

READING HABITS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AMONG LOWER PRIMARY STUDENTS IN TASHITSE CLUSTER SCHOOLS, TRASHIGANG, BHUTAN

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ABSTRACT: Reading is a foundational literacy practice that supports comprehension, vocabulary development, knowledge acquisition, and learning across the curriculum. This study examined reading habits and their relationship with academic performance among lower primary students in three schools within the Tashitse Cluster, Wamrong Dungkhag, Trashigang, Bhutan. Guided by a pragmatist paradigm, the study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from 80 students and 20 teachers, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews with six teachers and focus-group discussions with 18 students. The findings indicate that students generally recognize the value of reading, but their reading practices remain strongly oriented towards academic materials. Half of the student respondents identified broadening knowledge as the principal benefit of reading, while 42.5% reported that reading directly supports their studies. In terms of reading time, 47.5% reported reading for one to two hours daily, whereas only 15% reported two to three hours and 3.75% reported four hours or more. Major barriers included limited motivation, an uncondusive home environment, inadequate reading materials at home, and insufficient fiction and novels in the school library. Teachers were identified as an important influence, while parents and siblings also contributed substantially to students' reading engagement. School-based practices such as group reading, storytelling, silent reading, paired reading, library periods, reading clubs, book fairs, and reading challenges were reported as useful strategies for strengthening reading engagement. The study concludes that a sustained reading culture requires coordinated action among schools, teachers, families, and students, with greater emphasis on access to diverse and age-appropriate materials, reading for pleasure, structured reading opportunities, and supportive home environments.

Keywords: reading habits; academic performance; lower primary education; reading culture; literacy; Tashitse Cluster

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is not merely the decoding of written symbols; it is an active cognitive process through which learners construct meaning, connect ideas, develop knowledge, and communicate understanding. In primary education, reading is particularly important because learners progressively move from learning basic reading skills to using reading as a means of learning across subjects. The development of regular and purposeful reading habits is therefore central to effective learning and long-term educational development.

The present study focuses on lower primary students in the Tashitse Cluster, where strengthening foundational literacy is an important educational priority. The study responds to concerns about reading engagement and seeks to understand the factors that shape students' reading practices and the ways in which schools can promote a stronger culture of reading.

1.1 Background and Context

Reading habits refer to the regularity, duration, purpose, choice of materials, and conditions under which individuals read. Pagg and Bartelheim (2011) describe reading habits in terms of how often, how much, and what students read, together with factors such as motivation, preferred reading location, and reading

materials. From this perspective, a reading habit is broader than the amount of time spent with a text; it includes the learner's motivation, choice, purpose, and consistency.

Research reviewed in the original study indicates that reading is closely associated with knowledge development, comprehension, language proficiency, and academic engagement. Ameyaw and Anto (2018) characterize reading as a process involving thinking, recalling, and relating concepts, while Dadzie (2008) emphasizes comprehension and the application of information for personal and cognitive development. In the primary years, such processes provide a foundation for learning in language subjects as well as content areas in which students must understand written instructions, explanations, and problems.

The Bhutanese context gives additional significance to the issue. The original study cites the Bhutan Council for School Examinations and Assessment (BCSEA, 2019), which reported concerns related to reading literacy and students' ability to learn with understanding. The study also notes concerns about reading culture and academic performance in remote lower-primary settings. These concerns create a rationale for examining reading habits within a specific local context rather than assuming that findings from other educational settings apply directly to rural Bhutanese schools.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although reading is widely recognized as important for learning, students do not necessarily develop consistent reading habits simply because books are available or reading is included in the curriculum. The original study identifies several contextual barriers, including limited access to attractive reading materials, an uncondusive home environment, competing distractions, and low motivation. Students may also concentrate heavily on textbooks and teaching notes because these materials are directly associated with classroom tasks and examinations, leaving less time for recreational and extensive reading.

There is also a need for locally grounded evidence from lower-primary schools in remote settings. The present study therefore examines the reading practices of students in the Tashitse Cluster, the factors that hinder those practices, the role of teachers and families, and the school-based activities used to promote reading.

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to investigate reading habits among lower primary students and examine their relationship with academic learning. More specifically, the study sought to identify barriers to effective reading, examine the influence of family and teachers, and document school-based activities that promote reading.

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the reading habits of lower primary students?
2. What factors influence the reading habits of lower primary students, and what activities and strategies are used in schools to support reading?
3. How do students and teachers perceive the role of reading in academic learning and overall development?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study has practical significance for teachers, school leaders, parents, and education authorities. Its findings provide a local evidence base for improving reading environments, strengthening classroom and library practices, and supporting families in establishing reading routines at home. For teachers, the findings highlight the value of varied, accessible, and enjoyable reading materials. For schools, they point to the importance of structured reading opportunities and attractive library collections. For parents, they emphasize the value of encouragement, shared reading, and a quiet reading environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of Reading and Reading Habits

Reading is a meaning-making process that requires learners to interpret written language and connect information with prior knowledge. Dadzie (2008) defines reading in relation to comprehension and the application of knowledge, while Sibatuara (2018) describes it as an active process involving skills that range from word recognition to more complex forms of comprehension. Du Toit (2001) similarly views reading as an interactive process of thinking, recalling, and synthesizing concepts.

When reading becomes regular, voluntary, and sustained, it can be understood as a reading habit. Guthrie et al. (2007) associate meaningful reading with motivation and lifelong learning, while Kurtus (2000) emphasizes the

long-term cognitive value of regular reading. For young learners, establishing positive habits is particularly important because repeated exposure to appropriate texts can support fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, confidence, and independent learning.

2.2 Reading Habits and Academic Performance

The literature reviewed in the study generally indicates a positive relationship between regular reading and academic development. Frequent engagement with texts can expand vocabulary, improve comprehension, increase background knowledge, and support the retention of information. Muogilim (2000) argues that reading provides access to accumulated knowledge and contributes to intellectual development. In school settings, these benefits extend beyond language learning because students encounter written explanations, instructions, questions, and problems across the curriculum.

However, the relationship should not be interpreted as evidence that reading alone causes higher academic performance. Academic achievement is influenced by multiple factors, including teaching quality, prior knowledge, motivation, home support, learning resources, and socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, in the present study, reading is treated as an important contributor to learning and academic engagement rather than as a single causal determinant.

2.3 Factors Influencing Reading Habits

The development of reading habits is shaped by interacting home, school, social, and individual factors. Krolak (2005) emphasizes the importance of a home literacy environment in which children have access to books and observe adults reading. Ruterana (2012) similarly highlights the role of parental engagement and guided reading in establishing positive routines.

Access to appropriate materials is another important factor. Tella and Akande (2007) identify limited access to attractive reading materials as a barrier, while the literature reviewed in the original study highlights the importance of classroom libraries and print-rich environments. Technology and other distractions can also compete for children's attention. At school, teacher modeling, peer influence, classroom climate, and opportunities for choice can shape students' attitudes towards reading.

These factors suggest that reading habits cannot be improved through a single intervention. Effective promotion requires a combination of accessible materials, positive motivation, appropriate instructional support, protected reading time, and collaboration between home and school.

2.4 School-Based Strategies

The literature identifies several strategies for developing reading habits. These include teacher read-alouds, silent reading, paired and group reading, reading logs, classroom libraries, library periods, reading clubs, storytelling, book-related events, and targeted support for struggling readers. Bamford and Day (2002) emphasize accessible and varied materials in extensive reading, while Day and Bamford (2005) highlight the usefulness of monitoring reading progress and interests. Motivation is also important; Ulper (2011) notes that students' attitudes towards reading are influenced by motivational conditions, and Lenski et al. (1999) stress the importance of identifying learners' interests.

Taken together, the literature provides a framework for interpreting the Tashitse Cluster findings: reading habits are shaped by opportunity, motivation, environment, materials, and instructional practice, while sustained engagement can support broader academic learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Paradigm and Design

The study adopted a pragmatist research paradigm because the research questions required both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Pragmatism permits researchers to draw on methods that are appropriate for understanding the research problem rather than restricting the investigation to a single methodological tradition (Creswell, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2010).

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was used. The design combined qualitative exploration with quantitative evidence and subsequent interpretation. This approach was selected because the study required both an overview of students' reading practices and a deeper understanding of the contextual factors influencing those practices.

3.2 Study Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in three lower primary schools within the Tashitse Cluster in Wamrong Dungkhag, Trashigang, Eastern Bhutan. The cluster was selected on the basis of accessibility, feasibility, and shared cluster administration. The target population comprised lower primary students in Classes PP–III and teachers working with these learners.

The quantitative sample consisted of 80 students and 20 teachers, giving a total of 100 participants. The student sample included 40 males and 40 females. The teacher sample comprised 10 males and 10 females in the study design. For the qualitative component, six teachers were selected purposively, with two teachers from each school. In addition, 18 students were selected for focus-group discussions, with six students from each school representing different levels of reading proficiency.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants

Participant group	Male	Female	Total
Students	40	40	80
Teachers	10	10	20
Total	50	50	100

3.3 Sampling Procedures

Stratified random sampling was used for the student survey to provide representation across the selected schools, grade levels, and gender. Teachers were selected using total-population/convenience procedures because of the small number of lower-primary teachers available in the participating schools. Purposive sampling was used for the qualitative component to identify teachers with relevant experience in early reading and students representing varied reading proficiency levels.

3.4 Instruments and Data Collection

Two principal instruments were used: a structured questionnaire for quantitative data and semi-structured interviews/focus-group discussions for qualitative data. The questionnaire contained items addressing reading habits, influences, reading materials, time spent reading, and perceived benefits. Teacher and student perspectives were gathered to support triangulation.

Before data collection, permission was sought from the relevant education authorities and school leaders. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized, and qualitative participants were identified through codes rather than names.

3.5 Validity and Reliability

The quantitative instrument was reviewed for content and face validity by educational researchers and curriculum specialists to ensure alignment with the research questions and the local primary-school context. A pilot study was conducted with 15 students and five teachers from a neighboring school that was not included in the main study. The qualitative component followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Triangulation of survey, interview, and focus-group evidence was used to strengthen credibility, while member checking was used with teacher participants to confirm the accuracy of interview transcripts.

An audit trail consisting of transcripts, field notes, and coding procedures was maintained to support dependability and confirmability. Contextual descriptions of the Tashitse Cluster were also considered important for judging the transferability of the findings to similar rural primary-school settings.

3.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. The original methodology also proposed Pearson's product-moment correlation to examine the relationship between reading-related variables and academic performance records. However, the results section provided in the source document does not report a numerical correlation coefficient. Consequently, this refined manuscript does not claim a statistically established correlation or causal effect; instead, it reports the descriptive evidence and participants' perceptions of academic contribution.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The qualitative evidence was integrated with quantitative findings to identify convergent and complementary patterns.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1 Factors Hindering Students' Reading Habits

Four major barriers were identified among the 80 student respondents. The most frequently reported factor was lack of motivation to read (31.25%), followed by lack of a conducive home environment (28.75%), lack of reading materials at home (22.5%), and inadequate novels or fiction in the school library (17.5%). The findings indicate that students' reading habits are influenced by both personal motivation and the availability and quality of their reading environments.

Barrier	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of motivation to read	25	31.25%
Lack of a conducive home environment	23	28.75%
Lack of reading materials at home	18	22.50%
Inadequate novels/fiction in school library	14	17.50%
Total	80	100%

The qualitative responses reinforce these findings. Students described difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary and lengthy or uninteresting texts. They also mentioned television, mobile phones, noise, and other distractions. Importantly, access to books did not automatically result in regular reading; some students reported having books but using them only occasionally. This suggests that availability must be accompanied by motivation, appropriate text difficulty, and supportive reading routines.

4.2 Influence of Parents, Siblings and Teachers

The findings indicate that students' reading habits are shaped by significant adults and peers. Among the 80 student respondents, 52.5% strongly agreed that parents encouraged them to read, 43.75% strongly agreed that siblings influenced their reading, and 75% agreed that teachers significantly shaped their reading habits. These findings support the view that reading development is a shared responsibility between home and school.

The teacher influence is especially important because teachers control many of the immediate opportunities through which children encounter books and reading activities. At the same time, the substantial role attributed to parents indicates that school-based interventions may be strengthened when families reinforce reading routines at home.

4.3 Perceived Importance of Reading

Half of the students identified broadening knowledge as the main benefit of reading. A further 30% identified improved communication as the primary benefit, while 12.5% stated that reading helped them perform better academically and 7.5% associated reading with improved public speaking. The findings therefore show that students perceive reading as beneficial beyond examination preparation.

Perceived benefit	Frequency	Percentage
Broadens knowledge	40	50%
Enhances communication	24	30%
Improves academic performance	10	12.5%
Supports public speaking	6	7.5%
Total	80	100%

4.4 Types of Reading Materials

Students' reading was predominantly academic in orientation. Teaching notes were reported as the main material by 42.5% of respondents, followed by textbooks at 37.5%. Only 12.5% reported novels or fiction as their principal reading material. The remaining responses represented other materials. The pattern suggests that students' reading is strongly connected to formal academic requirements, with comparatively limited engagement in recreational or extensive reading.

This finding has important implications. Academic reading is necessary, but a balanced reading culture should also provide opportunities for students to read stories, fiction, magazines, newspapers, informational texts, and other age-appropriate materials for interest and enjoyment. Such variety can broaden vocabulary and background knowledge while supporting motivation.

4.5 Time Spent Reading

The most common reported daily reading duration was one to two hours (47.5%). A further 33.75% reported reading for 30 minutes to one hour, 15% for two to three hours, and 3.75% for four hours or more. Thus, most students reported some regular reading, but extended reading was less common.

Daily reading time	Frequency	Percentage
30 minutes–1 hour	27	33.75%
1–2 hours	38	47.50%
2–3 hours	12	15.00%
4 hours or more	3	3.75%
Total	80	100%

4.6 School-Based Activities Promoting Reading

Students and teachers reported a range of school-based activities designed to make reading regular, interactive, and enjoyable. Student responses referred to group reading, storytelling, reading quizzes, reading clubs, book exchanges, book fairs, weekly library visits, Reading Week activities, games, and competitions. Teachers reported daily silent reading, paired reading, read-alouds, storytelling, reading challenges, library hours, book exhibitions, and book clubs.

These activities share several characteristics. First, they provide structured opportunities for reading. Second, they increase social interaction around texts. Third, they offer variety and choice, which may strengthen motivation. Fourth, they position the library and classroom as supportive reading spaces. The findings suggest that reading promotion is most effective when it is integrated into everyday school life rather than treated as an occasional event.

4.7 Teachers' Perceptions of Extensive Reading

Teacher responses to items concerning extensive reading showed generally favorable perceptions of several principles. Seven of the 11 reported characteristics received mean ratings above the study's stated threshold of 3.4. The highest-rated principle concerned reading for enjoyment, suggesting that teachers recognized the importance of making reading pleasurable. Teachers also showed support for varied reading materials, learner choice, and accessible texts.

However, lower ratings were observed for some principles relating to reading speed, maintaining teacher silence during individual reading, reading together with students for motivation, and frequent dictionary use. These differences suggest that teachers may hold varied understandings of extensive-reading practices. Professional learning opportunities could therefore help teachers connect theoretical principles with practical classroom routines.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Reading as a Foundation for Learning

The findings reinforce the central position of reading in students' academic and personal development. Students themselves recognized reading as a means of broadening knowledge, improving communication, and supporting academic work. This is consistent with the literature reviewed in the original study, particularly the view that reading provides access to accumulated knowledge and supports comprehension and intellectual development (Muogilim, 2000).

The results also indicate that the academic value of reading is not limited to English or other language subjects. Students encounter written language in mathematics, environmental studies, and other areas of the curriculum. Stronger comprehension therefore has the potential to improve access to learning across subjects. Nevertheless, the study does not establish a causal relationship between reading time and examination performance because a statistical correlation coefficient was not reported in the source data.

5.2 Motivation and Reading Choice

Lack of motivation emerged as the most frequently reported barrier. Qualitative responses suggest that motivation is closely related to text interest, vocabulary difficulty, length, and relevance. Students were more positive when stories were exciting and understandable and less engaged when texts were perceived as difficult or boring. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing motivation and learner interest as important dimensions of reading behavior (Ulper, 2011; Lenski et al., 1999).

The implication is that reading promotion should not rely exclusively on compulsory academic texts. Providing choice and a wide range of age-appropriate materials may help students discover personal interests and gradually develop more sustained reading habits.

5.3 Home and School as Complementary Reading Environments

The study demonstrates that reading habits develop across settings. Nearly three in ten students identified the home environment as a barrier, while 22.5% reported inadequate reading materials at home. Qualitative responses further identified noise and electronic distractions as obstacles. These findings are consistent with the literature emphasizing the importance of parental modeling, access to books, and guided reading at home (Krolak, 2005; Ruterana, 2012).

At the same time, teachers were identified as major influences on students' reading. The findings therefore support a partnership model in which schools create opportunities and provide resources while families reinforce reading routines. A school can encourage students to borrow books, but sustained use of those books may depend on whether children have time, encouragement, and a suitable space at home.

The findings also suggest that resource provision should be accompanied by guidance. Some students reported having access to books but reading only occasionally. Thus, simply increasing the number of books may not be sufficient. Schools should combine access with reading routines, learner choice, discussion, modeling, and recognition of progress.

5.4 Academic Reading and Reading for Pleasure

The strong concentration on teaching notes and textbooks indicates that students' reading is largely instrumental. Academic materials are important, but an overreliance on them may limit opportunities for reading for pleasure and exploration. Only 12.5% of respondents identified novels or fiction as their main reading material. This finding points to a potential imbalance between reading to complete academic tasks and reading to develop curiosity and enjoyment.

Extensive-reading literature emphasizes accessible, varied, and enjoyable texts (Bamford & Day, 2002). For lower primary students, a diverse collection can include storybooks, picture books, graded readers, simple nonfiction, comics, poetry, magazines, and culturally relevant materials. Choice is especially important because learners' interests and reading abilities vary.

A stronger balance between academic and recreational reading may also support communication development. Students who encounter varied vocabulary and sentence patterns in meaningful contexts have more opportunities to develop expressive language. The students' recognition that reading improves communication and public speaking is consistent with this broader view of literacy.

5.5 School Activities and Reading Culture

The reported use of storytelling, silent reading, paired reading, book clubs, library hours, book fairs, quizzes, and reading challenges represents a promising foundation for a school reading culture. These activities transform reading from an isolated individual task into a shared educational experience. They also provide multiple entry points for learners with different confidence levels and interests.

However, sustainability is important. Special events such as Reading Week can generate enthusiasm, but regular classroom and library routines are more likely to influence long-term behavior. Schools may therefore consider a layered approach: brief daily reading, regular library access, periodic reading events, targeted support for struggling readers, and recognition of improvement.

5.6 Teacher Knowledge and Professional Development

The teacher survey revealed broad agreement with several principles of extensive reading but weaker agreement with some specific practices. The differences may reflect variation in teachers' prior training, interpretations of extensive reading, or the practical constraints of lower-primary classrooms. Professional development should therefore focus not only on definitions but also on classroom application.

Teacher learning could include demonstrations of read-aloud techniques, paired reading, guided choice, vocabulary support without excessive interruption, reading-level selection, reading logs, and strategies for supporting struggling readers. Teachers could also collaboratively review classroom libraries and develop simple systems for tracking borrowing, reading frequency, and student interests.

Professional development should be practical and context-sensitive. In rural schools, interventions need to recognize resource limitations while making effective use of existing textbooks, teacher-created materials, donated books, shared reading sets, and locally relevant texts.

VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

6.1 Implications for Teachers

- Integrate short, regular reading opportunities into classroom routines rather than relying only on occasional reading events.
- Provide learner choice by offering texts at different levels and across a range of genres and interests.
- Use read-alouds, paired reading, group reading, and storytelling to model fluent and expressive reading.
- Monitor individual reading progress through simple reading logs, observation records, and learner conferences.
- Use supportive remediation for students who experience difficulty with vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension.

6.2 Implications for Schools

- Strengthen classroom and school libraries with varied, age-appropriate, attractive, and culturally relevant reading materials.
- Protect regular library and independent-reading periods within the school timetable.
- Promote book borrowing so that reading can continue beyond the classroom.
- Use reading clubs, book fairs, storytelling, quizzes, competitions, and Reading Week activities to increase motivation.
- Develop a school-wide reading culture in which reading is valued for both learning and enjoyment.

6.3 Implications for Parents and Families

- Create a quiet and supportive reading space at home where possible.
- Encourage children to read regularly and discuss what they have read.
- Provide or borrow age-appropriate reading materials and allow children some choice.
- Reduce avoidable distractions during reading time, including excessive television or mobile-device use.
- Work with teachers and schools to reinforce consistent reading routines.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study examined reading habits among lower primary students in three Tashitse Cluster Schools and explored factors influencing reading engagement and perceived academic benefits. The findings show that students recognize reading as valuable, particularly for broadening knowledge, improving communication, and supporting their studies. However, their reading practices are predominantly oriented towards teaching notes and textbooks, while engagement with novels and fiction is comparatively limited.

The study identified motivation, home environment, access to reading materials, and the availability of fiction in school libraries as important barriers. Students' qualitative responses further showed that difficult vocabulary, lengthy or uninteresting texts, noise, and electronic distractions can reduce reading engagement. These findings demonstrate that the development of reading habits depends on more than access to books; it requires appropriate materials, motivation, supportive environments, and sustained opportunities to read.

Teachers, parents, and siblings all contribute to students' reading development, with teachers receiving particularly strong recognition as influences on reading habits. The school activities reported in the study—

including group reading, storytelling, silent reading, paired reading, library visits, reading clubs, book fairs, and reading challenges—provide a useful foundation for a stronger reading culture.

Overall, the study supports a whole-school and home-school partnership approach. Reading should be positioned not only as a means of preparing for examinations but also as a pleasurable, purposeful, and lifelong learning practice. While the findings indicate a positive perceived contribution of reading to academic learning, the evidence available in the source document does not include a reported statistical correlation coefficient; therefore, causal conclusions should be avoided.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Schools should expand library collections to include more age-appropriate fiction, storybooks, informational texts, magazines, picture books, and other materials that reflect students' interests and abilities.
- Teachers should provide regular protected reading time and combine independent reading with read-alouds, paired reading, storytelling, and guided discussion.
- Students should be encouraged to borrow books regularly so that reading becomes part of home as well as school life.
- Schools should strengthen collaboration with parents through reading guidance, simple home-reading activities, and communication about students' reading progress.
- Parents should establish supportive reading routines at home and minimize avoidable distractions during reading time.
- Schools should provide professional development on extensive reading, learner choice, text selection, reading motivation, fluency, and appropriate vocabulary support.
- Recognition systems may be used to celebrate improvement, reading participation, book borrowing, communication skills, and positive reading behaviors rather than rewarding only high-achieving readers.
- Future research should include larger samples, objective reading assessments, longitudinal data, and reported academic-performance measures to examine the relationship between reading habits and achievement more rigorously.

IX. LIMITATIONS

The study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in only three schools within one cluster, so the findings should not be generalized to all Bhutanese primary schools. Second, several measures of reading behavior were self-reported and may therefore be affected by recall or social-desirability bias. Third, the study design and available data do not permit strong causal claims about the effect of reading on academic performance. Finally, the study appears to have been conducted over a relatively limited period, which restricts conclusions about long-term changes in reading habits.

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