

## **Evaluation of School Uniform Policy in Turkey: A Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the results of current school uniform policies according to views of stakeholders. Descriptive case study method was used for this study to understand the concerns of the stakeholders about school uniforms. Data was collected through interviews with stakeholders and also reviewing the documents in TOKI Elementary and Middle School. Collected data was analyzed and evaluated to see the impacts of the school uniform on academic achievement, discipline, economical, safety, functionality, personality and self-expression. As a result of the study, almost all students support the free clothes policy in schools but most of the parents, teachers and school administrators support school uniform. Finally, parents' voting should be repeated every year. In addition, dress codes should be determined by school administration and parent-teacher association by taking ideas of parents, students and concerning cultural features of school neighborhood.

**Keywords:** Descriptive case study, school uniform policies, dress codes

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## Introduction

School uniform is a hot debate in many countries for many years. Both proponents and opponents have debated the school uniform policies on different platforms. There are also many scientific researches about school uniform because of its popularity. Some of these studies are described below.

School administrators and teachers, in particular, seem pleased with the outcomes of mandating uniforms, arguing that uniforms foster equality among students and promote better behavior. Overall, they believe the impact of uniforms has been the creation of environments more conducive to academic endeavors and achievement. Proponents suggest that school uniforms will make safer schools and better students. Schools are also made safer with uniforms because it is easier to identify outsiders. Opponents of school uniform policies question whether uniforms really reduce violence in schools and level the playing field. They contend there is no evidence uniforms produce any changes. They also argue that uniforms are an infringement of students' U.S. Constitutional rights (Thompson, 1999).

Educators were most convinced that academic advantages could be linked to obligatory school uniforms, while parents, followed by learners, were significantly less convinced about this. Educators were also quite convinced that school uniforms embraced social benefits, while parents and learners were less convinced about this (Wilken & Aardt, 2012). The results are similar to findings of Thompson (1999).

Sanchez, Yoxsimer & Hill (2012) investigated public middle school students' opinions on the benefits of wearing a school uniform. An overwhelming majority of the students (87%) clearly indicated that they did not like wearing a school uniform. The results are similar to findings of Thompson (1999) and Wilken & Aardt (2012). Generally, educators support the school uniform. On the other hand, students do not like school uniform.

Vopat (2010) recommends that children should be granted a certain amount of free expression in order to develop their substantive expression, and then perhaps we should impose a dress code rather than a strict uniform requirement. Vopat also said that uniforms do not provide claimed benefits like fostering discipline, promoting equality, and increasing overall academic performance. We are in fact doing children a disservice when we implement mandatory school uniform.

Bigger (2006) explains that Muslim women have problems on wearing Islamic head coverings in schools, colleges and universities especially in French and Turkey. While Turkish Government has solved this problem with a legislation of regulation of dress code the problem continues in France.

Happel (2013) sought the relationships between gender, gender performance, and school uniforms in the US especially investigate the significance of skirt-wearing among middle and high school girls. Skirts restrict movement in real ways; wearers must negotiate how they sit, how they play, and how quickly they move. Skirt-wearing, consciously and unconsciously, imposes considerations of modesty and immodesty, in ways that trousers do not.

The research of Gentile & Imberman (2011) identifies the impact of uniforms on student achievement, attendance and behavior from a large urban school district in the southwest United States (LUSD-SW). They found that uniforms generate improvements in attendance in middle and high school. The attendance results are particularly strong for girls. On the other hand there is a little evidence of uniforms having impacts on attendance or disciplinary infractions for elementary students. Moreover, the researcher found little evidence that uniforms have lasting impacts on achievement and discipline.

Using school uniform in United States has been increasing from year to year. In 1996, only 3% of public schools required uniforms. By 2005 uniform adoption had more than quadrupled as it

spread to 14% of public schools (Gentile & Imberman, 2011). According to source of National Center for Education Statistics about 22% of public elementary schools, 19% of middle schools, and 10% of high schools are already required some kind of uniforms for students (McDaniel, 2013).

Bodine (2003) explains the misleading of educational research for social and political purposes by criticizing the research of Brunnsma and Rockquemore (1998). They found statistically significant positive correlation between test scores and uniform use. By generalizing from the single school sector with the opposite correlation, they claimed that uniforms have a negative effect on academic achievement. Ideally, education research implies research in the service of students, teachers, families, and schools. However, far from clarifying an education policy issue, the authors clouded thinking about school clothing by introducing an unfounded claim that student uniforms result in lower achievement. Brunnsma and Rockquemore (2003) reply to Bodine via writing another article and defend themselves. They said they stand by their findings and look forward to future empirical analyses that build on, extend, and challenge what we already know about school uniforms: They will not increase academic achievement.

In Argentina, white smocks, which were adopted as the mandatory dress code around 1910 on the basis of an egalitarian rhetoric, were part of a politics of the body closely tied to Hygienism and linked to ideals of moral and racial purity. White smocks established a homogeneous and austere, monochromatic aesthetics of the school space that quickly identified transgression and indiscipline. In the US, uniforms were used for the schooling of minorities (Native Americans, women) as a way of rigorously training unruly bodies and of learning other aesthetic and bodily dispositions. Recently, urban public schools have adopted uniforms to counter-balance gangs' and rappers' dress codes (Dussel, 2005).

#### History of School Uniform in Turkey

Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 and Westernization efforts were launched in social structure and all government offices. As a result of this, compulsory dress and hat reform was implemented all through the country on 25.11.1925. The reform affected the school dress codes. In 1942, government issued a regulation for school clothes. According to this regulation, students should not be forced to wear different clothes except for hat and school uniform. Until 1970, hat was used in the schools as a part of the school uniform. In 1981, Turkish government regulated the compulsory school dress as black school uniform and white collar in elementary schools. In 1990, the color of school uniform was changed from black to blue. Suit, tie, skirt and white shirt were used for middle and high school students. After 2000, many school decided their own compulsory school uniform (Kahraman & Karacan, 2013).

In 2012, the government issued a new regulation for school clothes. According to this regulation, the government has set some dress codes. Paying attention to dress codes, students were allowed in dressing as they wish. These dress codes are (1) Students cannot wear badge, emblems, symbols, insignias and etc. except for schools' badges and emblems. (2) Students cannot wear clothes which affect the human health negatively and not convenient with the season conditions. (3) Students cannot wear torn, holed and transparent clothes (4) Students cannot wear skirts above the knee, deep slit skirt, short pants, sleeveless T-shirt, sleeveless shirt and shorts and tights which show body line. (5) Students cannot use and dress scarf, beret, hats, bags and similar materials including political symbols, figures and texts. (6) Students cannot make up, and cannot have mustache and beard. Students should come to school uncovered head, clean and undyed hair but female students in religious middle and high schools (imam-hatip schools) can cover their heads in all courses. Female students in regular middle and high schools can cover their heads in only elective Quran course (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığına Bağlı Okul Öğrencilerinin Kılık Kıyafetlerine Dair Yönetmelik, 2012).

These regulations increased public debate. Both proponents and opponents have debated the school uniform policies on different platforms. After all these debates, the government issued a new regulation for school clothes on 08 July 2013. According to this regulation, students cannot be forced

to wear one type dress (uniform) but both school administration and parent-teacher association (PTA) can decide school uniform together by getting the approval of majority of parents. Parents' voting will be repeated every four years. If majority of parents vote free clothes instead of uniform then students can wear whatever they want complying with national dress codes (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığına Bağlı Okul Öğrencilerinin Kılık Kıyafetlerine Dair Yönetmelik, 2012).

Erkan (2003) suggested similar regulation in his research. He explained that it is not easy to say yes or no to decide the uniform or free clothes in the schools. Teachers and school administrators as well as families should be participated to decision process about school uniform or free clothes.

Kahraman & Karacan (2013) conducted a study about free clothes in a public high school. According to this study, researchers found some negative results of the free clothes policy on school and students. Free clothes policy can create a security and control problems in school. In addition, free clothes policy can decrease academic achievement and increase dressing cost for students. Students can tend to undesirable behaviours, grouping, adopt negative role models and create problem in social relationship. The researcher also found some positive results for students, for example, giving importance to personal care, freedom of choice and individual preferences, increasing self-confidence and responsibility.

Akbaba & Konak (2014) explain that as a requirement of our area, free dress policy in schools should be continued although it caused parents to have economic difficulties, took the time of students, and brought-out the rich-poor distinction.

Generally, supporters of school uniforms claim the following advantages of uniforms. Uniforms increase (1) students' academic achievement, provide more (2) discipline and (3) safety. School uniforms are also (4) more economic, (5) functional. Moreover uniforms contribute (6) personality and self-expression. The study looks for the accuracy of these claims in TOKI Elementary and Middle School in Kilis. School applied free dress policy almost 1 year. Later, parents voted the school uniform (81%) in September, 2013. Despite the voting results, school administration do not implemented school uniform policy strictly. While some students come to the school with school uniform others come to the school without uniform or wearing just one part of the uniform. After 2 years experience, I looked for the results of free school clothes policies in TOKI Elementary and Middle School. What has changed in this school?

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the results of current school uniform policies according to views of stakeholders.

Research questions:

- (1) What do stakeholders think about relationship between school uniform and students' academic achievement?
- (2) What do stakeholders think about relationship between school uniform and students' discipline?
- (3) What do stakeholders think about relationship between school uniform and students' safety?
- (4) What do stakeholders think about economic advantages of school uniform?
- (5) What do stakeholders think about functionality of school uniform?
- (6) What do stakeholders think about school uniform in terms of students' personality and self-expression?

### **Method**

I used descriptive case study method for this study because it was helpful to understand the concerns of the stakeholders about school uniforms. Descriptive case study research is better to gather information of a greater depth than would be possible using another methodology such as survey data. Patton (1990) asserts that “qualitative methods permit the researcher to study selected issues in depth and detail; the fact that data collection is not constrained by predetermined categories of analysis contributes to the depth and detail of qualitative data” (p. 165). Merriam (1998) defines a descriptive case study in education as “one that presents a detailed account of the phenomenon” (p. 38). Yin (1994) states that “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Under these definitions, I decided to a descriptive case study in education for this research.

Data was collected through interviews with stakeholders in TOKI Elementary School. I interviewed with 40 students, 10 teachers, 25 parents and 2 school administrators. All interviews were semi-structured. I also reviewed the voting results about school uniform and briefing files of the schools.

### **TOKI Elementary and Middle School**

The case site was chosen as TOKI Elementary and Middle School in Kilis-Turkey because I have already had rapport with school administrators and many teachers. I also have a rapport with many parents because I have been living in the same neighborhood. In addition my 3 children and 6 nephews were going to this school so there was no access problem.

TOKI Primary school was opened in 2009 and located on city centrum of Kilis. The school is a typical elementary and middle school—provides education level for grades 1-4 in the morning and for grades 5-8 in the afternoon in the same building. The school enrolls 450 students in elementary school and 350 students in middle school (TOKI Elementary and Middle School, 2014).

The school building has three floors and includes 24 classrooms, 3 offices, 1 science laboratory, 1 technology classroom, 2 language laboratories, 1 map room, 1 counseling room, 1 room for course materials, 1 teachers’ room, 1 music classroom and 1 school library. In the basement, there is a big bare multipurpose room used on rainy days for physical education, sometimes for theater performances and other social activities. There are football teams, ping pong teams, theater club and music chorus in the school. Moreover, the school has playground space with surrounding wall. Students can play basketball and volleyball there. There are no gym, theatre and art and craft rooms in the school. The school canteen services to students and staffs. It includes course materials (notebooks, pen, pencil and so on), some chocolates, gums, crackers, coke and etc. There are no disable restrooms and elevators in the school (TOKI Elementary and Middle School, 2014).

There are 40 teachers working in the school (16 in elementary and 24 in middle school). In addition, there are 1 school administrator and 2 assistant school administrators working in the school. One consultant teacher works in the school to help students with their educational, social and physiological problems. There are three employees working in the school (TOKI Elementary and Middle School, 2014).

As all schools in the country, the school uniform was used in TOKI Elementary and Middle School until 2012. After that, the government issued a new regulation for school clothes. Paying attention to dress codes, students were allowed in dressing as they wish.

Education Ministers, Ömer Dinçer, said that until so far, authoritarian structure put pressure on our students. The new policies about free school clothes increase students' self-confidence and support democratic structure. (Ministry of National Education, 2013)

According to the new regulation, free dress policy was implemented in TOKI Elementary and Middle School for 1 year. Later, the government issued a new regulation for school clothes on 08 July 2013. According to this regulation, parents voted the free dress policy in September, 2013 and school uniform was accepted with the votes of 81% of parents. In the same way, all schools in Kilis City accepted the school uniform, except for Science High School. Despite these voting results, administration of TOKI Elementary and Middle School do not implemented school uniform policy strictly. While some students come to the school with school uniform others come to the school without uniform or wearing just one part of the uniform. After 2 years experience, I looked for the impacts of free dress policy in TOKI Elementary and Middle School. What has changed in this school? I shared my findings and discussion below.

### Results and Discussion

Tablo 1. Stakeholders' Views about School Uniform

|                                 |           | Increase<br>Achievement | Support<br>Discipline | Support<br>Safety | Economic<br>al | Functiona<br>l | Personalit<br>y and self-<br>expressio<br>n |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|---|
| Students<br>(40)                | Agree     | 2                       | 3                     | 11                | 13             | 1              | 1   |
|                                 | Undecided | 2                       | 2                     | 9                 | 8              | 2              | 1   |
|                                 | Disagree  | 36                      | 35                    | 20                | 19             | 37             | 38  |
| Parents<br>(25)                 | Agree     | 15                      | 18                    | 18                | 17             | 12             | 7   |
|                                 | Undecided | 3                       | 2                     | 2                 | 3              | 5              | 2   |
|                                 | Disagree  | 7                       | 5                     | 5                 | 5              | 8              | 16  |
| Teachers<br>(10)                | Agree     | 6                       | 7                     | 7                 | 7              | 6              | 1   |
|                                 | Undecided | 2                       | 1                     | 2                 | 2              | 2              | 1   |
|                                 | Disagree  | 2                       | 2                     | 1                 | 1              | 2              | 8   |
| School<br>Administrators<br>(2) | Agree     | 0                       | 2                     | 2                 | 2              | 1              | 0   |
|                                 | Undecided | 0                       | 0                     | 0                 | 0              | 0              | 0   |
|                                 | Disagree  | 2                       | 0                     | 0                 | 0              | 1              | 2   |

### Academic Achievement

Most of the parents and teachers believe that school uniforms increase academic achievement (see table 1).

Students will focus on what to wear instead of focusing on tomorrow's lesson. I think that school uniform was helpful and contributes students' academic achievement (Parent, male, 45 years old).

Students can be more proud of themselves with school uniform. Children with school uniforms feel themselves more student and concentrate more their lessons (Fourth grade teacher, male, 30 years old).

In contrary to parents and teachers, the school administrators do not believe that school uniforms increase students' achievement.

According to our national high school entrance exam results, there are no significant differences about our students' academic achievement for a few years. I believe that school uniforms do not effect students' achievements (School administrator, 40 years old.).

Almost all students do not like school uniform and they do not believe that school uniforms increase their achievement.

I feel more comfortable and better myself when dressing up as I wish so I can concentrate my lesson better. I think, free dress policy can increase my academic achievement (7th grade student, female).

Kahraman & Karacan (2013) found that free clothes policy can decrease academic achievement. According to Wilken & Aardt (2012), educators were most convinced that academic advantages could be linked to obligatory school uniforms, while parents, followed by learners, were significantly less convinced about this. Thompson, (1999) found that school administrators and teachers believe that school uniforms create environments more conducive to academic endeavors and achievement. In contrary to these findings, most of the parents in TOKI Elementary and Secondary School believe that school uniform contribute students' academic achievement (See table 1).

### **Discipline**

School administrators, most of the parents and teachers believe that school uniforms support discipline activities because students' dressing style can effect their behaviours (See table 1).

I think, school uniforms help us to keep discipline in the school. There is a strong relationship between students' behaviours and what they wear. If students wear like a punk generally behave like a punk. School uniforms are serious dress and students with uniform show more positive behaviours. The uniform can decrease in fights among students (Teacher, male, 42 years old).

Students do not believe that school uniforms provide discipline in the school. They believe that nothing changed in the school discipline after free dress policy (See table 1).

I don't believe that school uniform contributes discipline in school but school administrators and teachers think that they keep discipline when they force us to wear school uniform (Female student, grade 8).

Kahraman & Karacan (2013) found that students with free clothes can tend to undesirable behaviours, grouping, adopt negative role models and create problem in social relationship. Recently, some urban public schools have adopted uniforms to counter-balance gangs' and rappers' dress codes in United States (Dussel, 2005). Except for students, school administrators, most of the parents and teachers in TOKI Elementary and Secondary School believe that school uniforms support discipline activities (See table 1).

### **Safety**

Except for students, school administrators, most of the parents and teachers in TOKI Elementary and Secondary School believe that school uniforms contribute school safety (See table 1). They worry about school safety because of free dressing policy. They think any intruders can come to the school and damage to their children.

I think free dressing policy is not a good idea. Free dressing application can create a problem to recognize children if they are our students or not. Uniforms certainly help us to recognize any intruders who come into the school. After free dressing policy, some drug dealers can come to school garden or our classrooms. How can we solve this problem? We can also recognize our students outside of the school with school uniform. If we see their misbehaviour we can warn them (Assistant school principal, 38 years old).

In the study of Thompson (1999) proponents believe that school uniforms will make safer schools and better students. Schools are also made safer with uniforms because it is easier to identify outsiders. Kahraman & Karacan (2013) found that free clothes policy can create a security and control problems in school.

### **Economical**

Except for students, school administrators, most of the parents and teachers in TOKI Elementary and Secondary School believe that free dressing policy bring extra cost for parents. They think students are competitive with each other in trendy so they do not support free dressing policy (See table 1).

I think school uniforms contribute to the budget of the parents. Without school uniform, students demand more and variety new dress from their parents and they want to wear something different every day. School uniforms can help to banish fashion wars (Parent, 27 years old).

On the other hand, some stakeholders think differently. They believe that school uniform policy bring extra cost for parents.

Children has already some clothes used in street they can use the same clothes in their schools. Everyone's financial situation may not be good. Parents are asked to pay money for school uniform but some parents can not afford to pay this money. Most of the parents voted in favor of school uniform. I and my children support free dress policy but voting will be repeated after four years. Then my children will be graduated. I think four years is too long. Voting should be repeated every year because every year 25% of parents are changed (Parent, female, 28 years old).

Except for students, most of the stakeholders believe that after free dressing policy, the differences between poor and rich students in school are to be displayed more clearly.

Free dressing policy can create class differences among children. Poor students who wear cheap clothes would be exposed teasing of friends (School administrator, 40 years old).

The question "What am I gonna wear to school tomorrow" will arise at home. This will force low-income families. Competition will begin among children (Teacher, female, 26 years old).

On the other hand, some stakeholders do not believe that free dressing in school would be a problem among students because phones, shoes, watches, bags and such products already make feel differences.

Students come to school from the same neighborhood. They already know and see each other on the street. After the school they play together in their neighborhood. Everyone knows each other's economic status. So I do not think that poor students have problem with free dressing policy (Parent, 42 years old).

Kahraman & Karacan (2013) found that free clothes policy can increase dressing cost for students. Akbaba & Konak (2014) suggest that as a requirement of our area, free dress policy in schools should be continued although it caused parents to have economic difficulties, took the time of students, and brought-out the rich-poor distinction.

### **Functionality**

Except for students, school administrators, most of the parents and teachers in TOKI Elementary and Secondary School support school uniform explaining its functionalities.

School uniforms are useful to eliminate choice-related stress. The uniforms save time. Children do not think what to wear in the morning. They wear their uniform and go directly to the school. Moreover, Teachers can identify their students easier (Teacher, male, 36 years old).

On the other hand, almost all students believe that free dress policy is more functional.

We are active children and school uniform is not comfortable for us. Using tie, shirt, jacket, shoes are not comfortable and practical for us. Instead of the school uniform, t-shirts, jeans, sports shoes are more casual and comfortable dress for us. In addition, we are very hot during the summer or very cold in winter with school uniform (6<sup>th</sup> grade student, male).

School uniform is not good aesthetically. Adults decide what young people to wear. I do not have to dress up according to their pleasure. Everybody has a self-pleasure in dressing. Students should not be forced to dress up to according to somebody's pleasure (Female student, 8<sup>th</sup> grade).

Some parents and teachers also support students and believe that free dress policy is more functional.

I think using free dress policy is good but delayed application. When I was a student I did not like the uniform. When I came home, my first job was to remove school uniform. Mostly, I began to remove my uniform on the road. I do not think other students like uniform (Parent, male, 38 years old).

Sanchez, Yoxsimer & Hill (2012) investigated public middle school students' opinions on the benefits of wearing a school uniform. An overwhelming majority of the students (87%) clearly indicated that they did not like wearing a school uniform. The study in TOKI Elementary and Secondary School has the same findings.

### **Personality and Self-Expression**

Most of the students, teachers, parents and school administrators believe that free dress policy contribute students' personality and self-expression.

If compulsory school uniform conflicts with the child's inner world these children feel uncomfortable psychologically. Students want to dress up how they want to be perceived. School uniforms prevent students' self-expression and individuality. Mevlana who is an Islamic thinker said that "Either be as you seemed or seem as you are". There is a relationship between people's inner world and outer appearance. If people's dressing reflects their inner world people can feel happier (Parent, female, 46 years old).

What about student individuality? We should support student individuality and encourages diversity. Students feel unique if they wear clothes of their choice. If they wear school uniform they feel the same as all the students (Teacher, female, 35 years old).

In the first days, students were not adapted to free dress policy. They were confused such as what wore, how wore, where did they get, looks good on or not but over time they get used to these changes and clothing debate are decreasing day by day (School administrator, male, 40 years old).

We should have the freedom to choice. Our clothes are extremely important in our daily lives. School administrators and teachers should not force us for school uniform (Male student, 7<sup>th</sup> grade).

Some students want to wear clothes according to their religious requirement in the school for example head scarf or long skirt. They want to cover the most of their bodies. On the other hand compulsory school uniform policy does not allowed to do it. Bigger, S. (2006) explains that Muslim women have problems on wearing Islamic head coverings in schools.

Students who cannot wear according to their religious requirement feel unhappy. This situation affects students' approach to school and their academic achievement negatively. Students cannot be forced to wearing in contrary to their beliefs (Parent, male, 48 years old).

I think using free dress policy is good but not enough. Using scarf should be allowed in middle and high school. Existing application in headscarf is contrary to human rights. Students should

have the right to choose. We should not interfere with their lifestyle (Teacher, male, 33 years old).

On the other hand, some stakeholders believe that school uniform is useful to teach them how to dress formally for example in meetings or work places. School uniforms give students a sense of belonging and teach them.

Dressing style also is a way to reflect people's personality and give non-verbal messages to others. Sometimes, students can give undesirable messages around them with their dressing. For example, gang connections or advocacy for other illegal activities (School administrator, 40 years old).

Kahraman & Karacan (2013) found that some positive results for students, for example, giving importance to personal care, freedom of choice and individual preferences, increasing self-confidence and responsibility. Vopat, M. C. (2010) recommends that children should be granted a certain amount of free expression in order to develop their substantive expression, then perhaps we should impose a dress code rather than a strict uniform requirement.

### **Recommendations**

Policies establishing dress codes for public school students are not the same as policies regarding uniforms: Dress codes generally determine what students cannot wear to school, while policies for uniforms specify what a student must wear while in school (McDaniel, 2013). Instead of using school uniform, dress codes can be used in the schools. Dress codes give opportunities to children what to wear.

In current application, students cannot be forced to wear one type dress (uniform) but both school administration and parent-teacher association (PTA) can decide school uniform together by getting the approval of majority of parents. If majority of parents vote free clothes instead of uniform then students can wear whatever they want complying with national dress codes determined by educational ministry. Parents' voting will be repeated every four years.

Current regulation about school uniform is good but parents' voting should be repeated every year. If majority of parents vote free dress policy then dress codes should be determined by parent-teacher association by taking ideas of parents, students and concerning cultural features of school neighborhood. They can describe undesirable clothes (dress codes) and make students free to dress up whatever they want. Dress codes can be updated considering difficulties in practice.

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