited (Arlinwibowo et al 2020).

Online learning has a significant impact on changes in society, but it also has a positive impact on student development. As Anderson (2004) explained, "online learning can present challenges to educators because the tools and opportunities for discovering students' preconceptions and cultural perspectives are often limited by bandwidth constraints that limit the view of body language and paralinguistic clues." Distance learning challenges students to carry out the learning process and develop their potential, including the potential of their character. However, the only learning process was online for health reasons.

The distance learning process takes place from the students' homes with the help of parents and online guidance from the teacher. Problems began to arise: the implementation complaints came from parents and students, including teachers, who must conduct online teaching without training provided by the government (Islamy, 2021; Landa & Robandi, 2022).

The student's character behavior began to change; they were disciplined in doing assignments, studying hard, and communicating politely with the family before COVID-19. However, changes have recently occurred; some students study lazily, become angry when guided to learn, and show rude behavior. Government and madrasah principals must address this condition wisely and pay attention to character education programs.

The implementation of character education, a government priority program, was not effective because of distance learning. Theoretically, the implementation of character education requires three aspects: class-based educational design, school culture-based educational design, and community-based educational design. These aspects challenge educational institutions to continue fostering exemplary character in students (Najmuddin and Aprilianty, 2020; Trisiana, 2021).
Educational institutions, especially educational units at the madrasah, should create innovation to implement character education successfully through distance learning during COVID-19.

Following the government’s priority program, character education is also an essential part of the education program at madrasahs in Indonesia. It is carried out in a typical learning process and integration into its culture. This is in line with the character education planning in the program at each Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia.

The character education programs at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia cannot be implemented in face-to-face classrooms because of the pandemic. Madrasah principals and all parties involved in policymaking must determine policies related to the technical implementation of character education. Due to this problem, the researcher investigated the implementation of character education during the COVID-19 pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri.

2. Literature Review

The term character is from the Greek "Charassian", meaning to mark and focus on how to apply good values in the form of action or behavior. People who are dishonest, cruel, greedy, and engage in other destructive behaviors are called wrong-character people. Conversely, people following moral principles are called noble characters (Bass and Steidlmieier, 1999). Character is the central aspect in shaping a person's quality to be noble. If someone's quality is excellent and developed, then the person can be a human who benefits the surrounding environment and the nation's progress (Muhtar Dallyono, 2020; Saifullah et al 2020).

Character education aims to prepare a generation of qualified people ready to face future challenges (Anggraini et al 2022). Character education is a conscious effort to develop good values to humanize humans, improve their character, and train students' intellect to create knowledgeable and character generations that benefit the surrounding environment (Hamidaturrohmah et al 2022).

The term character education was introduced in the 1900s by Thomas Lickona when he wrote a book entitled "The Return of Character Education." He continued writing "Educating for Character: How Our School Can Teach Respect and Responsibility." Through these books, the Western world became aware of the importance of character education.

According to Ryan dan Bohlin in Kamaruddin (2012), character education contains three main elements: knowing the good, loving the good, and doing good. Character education is not just teaching right and wrong; more than that, it familiarizes students with kindness, makes them feel it, and wants to do it.

Character is synonymous with morals and ethics; in the Islamic perspective, a noble character is a result of implementing Sharia (worship and muamalah) based on solid faith conditions and relies on the Al-Qur’an and hadith (Muhammad AR, 2020). Character education does not focus on teaching what is good or bad. However, it encourages the application of good deeds and avoids wrong ones. Therefore, students become aware of what is true and false, feel good values, and get used to them.

The concept of character education in Islam was developed by several Muslim scholars, such as Gazali and Miskawaih, through their religious works on Islamic morality. The term “character” has the same meaning as morals’ in Islam (Gani, 2019). Morals are an essential aspect of Islam; the Prophet Muhammad said in a hadith, "I was sent to perfect the glory of morality" (HR. Ahmad). The hadith reflects that the primary mission of the Prophet Muhammad was to improve human morality. Briefly, character education is the mission of Islam to form human beings with the character following Islamic teachings (Muhammad AR, 2020).

Imam Al-Ghazali claimed that character leads to morality, which is the spontaneous attitude possessed by humans. It is also related to actions inherent in humans without thinking about it when they want to behave. Al-Ghazali asserted that morality is an attitude rooted in the soul causing various actions to encourage and guide students or educate human traits. Good traits are named good character and vice versa (Muki et al 2021).

The application of character education in Islamic educational institutions is broad. It is not only about honesty but also discipline, frugality, critical thinking, satisfaction feeling, tolerance, environmental concern, not arrogance, optimism, and behaving happily, productively, and objectively (Syarnubi et al 2021).

According to Al-Ghazali, there are two ways of educating morals: First, be serious and get used to doing good deeds. Second, do it repeatedly. Educating morals can also be done by the following measures.

a. Asking for God’s grace of perfect fitrah (events) so that lust and anger are made straight, obedient to reason and religion. The person can be knowledgeable (‘a’lim) without studying and be educated without education; it is named ladunniayah.

b. These morals are conducted by Mujahadah and riyyadah, who carry out actions desired by these morals. Briefly, morals are changed through training and education (Sulaiman, 2017).

Based on the above description, educational institutions should be able to become the center for students' character development in any situation, including the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia.

Quraish Shihab in Sukardi (2016) suggested four practical steps in forming character: (1) Soul management, (2) Habituation, (3) exemplary or modelling, and (4) a healthy environment. The steps must be applied consistently in schools and madrasahs to achieve character education effectively.
The process of character education in typical situations is implemented through a learning process in a classroom. However, it is different during the virus outbreak, which threatens health. Character education in Indonesia is carried out through online distance learning using technology. The Indonesian government did this as a form of responsibility for character education to form a nation’s generation with character and a nationalist spirit (Umam et al 2022).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research methods and locations

This research was conducted based on changes in students’ character at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia during distance learning due to COVID-19. Following the background characteristics of the problem, this research uses qualitative research methods.

The qualitative method aimed to find in-depth data that contained meaning. Factual data have value behind visible data (Sugiyono, 2011). Therefore, qualitative research emphasizes meaning instead of generalizations.

The research location was the Madrasah Aliyah Negeri (State Islamic Senior High School) of Aceh and North Sumatra. The location was selected since the initial research results indicated problems related to the implementation of character education during COVID-19.

3.2. Research subject

Subjects are individuals taken from a population or part of the population. Qualitative methods generally take a smaller sample, and the selection tends to be purposive rather than random (Muhadjir, 1996). Purposive is a technique for determining research subjects based on specific considerations (Arikunto, 2003). The consideration is that the subject understands the situation and provides the data for this study.

The study subjects were 5 Madrasah principals and 60 teachers who served at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Aceh Province and North Sumatra Province, Indonesia, namely, MAN 1 Medan, MAN 2 Model Medan, MAN 1 Pidie, MAN 1 Lhokseumawe, and MAN 1 Banda Aceh.

3.3. Data collection technique and data analysis

Research data were collected using three techniques: (1) Interviews with Madrasah principals and teachers to obtain data regarding the strategy for implementing character education during COVID-19, the application of character values, and its obstacles and solutions. (2) Direct observations of the educational characters’ activities in the five schools and (3) events documented at the research location in the form of writing and pictures of the implementation of character education at State Madrasah Aliyah in Aceh and North Sumatra, Indonesia, during COVID-19.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Result

The Indonesian government has paid great attention to the implementation of character education, including during COVID-19. This is a form of consistency in developing the student’s character, as the Indonesian generation follows the nation’s traditional ideals. The application of character education during the pandemic at MAN in Indonesia occurred through an integration strategy in distance learning by using a modelling approach or uswotun hasanah in the form of a good role model from teachers to students, such as helping each other during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, madrasah collaboration with parents in building the students’ character during the learning process takes place online. Madrasah also used online remote counselling services to strengthen students’ character during the pandemic because some students had psychological disorders and could not concentrate on the learning process. The research findings indicated that some students feel bored following online learning, which affects the ineffective learning process and causes less disciplined students’ character.

The internalization of the character education values at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia refers to 18 values developed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education: religious, honest, tolerant, disciplined, hard work, creative, independent, democratic, curious, national spirit, love of the motherland, respectful for achievement, communicative, peaceful, love to read, care for the environment, care for the social, and responsible. These values are integrated into the distance learning process using the Think Pair Share (TPS) learning model, which effectively strengthens the character values of honesty, tolerance, responsibility, hard work, social care, and other character traits.

The implementation of character education during COVID-19 at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia had obstacles. Therefore, in the early stages, distance learning implementation was ineffective. These obstacles are teachers’ and students’ abilities to implement online learning through the Google Meet and Zoom applications. Moreover, technical factors are other obstacles in applying distance character education because the internet network is unstable in some places. Research data also indicated that some students need laptops or other technological media to support online character education.
The solution from the Islamic school principals is collaborating with the government for a training program to improve teacher skills in online learning. Furthermore, the technical facilities were improved in the school to support the implementation of character education through distance learning, such as the Development of a Digital Center at MAN 2 Model Medan, 2022. Generally, the implementation of character education during COVID-19 at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia was successful.

5. Discussion

5.1. Strategy for implementing character education during COVID-19 in Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia

The COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the world three years ago, has impacted all sectors of life and affected people’s behavior or character, especially in Indonesia. Changes in behavior sometimes come from the moral order, where some people are more concerned with personal interests than social interests. There are state officials who commit deviations of authority that indicate a change in character. For example, in Indonesia, there were corruption cases in social assistance for the community impacted by COVID-19 carried out by the minister of social affairs.

Character changes also occurred among students because of the pandemic. Some students have begun to show disrespectful behavior to their parents and unstable emotions due to the boredom of studying at home. The distance learning system was used to break the chain of virus spread (Santi and Widyasari, 2021).

The negative character changes should be solved since Madrasah Aliyah is an Islamic educational institution that has a vital role as the center of national character education to overcome student behavior changes due to COVID-19. Therefore, implementing character education in Madrasah Aliyah is crucial to strengthen students’ character during COVID-19.

One of the teachers explained that COVID-19 impacted society’s social system and that the student’s behavior changed, for example, immoral behavior. Parents sometimes complain about changes in their children’s attitudes toward teachers because of learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teacher asserted that character education strengthens the students’ morale and character.

The other teacher added that Madrasah Aliyah must be an Islamic education center educating the nation’s students into a generation that follows the character of the Indonesian nation. The school is expected to perform a strategic role as a character education center for the nation’s students in any situation, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The implementation of character education in Madrasah Aliyah is under the applicable education system policies, in the form of implementing distance learning, not through face-to-face learning in the classroom.

The basis of the research data is five strategies for implementing character education in Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia during COVID-19, as follows.

5.1.1. Integration in learning

The strategy of implementing character education is carried out simultaneously and integrated into all subjects and educational programs in the madrasah. However, character education implementation is complex because of various factors, such as teacher resources and COVID-19 (Muhammad et al 2021). Therefore, madrasah must regulate policies related to the implementation of character education during the pandemic so that it can be conducted effectively.

One of the teachers explained that character education is integrated through the learning process and the subjects. He added that character education for learners is a shared responsibility; every teacher can integrate it into the learning process.

The integration of character education in the learning process must be supported by learning plans so it can be implemented effectively. Based on the research data, teachers at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia have prepared character-based learning plans. It was supported by the syllabus document, and a character-based lesson plan was used as a guideline for learning implementation.

The integration of character values and the target achievement must be planned appropriately to make their application more effective. The data from madrasah teachers and principals confirmed that lesson planning aimed to guide teachers in learning and ease their character education implementation through distance learning. It needs to be supported by formal learning planning because controlling and guiding distance learning is more challenging than face-to-face learning in a classroom.

Integrating character education into the learning process at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia is part of the steps taken to strengthen students’ character during the pandemic. This strategy positively strengthens students’ character with character indicators of helping each other and increasing concern among students. Therefore, the national character education program must be supported and implemented effectively at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri as the center of Islamic and national character education.

5.1.2. The implementation of character education through distance learning

The four-minute policy decision in 2020, including the Minister of Education and Culture, stated that the principles of education policy during COVID-19 prioritize the health and safety of all parties involved in the learning process in schools.
and madrasahs. For this reason, a learning method is needed to accommodate this so that the learning process can run to educate the nation’s children (Dewantara and Dibia, 2021).

Based on this decision, the secretary general of the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a circular letter number 15 in 2020 concerning guidelines for organizing learning from home during COVID-19. Its purpose was to ensure the fulfillment of children’s rights to receive educational services during the pandemic and to prevent and protect education unit members from the impact of COVID-19 (Putra et al 2020). Learning from home is conducted online, allowing interaction between teachers and students in the learning process. Online learning uses information technology advances and internet access (Limniou et al 2021).

The character education process at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia during COVID-19 was through distance learning following the policy of the government and the Minister of Education. This step is taken to ensure quality education for generations of the Indonesian nation. However, the character education process is carried out face-to-face in classrooms when the situation is normal.

5.1.3. Character Modelling

COVID-19 impacts the character education process, including students’ character. Distance learning carried out in the 2 years following the government policy showed changes in attitudes and morals in students. For example, students were not polite, spoke inappropriate words to their friends, and were less focused on online learning. This is in line with parents' complaints about the student’s attitude: they behaved impolitely, studied lazily, and wasted time playing games.

Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia must prevent student character changes to strengthen the national character of students through the learning process. One of the strategies was through the teacher’s role as character modelling for students at the madrasah.

Research data indicated that the teacher’s role as character modelling during the distance learning process is less effective because they do not meet the students directly in a classroom. Therefore, parents' modelling should be carried out at home during distance learning to break the virus chain. This strategy is effectively used for character education during the pandemic in Indonesia.

The parent's role as character modelling for students during the distance learning process at home is carried out through (1) parents showing politeness in front of children, (2) parents communicating in polite language, (3) parents doing prayers on time to form discipline in children, and (4) parents being honest with children and others.

Modelling the character of parents at home is crucial in strengthening students’ character during the pandemic. Character modelling can also be carried out in various parental activities at home.

A conducive home environment might help students’ character education during the implementation of distance learning due to COVID-19. Therefore, parents are expected to be able to create a conducive situation at home and foster the student’s character with the uswatun hassanah (good exemplary) approach (Syabuddin et al 2020).

Based on data obtained related to the character education process after the pandemic, known as the new normal period, the learning process returns to normal. Character education is also conducted regularly, face-to-face in classrooms. For this reason, the role of the teacher as a character model is very effective in giving good examples of characters to students.

The national character modelling carried out by teachers at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri during COVID-19 is as follows: (1) the teacher provides learning services in a friendly manner, (2) the teacher shows concern and affection for students, (3) the teacher teaches on time to set an example of discipline, (4) the teacher uses good language both in the learning process and in the school environment, and (5) the teacher guides students patiently, as some students might be impolite; her patience can be a character model for students.

The role of the teacher as a character model is broader than specific situations and conditions such as COVID-19. Teachers at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia are figures or character models in both distance learning and the new normal period. The teacher’s modelling strengthens students’ character, as indicated by mutual respect and discipline in the learning process.

5.1.4. Cooperation between parents and Madrasah

Good cooperation between Madrasah and parents is one of the strategies used at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia to implement character education during the COVID-19 period. The educational process during the pandemic was different from normal situations due to the health concerns of students, so the government established a distance learning policy.

Referring to this policy, the heads of Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia set strategic steps by collaborating and building good relationships with the parents to have the same perception about character education for students during distance learning.
The collaboration steps between Madrasah Aliyah Negeri and parents in supporting the character education process through distance learning are as follows: (1) The madrasah held meetings with parents at least once in one semester to convey the program for implementing character education, (2) The madrasah conveyed to parents about the mechanism of learning and character education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) The madrasah informed parents that the character of students could be formed through daily habits at home so that parents could create a conducive situation in the family.

Effective collaboration between Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia and parents also aims to equally participate in the character education program because without support from parents, it is very difficult for the schools to succeed in the character education programs during the pandemic.

5.1.5. Remote counselling services

Counselling services at madrasah are an important component of guiding students. In the COVID-19 situation, the role of counselling services must be more effective (Aldhmour, 2022) to motivate and strengthen the mental and character of students in dealing with changing situations and social situations.

COVID-19 not only changes the learning system and character education in madrasah but also impacts the psychology of students, causing anxiety and disrupting students’ concentration. Based on this situation, the head of the Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia optimizes counselling services for students for mental strengthening and character building through distance learning.

Long-distance counselling services during the pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia were carried out via phone, WhatsApp application, Google Meet, and Zoom. These applications were used because they enabled counselling teachers and students to interact online.

6. Internalization of Character Education Values during the COVID-19 Pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia


These character values align with the character education program developed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Indonesia (Syabuddin et al. 2020). Internalization of character values in distance learning is part of the commitment to education at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia to strengthen the nation’s character for students, especially during the pandemic. Despite the pandemic, character education remains important to foster in Indonesian students.

The internalization of character education values through distance learning must be supported by teacher professionalism in online media to convey character values effectively to students (Midgette et al. 2018). Data from Madrasah Aliyah Negeri teachers in Indonesia showed that the internalization of character education values in online learning requires teacher skills in designing learning and choosing the character values to develop in students.

Meanwhile, data from some teachers showed that strategies for internalizing character education values in the learning process could also be carried out using the cooperative learning model. Students work on assignments in groups and present them online. Through the cooperative learning model, the following character values were formed: cooperation, democracy, social care, independence, and other characteristics that can develop in students in online group learning interactions.

The data from the school principals showed that character education is an important focus in the educational process at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri during the COVID-19 pandemic because students must be equipped with the values of the nation’s character to become Indonesian generations with noble character. Its application was carried out by internalizing character values in distance learning, in an independent learning system, or in group learning using cooperative learning models, such as the Think Pair Share (TPS, a type of cooperative learning model that teachers can use. The character values that can be internalized in the learning process with the TPS learning model are honesty, tolerance, discipline, responsibility, hard work, social care, responsibility, and other character values.

The internalization of the values of the nation’s character during the pandemic in the learning at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia was also conducted using a student-centred learning approach. This approach can develop the character values of responsibility and independence in students so that they are effectively used in the distance learning process.

The use of the Jigsaw cooperative learning, the Student Teams Achievement Division (STAD), the Think Pair Share (TPS), and the student-centred approach positively contribute to the character development of students at the Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia during the pandemic because the models require participants to work in groups. These activities develop various character values, such as social care, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, and responsibility.
7. Obstacles and Solutions to the Implementation of Character Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia

The implementation of character education during the COVID-19 pandemic was different from normal conditions before the outbreak in Indonesia (Azhari and Fajri, 2022). During the pandemic, the education system in Madrasah Aliyah Negeri had to comply with the policies implemented by the Indonesian government in the form of a distance learning system, limiting face-to-face meetings and prohibiting gatherings in classes with a large number of students to prevent the spread of COVID-19 for the health safety of students.

Distance learning is a challenge to the implementation of character education at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia because of the sudden change in the learning system, and teachers have not been prepared and trained beforehand. Thus, in practice, sometimes teachers have to learn while teaching, and some teachers have difficulty teaching with the distance learning system.

The data from the interviews and documentation revealed several obstacles to implementing character education during the pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia, as follows.

1. The lack of teacher skills in using online learning technology hampered the implementation of character education during the pandemic.
2. The lack of student skills in using technology is also an obstacle in character education during the pandemic.
3. Not all students having devices, such as laptops, also hampers the character education process during the pandemic because the learning was conducted via distance learning.
4. Poor internet connection is also an obstacle to distance learning and character education during the pandemic.

The following are the measures taken by each principal of the Madrasah Aliyah Negeri involved in this study.

1. Providing training to teachers on the application of online distance learning to effectively implement character education during the pandemic.
2. Strengthening internet connections in schools to support the character education process during the pandemic.

Online character education is different from face-to-face education. It has some obstacles; for example, teachers have difficulty supervising students. Therefore, cooperation between parents and teachers is important to control students at home during distance learning.

The principal of Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia has collaborated with the government to overcome these obstacles, both for developing teacher competence in using online learning technology and adding supporting technology facilities to the schools.

8. Final considerations

The implementation of character education during the COVID-19 pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia was accomplished by integrating it into online distance learning. Furthermore, it also used a character modelling approach, built good cooperation between the schools and parents, and conducted remote counselling services. The implementation of these strategies was in line with government and Ministry of Education policies. Meanwhile, during the new normal era, character education was conducted face-to-face through the learning process in the classroom. Internalization of the values of character education during the pandemic at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri in Indonesia is done in the learning process and self-development activities, such as guidance counselling services, the Youth Red Cross, scouts, school organization, leadership, art galleries, sports, and extracurricular activities in the schools. The values of national character education internalized in the program include religiosity, honesty, tolerance, discipline, environmental care, social care, and responsibility. Meanwhile, one of the obstacles to the implementation of character education was the lack of teachers’ competence in using online learning technology. Teachers also experienced difficulties in fostering the character of students online. In addition, some students also lacked skills in using online technology media because they were unfamiliar with the system. Poor internet connection also hampered character education during the pandemic. The principals took some measures by adding technological facilities and an internet connection and provided training to improve teacher skills in distance learning and technology.

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Ethical Considerations

The author said that all informants agreed with this research.

Conflict of Interest

The researchers said they had no conflicts of interest.

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