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### **Exploring Assessment Practice in Community Schools in Nepal**


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### Abstract

The assessment that reflects the praxis of students' hands-on learning experiences motivates students to link theoretical learning to real-life situations. The existing assessment is blamed for being poor in assessing such quality. Therefore, this paper makes an in-depth study of existing practices of assessment systems and explores student-friendly, evidence-based, and goal-oriented assessment practices that lead students from the area of their interest to the designed goals. Following narrative inquiry as a research design, information was collected, coded, thematized, and generated meaning from the participants' meaning-making of the assessment system in the schools. The study found that the students have a sort of fear and detestation of the existing high-stakes testing. Similarly, the practical examination has lacked trustworthiness, validity, and consistency. Although students have experienced some assessment tools as friendly, engaged, and goal-oriented, they have weak decisive roles in grading. Classroom activities should be learner-engaged, performance-based, and hands-on experience-oriented. Their participation and performance in classroom activities can lead them to transcend the designed objectives. The grading scheme should be made so transparent and precise that the students by themselves can identify where their learning level is. The paper-pencil test as an assessment tool should reflect how the learning contents, classroom activities, and overall, the programs are. The study concludes that classroom activities should be designed in such a way that students' participation in the activities can lead them to achieve the designed goals.

*Keywords:* evidence-based assessment, rubric, hands-on experience, transversal competencies

### **Exploring Assessment Practice in Community Schools, Nepal**

Education is simply the systematic process of receiving or giving instruction in schools or universities. Some people claim it is a certificate while others opine that it is the process of gaining knowledge and experiences through different resources. It is widely accepted that it is the degree someone gets from a school, university, or institution. According to Naziev (2017), it is the process of transmitting and receiving information. However, it is not only the certificate and degree but also both the academic and transversal competencies that match the degree or the level of the certificate. Pedagogy on the other hand is the art or science of teaching. Similarly, critical pedagogy is an educational approach that attempts to make students critically conscious. It emerged in the mid-20th century, primarily associated with Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, “the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy” (McLaren, 2000 as cited in Keesing-Styles, 2003, p. 3). Freirean pedagogy empowers students to question and challenge any sort of domination and discrimination and even the beliefs and practices that attempt to dominate and discriminate against them. It focuses on challenging traditional educational practices and promoting a more participatory, student-centered, and socially just learning environment.

Critical pedagogical education promotes critical thinking and communication skills in students through different dialogue-based and action-oriented teaching-learning activities (Shpeizer, 2018). The activities emphasize students’ participation and collaboration and enhance empowerment maintaining social justice in the classroom. Educators in critical pedagogical practices often create a learning environment, an environment that fosters critical consciousness, makes them aware of power dynamics, challenges oppressive structures, and actively contributes to creating a more just and equitable society. In the same way, assessment is the process of documenting learning achievements, particularly, students’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

The study has captured students' abhorrence and reluctance towards high-stakes testing, the central tool of assessment. It then explores the possible practices of critical pedagogical assessment which is learner-friendly, constructive, and goal-oriented. Because of the dominant influence of high-stakes testing, students try their best to memorize the text, particularly, the ones likely to be asked, and recall them during the examination. During the whole academic session, teaching-learning activities are exam-oriented and are rarely focused on life skills and professional development. Whatever they learn is not important, but what is more important is their score on the paper-pencil test. Therefore, the study has attempted to explore the assessment practices that reflect both the student's learning experiences and the teaching-learning process. It also attempts to develop constructive assessment practices that are reliable and valid.

### **Critical Pedagogy as Theoretical Underpinning**

Critical pedagogical assessment works against the influence of Bourgeois hegemony, the dominance of the leading elites who prioritize one-size-fits-all types of tests. The capitalist class uses such types of tests to influence the people with their prevailing ideas, values, and cultural norms (Freire, 2005). He further emphasizes the test that values students' critical interpretation and diverse ideas from different perspectives. Additionally, critical pedagogical assessment liberates the learner, promotes learning to overcome oppression, and emerges from a love for the world (Serrano et al., 2018). Likewise, it should be dialogic-interaction centered. The students should be allowed to exchange their understanding of learning content and its practices in real-life situations. Then, they express their meaning-making. By validating their voices while sharing their ideas and understanding, we can assess each student's actual understanding. In the words of Keesing-Styles (2003), "It should value and validate the experience students bring to the classroom" (p. 10). Furthermore, the classroom environment affects students' performance so, it should be made student-friendly. The issue of

assessment should be observed. Keesing-Styles (2003) says, “The whole milieu of the classroom must be re-examined and re-constructed” (p. 12). The students who are encouraged to face challenges from the areas they have enjoyed in the class struggle more and try their best to perform their roles.

### **Assessment in Changing Context**

The existing assessment system cannot assess students’ diverse talents and learning achievements. For making it learner-engaged, evidence-based, and goal-oriented, restructuring is essential. Firstly, the assessment should discourage students’ dependence on rote learning and teachers’ one-size-fits-all type of instruction (Bondie et al., 2019). Similarly, it is expected to encourage students’ engaged learning which includes their active participation and performance. The second expectation of assessment is to motivate teachers to lead students toward the designed goal without fear and hesitation. As assessment determines students’ learning achievement and their status from the achievement, they endeavor best to obtain more marks and better grades from the paper-pencil test which is a dominant tool of high-stakes testing. The teachers are indirectly forced to prepare their students to obtain the expected marks and grades from the paper-pencil test. For this, they force the students to emphasize rote learning and memorize the prescribed notes and capsules that they give. The third expectation of critical pedagogical assessment is authentication and validation of students’ experience of classroom activities where they participate and perform their roles. Making an assessment authentic and valid is key to ensuring that they accurately measure what they intend to measure. For this, the questions and tasks should reflect the knowledge and skills that the students are expected to acquire.

For this, rubric development is quite useful. “Rubrics are useful grading tools that add reliability, validity, and transparency to assessment”(Chowdhury, 2018, p. 61). A rubric is a working guide that demarcates different levels of students’ performance in such a way that the students themselves can identify

their scoring or grading. It should be made so precise and concise that it reflects students' learning achievement. Then, the teachers self-evaluate and improve their teaching; the parents and guardians will be familiar with their offspring's learning achievement; the administration and management will identify where their education level is.

### **Methodology**

To explore existing assessment practices and find out the options for learner-friendly, evidence-based, and goal-oriented assessment, hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 2005) was used as the research design in which information was collected through in-depth interviews and class observation. The information was gathered from six grade-eight students pseudo-named S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6, and three teachers with the pseudonyms T1, T2, and T3 as participants from three public secondary schools in Chandragiri Municipality, Kathmandu. It was used to generate meaning and draw conclusions. For generating meaning from diverse perspectives based on varied lived experiences, the student participants were selected using purposive sampling based on gender: three boys and three girls; ethnicity: two from Brahmin and Chettri, two from Janajati, and two from Dalit; and study level. In the case of level of study, two students with A and above, two with B to A, and two below C + in the first terminal examination. Similarly, the teacher participants were selected purposely: one from English teachers, the next from social studies teachers, and the third one from mathematics teachers. This selection could make in-depth interviews and observations were used as information collection methods. The interviews were recorded and the field notes were captured from both participant and non-participant observation. Then, the information was transcribed for thematic analysis. The researchers in participant observation are actively involved in different activities but in non-participant observation, the researchers just observe

the classroom activities (Given, 2008). Real and precise information comes from participant observation.

### **Discussion of the Finding**

In this section, the themes derived from the information were assessment practice, existing school assessment, validity and reliability of assessment, and assessment in a changing context. They were discussed and interpreted connecting with literature and theory.

#### **Assessment Practice**

The assessment system has not been updated along with the emergence and advancement of various assessment practices. Assessment in education has a crucial role to reflect its status and improve the quality of education as a whole (Alexander, 2000). It reflects both the plus and minus sides in educational policy, management, education delivery, and overall outcomes. And then, it shows the areas to be improved and encouraged. Before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the measurement of intellectual exercise was challenging. It lacks consistency, validity, and reliability. To maintain consistency, multiple-choice question tests were developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Croft & Beard, 2022 as cited in Brown, 2022). As time passes, a variety of assessment tools have been developed and practiced. However, the public schools in Nepal are still following the traditional way of assessment. In the words of T1, “We develop questions for assessment from the given grid consulting old questions”. The teachers are reluctant to develop a new model of assessment and apply it in the class at least for internal assessment. It is not because they are unaware of different assessment models and practices but because they are not supported and encouraged significantly. According to Kanjee (2009), teachers require specific assessment skills to develop assessment tools and apply them effectively. The teachers find “following the traditional trend of assessment easy, economical, and risk-free” (T3). Training and

empowerment for the teachers to develop and apply various assessment tools is necessary for effective assessment practices.

In the context of education, assessment represents the evidence of teaching-learning performance. It is both the tool and process that is used to evaluate and measure students' knowledge, skills, and understanding of a particular subject matter. Teachers believe, "student's answer sheet is the only reliable evidence of their performance" (T5). They have also experienced the ill practices of the paper-pencil tests. Priority on rote learning, teachers' focus on the areas likely to be asked in the written examination, ignorance of hands-on experiences, and cheating and copying from others are some ill practices of written examination. As T3 says, "If we make examination tight, the students write nothing, then they fail the examination and we get complained. So, we ignore minor cheating and copying". Moreover, the paper-pencil tests do not encourage teachers to launch educational activities more creatively and critically and empower students to grow with their potential talents and creativity. The concerned authority has neither empowered the teachers to use newly emerged tools in assessing their students' performance nor made the existing tools (other than paper-pencil tests) reliable.

Effective assessment practices reflect not only the diverse needs and learning styles of students but also the efficiency of the whole program (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). It has an important role in informing the concerned authority about instructional decisions for providing necessary feedback and guiding educational planning. Existing assessment practice is suffering from traditional superficial rote-learning-based assessment. "[We need] less dependence on rote learning, repetitive tests, and a 'one size fits all' type of instruction" (Pellegrino, 2014, p. 2). For this, self-reflective, transparent, and evidence-based assessments that conscientize the learner and empower them to struggle even better than the previous ones are necessary. The assessment which can work transparently and



trustworthily likely a mirror of teaching-learning activities and the whole system has been essential so that it can discourage all the ill-practices and encourage best practices to promote transformative learning, hands-on experiences, and soft skills.

The concerned authority is expected to embrace various assessment tools and support the teachers to make use of them constructively. In the classroom context as Pellegrino (2014) claims, “instructions use various forms of assessment to inform day-to-day and month-to-month decisions about next steps for instruction, to give students feedback about their progress, and to motivate students”. He has described five major features of assessment. One of them is the assessment of higher-order cognitive skills. They are crucial for understanding individuals’ abilities to analyze, synthesize information, and apply knowledge in novel situations. Their assessment evaluates complex mental processes such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and decision-making. In contrast, traditional assessments often focus on lower-order cognitive skills such as memorization and recall. The next feature is a high-fidelity assessment of critical abilities. Students’ critical abilities in collaboration, modeling, problem-solving, and research which are real-life related should be included in the assessment. The third one is the internationally standard benchmark. The assessment should be so rigorous that it can meet international standards in terms of content and performance. The other feature of assessment is the use of instructionally sensitive and educationally valuable items. The instructional sensitivity is defined as “a tendency for an item to vary in difficulty as a function of instruction” (Naumann et al., 2019, p. 42). The last one is validity, reliability, and fairness of assessment. The assessment should measure students’ learning outcomes in such a way that it can reflect students’ accurate learning achievements. In other words, it presents logically or factually sound quality.

Care and Luo (2016) talk about “evidence-based strategies” (p. 45) to assess how transversal competencies are best achieved. Transversal competencies are soft skills (Tam & Trzmiel, 2018) that are practice-based and theoretically guided. Keesing-Styles (2003) focuses on the use of dialogue to assess students’ transversal competencies. Fostering the integration of theory and practices, dialogue makes students’ learning more meaningful. Dialogue-based assessment makes students critically aware and reason-based. “To achieve a critical approach to assessment, it must be centered on dialogic interactions so that the roles of teacher and learner are shared and all voices are validated” (Keesing-Styles, 2003, p. 10). Similarly, “Aristotle wrote about four contexts of reasoning or dialogue frameworks: demonstration, dialectic, contentious reasoning, and misreasoning” (Macagno & Walton, 2007, p. 101). One of them is the demonstration which is interpreted as pedagogical dialogue. The teachers due to their status quo and inept behavior, have not embraced dialogic pedagogy in which the students can interact with the teachers and their peers without any sort of hierarchy. They treat students in the way that “the students if let speak and perform freely, they become rebellious and the classroom becomes chaos” (T5). The teachers’ narrow concept has confined the students to be conscientious and grow with reasoning skills. The next is the dialectic framework. In this framework, the students are encouraged to present their ideas or opinions with reasons or evidence. So, it is reason-based or evidence-based dialogue. However, the teachers treat students as if they are empty vessels for them to fill up with knowledge and information as a teacher says, “We have to explain the topic clearly, give key points for them to prepare for paper-pencil tests” (T4). Such a top-down model of education cannot conscientize and empower critically.

### **Existing School Assessment Practices**

Two types of assessment (formative and summative) are practiced in public schools of Nepal. They are expected to be constructive and evidenced-

based but they are practiced traditionally and confined to assess theory-based learning achievement. Although “National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2063 made a policy regarding the assessment system introducing both types of the assessment system at the school level” (Sapkota, 2022, p. 58), the concerned authority has many more challenges to make them efficient to assess students’ diverse competencies. The formative assessment which could be made student-friendly, evidence-based, and goal-oriented is run traditionally. So, it has lacked reliability and validity as S5 says, “The grading in formative assessment depends on the teachers. It has a high halo effect”. Because of no precise and concise rubrics, the formative assessment lacks transparency and consistency in grading. The assessment is expected to assess what transformative learning took place, what hands-on experiences the students accomplished, and what transversal competencies they achieved; not what theory and information they store in their minds. Sapkota (2022) claims that most school teachers are not utilizing the varied tools of both assessments. The teachers assess students by paper-pencil tests. It is because the teachers choose the comfort zone. “Using varied assessment tools is effortful, time-consuming, and expensive” (T2). Similarly, the students say “What we learn is not important, but how well we wrote in the paper during written examination is important” (T4). Therefore, the concerned authority’s role is to empower and encourage teachers to utilize varied assessment tools for assessing students’ distinct learning outcomes has been essential. Varied assessment tools can be used as a summative assessment but paper-pencil testing has been the dominant assessment tool in the context of Nepal. The summative test is the paper-pencil test (Perry et al., 2022). The formative assessment is neither valued as a summative one nor in the priority of the concerned authority because it is highly affected by the halo effect. It lacks consistency due to no precise and concise transparent rubric. It is in the hands of the teachers who teach the students. It lacks consistency because of no transparent rubric and real

evidence. The next is external assessment. Each of the concerned authorities is aware of the summative assessment which is highly prioritized and widely valued. In contrast, the second one is reliable, valid, and authentic though it cannot measure students' diverse learning achievement. A student's academic status is marked with their score or grade from the external examination which makes students nervous and disheartened (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). The concerned authorities from the policy and management level are expected to empower and encourage the teachers to use varied assessment tools to assess students' transformative learning, hands-on experiences, and soft skills. Similarly, making the assessment valid, reliable, and transparent is equally important.

The formative assessment which is also termed as internal assessment is an ongoing evaluation practice of students' academic performance, skills, and knowledge within educational institutions. It takes place during teaching-learning and provides constructive feedback to improve teaching-learning (Sapkota, 2022). It is conducted by the concerned teachers within the school. Such assessments serve multiple purposes, including gauging student progress, informing instructional decisions, and providing feedback to both students and parents. One of the methods of internal assessment is classroom assessment in which students are assessed through quizzes, tests assignments, and homework. Assessing students on their performance in the roles given provides them with transformative knowledge, hands-on experiences, and life skills. For example, the teacher divides students into different groups, gives each group a task, and guides them to organize a quiz contest program and perform their roles. In such activities, the students collaborate, cooperate, and learn from one another. They, while working become responsible, critical, and reflective. Such learning is essential to nurture students with 21st-century skills (Fadel, 2008). In the words of S1 "Learning through doing ourselves is interesting and easy to gain goals". Similarly, the assessment of project work and presentation is learner-engaged and

includes multiple purposes. The students are assessed both from individual and group project works. From the individual project work, the students are assessed from their demonstration ability to research, analyze, and present information on a given topic. As T2 said, “Students learn better from project work but it is expensive and difficult to manage”. From group project work, their teamwork and communication skills and individual understanding are assessed.

Although we have “no perfect trend of using formative assessment to provide feedback for further improvement” (Sapkota, 2022, p. 63) in Nepal, the teachers have used different methods. One of them is the assessment of student’s participation and performance. In this test, students are asked to apply their knowledge and skills in a context. They demonstrate their competencies by performing or producing something. Based on their performance, they are assessed or graded. Assessment in critical pedagogical education should go beyond traditional measures of knowledge retention. It should transcend the traditional trend of assessment that emphasizes high-stakes testing. As T3 says, “Evaluating students from their performance during the dialogue and discussions is interesting but challenging to maintain consistency”. Teachers also evaluate students on their participation in different activities, for example in discussion, raising questions, or engaging in the roles given. The other method to assess students’ knowledge and skills in subjects like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics is practical assessment. In such methods, students’ hands-on skills are evaluated. The fifth one is peer assignment. In some cases, students are involved in assessing their peers’ work. In this situation, they have fostered a sense of responsibility and provided different perspectives. The last one is the portfolios which serve as a comprehensive and authentic way to evaluate students’ abilities and accomplishments. In this method, evidence of students’ work, achievements, skills, and experiences are collected. The teachers are unfamiliar

with this practice. The formative assessment tools if used constructively and made evidence-based can provide sufficient credentials for summative assessment.

The summative assessment is also known as a traditional or paper-pencil test and is “used to validate learning”(Sapkota, 2022, p. 57). It is an assessment method where students have to sit for a written examination at a scheduled time and answer questions or complete tasks using a pen or pencil on paper. This format has been a common method of evaluating knowledge, skills, and abilities in various educational and professional settings. The test includes different types of questions. Some of them are long/short answer questions, multiple-choice questions, true/false questions, fill in the gaps, etc. Such questions have encouraged students to memorize the content and recall it during the examination as S2 says, “We try our best to memorize through rote learning but very difficult to remember all the points and information”. Despite the wide use of paper-pencil tests for assessment and evaluation, it has some demerits or drawbacks as well. One of them is its limited assessment of skills. It often focuses on assessing memorization and regurgitation of facts rather than deeper understanding or critical thinking skills. The paper-pencil test cannot measure the practical application, creativity, or problem-solving abilities of students. The inability to measure students’ real-world skills is another default of paper-pencil tests. As its primary focus is on student’s ability to solve questions from limited courses or areas of knowledge, it cannot measure real-world skills like communication, teamwork, and adaptability which are essential in day-to-day life. The third one is time constraints. The test increases stress and anxiety among students (Rajendran et al., 2022). They have pressure to remember the contents during examination time. It makes them frightened and frustrated. The other demerit of paper-pencil tests is cheating concerns. As students have difficulty in memorizing all the theoretical knowledge, they look for easy options to write during examinations, for example copying from others or unauthorized materials. Finally, paper-pencil

tests cannot assess students' diverse learning styles. For example, it cannot capture students' ability in hands-on activities or project-based skills. Despite their widespread use, paper-pencil tests have some limitations. They may not effectively measure certain skills, such as hands-on abilities or interactive problem-solving, and scoring can be time-consuming, especially for large-scale assessments. In recent years, technology-based assessments and online testing platforms have become more prevalent, offering alternatives to traditional paper-pencil tests. These digital methods often provide quicker scoring, adaptive testing, and multimedia-rich question formats. The existing practice of high-stakes testing as an assessment tool is not authentic as it suffers from several ill-practices such as cheating, and bias. The assessment becomes authentic when it encourages students to "reflect upon their own 'lived realities' for assessment and learning" (Serrano et al., 2018, p. 9). The use of rubrics maintains consistency while assessing students' performance-based activities.

The practice of liberal promotion policy and the dominant influence of high-stakes testing have borne many ill-practices. To make liberal promotion policy learning-centered and goal-oriented, precise and concise rubrics that can make self-assessment consistent and reliable are necessary. "The focus on self-assessment by students is not common practice" (Black & Wiliam, 2006, p. 25). However, the rubric-based assessment reflects actual teaching learning and encourages both the teacher and students to do their best during classroom activities. Rubrics, according to Chowdhury (2018), "are useful grading tools that add reliability, validity, and transparency to assessment" (p. 25). For this, assessment should evaluate not only students' learning achievement of certain knowledge and skills but also the delivery process of concerned authority and students' learning process to meet the expected goal.

Assessment for being learner-engaged, evidence-based, and goal-oriented requires some practicable qualities. Firstly, the assessment should reflect real-

world scenarios and challenges which can include projects, case studies, and problem-solving tasks that require students to apply critical thinking skills to address complex issues. Secondly, the assessment should incorporate reflective activities and open dialogues as part of the assessment process. The assessment should encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences, articulate their understanding of social issues, and engage in meaningful discussions about their perspectives. Thirdly, the assessment should include socially relevant topics or issues. It encourages curriculum designers to focus on context-based teaching-learning content, teachers to center their classroom activities around existing social issues, and students to critically analyze and question societal norms, structures, and power dynamics. It also helps students connect their learning to broader issues and promotes social awareness. The sixth is collaborative assessments. It fosters collaboration among students by incorporating group projects or collaborative assessments. It promotes the development of teamwork, communication, and shared critical perspectives. The seventh is the inclusion of multiple perspectives. The assessment should assess students' ability to consider multiple perspectives and diverse viewpoints. It can be achieved through assignments that require students to analyze various sources, engage with different cultural contexts, and appreciate diverse viewpoints. The eighth is the encouragement of self-assessment and self-reflection. The education system should develop students' skills to evaluate their progress, recognize their biases, and set goals for personal and intellectual growth. The ninth is the assessment of the process. As main learning takes place during the process of teaching-learning activities, the assessment should reflect the process that students go through in reaching their conclusions. Assessment of student's ability to critically engage with the learning material, question assumptions, and adapt their thinking over time.



### **Validity and Reliability of Assessment**

The ultimate goal of education should be the preparation for life but it has been a part of the preparation for assessment. Valid and reliable assessment is widely accepted and treated similarly. Serrano et al. (2018) highlight that “authentic learning is critical, rational, and transformative” (p. 2). However, the teachers opine that the “paper-pencil test is the only valid and reliable assessment tool” (T4). It is necessary to make learning a part of preparation for life and assessment to reflect the preparation. The teachers are not empowered and encouraged to develop and work with the assessment tools that assess students’ critical understanding, transformative learning, and hands-on experiences. The teachers themselves accept the fact that “Internal assessment has not been accepted so valid, reliable, and standardized as the high-stakes testing” (T5). They if trained and empowered to make an assessment valid and reliable can make use of varied assessment tools strategically and make them as valid and reliable as standardized ones. The assessment that reflects how critical, rational, and transformative the learning is more standardized than the one that reflects theory-based knowledge without transversal competencies. As “reliability is an index that shows the extent to which a measuring instrument is reliable” (Erlinawati & Muslimah, 2021, p. 29), the measuring instrument is widely accepted when it maintains consistency. The measurement or assessment is the same or similar even when they are assessed repeatedly. In the words of Erlinawati and Muslimah (2021), “A test is said to be reliable if the scores obtained by participants are relatively the same despite repeated measurements” (p. 29). A well-designed rubric that is concise, precise, specific, and aligned with the learning objectives of the assessment maintains reliability.

### **Conclusion**

One-size-fits-all type of tests cannot assess students’ diverse talents and promote a sort of hesitancy and abhorrence among students. The assessment

system for assessing students' diverse learning achievement should embrace various assessment tools. In other words, assessment tools should be designed to assess students' real achievement of both academic and transversal competencies as expected from educational activities in the school. For assessing students' transformative knowledge, hands-on experiences, and soft skills, the teachers are required to empower and encourage them to develop and implement various assessment tools. The concerned authorities should promote assessment tools that are learner-engaged, evidence-based, and goal-oriented. By making the tools transparent, consistent, and trustworthy, the ill practices that were the result of paper-pencil tests can be reduced.

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