School improvement and the role of
district education officials in South Africa

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Abstract
This paper is based on small-scale, pilot research aimed at identifying key issues experienced by district level officials in South Africa in their efforts to support school leaders and teachers in raising standards of pupil achievement. The research was funded by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy. Its purpose was to facilitate initial project planning and development of a more extensive project to be undertaken in the future.

Managing the improvement of education is currently a prominent issue in South Africa. Large class sizes, high pupil-teacher ratios, poor quality facilities and lack of book and classroom provision characterise schooling for the poorest, black sectors of the population. In addition, district education officials work with limited resources and facilities and are expected to manage a high level of monitoring and support for primary and secondary schools in their areas. The research reported here attempts to discover officials’ views and opinions about the demands and challenges of their role and how they mediate government policy in their efforts to contribute to school improvement and raise standards of pupil achievement.

Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews of four education administrators and one headteacher in two provinces in South Africa. Data analysis is based on grounded theory using thematic analysis. The focus of the interviews enabled participants to talk through and reflect on their current roles in education in South Africa.

The findings indicate that district officials work within highly centralised, administrative procedures that are overly bureaucratic and, it can be argued, tend to be alienating and coercive rather than enabling. The research reported here, therefore, raises questions about how much support education officials are able to provide whilst working in such a restrictive administrative environment. Finally, suggestions are included for further research into the role of the district official in the South African education system.

Key words: South Africa; district officials; dysfunctional; accountability; bureaucracy; monitoring.
**Introduction**

This paper is based on small-scale, pilot research aimed at identifying key issues experienced by district level officials in South Africa in their efforts to support school leaders and teachers in raising standards of pupil achievement. The research was funded by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy. Its purpose was to facilitate initial project planning and development of a more extensive project to be undertaken in the future.

**South African context**

District education offices are the management and administrative units that operate between schools and the provinces in South Africa. They play an important role in the monitoring and administrative procedures that translate central policy into strategies at local and school levels. Policy development and co-ordination for education remain centralised, but the management and financing of schools is devolved to the nine provincial governments. This has led to a situation where provincial governments have not had the resources to ensure that initiatives developed at the centre have been fully and successfully realised in local areas (Lemon, 2008: 110). This has been exacerbated by the complexities of the administrative structures put in place to support the country’s schools. Part of those structures include the 52 districts, which are the rough equivalent of counties in the UK, with populations of between 6,000 to around just under 4 million inhabitants.

In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, for example, there are 12 districts which in turn are divided into 41 areas referred to as ‘circuits’, each with its own manager. Within a circuit are a number of wards and in KZN there are 201 wards. Each ward has a ward manager who is responsible for around 30 to 40 schools.

The research reported here is primarily focused on the role of the ward manager.

**The ward manager**

The ward managers who were interviewed as part of this research worked as district officials who had responsibility for a number of schools in their ward. They were
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responsible for the administration of the schools and according to one of the ward managers interviewed for this research, were expected to:

- ensure that the schools were functioning well;
- ensure that the schools met the legislative requirements laid down by the provincial department of education and central government;
- support the principals in terms of school leadership, management and development;
- assist the school management teams in drawing up the school policies;
- ensure that all the departments within those schools were fully functional;
- assist the school managers with learner admissions and learner progression;
- ensure that there was a fair treatment of all the members within the schools, that is, the workers, the staff and the learners;
- service the school governing bodies.

Ward managers appear to spend most of their time visiting schools, but often the distance between schools can be quite substantial, sometimes up to a hundred miles. In a typical week, they would spend up to 4 days visiting different schools and then at the end of the week they would be in the office ‘doing the paperwork’.

They are the ‘Jack of all trades in the department’ but they play a pivotal role in the structures that support and monitor the performance and improvement of South Africa’s public and independent schools. However, managing the improvement of education is currently a prominent issue in South Africa. Large class sizes, high pupil-teacher ratios, poor quality facilities and lack of book and classroom provision characterise schooling for the poorest, black sectors of the population (Plowright and Plowright, 2008). Such schools are often dysfunctional. They are schools where ‘teachers do not always conform to overt forms of regulation, such as arriving on time and keeping to school hours, or adhering to nationally devised curriculum planning and assessment requirements’ (Christie, 2010: 707).

A question put to the minister of Basic Education in the National Council of Provinces, South Africa’s second chamber, in June 2010, asked whether any schools were found to be dysfunctional in 2009 (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2010). The answer was 506 schools. In addition, the report identified a number of factors to have
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contributed to the reported underperformance of the schools. It is worth including these, paraphrased, in full:

1. The lack of leadership by principals, including lack of management competences and lack of supervision of the work of teachers and learners.
2. School management teams which do not understand their roles and responsibilities and are unable to monitor curriculum delivery in schools.
3. Vacant and unfilled teacher posts.
4. Prevalence of teacher absenteeism, limited teaching and contact time and lateness.
5. Learners’ absenteeism and truancy, drug and alcohol abuse, ill discipline, and teenage pregnancy and lateness.
6. Poor curriculum planning at the level of the school.
7. Teachers subject knowledge gaps.
8. Lack and/or shortage of textbooks and relevant learning and teaching support materials.
9. Lack of support from the school governing bodies and parents.

The reply also noted that district support of schools was, in places, inadequate.

During the apartheid years, there was an erosion of the culture of learning and studying in township secondary schools, resulting in poorly motivated students leading to repeated poor exam results, which continued even after the establishment of the new democratic government in South Africa in 1994 (Masitsa, 2008: 86). Because of the funding mechanisms within the education system, many schools even now can offer only the smallest salaries and, so for many years now, have attracted less motivated and poorly qualified teachers. Further, it is well known that more affluent schools, including the former model C (white) schools, are able to supplement state funding with higher school fees that, for example, can be used to pay for additional teachers. In addition, principals in South African schools do not receive adequate preparation or training in financial and human resource management, especially in poor, socially and economically deprived rural areas which lack infrastructure such as roads, electricity, sanitation and an effective transportation system (Singh and Gumbi, 2009). So, the discrimination and the disadvantage continue, with the potential now for social class to gradually replace
race as the distinguishing feature of advantage in the education system (Lemon, 1994: 97).

Chinsamy (2002) argues that the failure to implement policies developed centrally has been regarded as the primary reason for the failure of transformation in South African education and responsibility for this lies at the door of the district office. This may be an unfair accusation, given the overwhelming and debilitating history of the political, social and economic inequalities and disadvantages that the majority of the SA population has suffered. Such 'vast backlogs of the apartheid legacy, combined with modest economic growth, precluded and continue to preclude, transformation of schools serving historically disadvantaged groups' (Lemon, 2008: 131). Recent public service strikes in South Africa, in 2010, including the education service, represent a growing dissatisfaction from workers about the poor level of professional recognition and financial support they receive from central government (The Economist, 26-8-10). In addition, central government initiatives are characterised by 'Policy as symbolism as opposed to practice' (Soudien, 2007: 452) and therefore can not achieve what they were designed for. Currently, therefore, district officials work with limited resources and facilities and are expected to manage a high level of monitoring and support for primary and secondary schools in their areas. Further, and inevitably, in any education system there will be tensions between efforts aimed at school development and improvement and those aimed at inspecting and evaluating school performance. In other words, there will be issues around how officials go about their work of 'assuring accountability but also of ensuring development' (Plowright, 2007: 375). Perhaps surprisingly, therefore, given the potential importance of the district education offices, there has been a limited amount of research reported about the part played by districts in attempting to address the difficulties the South African education system experiences. The research reported here, therefore, begins the process of discovering how district officials mediate government policy that demands a high level of external monitoring of school functionality and their contribution to raising standards of pupil achievement and improving schools.

**Methodology**
The research strategy and design were based on Plowright’s (2011) FraIM. There is not the space here to include a detailed explication of the FraIM and how it
conceptualises the research process, nor is there an opportunity to detail each component of the FraIM, but the practicalities involve:

- asking clear research questions within identified professional, theoretical and policy contexts;
- using appropriate sampling procedures supported by an effective data source management strategy;
- employing systematic methods of data collection determined by degree of structure;
- generating numerical and/or narrative empirical data;
- selecting evidence from the analysed data;
- arriving at provisional, warrantable inferences aimed at addressing the initial research question(s);
- working within a participant-centred ethicality;
- using an explanatory, integrated philosophical paradigm.

Participants and methods of data collection
Data collection was based on semi-structured interviews of four education administrators, ward managers, in two provinces in South Africa and one head teacher from one of those provinces. Respondents were contacted during visits to South Africa in 2009 and 2010. Data source management was based on case study and selection of respondents was by means of both convenience and purposive sampling (Plowright, 2011).

Data analysis employed a grounded theory approach that emphasised theme analysis (Charmaz, 2006) rather than the overall research strategy or design (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The focus of the interviews enabled participants to talk through and reflect on their current roles working in the education sector in South Africa. The interviews generated just over five hours of digital recording and just under 41,000 words of transcription. The analysis of data was undertaken using the software package Atlas ti.

Findings
Despite the small number of interviewees in the research, it was possible to identify a number of themes that emerged from the data. These themes appeared to be
import important for how the participants felt about their role as a ward manager or were seen as issues for the head teacher interviewed. The themes are listed below:

- Bureaucracy as obstacle
- Monitoring school performance
- Tensions between school plans and government policies
- The challenges of supporting schools
- Poor teachers and teaching and their impact on student learning
- Principals and school management team issues
- Financial difficulties
- The governing body

For purposes of this paper only the first two, listed above, will be reported on. In the account below, the ward managers are referred to as WM1, WM2 and WM3; the deputy district director as DD and the headteacher as HT.

**Bureaucracy as obstacle**

The disempowering effects of the obstacles that bureaucratic procedures present appear to be experienced by those interviewed for this research. One of the ward managers complained that there was too much bureaucracy, saying:

> You know, when you look at the structure of the department, the provincial and national, then it is too bureaucratic. (WM1)

There are occasions when delays frustrate the smooth running of the administrative procedures. One of the ward managers interviewed gave an example:

> For instance, with the payment of educators, when we employ an educator, hey, it takes a long time! The school must submit to the ward manager, the ward manager to the circuit, the circuit to the district director. Then, people are signing, and then we take it to the service centre [in the province], then the payment is in. The service centre must then request that the head office pay the district… (WM1)

Another ward manager believed that poor administration had a detrimental effect on the reputation of the district education office:

> I had a case, where one teacher assaulted a child. The case was reported to the department but it took about almost two years for that teacher to be charged. Now the department becomes a laughing stock here. Most of the
teachers, they say that we are just a harmless dog, we bark but we don’t bite. (WM2)

The administrative procedures appear to be highly controlled and centralised, relatively rigid and inflexible and based on a hierarchical authority structure underpinned by a powerfully strict regulatory function (Bush, 2011). Even within the district director’s office there are frustrations, as the following shows, described by a deputy director. The deputy’s main task was to co-ordinate the work of the ten sub-directories in the district and this also included managing the financial resources for staff development to meet school development plans. They explained:

Last week, we were invited to a meeting from the schools development fund. Some funds are devolved to the district for training and staff development mainly. That was last week, October. You are talking about one point eight million Rand (c£140,000). It is not deposited in the bank account of the district. The district does not have a bank account. It’s something that you have to requisition elsewhere, in order to access the funds…Because of the time frame, it means by the end of this year none of the funds will be used. (DD)

However, there were ways of mitigating the bureaucratic obstacles that got in the way of getting things done in the district office. The deputy director believed that:

It becomes easier if, in the director’s office, there’s someone who is a deputy director as well. Then, if you liaise with that person, then at least it will be easier because you are the same level and your frustrations are the same, so you talk the same language. And it might fast track the process of getting what you want from the office, but otherwise most of the initiatives are frustrated by the fact that there is a long line of people that you have to write to, before you get what you want. (DD)

There were other ways of getting things done. The headteacher revealed that:

At every level there is a problem, so you that is on the ground, you are hurt the most…I know of principals who do go and sit there in the regional office, and they don’t move. Solve my problem. I had to do that here…they react immediately. I said if you don’t solve it, then I will be going to the newspaper or my governing body will. (HT)

Ward manager WM1 gave a, perhaps trivial, example of the bureaucratic procedure that had to be followed because the district offices did not have the delegated authority to make even small financial decisions. The manager explained:

There is no money in the districts. The districts can only requisition from the head office, so…if they need catering, just catering for tea, you will send a thing to sign, just so that you can get tea. Just say that we were having a
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meeting...you must requisition in advance, almost 21 days. You just need a small amount of money, just to run a small workshop, then it will take 21 days...so people have it without tea. (WM1)

The head teacher interviewed as part of the research was asked how much contact they had with the district office. They answered:

Not very much but we have with our circuit office. We have twenty three schools and then we have our circuit manager. We really go to her. Whatever problems we have, we address it with her and then she takes it up further to the region...where she has tried so hard and not getting anywhere. (HT)

It appears then, that the participants interviewed for this research struggle at times to overcome the inertia they experience as a result of the bureaucratic procedures in the South African education system. As the head teacher explained:

The ideas are there, but the implementation, because we have, as South Africans, very good policies, the implementation is the big challenge. (HT)

Finally, ward manager WM1 acknowledged that education in South Africa, compared to other countries, had many difficulties to overcome. They were hopeful that it would improve, although they knew it would not be easy:

This is going to take time, there is a shortage of resources. There are some schools that are managing there without electricity. How can the school function without electricity? (WM1)

The bureaucratic procedures identified in this section hardly appear to be enabling mechanisms and are more akin to the coercive formalisation referred to by Adler and Borys (1996). From their typology of organisational structures, the culture within which school and district officials work appears to be closely aligned with a ‘Mechanistic’ organisational form. This is characterised by a high level of formalisation and a coercive type of formalisation. In the former, formalisation ‘undermines employees’ commitment and fosters dissatisfaction...[and] also limits innovation’ (p63). In the latter, ‘procedures are designed to force reluctant compliance and to extract recalcitrant effort’ (p69). This can be seen more explicitly in the monitoring of school performance by district officials

The monitoring of school performance
An important function of the district office in the South African education system is to monitor delegated school-based management. It appears, however, that the main
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focus of the monitoring process relies on checking that the school is following, almost
mechanistically, the administrative procedures handed down by central government.
However, due to pressure of time and resources, district officials usually only check
and monitor those schools that are under-performing, which is measured by the
schools’ examination results. As one ward manager put it:

>You can only tell a good school by the results that the school produces.
(WM2)

The deputy district director explained that schools are expected to achieve a 60% pass rate overall and any school falling short of 60% is deemed to be failing:

>That 60% pass is the 60% pass at the end of the year, but it consists of the continuous assessment throughout the year plus the exams they sit at the end of the year. (DD)

One ward manager explained the main tasks that district officials are expected to carry out:

>One of my roles as the ward manager, my core function is management…checking that the school is functioning generally, coming into school on time, that teaching and learning is taking place, that all the documents are there…specifically, we are also managing curriculum instruction…teaching and learning, that is our core business. To check whether learners are being taught appropriately. (WM1)

On being asked how the checking process is undertaken, they explained:

>It is things that are there in the documents. We would check the resources, we would check the curriculum, under the curriculum we check timetables and we check policies and we check staffing…whether the vacancies are filled by qualified teachers, or filled by unqualified teachers. And then we also check the functioning of the school governing body, we monitor how the school governing body functions. (WM1)

So, how is the functioning of the school governing body (SGB) monitored? This required ensuring that the documentary records of meetings and minutes were available. But did the officials attend the SGB meetings?

>No, we don’t go to the meetings, unless there is a problem, no when we get to there, because the school governing body must have at least 3 - 4 meetings a year, we check whether they have these meetings, and other special meetings. So we check the minutes. (WM1)
Perhaps it is not surprising that an important task for an education official or administrator is to ensure that a record of events, meetings and discussions are maintained. The issue here, however, is whether or not the amount and type of administration operates as an enabling device or creates obstacles to making a contribution to the effectiveness of the education service. There is some evidence from this pilot research, including anecdotal accounts, that the administrative procedures create almost *overwhelming* difficulties to developing good, professional practice in South African schools. The deputy director pointed out:

> Even us, we have a lot of paper that we have to complete. We have to complete the forms, and we have to complete the meetings and we need to keep the minutes and it really takes time to do that. So I would say that there is lots of paperwork. (DD)

However, the deputy director also argued that there was a need for record keeping when visits to schools were made:

> You cannot just be satisfied with talking to the principal or the head of department and he or she telling us that this is what we do. We need some evidence, something that we can take away with us...[so] we do insist that there has to be something that is submitted to the office, or that is kept as a record at school, so that when we visit the school we are able to check what it is that they are doing. (DD)

However, it seems that the procedures are open to misuse:

> Most of the time when schools submit, they submit like perfect records, records which show that they are coping and doing well, but when you get to the school you find that it is different. (DD)

This applies to the planning process, which is an integral part of the management procedures that a principal will be responsible for. Again, the deputy director pointed out:

> But you do catch people sometimes, and find that this person just changed the date. At the beginning of the year, all schools have to draw their improvement plans, turn-around plans. How they are going to improve. There are certain cases where you will find that the school has just changed the year on the top, but when you go through this plan then the dates do not match the days with the current year. (DD)

It appears that there is limited opportunity for district officials to monitor and evaluate classroom practice in schools. This is left to the principal, but according to one ward manager, ‘They usually do not check what is happening in the classroom’ (WM3).
This means there is a lack of external accountability procedures which would enable both cross-school comparisons to be made and collaborative working to be undertaken. Not surprisingly, perhaps, protocols have to be followed and visits to schools arranged in advance when classroom visits are made. One ward manager explained:

*If I want to visit a class, I make an appointment. I will come on this date and say this is what I want to see. Because we also have the unions and we have to conform to them.* (WM3)

Again, however, the focus is not on teaching and learning but checking procedures and management issues:

*When I go there, I check on the timetable. Any teacher who is not in class at that time, I then request him, unless there is a specific focus, unless like I say, okay, I want to check maths. I want to check natural science for example, then I will make an appointment.* (WM3)

If classroom visits are made, there is a sense of duty and awareness of the importance of classroom practice:

*Yes, I believe that we will not be doing justice if we only go to the school and only end up in the office, because the main business of the school is in the classroom. Even myself, sometimes I go to the classroom, with the principal.* (WM2)

Again, however, the visit does not incorporate any observation of teaching and learning. When the ward manager is in the classroom:

*I normally just greet them [the pupils] and then I will maybe just choose one or two of the learners that I will speak to, and will speak directly to them. I have not stayed in the classrooms for more than ten minutes…*it is not my job. (WM2)

There is the underlying assumption, and expectation, that the school principal and heads of department will take responsibility for classroom observation and evaluation of learning and teaching. In other words, support for learning and teaching is a leadership responsibility. Indeed, it is mandated by the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) (Bush et al, 2010) which provides appraisal for teachers, with the main objective being ‘to ensure quality public education for all and to constantly improve the quality of learning and teaching’ (Education Labour Relations Council, 2003: 3). However, the IQMS has come under some criticism. For example, it is a paper-driven system that takes up too much time and its
implementation has not been managed well nor funded adequately (Bisschoff and Mathye, 2009). In addition, the underlying principles and their procedures create a conflict between ‘the politics of accountability and the development of human resources’ (Weber, 2005: 67), unlike the teacher-owned, self-sustaining form of professional development, that supports the improvement of teachers’ classroom practice (Ono and Ferreira, 2010).

These points raise questions about how teachers should be supported, and not just monitored and evaluated, in the classroom. It also assumes, perhaps, that there is an agreement about what the characteristics of a successful and effective school are. With this in mind, ward manager P was asked if there was a common understanding among educators about what schools should be doing to ensure their effectiveness. P claimed that there was some form of agreement but the problems lay in knowing how to bring about that improvement, to achieve effectiveness, saying:

*The problem lies with [implementation]. I believe that if we want all schools to be functional…the question is how do we make them…functional? Then the question is: where and how are we going to come together, what are we going to do as ward managers? This is what we are going to do. As governors, this is what we are going to do. We then put all those plans together and we come up with one document. So we’ll know, so I will know as a ward manager. I will know what the others are doing. I will know what the governors unit is doing. I will know what all of the managers are doing. But, as it is now, there isn’t such a thing. What we are doing, nobody knows what we’re doing.* (WM2)

The ward manager’s final words appear to provide a summary of the main difficulty that officials face in the South African education system. The lack of co-ordination and the absence of any real, sustainable collaboration are proving additional obstacles to district officials who have a pivotal role to play in developing the country’s education provision.

**Conclusions**

The small scale pilot research reported here suggests that district officials are committed and dedicated professionals working in the education sector of South Africa. They are struggling against the legacy of the apartheid years that discriminated against African schools that served economically and politically impoverished communities. The officials work with limited resources and facilities and are expected to manage a high level of monitoring and support for primary and
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secondary schools in their areas. The difficulties are exacerbated by having to work within highly centralised administrative procedures that are overly bureaucratic and tend to be alienating and coercive rather than enabling and supportive (Adler and Borys, 1996). Therefore, the research raises questions about the level of contribution district education officials can make to school improvement and raising standards, whilst working in such a restrictive, administrative environment.

Prew (2009) argues that school development and improvement needs to be focused on raising levels of functionality. Although not reported in this paper, the district officials mentioned on a number of occasions that they were responsible for a number of schools in their area which were clearly dysfunctional. In fact, one ward manager acknowledged that ‘most of the schools in the district, they are dysfunctional, so it becomes so difficult for the ward manager now to assist’ (WM2). To work with such schools is not easy task and it is difficult to detect whether or not the interviewees in this research were optimistic about the future. The obstacles must, at times, appear insurmountable.

This article has looked at the type of bureaucratic system that education officials work with. It has not mentioned a host of other issues that the education system and structures are beset with. One of those is the leadership and management of teaching and learning. This might include the relatively recently introduced learner-centred Outcomes Based Education (OBE), which is creating difficulties for schools, educators and administrators (Onwu and Mogari, 2004). There has been limited confidence that its introduction will improve the quality of education and make a contribution to transforming South African schools (Botha, 2002). Further, there is limited material for professional practitioners on the management of teaching and learning in South Africa, but nevertheless there is a developing awareness of its significance for South African schools (Moloi, 2007).

Another area that is an issue for education in South Africa is that of the role of the governing body in school improvement (Hesystek, 2011) and the inequalities associated with the appointment of parent governors in the townships, where many parents/carers ‘are either only functionally or even marginally literate and often less numerate’ (Mestry and Naidoo, 2009: 109). Linked with issues associated with
parental governors, is the contribution that parents can make to their children’s achievements. There is some evidence from research across South Africa that there is a need to increase parental participation in order to improve children’s education (Mmotlane, Winnaar and Kivilu, 2009).

Even if it were appropriate to do so, it is difficult to offer any specific recommendations about the way forward for South African education. However, any potential solution would no doubt involve the use of a higher level of delegated responsibility to the districts and to school leadership. In addition, providing more effective support mechanisms for educators and school management teams that will lead to raising pupil, and teacher, standards would also be a priority. But any further comment may risk falling into the trap of imposing solutions from school development from the west, without taking into account the cultural, social and historical contexts of the South African education system (Bryan, 2011). At the very least, the way forward would need to be based on full community involvement in the school - but on the local community’s own terms (Prew, 2009).

Finally, one of the purposes of undertaking this research was to gauge the feasibility of carrying out a more substantial study about the role the districts play in supporting schools in South Africa. There is a noticeable paucity of research about this area of education and there is now a need to draw more widely on a larger number of district officials and school management teams. The task here might be to explore the extent to which they are able to mitigate government policy and work, for example, as ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 2010) exercising a high level of discretion in the day-to-day management of implementing centrally controlled government policy. Alternatively, it may be focused on understandings about developing a learning organisation culture, where all stakeholders’ contributions, including those of the community, are valued and used for organisational aims, based on critical but supportive self-evaluation (Plowright, 2007).

Whatever the specific focus of future research, it would need to explore the iteration and tensions resulting from ‘capacity building interventions with high stakes accountability measures’ (Taylor, 2009: 354) that point the way towards school improvement for all schools and, most importantly, for all pupils.
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