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**School improvement plans, a tool to improve
the quality of education**

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Abstract

Much has been said about school improvement plans (SIPs), which have been implemented in many countries, with different characteristics and with different results in each of them. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate, through the research carried out, the impact of SIPs on students' learning and, from that perspective, to determine what characteristics the research should have in order to have a direct impact on students' learning. To this end, an exhaustive bibliographic review will be carried out to show the effects of the improvement plans in the communities, counties or countries that have implemented them. The result of the above will be to determine, according to the few existing investigations, the elements that SIPs must have in order to have an impact on student's learning.

Keywords: School improvement plans, improving the quality of education, educational improvement, accountability.

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1. Introduction

There has long been a great deal of scientific debate about how to improve performance in schools. Scientific research has provided us with many tools to confront these processes; however, there is one that is the most used and implemented in education systems worldwide: the accountability system (Anderson, 2005; Dussaillant & Guzman, 2014; Manno, McMeekin, Puryear, Winkler & Winters, 2006; Schedler, 1999). According to Anderson (2005), there are three types of accountability: the first has to do with existing regulations, that is, compliance with norms, the second with adherence to professional standards and finally the third with learning outcomes and student performance. Puryear et al. (2006), on the other hand, mention that accountability systems are based on at least the following three components: (1) school performance information which is generally determined by standardised student assessments and any tests that provide additional information about the pedagogical and institutional processes of the schools; (2) setting goals that inform what the expected outcomes are in each of the schools and (3) establishing consequences for whether or not the goals are met (Manno et al., 2006; Schedler, 1999). Within the accountability system, we can identify one of the most used tools in many Latin American countries (Chile, Jamaica, Colombia, Mexico, Argentina, Costa Rica and Brazil), as well as in the United States and England, such as the School Improvement Plans (SIPs) (Alves, Elacqua, Martinez & Santos, 2016).

The improvement plans are educational innovation projects carried out in schools, with the participation of all the members, with the aim of improving the organisation in the didactic, organisational and management aspects (Canton Mayo, 2009). The Department of Education and Science of Asturias (2009) defined an Improvement Plan as an intentional action through which a centre articulates a process that allows it to reinforce those aspects considered positive and modify or eliminate those that are judged negative as a result of its previous self-evaluation process. For Pedro et al. (2005), an improvement plan is the proposal of actions, resulting from a previous process of diagnosis of a unit, which collects and formalises the improvement objectives and the corresponding actions aimed at strengthening the strong points and resolving the weak points, in a prioritised and timed manner. In short, the SIP is a planning of a continuous improvement process, which establishes goals and actions aligned with the reality of the educational centre that executes it in order to improve academic results as well as the value of the students (integral improvement). This planning forces leaders and planning teams to set priorities, set goals, develop strategies and engage staff and other stakeholders (Armstrong, 1982; Kotler & Murphy, 1981).

However, there are some researchers who reject the idea that the formal improvement planning can have positive effects on schools, and thereby improve student outcomes (Bell, 2002; Mintzberg, 1994). This article will review the most recent research related to SIPs and their effects on student outcomes in order to conclude whether or not these accountability-based instruments generate changes in school improvement processes.

2. School improvement plans

In the mid-60s, private companies already had strategic planning systems where they designed a plan in order to achieve the proposed objectives by means of certain strategies and procedures designed for it, the above is embodied in the words of McNamara (2003), who says that the purpose of strategic planning is to be able to design a plan in order to determine where an organisation wants to go, what is needed to get there and how to know it arrived. In this same sense, strategic planning implies exploring the organisation's environment together with the conditions it faces, establishing goals and objectives as well as defining how such goals and objectives will be developed, in addition to implementing a monitoring and control system for the implementation of the plan (Robinson, 2007).

SIPs have virtually the same characteristics as the strategic planning discussed in the previous paragraph, where staff analyse problems, identify underlying causes, set goals, incorporate strategies and adopt policies that directly address problems, and monitor implementation (US Department of

Education, 2006). According to Patterson, Purkey and Parker (1986) *a strategic plan (must) be dynamic, ... constantly monitored, interpreted, altered, improved and, above all, implemented* (Patterson et al., 1986, p. 115). According to Curry (2007), the SIP is a state mandated plan created by the School Advisory Council of each individual school and is intended to be a plan for the school improvement process. In summary, we can say that a SIP is a planning for school improvement, which must take into account the school context, culture and results of students with the idea that they can set goals achievable and contextualised to the reality in which the organisation is immersed, in order to achieve better results both academic and value in students.

Bearing the above in mind, I think it is useful to know whether these SIPs are effectively a tool for school improvement or just a mere document that each school must produce on behalf of the administration, and therefore do not provide major advances in improving the quality of education. For this purpose, the main studies related to the impact that SIPs have had on the academic improvement of students will be presented below.

3. Studies on the impact of SIPs on student academic achievement

Planning forces leaders and planning teams to set priorities, set goals, develop strategies and engage staff and other stakeholders (Armstrong, 1982; Kotler & Murphy, 1981). Fernandez (2011) said that careful planning helped organisations to become more introspective and assisted them in the developing procedures for on-going evaluation and comment on their policies and priorities. However, some researchers have criticised the idea that the formal planning can produce great improvements in schools and other organisations (Bell, 2002; Mintzberg, 1994).

3.1. Studies that favour the implementation of school improvement plans

In a study published by Edmonds (1982), in which he reviews existing improvement programmes designed at the local, state and university levels in the United States, mostly primary schools, he points out that one of the most important characteristics of school improvement programmes is their attempt to improve the performance of students in standardised measures of performance, with which school improvement programmes attempt to introduce into schools the factors that are related to school effectiveness. All of the improvement plans studied by Edmonds come from schools in New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, New Haven and St. Louis. Another common denominator of these programmes is that they all try to introduce leadership, climate, expectation and evaluation approaches into the schools, but they are different in their designs for change and their starting point, as there were programmes that encouraged schools to participate on a voluntary basis, while others made participation mandatory, some were initiated by school officials, while others were initiated by outsiders. Despite the above, this research shows that the improvement plans designed in each of the participating schools had significant results and advances in the academic results of the students, most of whom were from very vulnerable sectors. This meant that the people in charge of carrying out the programme were empowered and not only made visible the need to improve their educational unit, but also had the necessary tools to carry out the programme successfully (Edmonds, 1982).

In a dissertation published by Curry (2007), entitled '*A Study of SIPs, School Decision-Making and Advocacy, and Their Correlation to Student Academic Achievement*', he collected data from 38 high schools and 29 high schools in Broward County, Florida, during the 2004–2005 academic year. The objective of the study was to determine if there was a correlation between the strategies that were in the improvement plans in both the areas of mathematics and writing and the academic performance of the students. From a series of surveys, interviews with school staff as well as administration and revisions of SIPs, a significant correlation was found between the mathematics and writing strategies found in the SIPs and the achievement scores of students in those subjects (Curry, 2007).

From this research it can be concluded that the strategies found in the School Improvement Plans may increase student achievement particularly in Math and Writing. Furthermore,

this study demonstrates how School Advisory Councils influence the school improvement process and student academic achievement (Curry, 2007, p. 103).

Continuing with studies of successful SIP implementation, Fernandez (2011) explores the relationship between SIP quality and school performance by examining a unique set of data from the Clark County School District, the fifth largest school district in the nation. Fernandez notes that there is a strong and consistent association between the quality of school planning and the overall performance of students in math and reading, and she mentions 17 indicators by which SIPs should be evaluated in order to identify their quality. The results of this study provide some evidence that there is a positive relationship between the quality of strategic planning and a school's academic performance. In addition, he explains that the association between SIP quality and school performance may be taking advantage of other institutional dynamics in addition to SIPs that actually increase student achievement. For example, schools with more experienced teachers and principals are better able to develop well thought-out plans, it should be noted that correlation does not prove causality, as previous research has shown that schools with highly skeptical staff of reform efforts can actively resist organisational change and effective leadership can help alleviate that skepticism (Weber & Weber, 2001). In these cases, it is the quality of the staff that drives performance, not necessarily the quality of the SIP. On the other hand, what the author mentions is that if a problem is easily identifiable and/or if there are pedagogical techniques that have substantial evidence of alleviating the problem, then schools may be able to articulate those problems and solutions within a SIP and adopt strategies to solve those problems (Fernandez, 2011).

Geoffrey and Lesley (2014) conducted an action-research study of four low-performing secondary schools in a large municipality in the Cape Town metropolitan area, none of which had SIPs. The great objective was that the members of these four schools would be able to build a SIP and identify actions to implement it. To this end, interviews and focus groups were conducted with the members of these organisations, with the idea that they could reflect on their practices and empower them to implement the improvement plans of their schools. In addition, workshops on empowerment and capacity building were held. All this concluded with the creation and implementation of SIPs in each of the participating educational institutions. The result was that the management teams in each of the schools learned not only how to develop their SIPs, but also the importance of having them to improve the functioning of their schools and their own management practices. One of the conclusions of this study was also that schools can only progress towards the development of the whole school if they have properly constructed SIPs. This study complements what Fernandez (2011) points out, which bets on the quality of the improvement plan so that it can be effective; however, it should also be borne in mind that the team in charge of construction and guide the construction of it, must be empowered and trained to carry it out successfully (Geoffrey & Lesley, 2014).

Another of the most current studies on the positive impact that SIPs have on academic performance is that carried out by Ettinger (2015), where through his role as a resident in the Cambridge Public Schools, he changed the approach that was taken to SIPs from an approach of compliance on the part of organisations in which the SIP was seen as a document archived on the shelves to another of continuous process of improvement. To this end, it incorporated new strategic planning templates and incorporated the opinions of the actors involved in promoting such SIPs, that is, school principals, technical teams and teachers. All this provoked a new impulse for the SIPs, since the people in charge of designing these tools felt mostly motivated and convinced that SIPs served to improve student results, which promoted a main axis of research which was that SIPs, on their own, have no impact or a limited impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Another of the conclusions mentioned in the study is that if schools do not receive additional support to implement improvement processes, they are less likely to use these processes to improve teaching and learning; therefore, schools that implement these processes should be accompanied and monitored so that they can ultimately have favourable results and do not get lost along the way or deviate from it (Ettinger, 2015).

In another study by Huber and Conway (2014), which was conducted in 30 districts of the State of Connecticut, examines school improvement planning through the lens of goal theory as defined by Locke and Latham (2002). These authors state that a goal is the object or objective of an action to be achieved within a given period of time.

The hypothesis of this study is that schools that create quality SIPs consistent with the principles of goal theory will have students reaching higher levels. The author found that there is a relationship between the quality of a SIP and the performance of students (as already stated by Fernandez (2011)), on the other hand, he argued and demonstrated that the theory of goals can be a potentially useful framework for thinking about school improvement planning although he recognises that there are other factors that affect student performance which has not yet found a simple solution to ensure the success of all the students.

As has already been stated in various studies, there are many factors that determine the success of a SIP, including the quality of the plan, the training that can be acquired by the people in charge of leading such a plan, among other factors, However, all of this research indicates that the formal planning for school improvement can be the beginning of a path to student achievement, as Ahearn (1998) points out, where the implementation of a SIP requires that all stakeholders—principals, teachers, parents, students and community representatives—come together with a shared vision and a set of goals if children are to ultimately benefit. Following a comprehensive planning process helps schools and districts successfully complete a plan that can be effectively implemented (Ahearn & SERVE: South Eastern Regional Vision for Education, 1998).

3.2. Studies that do not favour the implementation of SIP

Just as there are studies in which the results show that the implementation of SIPs has a positive impact on student results, there are also other studies that contradict what was stated in the research reported and focus mostly on the fact that schools use SIP only to be accountable to the administration. One of the investigations that points to the above is that conducted by Mintrop and MacLellan (2002), which consisted, on the one hand, of reviewing 46 improvement plans selected from a Maryland state system on probation for low performance in 1998 and, on the other hand, of conducting a case study of seven schools, of which three are elementary schools and four secondary schools. The research findings of the 46 improvement plans were that schools used a very vague approach in order to be able to cover all the bases that they had to satisfy in SIP with insignificant statements (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002), “... such as ‘all students can learn’ or high expectations for our students” (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002, p. 284). On the other hand, from the case study of the seven schools, they concluded that teachers and principals lacked a common purpose for the construction of the Improvement Plans, because they saw in them *mainly as a requirement with which one must comply* (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002, p. 288). This shows the success of the State in implementing a system of accountability over a system of school improvement; therefore, in this sense the SIP becomes a document that only serves to have resources or to leave the administration or the State happy. In the words of Mintrop and MacLellan (2002), it would be so:

The role of improvement plans in the internal development of the schools is less clear. At best, they seem to function as an officially sanctioned lever that school administrators can use to demand unified action from faculties (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002, p. 296)

Another study by Bell (2002) analyses the strategic planning systems implemented in schools in England. Bell mentions that the strategic planning is rigid and inflexible, which means that its results will be disjointed and disconnected from knowledge; therefore, the acquisition of knowledge will be limited to context-specific competencies ... *monopolisation of power by a few and social relationships derived from modes of activity which are rooted in conflict, competition, hierarchy and social control as the prime determinants of social order* (Bell, 2002, p. 11). In the same vein, he argues that strategic planning as a management technique is deeply flawed and based on unnecessary assumptions about

the purpose of education; therefore, for Bell, it is unlikely that a useful contribution can be made to school improvement management processes because planning is such a sophisticated process it is very unlikely to respond to unknown future organisations (Bell, 2002).

Mintzberg (1994) is another researcher who has criticised strategic planning, since he points out that since it began in the early 60's as a tool to improve productivity results; it is for this reason that many managers of organisations bet on this way of designing improvement processes for their organisations; however, this improvement was not entirely certain (Bloom, 1986), because in order to achieve real improvement processes must take into account multiple factors involved in planning to increase production. On the other hand, White (2009) found that the process of creating SIPs is more associated with compliance and stakeholder participation than with the leadership needed to improve student learning.

In a study of the Chicago Public Schools in the 1990s, O'Day (2002) writes that SIPs, *Most often became symbolic exercises to respond to district office requirements rather than reflective and inclusive learning experiences for staff* (O'Day, 2002, p. 311). Another study conducted by Buffett (2005) in the Boston Public Schools in 2003–2004 found no relationship between SIPs and student achievement, mentioned below:

I leave this study unconvinced that the answer to supporting the development of internal accountability lies in the design of more sophisticated planning guidelines... However, I (still) believe that planning can be an effective way to build internal accountability, but teachers and principals need much more support to use it this way (Buffett, 2005, p. 182).

Previous studies have shown that strategic planning tends to take place in non-hostile environments, where accountability is an unproductive policy for improvement. Within this context, SIPs will not produce results because they are generated by policies that are toxic in one way or another and very unproductive, where the role of leader or director of the organisation is usually inflexible, in addition to taking most of the decisions involved in the SIP, without considering the entire organisation. On the other hand, in most of the previous studies, the presence of accountability is very marked as the only important factor within the SIPs, due to the fact that the administration usually conditions the delivery of financial resources to certain schools that have complied with their improvement plans or to others that improve their processes; however, it is not clear if the administrations are able to monitor educational organisations, so that they can support them in their improvement processes.

4. Countries that have successfully implemented school improvement plans

In some countries, some public policies have been implemented within the framework of accountability to schools, which have to carry out a SIP. Here are some details of some of the countries that have successfully implemented improvement plans.

In England (United Kingdom), the *Pupil Premium* (Ofsted, 2012) programme is launched in 2011. It provides additional funding for publicly funded schools and is specifically designed to favour the most disadvantaged pupils at all the levels of education, with the aim of closing the gaps between them and the most advantaged pupils (Department for Education and Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2014). Schools have a certain autonomy to decide on what to spend the resources provided by the government, as long as these resources are destined to the promotion of strategies that allow disadvantaged students to advance. On the other hand, all schools have received specific documentation with recommendations from The Education Endowment Foundation to use the funds, which range from the implementation of SIPs to tools to foster professional development among teachers. On their sides, schools are required to publish on the Internet (so that the entire educational community can have access to the information), how they have made use of the additional resources (Department for Education, 2014; Ofsted, 2016), and to report regularly to the Office of School Inspections (Ofsted) on student progress. All the data provided on student performance are used by

education authorities, along with qualitative assessments to reward public recognition and provision of more resources to the best schools. With regard to the results reported by the ministry on the progress and gaps between students, these have improved and the gaps between students have narrowed (Carpenter et al., 2013; Department for Education, 2017; Sols, 2017).

Another country that has successfully implemented SIPs through an Accountability system is Ireland through the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) created in 2005 by the Department of Education and Skills. This programme supports different sectors and populations of education, such as nursery schools, support for teachers in schools immersed in vulnerable sectors, implementation of plans to improve reading, writing and mathematical skills (both for students and for families), actions to reduce student repetition and school dropout, in addition to establishing incentives for teachers and principals to work in disadvantaged communities. The entire programme is supported by a standardised system of indicators that allow for the identification of the different levels of educational disadvantage present in schools. According to an evaluation published in 2015 (Smyth, McCoy & Kingston, 2015), the programme has been a success, due to its spectacular results based on three focuses, on the one hand, the implementation of ambitious and measurable objectives, the evaluation and monitoring of the progress of each student in relation to the proposed objectives and finally the coordination with social services to support the educational trajectory of each child (Sols, 2017).

Portugal also has a system that implements SIPs under the *Programa Territorios Educativos de Intervencao Prioritaria (TEIP)* (Direcao-Geral da Educacao (DGE), n.d.) programme. Through this programme, Portugal has sought to improve the school success of students through multiple interventions that seek to respond to discipline problems, facilitate the transition to working life, encourage coordination among administrators, reduce dropout and absenteeism. On the other hand, the programme injects economic resources into schools to hire technical-medical teachers, social workers, psychologists, among other professionals in socially excluded territories. The results have shown that the project could stabilise and improve the school organisation by improving inclusion, social cohesion and a constant improvement in the educational outcomes of students (Abrantes, Roldao & Mauritti, 2011; Sols, 2017).

There have been other laws and reforms in numerous countries both in Latin America, as well as in North America, that have not been as successful as might have been expected, because accountability was a very important part of the advances and schools turned specifically to prepare their students for exams. One of the laws was the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* enacted by the United States in 2002 and was in effect until 2015 to be replaced by a new *Every Student Succeeds Act*, which maintained certain parts of NCLB and repealed others. The purpose of this law was to provide equal educational opportunities to disadvantaged students (Department of Education, 2003; Lee, 2019), for which the State through this law holds schools accountable for the academic achievement of all the students including those with learning disabilities that were not considered on state standardised assessments prior to this law. At the beginning of the Law, many schools were striving to achieve and obtain good results in state evaluations, since the State also incorporated sanctions for schools that did not achieve their goals or expected results, sanctions that could range from changing the school's management team to closing the school. Notwithstanding the above, the Act included a number of advantages, one of which gave more flexibility to states to use federal grants, provided that schools were improving, teachers had to be *highly qualified* in the subject they taught and that schools had to use teaching methods and instruction supported by scientific research. All of the above allowed education in the United States to advance in relation to inclusion, because students with learning problems had to be integrated, which prior to this Law were not included in the general curriculum or in state assessments (Dee & Jacob, 2010). On the other hand, it was possible to improve the mathematical performance of the students who came mainly from disadvantaged sectors; however, no optimistic results were found in Reading, as the study carried out by Dee & Jacob (2010) makes clear:

Our results indicate that NCLB brought about targeted gains in the mathematics achievement of younger students, particularly those from dis- advantaged backgrounds. However, we find no evidence that NCLB improved student achievement in reading. School-district expenditure increased significantly in response to NCLB, and these increases were not matched by federal revenue. Our results suggest that NCLB led to increases in teacher compensation and the share of teachers with graduate degrees. We find evidence that NCLB shifted the allocation of instructional time towards math and reading, the subjects targeted by the new accountability systems (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 149).

Despite this, according to the research (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Huber & Conway, 2014; Lee, 2019), schools began to prepare their students for state assessments, which led schools to work only on the basis of the standardised assessment, leaving aside the available curriculum for each teaching, which led to assessments not accurately reflecting the achievement of each school, but reflecting the preparation of these for standardised assessments. This is why academics point out that the NCLB Act (Dee & Jacob, 2010; Huber & Conway, 2014; Lee, 2019) was anchored in accountability without being able to detach from that system, which entails according to the literature related to accountability that this alone does not promote improvements in the academic performance of students (Hanushek & Raymond, 2005).

5. Conclusion

From the literature review and analysis conducted on the impact of SIPs on student academic achievement, the following can be concluded:

5.1. On the process of creation and implementation of SIPs

According to the bibliographic review and the successful policies based on SIP, it can be said that the process of creation and of SIP must be very well structured, establishing appropriate diagnostic strategies, in order to identify in a correct way, the deficiencies that each educational institution has, making it impossible to improve their academic results. On the other hand, identify what needs immediate attention, and thus prioritise the objectives that need more attention. The above leads to a path of improvement that can extend for a few years, despite the above each goal must be achievable, because if we set too ambitious goals is the risk of wasting many efforts in achieving an unattainable goal. This does not mean that objectives should not be challenging. The participation of the educational community is one of the fundamental pillars in obtaining achievements in the process of creation and implementation of the SIPs because, on the one hand, they must feel committed to each of the proposed objectives, they must have a shared vision, and on the other hand, they will be in charge of executing each one of the steps to reach the goals of the plan; therefore, practically the entire plan must emerge from them. As Ahearn (1998) points out, the implementation of a SIP requires that all stakeholders—principals, teachers, parents, students and community representatives—come together with a shared vision and a set of goals if children are to ultimately benefit, which requires synergy to actually have the desired effects.

Another aspect related to the construction of the SIPs is the quality that they have. As some researchers said (Fernandez, 2011; Geoffrey & Lesley, 2014; Huber & Conway, 2014), the quality of an improvement plan is vital for the development of the school and for this direct teams must be empowered and committed to school improvement.

All of the above does not make sense without a plan for continuous monitoring of the SIP, with the objective of establishing control and making the necessary modifications according to how the plan is being developed. This point is very relevant in the development of the SIP.

5.2. On the preparation of management teams and teachers

Another aspect to consider when making a SIP is the preparation of the people who will be in charge of leading such a tool. As pointed out by Mintrop and MacLellan (2002) in their research in Maryland schools, where the plans failed due to the fact that the management teams that had to lead such plans lacked a common initiative and purpose, that is to say that both teachers and directors must commit to each one of the steps and guidelines incorporated in the plan, since if the people in charge of leading the improvement projects do not believe in these as a tool to achieve good results, the plans will only act as one more document in the school library. Therefore, leaders must be prepared in terms of knowledge, strategies and empowerment for the implementation of SIPs.

5.3. Other relevant considerations

Personally, I am convinced that a SIP is a clear tool to achieve good academic results and raise the quality of education in each school, as long as these are created in each school based on a real context, with goals that are visible in the short term, with a preparation of leaders, with real participation of the educational community, I am convinced that they can give good results. The research gives us the necessary tools so that the SIPs can function in a correct, planned way and according to the needs of each school.

In spite of the above, it is very important to bear in mind that improvement plans are not a panacea for school improvement, nor are they a master key that will always produce good results. It is important to consider that SIPs should be linked and guided by a policy of continuous improvement and backed by a focus on improvement, as mentioned in the research developed by Ettinger (2015), which shows that SIPs in themselves are unlikely to produce improvements in teaching and learning. From my point of view, the approach that can be closest to an optimal implementation of a SIP is the *improvement of school effectiveness* (ESI) because it has a structure that fits very well to the SIPs and allows them to give a more meaningful vision to the improvement processes. On the other hand, the literature of the ESI shows us that we must understand very well the environment of the school, as well as the culture of the school to implement significant changes in schools. We must conceptualise a SIP as an agenda that management teams can use to improve the functionality of the school and also as an accountability tool to measure the progress of improvement in schools (Van Der Voort, 2013).

Finally, I would like to mention that as mentioned in the research on school improvement (Duke, Carr & Sterrett, 2013), the future of hundreds of honeys of children and young people from lower-performing schools are in serious danger if they do not achieve sustained improvement processes and a concrete tool to act and create a contextualised improvement route for each educational organisation are the Improvement Plans.

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