



ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES IN COVID-19 SITUATION: A CASE STUDY ON A RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL IN BANGLADESH

Kalyani Bain*

Education Discipline, Khulna University, Khulna - 9208, Bangladesh

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Abstract

The first case of the COVID-19 virus in Bangladesh was confirmed on March 8, 2020 and due to this pandemic the government announced closure of all educational institutions on March 17, 2020. This study aimed to investigate the academic experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of a secondary school situated in a rural region of Bangladesh. For this study, a case study within a qualitative framework was conducted. Interviews of all the teachers and interviews as well as focus group discussion (FGD) of twenty-four students who were selected by convenience sampling were undertaken. This study finds that the entire academic experience was extremely hard and new for both teachers and students. They experienced a sense of alienation during the school closure. In September 2020, online classes started but both teachers and students encountered a variety of obstacles, such as lack of proper devices and required skill-sets, excessive cost of mobile data, poor network. The institution also tried assignment method which was challenging as it was a completely new task. The school resumed partially on September 12, 2021, with a reduced number of active school days. All the participants felt that partial resuming did not enable effective learning. This study also finds that both teachers and learners have tried several coping strategies. Teachers have assisted one another and contacted with the students through phone calls and in-person visits. Students also sought help from their family-members and peers. This study has implications for policymakers, teachers and learners. Policymakers can mitigate future extreme circumstances by fixing network faults, offering financial aid to teachers and students, and organizing skill-building programs. Teachers and learners from schools with similar context can consider coping strategies like asking for assistance from peers and family members, being innovative for getting connected with each other for continuing academic activities during tough time.

Keywords: COVID-19, Academic experience, Challenges, Coping strategies, Secondary school

Introduction

This study explored the overall academic experience, challenges and coping strategies of a 55-year-old secondary school situated in rural area of the south-west part of Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. The considered timeline for this study is March, 2020 to March, 2022. World Health Organization (WHO, n.d.) defined the COVID-19 pandemic as a global outbreak of an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The first case of the novel virus was recorded in China in December 2019 and then the virus was spread rapidly to other areas across the world. World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020 and characterized the outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. On March 8, 2020, the first case of this virus was confirmed in Bangladesh. Because of the pandemic, the government of Bangladesh announced the closure of all educational institutions on March 17, 2020.

According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), as of April 2023, the pandemic had caused more than 762 million confirmed cases and 6.89 million deaths which has made it one of the deadliest in history. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2022b) reported that besides causing health hazards, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the education sector significantly across the globe. UNESCO (2022a) also reported that it affected more than 1.5 billion students while the most vulnerable learners were hit the hardest. Most governments around the world temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread

*Corresponding author: <kalyanibain@edu.ku.ac.bd>

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of the virus and these closures affected over 90% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2022c). Tadesse et al. (2020) found that during school closure the level of anxiety, depression and stress were high among students.

According to Tadesse and Muluye (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has affected schools, students, teachers, and parents and this crisis has contributed in increasing social inequality among the learners as students do not have equal access to technology and educational materials required for continuing education in pandemic time. They also claimed that there is a significant difference among schools in terms of technology and educational resources while schools in disadvantaged, rural areas lack the appropriate digital infrastructure required to deliver teaching at the remote. Students from more advantaged parents attend schools with better digital infrastructure and better teachers having higher levels of digital technology skills while disadvantaged students are attending schools with lower ICT infrastructure and other educational resources (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

In Bangladesh, a large number of students live in rural area. According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), the future of 37 million children in Bangladesh is at risk as their education has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic negatively impacted the overall welfare of adolescents in several ways (The World Bank, 2021). In Bangladesh, around half of the adolescents spent less time on education than before the pandemic and 94 percent increased time on household chores or childcare which may result in dropping out from school (The World Bank, 2020).

During the pandemic, the investigator of this study mostly stayed in her village home which is around 2 kilometers away from the school which has been investigated in this study. Every child in her neighborhood was enrolled at the school. Through informal interactions with them, she got several basic information regarding the academic experiences of the school during the pandemic which made her aware of some issues faced by them. Besides, different aspects of academic experience were very frequent in electronic and online media during the pandemic time. All of these factors made the investigator inquisitive about this case and motivated her to carry out this study. The research questions of this study focus on the overall academic experiences of the school during the COVID-19 pandemic with special attention to the challenges faced by the stakeholders and their coping strategies and innovation for the new situation.

Methods

Research Approach: For this study, a case study within a qualitative framework was conducted. Academic experience of a rural Bangladeshi secondary school during the COVID-19 pandemic is the central phenomenon of this study. Creswell (2012) asserted that qualitative research is the most suitable approach for exploring and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon. And Yin (2014) stated that case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context.

Sources of Data and Sampling technique: Data was collected from all the ten teachers of the school including the head teacher and twenty-four students, four from each grade (grade six, seven, eight, nine, ten and SSC candidates). Participant students were selected by using convenience sampling. Available and willing data sources were needed for conducting this study. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008) convenience sampling allows it. Gender balance among the students has been tried to be maintained consciously while selecting student participants.

Collection and Analysis of data: As mentioned earlier, the considered timeline for this study is March, 2020 to March, 2022. The data collection occurred in two phases; first in June 2021 and subsequently in March 2022. In both phases, interviews of all the teachers including the head teacher were conducted for understanding the teachers' perspective. For exploring the students' perspective, interviews as well as a focus group discussion (FGD) were conducted. According to Bell (2010), interview is one of the most frequently used tools for conducting case studies and it allows following up ideas, probing responses and investigating motives and feelings which were needed for this study. Bell (2010) also argues that FGD is useful when participants have a shared interest, concern or experience and in-depth information is needed 'about how people think about an issue'.

The approach of conducting the interviews was open-ended guided or focused interview. A framework containing some key topics (over all experience, academic activity, assessment, communication among the

stakeholders, challenge, coping strategy, innovation etc.) were prior determined, based on which certain open-ended questions were asked. Respondents were given the freedom to talk and give their views in their own time. There were scopes for asking supplementary questions as well. According to Bell (2010), a guided or focused interview fulfills all these requirements.

After collecting data, qualitative data analysis was done. Following inductive coding, codes were generated by directly examining the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Similar coding pieces of data were grouped into minor themes from which finally major themes emerged. According to Creswell (2012), it is useful to see that researchers have several minor themes subsumed under the major theme.

Results and Discussion

Description of the case

The school studied in this research is a 55-year-old secondary school situated in a rural region of the south-west part of Bangladesh. It is 30 and 12 kilometers away from the district and upazila town respectively. The school was established in 1968 and went under Monthly Payment Order (MPO) by Bangladesh government in 1984. At present there is no practice of multiple shifts and multiple sections in the school. At the time of data collection, it had 368 students and 10 teachers. There are two academic buildings. One of them is three-storeyed and the other one is single storeyed which is quite old. There is a digital lab having 3 laptops and 7 desktops. Two classrooms of the school have got multimedia projector. There is no Wi-Fi connection in the school while the cellular data connection is extremely poor. For getting moderately good cellular data connection, teachers have to go to the roof top of the three-storeyed building. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Bangladesh announced closure of all educational institutions on March 17, 2020. This school followed government order and was closed for 543 days from March 17, 2020 to September 11, 2021. The school resumed partially on September 12, 2021, with a reduced number of active school days. In response to a notable increase in COVID-19 transmission, the government again closed all schools on January 21, 2022, until resuming normal operations on February 22, 2022. During the pandemic time, the school has always attempted to comply with government directives. Detailed findings on the academic experiences, challenges and coping strategies of this school in the COVID-19 pandemic situation are discussed below. Pseudo names of the participant teachers and students have been used in the following section.

Academic Experiences and Challenges in COVID-19 Situation

The entire academic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic time was extremely hard and novel for both teachers and students

The head-teacher expressed that he struggled much for getting timely instruction from the government. As the pandemic was a completely new situation for him to deal with, he felt lost at times. Several other factors made it worse. In his words:

It was tough, very tough actually. As a head-teacher I was completely lost at the beginning. I was trying to cope up with the new situation but there were times when I was completely clueless. Later, government directives guided me. But there were several factors which made my task harder.

This study finds that all the other teachers (both male and female) also felt the same. Continuing academic activities during the COVID-19 pandemic was very challenging and completely new for them. One of the teachers of the school, Mr. Sarker said:

It was completely new for all of us. We didn't have any prior experience regarding this. Directions from the government and our head-teacher guided us but I feel that those were not enough (for continuing academic activities). And the fear of the pandemic made all these lot more difficult. I was scared; we were very scared.

The participant students of this study described their experience during the pandemic time in a similar way. They expressed that the entire academic experience during the COVID-19 pandemic time was extremely hard and novel for them. During the first phase of the data collection, Abir who is one of the participant students said, "The school has been closed for several months. I don't know when everything will be normal again. No...I don't study at all. My friends do the same. We don't know what to do." This finding is applicable for both male and female

students. Tripti who is one of the female student participants said, “The school has been closed for many days. This is quite new for me. I don’t know what to do.”

These findings are consistent with literatures as UNESCO (2022b) reports that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the education sector across the world. UNESCO (2022a) also reports that it affected more than 1.5 billion students and the most vulnerable students were hit the hardest.

The school was closed from March 17, 2020 to September 12, 2021 for 543 days which is one of the longest school closures in the world

The government of Bangladesh declared the closure of all educational institutions and like all other schools in the country this school followed this order. The head-teacher said:

From the beginning of the month of March, 2020 almost everyone was discussing about the closure of schools. There were several news regarding this. At last, our government declared the closure; I heard it from television news. Though our students also got the news from television and other sources, I along with my other teachers and staffs tried to convey the message to all of them.

Most governments around the world did the same in an attempt to minimize the spread of the virus and these nationwide closures have affected over 90% of the world’s student population which is over 1.5 billion learners in 165 countries (UNESCO, 2022c). This closure has seriously interrupted the functioning of the education system such as reducing learning, and restricting the activities of authorities, parents, and decision-makers (UNESCO, 2022b). UNICEF (2021) asserted that the associated consequences of such continuous school closures are learning loss, mental distress, missed routine vaccinations, drop out, increased rate of dropout, child labor, child marriage etc. and many of these consequences are already visible and many will continue to be felt in the years to come. This study also finds the same. Six among the twenty-four student participants have shared that they were not sure whether they would be able to continue their schooling after the pandemic is over. This study finds that the reasons of dropping out from school during the pandemic are not same for boys and girls. Student participants of this study asserted that a significant amount of their male peer have already engaged themselves in income-generating program outside of their home while at least 15-16 girl students from the school had been married off during the school closure which they felt may restrict them from coming back to school.

Both teachers and students experienced a sense of alienation during the school closure

Both the participant teachers and students have admitted that they have felt some sorts of disconnection throughout the time. The study finds that this finding is not gender specific, both male and female participants (teachers and students) felt the same. During the first phase of the data collection, Sumona who is one of the participant students said, “We are disconnected.we haven’t met our teachers and friends except who live in the neighborhood for a long time. I feel lost at times.”

This finding is consistent with literatures. According to Donnelly et al. (2021), school closure created lack of personal interaction between teacher and student. Tadesse et al. (2020) also finds that during this time the level of anxiety, depression disorders, and stress were high among the students.

The school has always attempted to comply with government directives though it faced difficulties in getting updated information regarding government orders because of poor cellular network connection

The government of Bangladesh took the decision of closing all the educational institutions temporarily from March 17, 2020 because of the pandemic. After a few months, a government order was made to organize online classes for the students. Then towards the end of the year 2020, order was made regarding subject-specific assignment. Then government finally took the decision of partial resuming of the schools from September 12, 2021. In response to a notable increase in COVID-19 transmission, the government again declared the closure of all the schools on January 21, 2022 and finally took the decision of resuming normal operations from February 22, 2022. This study finds that the school studied in this study has tried to follow all the mentioned directives from the government. The head-teacher said:

We have been following the government orders from the very beginning. I got to know about the orders from online meetings and through formal letters. I tried to disseminate the orders to my teachers, staffs and students in earliest possible time.

But due to various challenges, the school found it difficult to execute all the directives effectively. The head-teacher along with other teachers faced difficulties in getting updated information regarding government orders because of poor cellular network connection. In the words of the head-teacher:

But initially I suffered a lot in getting updated information due to poor cellular network. Sometimes I went to the rooftop of the school building and sometimes I went to the upazila town for getting better network. I also frequently contacted with head-teachers of other schools so that I can be updated. Poor network issues restricted me from getting regular access to official online meetings. Besides it kept interrupting me during the meetings. All of these were quite humiliating for me.

A report in *The Daily Star* by Islam (2023) reported that the status of mobile internet in rural Bangladesh is poor in general. Moreover, internet performance was negatively affected in Bangladesh during the pandemic while slow browsing (56 percent), low download speed (51 percent), and frequent disconnection (48 percent) were the most common underlying problems with internet access and users became more dissatisfied with the speed, reliability, and steadiness of their connections (Internet Society, 2022).

Online class started from September, 2020 but it was mostly ineffective due to several obstacles

Each and every teacher of this school organized online classes as per the directions from the government. The number of online classes was smaller in comparison to regular face to face classes. A shortened syllabus as well as a routine was provided centrally. Some of the teachers organized online classes from their home while the rest felt comfortable in organizing classes from the classrooms in the school. Initially, live classes on virtual platform like Zoom and Facebook were attempted. But due to very poor attendance, later decision was taken to switch to pre-recorded online classes. The participant teachers revealed that there was lacking in the dissemination of online classes. Mostly it was generalized dissemination through emailing to district secondary education office and submitting to central dashboard while targeted dissemination among the students of this school was unsuccessful. Using Facebook page of the school as the platform was tried but the reach was very low. This study finds that the teachers including the head-teacher felt that online classes were mostly ineffective in terms of ensuring learning of the learners. One of the teachers Mr. Karim said, “No...it (online class) was not very successful. I am afraid that only 5-10% students attended these classes. There were other challenges as well.”

Students expressed their experience regarding online classes in a similar way. None of the participant students attended live online classes while only three of them (two female students and one male student) viewed recorded online classes and the number of classes viewed by them is 2, 1 and 6 respectively. None of them except the last one searched for the classes rather watched it as it popped up in front of them while scrolling casually. All participant students acknowledged that online classes were mostly ineffective as it was tough for them to access and there was limited scope of teacher-students interaction.

This study finds that while engaging or intending to engage in online classes, both teachers and students encountered a variety of obstacles, such as lack of proper devices and required skill-sets, excessive cost of mobile data, poor network etc. Twenty-one students among the twenty-four student participants do not have smart devices needed for attending online classes in their home while three of the teachers do not possess smart devices. According to them, the most common reason of not having smart devices is financial constraints. This study finds that gender issue might be relevant here as the three students possessing smart devices are all male and two among the three teachers who do not possess smart devices are female.

All the participant teachers and students stated that they lack in the skills required for participating effectively in online classes. All of them agreed that the cost of mobile data is very high. In response to ‘why don’t you attend online classes regularly?’ one of the participant students named Anita said:

I do not have smart phone at my home. Sometimes I try to borrow devices from others. The cost of mobile data is also very high; my family can’t afford that. Moreover, I am not very skilled in this regard.

Teachers stated that in online class, unlike face-to-face class there was limited scope of teacher-students interaction which was completely new for them. Teachers also emphasized on their lacking in the required skills for arranging online classes and poor network issues. This study finds that there might be gender issues here as all female participant teachers expressed that they lacked in ICT skills and confidence in comparison to their male colleagues. Ms. Moumita who is a female teacher said, “Actually I don’t have any smart phone, I also don’t possess any laptop in my home. Besides, I don’t have much interest in digital devices. That’s why I am not very confident (regarding organizing online classes).”

All the participant teachers admitted that they just merely organized online classes and could not think about ensuring the effectiveness of the classes as the whole scenario was not supportive. They had to limit the duration of a class to 10-15 minutes as longer span of time would lead to larger file size which will be difficult to upload for poor network. Besides, they faced regular interruption during the class for network issue.

These findings are consistent with a number of contemporary literatures. Literatures show that along with different modes of distance learning, online class was used frequently during COVID-19 pandemic time and the findings regarding the challenges and effectiveness of it are quite similar for rural area of different developing countries (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Different studies by Datta (2022), Das (2021) and Khan et al. (2021) found that though online education was practiced on a large scale in Bangladesh during COVID-19 pandemic, but mostly it failed to achieve the desired level of effectiveness for several reasons. According to Ministry of Education (2019), ICT skills of the teachers and students in Bangladesh are not up to the mark yet. A report on the Daily Star titled ‘54% Bangladeshi rural households lack internet accesses: survey’ (2020, September 13) reported that majority of the households in rural areas of Bangladesh lack internet access for various reasons. A report in The Daily Star by Islam (2023) also asserted that there are complaints about poor mobile internet speed in rural Bangladesh. Meanwhile, Haq (2022) claimed that education during COVID pandemic cannot happen without robust and resilient internet infrastructure. He also added that low speed and poor internet quality results in putting people at risk of being left behind.

Telecasting distance learning classes on the National Television Channel was attempted but it failed to connect with the learners

In the later part of the year 2020, besides online classes, the government of Bangladesh took initiatives for telecasting grade and subject based classes on television channel. This study finds that though the teachers of this school informed the students about the classes, students hardly engaged themselves in it. This finding is similar for both male and female students. The main reasons are lack of motivation and not having access to the television. Besides, the schedule of these classes was unknown to majority of them. All the participant students knew that classes were being telecasted on television but they revealed that majority of them did not attend these classes. This study finds that almost half of the participant students don not have television set in their home which restricts their access to classes telecasted on television. A study by The World Bank (2021) found similar result. It found that 55 percent of grade nine stipend recipients did not have access to television while only 43 percent of children who had the access, chose to watch television learning programs. Literatures show that along with other modes, television class as a mode of distance learning was frequently used during COVID-19 pandemic and the findings regarding the challenges and effectiveness of it are quite similar for rural area of developing countries (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

Students submitted subject-specific assignments to the school which assured the participation of almost every student though it was completely new and challenging for both students and teachers

Towards the end of the year 2020, the ministry of education took the decision of using assignment method for the secondary level. A comprehensive schedule of submitting the assignments was provided centrally and the students were asked to submit subject-specific assignments to their school. The school studied in this study followed the same. It tried to disseminate the instructions regarding this method. Though the government tried to guide the teachers by providing instruction about it, it was challenging because it was a completely new task for them. All the participant students submitted a good number of assignments to the school. This study finds no significant difference among boys and girls in this regard. At the beginning while doing assignments, the students struggled much because it was a completely new task for them as well and they have not done this earlier. But later on, almost

all the participant students just copied from the readymade answers available in online and other sources when writing assignments. Both teachers and students acknowledged that doing assignments was not effective in terms of ensuring effective learning as it was mostly plagiarized. But they feel that assignment was a better strategy in comparison to online class as it succeeded to ensure the participation of almost every learner. However, almost all the participant students have admitted that they submitted the assignments as they heard that it was the requirement for getting promoted to the next grade. Literatures show that assignment as a learning method was frequently used during COVID-19 pandemic and the findings regarding the effectiveness and challenges associated with it are quite similar for rural area of different developing countries (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020).

The school resumed partially on September 12, 2021 but reduced number of classes did not enable effective learning

The school opened partially as directed by the Government order with a reduced number of active school days. All the participant teachers and learners felt that this curtailed number of classes was not enough for ensuring effective learning. Ms. Chowdhury, one of the teachers of the school said:

Reduced number of active school days means reduced number of classes which indicates less teacher-student interaction. It was not enough for ensuring learning of the learners. Besides, because of reduced number of school days there was lack of regularity and seriousness in the students.

Each grade had one or two offline school days weekly and only SSC candidates got four active days weekly. According to the Dashboards on the Global Monitoring of School Closures Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic, partial opening of school was practiced in almost every country in some point of these pandemic days (UNESCO, 2022b).

Under government directives, the school schools on January 21, 2022 in response to a notable increase in COVID-19 transmission until resuming normal operations on February 22, 2022.

Coping Strategies and Innovations in COVID-19 Situation

This study finds that both teachers and learners of this school have tried several coping strategies and innovations during the tough period of COVID-19 pandemic

Teachers have assisted one another when they faced difficulties while organizing online classes. They lent their smart phones to their colleagues and if someone was having technical issues, others tried to help him/her. They revealed that in search of better network connection they went to rooftop of the school building and even to the upazila town for several times. In addition, they attempted to contact with the students and their parents through phone calls and in-person visits. They divide the students among them, collect phone numbers from school database and then made phone calls. All most all the teachers tried to monitor and motivate learners regarding online and TV class by visiting the students' home in his/her own and neighbor villages. Though they are not sure about the positive impacts from their efforts, they claimed that they tried to be connected with their learners in any form. Besides, even before getting the government order, when live online classes were having very low reach to the learners, the teachers of this school thought of switching to pre-recorded class. Moreover, when students were submitting assignments, the teachers of this school tried to ask relevant questions to the students so that they increased their seriousness regarding this.

The students of this school also practiced various coping strategies during this pandemic time. At the beginning of the pandemic as they were lost about their academic activities, they made some extra effort for continuing their learning. They also attempted to support one another in getting necessary information and doing academic activities. Besides, whenever they faced any difficulty while doing any academic activity, they sought assistance from their parents, elder siblings and other family-members. Sumon, a grade 7 student, who is one of the participants said, "Generally, I study on my own. But whenever I faced difficulties, my elder sister and my peers who lived in my neighborhood helped me. Sometimes I also contacted with my other peer through phone calls."

Tadesse and Muluye (2020) has got similar findings regarding teacher's efforts for contacting students during school closure and students' tendency to seek help from family members for continuing their academic activities during COVID-19 pandemic time.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have implications for policy maker, teachers, learners and other stakeholders. Any other educational institution having similar context can get insight from the findings. As discussed in the previous section, this study finds that both the teachers and the students experienced a sense of alienation during the school closure. So this study recommends that the policy makers as well as every respective school authority should take measures for ensuring the wellbeing of their mental health during such tough period.

This study also finds that both teachers and students faced a variety of obstacles such as lack of proper devices and required skill-sets, excessive cost of mobile data, poor network etc. while engaging in academic activities during the pandemic time. So this study recommends that policy makers may make efforts to minimize the challenges by offering financial aid to the teachers and students so that they can afford required digital devices and cellular data package. Policy makers may also take necessary steps for fixing network faults in the rural areas. This study also recommends that Government may take initiatives for organizing skill-building programs for both teachers and students focusing on the knowledge and skills needed for continuing academic activities in extreme situation like COVID-19.

As discussed in the previous section, this study finds that sometimes male and female participants' experiences were different from each other during the pandemic time. Policy makers may consider making some gender specific interventions like organizing counselling and training program, providing financial aids etc.

Besides, this study finds that both the teachers and learners have tried several coping strategies like asking for assistance from peers and family members, being innovative for getting connected with each other and for continuing academic activities during the tough time of this pandemic. If in future we have to face another wave of COVID-19 or different extreme situation like this, the findings can guide in assuming the probable challenges and coping strategies that can be considered.

Some findings of this study are based on recall of the situation by teachers and learners, which may create recall bias. To minimize this, data was collected in two phases. Some findings of this study are similar for both male and female participants while some are different. This study finds that gender issues might be relevant here which needs to be investigated more deeply in a future research. In this study, academic experiences, challenges and coping strategies of a rural Bangladeshi secondary school during the COVID-19 pandemic have been explored by conducting a case study. Further studies may be carried out on a larger scale. Besides, future research can be done focusing on schools situated in the urban areas of Bangladesh.

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