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The Triangulation Blueprint: Bridging the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality in Islamic Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of education in the era of Independent Learning necessitates robust character development. However, affective assessment in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) often becomes limited to administrative formalities, risking the reduction of the curriculum's vision to rhetoric without meaningful behavioral change. This study critically examines the challenges and strategies in implementing affective observation assessment at SMP Negeri 1 Baitussalam, Aceh Besar. Employing a qualitative case study, data were gathered through observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews with PAI teachers and students. Analysis utilized Krathwohl's Affective Taxonomy and Character Education Theory. Findings indicate that value internalization is hindered by subjectivity bias, students' psychological barriers to honest self-reflection, social conflicts in peer-assessment, and the "name passenger" phenomenon in group tasks. Instrument triangulation—integrating self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher journals—emerges as an effective strategy, minimizing data manipulation and fostering internalization of values. This triangulation model is recommended as an authentic standard to strengthen character education in the digital era.

INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century has changed significantly, especially with the Freedom of Learning policy, which now emphasizes character and affective skills over just cognitive mastery (Hunaepi et al., 2024; Haq & Wakidi, 2024; Kurniawan, 2024; OECD, 2024; Zainudin et al., 2025). The use of Information Technology (IT) has expanded access and encouraged a move from traditional teaching to more interactive, personalized, and collaborative learning (Alenezi et al., 2023; Almufarreh & Arshad, 2023). As a result, the education system must continue to adapt, as seen in updates to the Indonesian curriculum in response to social, political, economic, and technological changes (Hadi et al., 2023; Hidayat et al., 2025). In Indonesia, these curriculum changes call for better assessment standards to accurately measure students' attitudes (Dewi & Arifin, 2024; Herlina, 2023;

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Muchson, 2023; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Even though digitalization is happening quickly (Haleem et al., 2022; Djibran et al., 2024; Timotheou et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024), tools for evaluating character often remain basic and do not reflect real changes in behavior.

In Islamic Religious Education (PAI), affective assessment is important because it aims to connect faith, seen as understanding values, with charity, which means putting those values into practice. Observing students in real situations is considered the best way to record their behavior (Connor et al., 2020; Nurlaelah et al., 2021; Puspita & Suyatno, 2020; Sunandang et al., 2023). However, research shows that PAI teachers often use traditional or informal observation methods (Anwar & Menekşe, 2021; Eddy et al., 2020; White et al., 2022), which do not fully capture students' overall character development (Birkeland et al., 2020; Minh et al., 2023; AL-Balushi & Mat Saad, 2021). Without effective evaluation tools, the goals of the Merdeka curriculum may remain ideas rather than be put into practice (Thorat, 2025; Rocha et al., 2025; Sandiyani et al., 2023; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024).

The main challenge in affective observation assessment is making sure the data is objective, not just having the right tools. Students might try to present themselves in a better light, which is called social desirability bias, and teachers often struggle to confirm their observations with other data (Anwar & Menekşe, 2021). At SMP Negeri 1 Baitussalam, Aceh Besar, a layered observation system has been introduced to tackle this issue. Focusing on junior high school students is important because this is a key time for building identity and character. This study will closely examine the challenges and strategies involved in observation assessment for PAI subjects at SMP Negeri 1 Baitussalam. It will show how using self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher journals together can make assessments less subjective.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design to explore in depth the attitude assessment techniques applied by teachers at SMP Negeri 1 Baitussalam, Aceh Besar. The research was carried out on July 3, 2025. The focus of the research is directed at the application of observation techniques in assessing students' attitudes, both inside and outside of class hours, such as in worship activities in prayer rooms and social interactions in the school environment.

The determination of informants was carried out purposively. The criteria for selecting informants include PAI teachers who have lived teaching experience as well as students who are selected based on the teacher's recommendation to represent the variation in discipline levels (high, medium, and low) in grades VIII and IX. In total, the informants consisted of one PAI teacher (G-PAI) and six students (S-VIII-1 to S-IX-3). In order to maintain research ethics, the identities of all informants are disguised using the code as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informant Profile

Informant Code	Informant Status	Gender
G-PAI	Islamic Religious Education (PAI) Teacher	Male
S-VIII-1	Grade VIII Student	Female
S-VIII-2	Grade VIII Student	Male
S-VIII-3	Grade VIII Student	Female
S-IX-1	Grade IX Student	Male
S-IX-2	Grade IX Student	Female
S-IX-3	Grade IX Student	Male

The research instrument was developed based on affective taxonomy (Krathwohl Taxonomy) which includes five main aspects as detailed in Table 2:

Table 2. Aspects and Indicators of Attitude Assessment

Attitude Aspect	Attitude Indicators
Receiving or Paying Attention	Sensitivity to external stimuli, such as phenomena or problems in learning.
	Enthusiasm and desire in learning, such as enjoying working on problems or reading.
	Awareness of values such as discipline and responsibility.
Responding or responding	Active activities in seeking information and learning, such as reading and asking questions.
	Involvement in social activities, such as helping each other and maintaining cleanliness.
Evaluate or appreciate	The ability to give value to something, so that it is valued and maintained.
	Consistency in carrying out positive values, such as diligence, discipline, and objectivity.
Organizing or managing	The ability to integrate different values in actions and behaviors.
	Supporting and following efforts to uphold positive values, such as discipline.
Character	Integrating values in various aspects of life, such as discipline at school and at home
	Apply these values in daily actions.

Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) Observation, in which the researcher acts as the main instrument that conducts passive participatory observation to minimize behavioral bias in the observed subjects. This technique was done to observe the authentic behavior of students directly; (2) In-depth interviews with PAI teachers to explore assessment methods, as well as with students to understand their perceptions; and (3) Documentation in the form of teacher notes and student assignment results. The validity of the data was tested through technical triangulation (comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documents) and source of triangulation (comparing teacher and student information). Data analysis was carried out systematically using Milles et al .,(2014) which includes the stage of data condensation, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification.

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants' identities and personal information were kept confidential, and their participation was entirely voluntary. All information collected was used solely for research purposes, ensuring respect for participants' rights, privacy, and dignity.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of PAI Lesson: Observation Assessment and Internalization of Students' Affective Values

The affective domain includes mental aspects and values, encompassing behavioral characteristics such as feelings, interests, attitudes, emotions, and values. Competencies in this domain relate to individual interests and mentalities, including responsibility, cooperation, discipline, courage, confidence, honesty, respect for others, and self-control. These competencies reflect an individual's expression of values or life orientation as demonstrated through behavior (Butvilas et al., 2022; Estrada et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2021; Hsu et al., 2024; Kuo et al., 2024; J. Li et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2020; Zych et al., 2020). The evaluation of competencies in educational contexts seeks to measure student behavior resulting from the learning process (J. Li et al., 2023), by integrating assessments that capture both comprehensive understanding and personal attitude development.

Assessment of competencies related to student behavior involves five key aspects that should be evaluated during the learning process: acceptance or attention, response, assessment or reward, organization or management, and character. These aspects provide a basis for evaluating students' attitude development, which can be observed in both classroom settings and daily life. This comprehensive approach supports the cultivation of positive values and character among students (Asrial et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2022; Halimi et al., 2021; Ponomariovienė et al., 2025; Vazquez-Marin et al., 2025). Therefore, this evaluative process aims to identify students' potential to develop the values that underpin positive behavior.

The evaluation of attitude is instrumental in identifying students' potential to develop values that support positive behavior. At SMP Negeri 1 Baitussalam, Aceh Besar, teachers of Islamic Religious Education have generally implemented assessments of social and spiritual attitudes effectively. Data from interviews with teachers and students, along with observation results, indicate that assessments were conducted using multiple methods, including direct observation, self-assessment, peer assessment, and journal or daily recording. The following discussion presents the results of these assessments and relates them to field findings and relevant interpretations.

Receiving and responding

The acceptance stage of PAI learning at SMPN 1 Baitussalam is evaluated by tracking students' motivation and attention in the classroom. Since observation and self-assessment have become established school policies, the primary challenge now concerns students' objectivity and honesty during self-evaluation. A student described how she and her peers responded to this assessment routine:

> *In the past, when I was told to fill out a self-assessment sheet, I was confused, I thought what was this for, sometimes it was filled out just to be safe. But here it is normal. It's just a matter of being honest if it's too late to take notes or not pay attention to the father, explain it, because the teacher also has his own notes, if he is caught lying, he will be ashamed of himself later. (S-VIII-1, Interview, 2025).*

The statement underscores the challenge of confirmation bias in self-assessment, noting that the school's cross-checking strategy effectively promotes students' intrinsic motivation to be honest. Among grade IX students, this motivation is reflected in the adoption of independent learning strategies, shaped by the awareness that their behavior is being monitored. This awareness indirectly cultivates habits of independence and learning discipline, as reported by a grade IX student:

If we are looking for material, now we prefer to search for it using Google or read books first. It's also embarrassing to ask the teacher but the question is very trivial. After all, if we look at trying to find out for ourselves before asking, usually the teacher's assessment is also better. (S-IX-1, Interview, 2025).

In the response stage, a significant challenge arises from implementing peer assessment. This approach frequently conflicts with adolescents' social dynamics, which are often characterized by interpersonal conflict. Rather than proceeding smoothly, this strategy often provokes strong emotional reactions, as one student openly expressed:

Honestly, being evaluated by your own friends can sometimes hit you emotionally, especially if you get a low grade on a group assignment even though you feel like you contributed. At first, it even led to a small argument over it. But from that, I thought, maybe it's the way I speak that comes off as sharp, so now during discussions I try to ho. (S-IX-2 Interview, 2025).

This kind of social friction actually fosters empathy and the skill of managing the ego organically. In the face of subjectivity and student conflicts, the Islamic Religious Education teacher (G-PAI) explained the triangulation of the strategies he applied in the field. In a more in-depth interview, he explained:

The biggest challenge really lies in the students' own objectivity. They're middle schoolers, after all, so sometimes they protect their friends or even deliberately put someone down when they're in conflict. That's why my strategy is that the grading sheets aren't set in stone for their report card. I still use my daily observation journal as the main reference, both in class and when they're elsewhere in the school. But at the very least, with this system, they become aware that their behavior is always being watched. The idea is that, over time, they will naturally develop responsibility and caution in their actions and interactions—with friends, teachers, parents, and the community at large. (G-PAI, Interview, 2025).

This analysis questions the assumption that affective assessment is easy. Challenges, including maintaining objectivity, potential for value manipulation, and the impact of interpersonal relationships, are central to the assessment process. The teacher's method, which combines peer assessment with observational triangulation using a teacher journal, offers substantial support for Vygotsky's social constructivist paradigm. The internalization of values such as responsibility and respect emerges not from a one-sided process but through conflict resolution and structured social interactions within the school context.

Assessing and Managing

During the assessment stage, a primary challenge identified in the field is the psychological barrier that prevents students from setting aside personal biases to articulate their goals to themselves and their peers. Observations indicate that the ability to evaluate actions proportionately develops gradually rather than immediately. For example, one student reported a complex experience when self-assessment and peer-assessment tools required him to confront his own detrimental habits:

At first, I felt embarrassed to write that I often yapped in the group. It doesn't look good, right? But when friends criticized me, saying I was too talkative and didn't give others a chance to speak, I finally realized it. Admitting your own weaknesses is definitely hard, but from that point, I started learning to hold back so others could have a chance to think and contribute. (S-IX-2, Interview, 2025).

The transition from denial, often associated with prestige, to acceptance serves as a key indicator that affective assessment instruments have moved beyond administrative

formality and are beginning to influence students' reflective consciousness. The challenge of maintaining objectivity also extends to students' evaluations of their peers. The process of recognizing positive behaviors among classmates is frequently influenced by personal sentiments or competitive dynamics typical of adolescence. Nevertheless, the consistent practice of transparent evaluation is gradually diminishing this resistance. For example, one student described his emotional response, noting that when he observes a peer who is particularly diligent, he sometimes perceives it as an attempt to gain favor with the teacher (S-VIII-3, Interview, 2025). This emerging critical perspective in assessment demonstrates that students are increasingly able to filter emotional biases and serve as role models in goal attainment.

Within the domain of organization and management, the complexity of challenges increases as students are expected to translate abstract values of consciousness into concrete behavioral practices. In practice, the most common issue is "name passengers" in group assignments, where some students contribute little. One student corroborated this observation and described his strategy of leveraging the grading system to ensure completion of assigned tasks, stating in his presentation:

> *In the past, in group work, only the smart ones did all the hard work while the others just rode along with the name. But since peer evaluation was introduced, I've become more assertive in dividing tasks. 'You handle the writing, you find the materials on your phone, I'll do the presentation.' If someone tries to stay idle or play around instead of working, I immediately warn them that they'll get a poor cooperation score. (S-IX-3, Interview, 2025).*

This pragmatic managerial action demonstrates that observational assessment mechanisms effectively equip students with the confidence to uphold communal justice and responsibility. PAI teachers (G-PAI) critically observe this transformation of values into organized actions. Practitioners in the field recognize that character formation does not follow a consistently upward trajectory; rather, it fluctuates and requires ongoing intervention. In a more in-depth interview, this perspective was further analyzed:

> *Don't think it's easy to tell children of this age to continue to be consistent. Today they can be disciplined, the next day they will be lazy or selfish. Therefore, the assessment sheet from the student for me was only a temporary shock tool. The main strategy remains in my direct observation. If I see a child who is starting to slack responsibility, I call him personally, I show him my journal. I said: last month the grades were good, why is this week so often late and disturbing friends?' Reprimands based on observation data like this make them unable to evade. They practiced managing their time and attitude, because they knew that their track record of behavior was clearly recorded in my hands. (G-PAI, Interview,2025).*

The analysis of the field data strongly supports Lickona's Character Education theory. The alignment among moral knowledge (understanding of values), moral feeling (emotional engagement), and moral actions (observable behaviors) does not occur in a straightforward or automatic manner after students complete the rubric. Instead, effective character development results from the dynamic interplay of students' internal conflicts, the management of peer conflict resolution (as illustrated by the "name passenger" case), and the decisive intervention of teachers, who utilize observation as a dialogical and reflective tool rather than merely as an instrument for assigning final report card scores.

Character

The character stage represents the highest level of Krathwohl's taxonomy, in which positive values are internalized and become integral to the student's personal identity. Within the case study conducted at SMPN 1 Baitussalam, the primary challenge at this stage concerns consistency, specifically the extent to which students can sustain positive attitudes when they are beyond the reach of supervision or formal teacher assessment. Field observations indicate that the shift from extrinsic motivation, such as fear of poor grades, to intrinsic motivation, or genuine character, is a gradual process that can be demanding for students. One student described this transitional experience:

> *The hardest part is keeping yourself in check to stay diligent and polite at home or when there's no teacher around. At first, I was disciplined just because I was scared of messing up my grades in the teacher's book, but after a while, it got tiring to always have to keep up that image. So, I just went with it. And you know, it actually feels better to get your work done early and not fight with friends, so that's just become a habit now. (S-VIII-1, Interview, 2025).*

This recognition serves as empirical evidence that affective assessment instruments initially operate as a form of coercion, which, over time, becomes internalized within the student's psychological comfort zone. By grade IX, this habit demonstrates a more entrenched character, although it continues to be shaped by the practical reasoning characteristic of adolescents. One student notes that the culture of peer evaluation has permanently altered his mindset:

> *Now it's automatic—whenever there's group work, I just take a role. Whether there's a grade or not, it feels wrong to just sit there and wait for the work to get done. You feel embarrassed with yourself, especially since friends already know everyone's share of the work. (S-IX-1, Interview, 2025).*

Similarly, one student emphasized that maintaining guarded attitudes has become an advantageous social strategy. The student affirmed the validity of the teacher's advice that self-control and politeness naturally elicit respect from others. As a result, the student now deliberately behaves calmly and politely in various situations, perceiving this approach as providing greater social security (S-IX-3, Interview, 2025).

However, from the teacher's perspective, evaluating a student's true character is a highly complex task. Teachers of Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) (G-PAI) acknowledge that data obtained from self-assessment sheets or peer evaluations cannot be fully relied upon as evidence that a student's character has been fully developed. During an in-depth interview, one teacher described the practical realities and strategies implemented in the field:

> *You really see a child's true character when they think no one is watching. That's why my most valid observations aren't during class time, but during breaks, in the cafeteria, or when they're jostling to get in line for ablution at the prayer room. That's when you can tell who is patient and who is still selfish. The challenge is, even if we've shaped them well at school, their home environment may not support it, so old habits resurface. Character isn't magic. The routine observation and assessment we've done over the years is like installing an 'automatic brake' in their minds. The hope is that when they're about to act out elsewhere, their subconscious immediately reminds them, 'Hey, don't, remember the habits from school. (G-PAI, Interview,2025).*

Analysis of interview findings and overall observations demonstrates that character formation in PAI learning does not follow a linear trajectory. Lickona's theory of Character Education similarly highlights that integrating moral knowledge (knowing the right),

moral feelings (feeling compelled to do right), and moral actions (acting right) often encounters challenges due to students' egos and social dynamics.

This case study at SMPN 1 Baitussalam demonstrates that the successful internalization of values is a deliberate process. The progression of attitudes from receiving, responding, assessing, and managing to ultimately possessing character has been achieved through the implementation of a comprehensive observation system. The triangulation strategy, which includes self-assessment, peer assessment, and tacit teacher observation, effectively minimizes the manipulation of affective data. Ultimately, affective observation assessment serves not merely as an administrative tool for report card completion but as a significant pedagogical instrument that compels students to engage in reflection, respond to social critique, and consistently develop positive character traits.

Critical Analysis of Authentic Assessment: Synergy of Triangulation Instruments and a Paradigm of Holistic Islamic Education

The implementation of observational assessment at SMPN 1 Baitussalam constitutes more than a curriculum administrative milestone; it serves as empirical evidence of education's fundamental purpose. In this context, education is conceptualized as a transformative process that shapes the behaviors and attitudes of individuals and groups, fostering comprehensive human development through learning. The institution's educational practices illustrate that, within the Islamic framework, instruction grounded in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad extends beyond cognitive development and knowledge transmission. It necessitates cultivating character and behavior consistent with Islamic principles (Aulia et al., 2024). The documented shift in student behavior from compliance motivated by fear of negative judgment to the habitual embodiment of discipline demonstrates that education enables teachers to guide and nurture the younger generation into conscious, responsible, and resilient individuals (Bulkani et al., 2025; Michael et al., 2024; Sriyanta et al., 2025). This perspective aligns with Ahmad Tafsir's (2009) assertion that education ensures holistic development across physical, intellectual, and spiritual domains through independent learning, environmental engagement, and teacher guidance.

The paradigm of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) requires integrating faith, understood as theoretical beliefs, with charity, or practical action. The actions of grade IX students in addressing the issue of "name passengers" during group work exemplify the practical application of Islamic teachings, which prioritize justice and communal responsibility to achieve social well-being (Rahman et al., 2024; Tabroni et al., 2022; Yusri et al., 2023). The ongoing reinforcement of affective values through peer assessment instruments functions not only as an evaluative mechanism but also as a means for students to directly convey religious teachings (Sarwadi & Nashihin, 2023). Additionally, the emergence of student initiative to independently seek literature prior to consulting teachers indicates that PAI plays a critical role in fostering scientific intellectual abilities that are congruent with religious values (Zainuri et al., 2022).

Observation has become a primary pedagogical tool for assessing and managing complex behavioral changes. This approach involves systematic monitoring, which is essential for gathering objective data on classroom interactions and learning processes. It also contributes to teacher professional development by highlighting individual differences among students (Doabler et al., 2021; Korea et al., 2023; W. Li, 2023; Liu et al., 2021; Page et al., 2020). Various observation methods, including participatory and structured techniques, are employed (Al-Hendawi et al., 2025; Johnson et al., 2021; Nuraisyah et al., 2024; Zhu Ya-nan, 2023), and these methods are foundational to

authentic assessment and inclusive education (Bedalla & Elzouki, 2023). At SMPN 1 Baitussalam, this process is implemented through the PAI teachers' journal (G-PAI), which functions as an evaluation instrument, a reflective tool, and a source of data-driven personal feedback, thereby promoting accountability for student behavior.

The application of observation instruments prompts educators to enhance their pedagogical sensitivity. Ongoing observation enables teachers to discern students' perspectives, cognitive processes, and emotional states, facilitating the design of targeted learning interventions and strategies (Burgess et al., 2021; Dignath & Veenman, 2021; Ndihokubwayo et al., 2020; O'Leary, 2024; Teasdale et al., 2020; Uibu et al., 2023; White & Maher, 2024; Windsor et al., 2022). The mutual respect and empathy cultivated through conflict resolution and peer evaluation indicate that social interaction among students provides a practical context for the development of life skills. Attitude assessment is critical, as attitudes reveal the underlying personal values that inform behavior (Asrial et al., 2024; Pranjia et al., 2020; Saripudin et al., 2021; Siswanto et al., 2025; Suhirman et al., 2020; Winarno et al., 2023). Since character formation is a dynamic and gradual process, incorporating diverse assessment indicators is essential (Pranjia et al., 2020; Siswanto et al., 2025; Thomas et al., 2022).

Triangulation strategies that combine direct teacher observation, self-assessment, and peer assessment constitute the most comprehensive approach to affective assessment (Adawiah, 2023; Al-Rashidi et al., 2022; Denessen et al., 2022; Shui Ng & Yu, 2023). This multi-faceted method enables educators to obtain a holistic and substantive understanding of student development (Díez-Palomar et al., 2020; Siu et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2022). The internalization of values, described by PAI teachers as the installation of "automatic brakes" in students' subconscious, exemplifies the realization of these theoretical principles. Such a rigorous and continuous assessment system fulfills the primary objectives of education: transmitting knowledge, culture, and systematic values to empower the next generation to achieve their potential within society (Komariah & Nihayah, 2023; Puspitasari et al., 2022; Yusri et al., 2023). The integration of observational assessment at SMPN 1 Baitussalam demonstrates that PAI successfully preserves Islamic cultural and religious values by embedding them within each student's character.

CONCLUSSION

The implementation of affective observation assessment in PAI learning at SMP Negeri 1 Baitussalam is characterized by fluctuating dynamics at each stage of Krathwohl's taxonomy. The primary challenges identified include: (1) subjectivity bias and psychological barriers, such as prestige, affecting students during self-assessment; (2) susceptibility to emotional friction and social conflicts among adolescents during peer assessment; and (3) inconsistencies in student behavior, including the "name passengers" phenomenon in group assignments and diminished discipline outside direct supervision. These findings indicate that character formation is a complex, non-linear process that does not occur automatically following the acquisition of moral concepts.

To address these challenges, PAI teachers have implemented an authentic, triangulation-based assessment ecosystem. This approach systematically integrates self-assessment sheets and peer assessments with teacher observation journals, which serve as the final validation instrument. Rather than serving as punitive measures, these assessments serve as platforms for dialogue and data-driven feedback, ensuring students are accountable for their behavioral patterns. The integration of these three instruments

has demonstrated effectiveness in minimizing affective data manipulation and fostering students' conflict-resolution and ego-management skills.

Both theoretically and practically, the integration of assessment strategies at SMPN 1 Baitussalam exemplifies a holistic Islamic education paradigm that unites faith (moral cognition) and charity (practical action). Through sustained and layered supervision, affective assessment instruments function as internal controls or "automatic brakes" within students' subconscious. This study recommends the observation triangulation model as a reference for comprehensive affective evaluation in other educational institutions, to ensure that attitude assessment extends beyond numerical reporting and contributes to the realization of social piety and holistic character development.

Based on the findings of this study, educators are encouraged to use proven evaluation methods to better integrate religious values into sustainable character development. These methods can support a more systematic implementation of character education in practice. Further research may explore their application in broader educational contexts.

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