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From Rhetoric to Practice: Bridging the Gap Between What We Believe and What We Are Able To Do

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From Rhetoric to Practice: Bridging the Gap Between What We Believe and What We Are Able To Do

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Abstract

This paper discusses the practical reasons for the disjuncture between the rhetoric and the practice of promoting children's participation. It articulates views put forth by various practitioners, and explores a variety of beliefs, including participation being a means to an end, and an end itself. It highlights some of the underlying reasons for the gap between the rhetoric and the practice of children's participation, including an absence of a meaningful dialogue that helps adults who are struggling with the issue, to understand the rationale for sharing the decision-making power with children. It concludes by identifying key insights gained from the debate, including that unless these issues are addressed, we are likely to fuel an ever-growing disjuncture between what many practitioners believe, and what they are required to practice.

1. Introduction

Many practitioners working within the mainstream appear to have embraced the idea of children's participation in the activities that they undertake to promote children's rights. Some have insisted that children should be given an opportunity to participate in all areas of decision-making that has an impact on their life. Furthermore, they argue, we should actively create opportunities for children to participate so that they acquire the skills and the experience necessary to exercise this right. Despite the rhetoric, however, many practitioners are not confident about how to go about practicing these ideals and certainly there is a diversity of opinion on how to practically apply this desirable principle. This debate is of course healthy: it enables us to examine the *gap between what we say we would like to be able to do, and what we are able to do in practice*.

This paper discusses an instance of such a debate and suggests that there are two broad categories of reasons to explain why there is a gap between the rhetoric and the practice of children's participation. Firstly, due to historical and traditional reasons, the concept of children's participation is controversial for some practitioners. The shift in the power dynamics within the adult-child relationship implied by this approach is seen by some as 'un-African'. They conceptualise 'the African way' of relating to children as characterised by a hierarchy in which the adult legitimately occupies a much higher status. Thus relating with children in a way that challenges this status quo is unacceptable to proponents of this view.

Secondly, even if many practitioners accept the idea of children's participation intellectually, they are genuinely struggling to integrate the idea in their practice and to relate it to their experience. Years of counter-experience make it harder to put the newer ideas into practice, and not fall back to familiar ways of relating with children. Both of these reasons create an internal conflict for

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some practitioners who on the one hand have to adhere to the values espoused by the organization they work for, and on the other hand have personal questions about the practicability of child participation at the community level.

This paper suggests that to overcome these barriers, protagonists of children's participation need to make a clear and an understandable case that enables practitioners to harmonize their practice with their daily experience. This means, firstly, we need to recognise that there is a conflict within a substantial number of practitioners that hasn't been given sufficient space within their respective organizations. Secondly, we need to build an understandable case for how children's participation can strengthen relationships, improve outcomes and be beneficial to all concerned. Thirdly, we need to reassure the adults with convincing arguments that their fears of disempowerment and anarchy will not be realized. Fourthly, there is a need to clarify the fact that children's participation in any given process does not have to be an 'all or nothing' transaction and that there is a valid gradation that may help in understanding what may be appropriate within a given context and that adults have a legitimate role to play in guiding and protecting children. Finally, there is a need to develop practical skills and experience that will enable individuals to reconstruct their relationship with children within a more equitable framework. Unless these issues are addressed, we are likely to fuel an ever-growing disjuncture between what many practitioners believe and what they are required to practice.

It is not the intention of this paper to review current literature regarding the application of a participatory approach with regard to working with children. Instead the discussion will be rooted in the experience of a team of practitioners from diverse backgrounds that grappled with the underlying issues as they designed a study to learn about children's experience of violence. In so doing, it will articulate some of the operational compromises that were necessary. It will also discuss what the team learned about the practice of promoting children's participation.

2. Children's Participation

While the issue of participation in development practice has had a longer history, it has received much attention within recent decades. A robust case has been made for why it is an important evolution of the paradigm of the top-down development practice (Chambers 1994). Much has been written about the importance of agency for equitable development and how the participation of the people at whom the development approaches are directed, can ensure sustainable outcomes. However, as an orthodoxy that has rapidly become a requirement if practitioners want to be taken seriously, it has also had its fair share of critics, including those who have argued that in many instances, the de-politicisation of the practice of participation has led to unjust and illegitimate uses of power, thus rendering the idea tyrannical (Cooke & Kothari 2001). The charge here is not simply that it is the imperfect practitioner or faulty tools that can make participatory development tyrannical but that the problem is systemic and that an alternative more just paradigm may be needed. Others have claimed a more optimistic prognosis for the future of participation by reclaiming its original transformative power (Hickey and Mohan 2004).

Participation of children brings a further complexity to the discourse due to the popular perception of childhood as a stage of development characterised by lack of maturity and passivity (Prout & James 1997). As a result, advocates for children's participation are required to make an explicit case in a way that is different from participatory work with adults, the reasons for which are often taken as self-evident.

The case for promotion of children's participation frequently begins by citing UNCRC (for example Articles 12-15), which has been hailed as a unique conceptual synthesis of the case for protection and participation of children going hand in hand (Santos Pais 2000). Others have argued that while being implicitly supportive of the issue of participation, UNCRC is more focussed on the protection of children, and emphasizes much more the role of duty-bearers to create a conducive environment for children's development (Cantwell 1998; Libel 2000 in Ackerman et al 2003). However, a multifaceted case for children's participation has been articulated (Rajani 2001:9), including the notion that participation is not only a right, but also a means to an end of realising rights in general (World Youth Report 2003: Chapter 10).

At a practical level, much impinges on one's understanding of the concept of participation, and particularly in the case of children, it is important to determine what is meant by 'meaningful participation'. A much-cited definition of participation was proposed by Roger Hart (1992): "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives". He went on to propose a ladder of participation which outlines levels of participation of children in various interactions with adults from 'assigned but informed' to 'youth-initiated, shared decision making with adults'. Reddy and Ratna (2002) have dispensed with the levels of participation analysis but elaborated on Hart's ideas regarding how the concept of child participation manifests with variety in adult-child engagement within development practice. In this analysis (13 different types of transactions are discussed), the concept of children's participation can be understood with more precision when one becomes cognisant of the power distribution within each type of adult-child transaction.

3. Background

Raising Voices, in collaboration with Save the Children in Uganda, undertook a study to consult children and adults on their perception of violence against children (Naker 2005). Although it was recognised that children's knowledge and experience were the key to a realistic understanding of the nature and the extent of the problem, it was also recognised that there were practical and ethical considerations that need to be borne in mind when involving children in an exploration of violence against them. Furthermore the research team that was assembled consisted of practitioners from various backgrounds that also had a variety of views regarding children's participation. Thus the research team wrestled with the question of children's participation in the study, and considered various options. The issue was not (at least overtly) whether children should participate in the implementation of the study but how to make that participation meaningful. The debate focused around how to avoid lapsing into empty compliance and meaningless rhetoric without an honest commitment. At the heart of the discussions was the fundamental question: Given the context in which we are working, what would count as children's meaningful participation in a study of this nature?

The study involved travelling to five geographically diverse districts of Uganda over an extended period of time. Involving a core group of children in the actual data collection was therefore not possible for practical and ethical reasons. The team also explored the option of training children who were already living in each of the districts to undertake the research but the budgetary constraints as well as doubts expressed by the research advisory team regarding standardisation of the quality of data collection eventually led to the demise of that idea too. Finally a decision was made that an Advisory Committee of children would be established that will have a meaningful voice in how the study is designed and executed. Therefore an Advisory Committee of forty children, aged ten to seventeen, half girls and half boys, was assembled.

4. Children's Participation in this Study

Through the Advisory Committee we sought children's expertise on fundamental issues: What should we ask? Who should we ask, and how? Three girls and three boys acted as a core group of children whose capacity was developed by the research team to act as facilitators of their respective group and as group leaders during discussions. Their role was to chair meetings, facilitate discussions and strive to develop key recommendations through three distinct meetings. The first meeting addressed the broad issue of children's experience of violence, and how would they like adults around them to understand it. The second meeting was focussed on what we should ask children about their experience of violence and what kind of language should we use when referring to violence. The third meeting focussed on what kind of methodology might be suitable in enabling children to contribute their views. Based on these contributions, a topic guide was developed and the Advisory Committee members agreed to act as the first trial group for field-testing of the tools (for further discussion of how the input from the Advisory Committee influenced the study design see Naker 2005). They were then asked to comment on their experience of being subjects of the study and to make final recommendations regarding the tools for the study.

The central message that emerged from the Advisory Committee was that violence against children is a consequence of children's low status in their relationship with adults. Repeatedly they pointed to acts of impunity, how little children's feelings mattered to adults or how little time and resources were invested in responding to children's needs. Their lower status meant that children were excluded from many of the decision-making opportunities and their needs were routinely overlooked. They were regularly disrespected, neglected and humiliated and as a result, many children had not had an opportunity to develop their skill or confidence in being able to contribute their views, needs and desires.

The research team considered this message and assessed what it should mean for the design of the study with regard to children's participation. Some members within the team argued that for a child-centric agency that was interested in preventing violence against children, it was important to strive to create as many opportunities as possible to not only build children's confidence and skills but also to enable them to experience their views being taken seriously. Advocates of this view argued for a more central role for the Advisory Committee that would entail decision-making power over the course of the study. However, others within the research team were cautious regarding what that participation should mean in this study, what its aims were and what would constitute meaningful participation with relation to the Advisory Committee. The following is a brief description of the debate and the final resolution that the team arrived at as a result of engaging in this discussion.

4.1 Participation as an end

Some members of the team argued for a broad conceptualisation of children's participation in this study. They suggested that children's participation should be an 'end in itself' and that the process should be more focused on creating a meaningful experience for children who participate through the Advisory Committee. In this formulation, the ultimate outcome or recommendations that the children would contribute to the research team was considered a by-product, and that the very process of meaningful engagement would create useful knowledge and teach us about what were children's urgent priorities regarding violence against them. In this group's conceptualisation, our interactions with the children would be characterised by a deeper power sharing as elaborated by Reddy and Ratna's (2002) description of transaction type thirteen:

“Jointly initiated and directed by children and adults: There are adults and children who have developed a partnership and they jointly initiate and direct the processes. They have joint ownership of the idea, the process and the outcome. They may play different roles, based on mutual consent. This relationship is possible only when both the adults and children are empowered and are able to pool their respective strengths to achieve a common objective, in partnership with each other.”

Reddy and Ratna (2002)

This group argued that once we recognise the current disjuncture between our rhetoric and practice, we realise that by creating an opportunity for children to participate in this manner in the study, we could:

- Create an opportunity for a deeply powerful experience for these children. For many, this could be the first time they may have had an opportunity to experience what it is like to have their views taken seriously.
- Initiate a process of ownership of children’s agency, albeit at an individual level. Ultimately this could contribute to a broader movement of promoting children’s rights.
- Open possibilities for these children to influence in a deeper way the narrow thinking of many adults regarding children’s aptitude and their ability to make meaningful contributions.
- Create ownership of the issue and thus enable children to contribute uniquely in developing a deeper awareness of the variegated nature of their experience. Furthermore it could truly enrich our analysis if children share decision-making power regarding their concerns and are in a position to point out our blind spots as adults.

The basis of this group’s argument was that the exclusion of children in many of the decision-making processes is deeply entrenched in practice and that what is needed is a radical overhaul of the modus operandi. In this view, all development processes should have implicitly built into them a mechanism through which children enjoy meaningful participation and through which they exercise real power. All programmatic activities should embody within it an opportunity for children to have access to an authentic experience of what it feels like to exercise power and assume some of the responsibility of exercising the power. In essence, this would mean that in current practice, we should exercise affirmative action and create real opportunities for children to experience meaningful participation regardless of what the objective of that activity is. This should be seen as a goal in itself for all child-centric organizations.

4.2 Participation as a means to an end

Other members of the team began with an explicit view that within the Advisory Committee, children’s participation should be seen as a ‘means to an end’. They argued that the involvement of children should be focused on improving the quality of information we would eventually collect and that the intention of the Advisory Committee was to tap into children’s knowledge to formulate more appropriate questions with more relevant language. In this formulation, children were seen as consultants who were contributing their specialised experience. In this group’s conceptualisation, our interactions with the children would approximate Reddy & Ratna’s (2002) description of transaction type nine;

“Children consulted and informed: Some adults believe in consulting children and keeping them involved. The adults take the lead role but inform the children about the situation and seek their opinion. They try to give children a sense of ownership over some aspects of the process, but under their supervision. The adults are still in control

over the process, but they keep it flexible to incorporate the suggestions and concerns of the children.

This group articulated a robust argument based on a need to be honest in our practice and to avoid lapsing into disingenuity, simply to serve a prevailing orthodoxy. They argued that constructing a realistic portrayal of children as advisors rather than implementers of the study would:

- Demonstrate the honesty of our actions, and build confidence and trust with participating children.
- Recognise that children were ‘experts’ regarding their own experience and that we see their role, in this context, as ‘experts’ rather than just children. Furthermore, children as ‘experts’ would be ideally placed to critique the relevance as well as the appropriateness of our approach. They would be able to comment on whether our line of questions is likely to elicit a response that truly reflects children’s reality.
- Acknowledge the reality that while children are well placed to tell us about what might work if we want to learn about children’s lives, they may not have the experience to comment on the appropriateness of research methodology.
- Avoid patronising children and acknowledge their agency rather than relegating their contributions as emanating from a special interest group.
- Counter-balance prejudices that may be present in our conception of the problem as well as our use of the language as adults. They would also serve as a reliable reference group to gauge responses and against which to check our expectations regarding the magnitude of the problem.

While all members of the research team agreed on the outcomes desired from this study, this group asserted that it was not necessary to attach a requirement on the process of the Advisory Committee that its primary purpose be to serve as a space to empower children. However, they also pointed out that if the process were properly put in place, children would be likely to feel significant personal development as a result of their participation.

4.3 Practical compromise

Between these two poles were shades of views expressed by various individuals who acted as advisors to the study. There was a substantive debate on the merits of the two approaches and indeed whether they were always mutually exclusive. Eventually the group adopted a practical compromise and agreed on the following as a way forward:

- a) The Advisory Committee will have an advisory role and not an executive one. That means the views of the children’s Advisory Committee members would be heard carefully and considered by the research team in a similar way to those of the adult advisors. It was made clear that the research team would make the final decisions regarding the final protocol to be used.
- b) Research team members will work with a core group of children initially to develop their capacity to facilitate the group process of the Advisory Committee and chair meetings in an equitable and an efficient manner.
- c) Within the committee, children will lead the discussion and chair the meeting. There would only be one adult in the room and that person’s role was to act as an advisor when called upon to do so. This person was trained to avoid, as much as possible, sabotaging the process and instructed to explicitly refuse to make definitive statements. Their role was to merely serve as a provider of information when asked to do so and to take notes

- regarding key contributions. In particular they were asked to reflect back to the children the responsibility of exercising their power instead of deferring to the adult in the room.
- d) A core group of the children made structural decisions regarding the operation and the constitution of the committee including whether the two committees would be sex segregated and differentiated by the age of the children.
 - e) The Committee would consider during its deliberations the objectives, the broad methodology of the research, as well as all the tools for data collection and comment on its relevance and recommend possible modifications. The core group was given assistance in developing a methodology for facilitating these considerations.
 - f) The Committee would try to develop a consensus on recommendations they were suggesting.
 - g) Once the Committee had developed recommendations, the research team would have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions regarding the recommendations but could not challenge the validity of children's opinions.

It was recognised by all that this was a compromise based on the complex needs of the activity as well as our individual beliefs around promoting children's participation in a meaningful manner. Clearly the experience of participation in this case may be colored by the fact that it is a time-limited opportunity, and accessible only on an ad hoc basis. Furthermore one could wonder about what it means to meaningfully participate in a process where the key parameters are defined externally and that one's views may be heard but not guaranteed to lead to action. Children with their lifelong experience of marginalization would be expected to be sceptical of such opportunities or at least reticent in fully trusting it. Sympathetic adults may also add a further charge of the process being open to subtle forms of manipulations, from the look in the eye, to the constructs of the physical environment within which such meetings are likely to be held.

Nevertheless, after an honest debate, it was recognised that the aim of creating an opportunity to participate was to emphasize that all of us should have an opportunity to have our views taken seriously. All of us should have an opportunity to learn how to contribute our views in a democratic fashion and should be given the opportunity to learn the importance of engaging with others. If children are to participate meaningfully, they must have the opportunity to learn that persuading others to their point of view requires skill and strategic thinking, and the development of credible arguments. Furthermore, children have to grasp that the right to participate is about exercising one's voice but does not guarantee that one will get one's way, and that participation is about partaking, rather than always prevailing. The group came to a consensus that the process of the Advisory Committee, when exercised in good faith, approximates reality.

5. What did we learn?

While we entered into the process with uncertainty, we emerged with considerable confidence that the exercise was meaningful. We learned much about adults' ability create participatory space for children, and about ways in which children participate. The following are some of the insights that we gained.

a) There was uncertainty about what the rhetoric of children's participation means for the adult-child relationship. Many wondered where the boundary lay between appropriately guiding children and allowing them to make their own decisions and what such interactions would mean for the role of the adult in the child's life. Others worried that child participation was an idea that could be perceived as an external notion that sits uneasily with African ways of doing things. They argued

that there is a tradition of elders guiding others and that children should learn this legitimate deference to a more experienced adult around them. Underlying this view was the anxiety that was subsequently expressed by many adults in the community (Naker 2005). They felt that tradition and culture as they knew it, were being eroded without clearly articulated justification (beyond the repeated claims by people with resources). For example in this study 85% of the adults had heard about children's rights and yet a significant proportion of these adults were suspicious of the idea. While it can be argued that many of these adults are simply afraid of losing the power they are currently wielding over children, there is also a deeper underlying perception amongst these same adults that things are changing too fast in the direction that takes them further away from what is familiar. In the absence of a meaningful dialogue that aims to build understanding and inspire internally motivated change, many Africans are likely to hold onto suspicion as a shield against the current programmes that many child centric organizations are implementing.

b) There is a tension and some degree of discomfort amongst some practitioners regarding the rhetoric on what is, and what should be considered to be meaningful participation for children. While many practitioners may not have a clearly articulated framework within which to place their views and often presented their positions as based on their hunches, experience or knowledge of their communities, what was undeniable was that there is, at the very least, a substantial incomprehension of the perceived orthodoxy. Often practitioners would express dissent tentatively. In safer spaces, some revealed that the issue of children's participation was an edict that had been passed down the line to them without a clear unfolding of the rationale or the deeper argument that underpins the position. Clearly, we are in danger of creating a substantial subgroup of practitioners who are required to implement a rhetoric that they are not fully convinced of, or authentically subscribe to.

c) The practice of children's participation is harder than the rhetoric. Despite the best intentions of the adults within the team, there were often times when we fell back on the usual practices learned over years of repetition, such as discounting the depth of children's experience or suggesting structures for the meeting that were alienating to the children. For example the first meeting with the children was held in the classroom where they were expected to make assertive contributions in an environment that is associated with subservience in children's minds. When the meeting was subsequently transferred to a playground of the school under the shade of a tree, many children became more assertive and outspoken.

d) Breaking the power barrier is a slow process requiring persistence. Understandably children approached the idea of participation with scepticism and paced their contribution based on the level of safety they felt. The child facilitators themselves were unsure of how to exercise their power as leaders of the group and the participants initially responded with incomprehension at the absence of an adult leader at the meeting. However, when the contributions from the first meeting were compared with the contributions from final meeting, there was a marked progression of confidence in tone and content. At the first meeting, when the facilitator explained that the adult note-taker would not intervene or control the conversation, many children began testing that assertion by giving answers that they felt would provoke the adult note-taker. For example one child said that he simply ignores his parents when they try to force him to do something he does not want to do. He and others kept looking at the note-taker for a reaction, expecting a reprimand. However after several such testing remarks and when they realized that an intervention was not forthcoming, eventually they began to focus on sharing what they truly felt. That same child later clarified that it is not that he simply stops listening but that he felt paralysed by the fear when he felt he was being humiliated. Many children, it appears, had developed a finely-tuned ear for when it is worth taking a risk to reveal oneself.

e) *Children's participation may not be linear.* Honest participation is a learned skill that requires a supportive environment and a cumulative and a subtle sense that what is being contributed will be heard with attention. For example (as reported by the adult note-taker) it was a chance remark by one of the children during a preliminary game that led to the formulation of the central distinction that children actually understood violence against them in a fundamentally different way from adults. One child remarked, "Mzee [father] thinks a slap is like scoring a goal. But he doesn't remember that it is everything that goes before the goal that leads to the goal." This assertion was later picked up as a discussion point by the group leader (an older child) who was alert to the subtext of this comment. After probing and provoking reflection within the group, it emerged that the group understood this comment to mean that if his father really wanted him to learn something, he had to do more than simply beat him. Discussions about what else the father needed to do led to the final suggestion that children think of violence as the way adults relate to them rather than just the isolated acts they perpetrate on children..

f) *Children's participation creates expectations.* Many children have never had the experience of being consulted or of being asked to participate in a manner that strives to ensure that their views carry sufficient weight. Thus it is crucial that we learn to build children's capacity skilfully and in so doing that we do not offer fragmentary and contradictory messages to children. For example, it is crucial that we remain realistic about what the outcome of the research process might be. Participation is about having the right to be taken seriously rather than having your views always prevail. It is counterproductive to create an expectation that by creating a space for children's views to be heard, there is always an undertaking to act on them.

g) *Children as a group are heterogeneous and have complex and differing priorities, interests and histories.* It is tempting to think that if asked sensitively, in a suitably safe environment, a uniform view of children's needs might emerge. Reality is rarely that simple. For example, it was not uncommon to find that girls stressed different priorities from boys, older children stressed other priorities compared to younger ones and out of school children also had a substantively different contribution to make. Thus enabling children's participation requires accommodating a multiplicity of views and priorities.

h) *It is easy for adults to over-interpret when children communicate things that challenge adult expectations.* It is difficult for many adults to take children's views at face value without qualifying or interpreting them. For example it was hard for many researchers initially to grasp the intensity of the response when children were asked how they feel when violence is committed against them. Children expressed intense rage and many talked about transitional suicidal feelings. Initially adults responded with incomprehension, and in debriefing meetings, often reported the findings with nervous laughter and attaching a subtle implication that the children were being dramatic.

i) *Watch out for subtext.* Many children are not used to communicating their views directly and thus it is important to develop an ear for subtext. This is distinct from interpreting what is being communicated and involves focussing on what is being communicated without the actual use of the words. For example, in the Advisory Committee of girls, a debate resulted when some of the girls suggested that it is better to be beaten, even severely, than to be asked to remain in 'detention' after school to reflect on their mistake. It was only skilful probing on the part of the group leader that ultimately led to the revelation that the anxiety was about being sexually harassed during the 'detention' or on the way home in the evening when the road might have fewer people on it.

6. Conclusion

Bridging the gap between the rhetoric and the practice of children's participation is complicated. Despite a lifetime of being excluded, many children are quick to grasp the opportunity to participate. However their skill is still growing, and opportunities to develop the skill and experience are far too few. This makes them particularly vulnerable to being manipulated and co-opted and as a result, it is relatively easy for many practitioners to continue paying lip service to the rhetoric, and yet practice only a token form of participation. Clearly as children grow in experience, they will be in a better position to resist the rhetoric that belies the practice.

At a deeper level, many adults are uncertain about how they feel regarding the sharing of decision-making power with children. Many practitioners have just been told about the value of promoting children's participation as a part of their organization's way of doing things, without a careful examination of their existing system of belief. They have imbibed edicts over a lifetime that have implored them to maintain power and authority over children, yet they are now being asked to rethink their experience. Even if the practitioners accept the arguments intellectually, the process of overcoming years of conditioning is difficult. Many of their transactions with, as well as views about children are visceral, and entrenched in deeply held prejudices about children's abilities. These individuals are not callous or unsympathetic to children. They are just unsure of what the redistribution of power means. Clearly, these practitioners need help in assessing the meaning of this vision, and how to integrate it in their practice.

In a sense bridging this gap is a radical undertaking. It suggests a fundamental shift in the power distribution within the adult-child relationship. It is therefore predictable that there will be resistance, and possibly even a backlash, before the idea is considered seriously. However, if we do not begin the work of convincing colleagues and persuading decision-makers of this different way of relating with children, we are likely to languish in an era of an ever-growing gap between the rhetoric and the practice of promoting children's participation.

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