



Education in Austerity: Exploring Parental Participation in Supporting Community Schools in Two Villages of Eastern Zambia

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to explore parental participation in supporting village community schools in two villages of Eastern Zambia. The involvement of parents in their children's education has long been considered by educational researchers as a significant factor in positively impacting children's success. A qualitative case study design was used based on naturalistic phenomenological philosophy that views reality as multi-layered, interactive and a social experience. The interpretive method was preferable because it takes into account the significance of context in relation to meaning. The target population were head teachers, parents, members of the Parent Community School Committee (PCSC), teachers, civic and village headmen. The study found that the role of parents and PCSC members in sampled schools mainly focused on infrastructural development of schools and mobilization of communities for material contributions and labour to the schools. Construction meetings were compulsory for all members of the community and failure to participate in community construction attracted a fine of a chicken or confiscation of household goods such as buckets or pots. The study recommended inter alia that the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders should support community schools by providing adequate learning and teaching requisites in schools.

KEYWORDS:

Parental participation, parent community school committee, volunteer teachers, community school.

BACKGROUND

Community schools are founded, owned and operated at the community level through the Parent Community School Committees (PCSC's). Community schools in Zambia started in the 1980's as a response to inadequate schools and school places. Vulnerable children such as the orphans and the poor failed to access places in conventional schools especially in the rural parts of the country. Since then, community schools have become an increasing source of basic education in Zambia. For this reason, the Ministry of Education (MoE) recognized community schools as part of the education system in Zambia in 1992 (Kelly, 1997 and Carmody, 2004). The needs of vulnerable children such as orphans and the poor were the major reasons for the establishment of community schools. Thus, community schools have developed from the bottom-up, as community interventions

to provide education for children who are unable to access conventional schools (Falconer-Stout, Kalimaposo and Simuyaba, 2014). Initially, it was not clear as to who was ultimately responsible for the coordination of these schools. In 1996, the MoE supported the formation of the umbrella body, now defunct called the Zambia Community Schools Secretariat (ZCSS) to cater for the administrative needs of community schools at national level.

According to the Zambia Community School Secretariat (ZCSS, 1997), the first "Open Community School" was established in Mtendere, Lusaka in 1982 by the Dominican Sisters. Most community schools, however, started operating in the early 1990's. Prominent among these early initiatives was the Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) which was established in 1993 and registered as a Non-governmental Organization in 1996.

According to the operating guidelines of community schools, the Parent Community School Committee (PCSC) is the governing board of the school. Members of the PCSC are elected representatives of the community and are supposed to inform the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) of the school's existence. Members of the PCSC initiate the formal registration process of the school through DEBS Office. The

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school is then inspected by the District Education Standards Officer (DESO) who decides whether to recognize and register the school or not.

Although the Zambian government with the support of local and international organizations has developed programmes to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE), resource and infrastructural constraints continue to challenge the country's educational system. Zambia's Free Basic Education Policy of 2002 opened doors of opportunity for millions of children. However, some children particularly those who are at risk of poverty, malnutrition and sickness especially Zambia's orphans and vulnerable children remain left behind (UNESCO, 2008; Petrauskis & Nkunika, 2006). The presence of community schools show the lack of capacity on the part of the Zambian government to provide adequate school places to primary-aged children. In as much as community schools make meaningful contributions to the goals of EFA by increasing access for children especially in the rural areas, it is not clear how community schools are monitored and evaluated in Zambia. Given the goals of community schools to cater for vulnerable children, the progression rates of learners in community schools is unclear as little is known about their progression with respect to access to secondary schools and higher education.

It has long been known that there are significant links between social background, educational achievement and subsequent life chances. Although there is considerable variation at the individual level, children from underprivileged homes tend to achieve quite less in school compared to their privileged counterparts in school. It is clear that, in spite of successive waves of reform, Basil Bernstein's dictum that 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein, 1970) remains more or less as true today as it was at the start of the 1970s. A report from the Centre for Economic Performance (Blanden et al., 2005), for example, finds that intergenerational mobility, i.e., the ability of people to achieve a socio-economic status different from that of their family in England is low compared with most other economically-rich countries. A major factor limiting mobility is the strong relationship between family income and educational attainment with children from affluent families taking greatest advantage of any new educational opportunities that may arise.

Baseline studies on learning achievement levels conducted in some community schools in Zambia by the Examinations Council of Zambia indicate high pass rates for some community schools in Grade 7 Composite Examinations (ECZ, 2012, Falconer-Stout, Kalimaposo & Simuyaba, 2014). Similarly, other pupil assessment metrics in Reading such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) conducted by USAID Time To Learn (TTL, 2013) show that despite the stigma associated with Community Schools, evidence shows that some of the community schools produce better results than the conventional schools. Parental

engagement has repeatedly been shown to be one of the most important factors impacting pupil performance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Parent Community School Committee (PCSC) is the governing body of a community school elected by members of the community. Apparently little research seems to exist in the Zambian Community School context on how parents contribute to the welfare of community schools in their localities. Therefore, this study sought to explore parental participation in supporting community schools in two villages of Eastern Zambia.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of parents in improving community schools in two villages of Eastern Zambia.

Research questions

1. What is the role of parents in supporting village community schools?
2. How do parents contribute to the welfare of village community schools?
3. What are the views of parents, PCSC members, teachers, head teachers, civic and traditional leaders on the participation of parents in supporting village community schools?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A school-family-community partnership model by Joyce Epstein was used to explain the enhancement of the education of the learner in community schools. Usually, families and schools have been used viewed as tools with utmost effect on the development of children. However, communities have received increasing attention for their role in socializing young people and ensuring success in a variety of societal domains. According to Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence (1995), schools, families and communities are recognized as the most important institutions that socialize and educate children. Epstein model relooks at the relationship between schools, families and communities as one of the overlapping spheres of influence that share a concern about the child's success. The main key element of the theory is that certain goals, such as learner academic success are of interest to each of these institutions and are best achieved through their cooperative action and support. As a framework for increasing parental involvement in education, the model identifies six types of educational involvement and encourages schools to come up with activities that involve schools, families and communities within the six types. The model has been influential in shaping social policy concerning parental involvement in education.

Involvement of a parent is recognized as an important factor in improving the quality of education of a child. Because of

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its importance, understanding how parents help their children and how schools can encourage greater parent-participation have been important research focus in education and sociology. Epstein's model is segmented into two main components called spheres (Epstein, 2002; Yumba, Mbozi & Kalimaposo, 2018). The first segment indicates the partnership of schools, families and communities as spheres which overlap. According to Epstein, the spheres assume that schools, families and communities each have a role and influence in the education of a child. The overlap of the spheres indicates that the interests and influences of the stakeholders in a child's education are mutual. Time and experiences are regarded as significant factors that influence the degree of overlap of the spheres. Hence, time in schools, the age of the child, and the experiences of the child in the family and in school can influence the degree to which schools, families and communities have mutual interests and influence on the child. For example, parents are more involved in school when their children are young. Thus, the partnership model would depict a greater overlap of parents and schools for a Grade One pupil than for a learner in secondary school (Epstein, et al., 2002). The involvement of parents in their children's education has long been considered by researchers as a significant factor in positively impacting children's success (Parhar, 2006: 1; McNeal, 2001; Lemmer and Van Wyk, 2004 and Jeynes 2005). Vassallo (2009) confirms that parental involvement in a child's education is a strong predictor of learner achievement (Yumba, Mbozi & Kalimaposo, 2018)

Houtenville and Conway (2008) concurringly mention parental involvement as an important factor in pupil achievement. For example, if a parent has time to help a child with home work, that child will most likely develop interest in school work and will apply himself or herself to school more diligently (Mwanamwambwa, Kalimaposo, Mubita, Sikayomya, Muyangana & Haambokoma, 2021). Broadly speaking, there are two types of parental involvement namely, *school-based involvement* and *home based involvement*. The two impact on pupil achievement differently.

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) and Hoell (2006) identify two types of school-based involvement namely *school communication* which involves contact between parents and school personnel aimed at sharing information that includes the child's progress, establishing good relations between teachers and parents as well as discussing emergent problems. The other type is *school participation* which involves volunteering for school activities and attending school functions as well as participation in school governance (Jeynes, 2005; Houtenville and Conway, 2008).

Material resources provision or contributions such as paying for teaching material, maintenance of buildings or furniture and fittings constitute important school based involvement (Vogels, 2004).

Home –based involvement appear to have greater impact than school-based involvement. Hoell (2006) and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) identify two types of home based involvement, namely home discussion, which is associated with discussing school related activities and home supervision which involves monitoring the child's out-of-school activities and home work (Muyabi, Kalimaposo, Mubita, Mulubale, Haambokoma & Milupi, 2022).

Among the benefits accruing from parental involvement are: improved attitudes of learners at school; improved behaviour; decreased truancy; a decrease in delinquency and a more positive attitude towards the school (Vassallo, 2001; Kalimaposo & Muleya, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was used in this study based on naturalistic phenomenological philosophy that views reality as multi layered, interactive and a social experience. The interpretive method was preferable because it takes into account the significance of context in relation to meaning. It assumes that all human action is meaningful and has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010; Kalimaposo, 2010). Interactive strategies such as semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and observations were used in the study.

POPULATION

The target populations for this study were head teachers, parents, PCSC members, civic and traditional leaders such as Councillors and village headmen

Sample and Sampling procedures

The sample comprised 5 teachers; 8 PCSC members; 2 councilors, 7 village headmen and 20 parents. Purposive sampling procedures were used.

Data collection techniques

Data were collected through semi – structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations, analysis of documents and in-depth interviews with key informants.

Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed through coding and categorization of themes that emerged from the data. The analysis was done by means of examining the field notes on interviews, focus group discussions and observations made on responses from participants and activities observed. The researcher reflected on the meaning of responses from participants leading into the development of hunches about meaning and seeking to confirm or disconfirm the hunches in subsequent interviews or observations. The sorting of data into manageable units involved categorizing, comparing, synthesizing and searching for patterns.

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DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH SITES

Mafumela Community School

Mafumela Community School is found in Maguya Zone, about 20km off Chipata-Malawi road. During the visit we interacted with the head teacher, teachers, PCSC members, parents, village headmen and area Councilor. The name *Mafumela* is a Ngoni word meaning moving out or moving away (exodus). Informed that Mafumela village was formed by families that moved out of a village where some men used to mess around with other peoples' wives. Adultery and wife swapping was rampant in the area and so some families decided to leave the village and settle in a new place which they called Mafumela (moving out).

Mafumela Community School was established in 2002. The school was constructed with the support of the Catholic Church on a piece of land given by the village headman. The school is a grass thatched classroom. At the time of the visit, it was rainy season. The physical environment of the classroom was such that the grass thatched roof leaked and part of it appeared to be on the verge of collapse. The earth floor had little pools of water due to heavy rains. The lighting inside the classroom was rather dim. There were no chairs and desks in the classroom. Pupils sat on make shift moulds made of bricks and clay. The history of the school appears not very clear to the local people as some people associate the origins of the school with a white missionary, a woman who came to preach in the area. She brought books and other educational materials in the area and wanted people that would help in the teaching. Before the classroom structure was erected children were meeting at the home of the current PCSC treasurer.

At the time of the visit, there was only one volunteer teacher at the school who also acted as the head teacher. Informed that the school was staffed by three volunteer teachers when it started, two men and one female. The female teacher got married and joined the husband in another village while the male teacher left the area when his father passed on. The level of education for the current teacher is Grade 9 while the man and woman who left were Grade 12 and Grade 8 respectively. The school recruited two other Grade 12 volunteer teachers, a man and a woman who later left due to inadequate support from the community. Since the two teachers left in 2018 the school has not recruited any teachers.

The school appears to have problems in retaining teachers due to lack of support from the community. Community school teachers are hired on voluntary basis by the PCSC. The PCSC is responsible for the welfare of volunteer teachers. The PCSC is expected to mobilize resources for volunteer teachers from the members of the community. Payment for volunteer teaches is usually in kind, either money or donations of agro products such as maize from the community members. Informed that the volunteer teacher at this school was entitled to only one bag of maize per year. The extra grain bags collected from the community goes to

support the Ncwala traditional ceremony, an annual traditional ceremony for the Ngoni people.

The PCSC does not appear to have confidence in the current volunteer teacher due to his low qualifications. A number of people interviewed hinted that they would be happier with a Grade 12 teacher. However, the current volunteer teacher appears resilient as he seems committed to work against all odds. He has continued teaching since his colleagues left in 2018 in spite of the meager support he receives from the community. The Zonal Head teacher commended the volunteer teacher at Mafumela for his good record keeping and desire to learn. The volunteer teacher appears active in the improvisation of learning materials using local resources. The two chalk boards were resurfaced using his initiative and some flash cards made from card boards and manila paper.

The PCSC meetings at Mafumela appears irregular, nobody seemed to have a definite answer with regard to the number of scheduled meetings in a school term or year. Informed that that meetings were usually held at the school. The volunteer teacher serves as Secretary on the PCSC according to the operating guidelines of Community Schools. Much of the activities of the PCSC appear centered on the school infrastructure development. Some key informants interviewed reported that decisions made by PCSC were never implemented. A case in point is the brick making project, the community was mobilized to mould 5000 bricks which were later loaned to a local church without the knowledge of some PCSC members and the local community. Some participants interviewed revealed that plans of the PCSC were never implemented and most of the things were left in the hands of the volunteer teacher.

Informed that the PCSC encouraged parents to send their children to school, sometimes they wrote letters to the Chief or village headmen. Informed that parents are also reminded to help their children with homework. A casual look at the literacy levels of parents seemed to indicate that few parents would be able to assist their children in school work. The PCSC Chairperson often observed lessons in the school and interacted with the volunteer teacher and pupils. The PCSC engaged the Ministry of Education by visits to the Ministry of Education officials such as the Zonal Head teacher, DRCC and DEBS offices requesting for learning / teaching materials and trained teachers among other things.

During focus group interviews with PCSC members and selected parents, we heard that school attendance during the rainy season was difficult for children who came from neighboring villages as they had to cross bridges and some bridges broke down due to heavy rains. School attendance was also affected by poor water and sanitation. The only pit latrine in the school had broken down due to heavy rains. At the time of the visit, there was no functional toilet in the school; pupils were using the nearby bush to answer the call of nature. The school does not have safe and clean water points in the school, pupils have to draw water from a stream

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a few kilometers from the school. The water from this stream is not safe as animals such as cows and goats drink from the same stream. Despite, all these challenges pupils are eager to learn and some have to walk long distances to and from school. Teacher absenteeism was also reported as a factor that discouraged pupils from attending school. Due to inadequate support from the community, the volunteer teacher has to fend for himself by doing other pieces of work to raise money for his survival.

The Mafumela community appears committed to the education of their children, but they do not seem to support volunteer teachers adequately. Some parents are only able to contribute once in a year after their harvest. The poverty levels appear high in the area. The PCSC wants a trained teacher seconded to the school by the DEBS office but they do not have facilities such as a teacher's house, toilets, enough classroom space to attract trained teachers. The PCSC has not changed since inception; some participants felt other people should take over while others want to maintain the current committee.

Interview with the DRCC reviewed that the school does not send action plans to her office. Mafumela does not send reports and its file was empty in the Zonal records. The community was expected to spearhead projects at the school, the school had a lot of land which they could have utilized for various income generating projects. According to DRCC, most members of the PCSC do not appear to have ideas on how they could transform their school; they continue to blame government for everything.

Chandeke Community School

Chandeke Community School is in Phikamalaza Zone of Lundazi District. During this visit, we interacted with teachers, head teacher, PCSC members, parents, village headmen, previous teachers, and area Councillor. The school is located along Chama road, about 8km from the Central Business Centre of Lundazi District. The school started in 2006 by a Grade 12 school leaver who was teaching children under a grass thatched shelter for the Agriculture Cooperative Society. Some parents in the area got interested and encouraged their children to attend lessons at the shelter. In 2007, parents decided to have a Grade 1 class. The community members asked the area Councillor for a piece of land where they could build a school as children from Chandeke used to walk long distances to attend schools in the neighbouring villages. The school shifted from the agricultural shed to the piece of land allocated by civic leaders as construction site of the school. Children were learning under a tree. The area Councilor advised the Chandeke community to mobilize up front materials such as stones, building sand and bricks including skilled people in the community such as brick layers and carpenters. The community molded bricks and construction of the school started. Since the PCSC was organized and constantly

engaged the DEBS office and other civic leaders, the Educational Standards Officer (ESO) visited the school. This officer found a lot of children in the school, some of whom were above seven years old. The PCSC was advised to write an application to the DEBS office for the upgrading of the school from Pre-school to Primary School. The DEBS accepted the application and the school was advised to apply for Constituency Development Fund (CDF) through the Lundazi District Council. The school applied for the construction of a classroom block (1x2). The CDF application for the construction of a 1x2 classroom block was successful; the money was disbursed in phases. The first allocation was for the purchase of cement, while the second allocation was for the building of the teacher's house. The third allocation was for the completion of the 1x2 classroom block. The CDF grant boosted the morale of the Chandeke community and they mobilized all the surrounding villages that have children at the school. With the teacher's house completed, the DEBS office seconded a trained teacher to the school.

Reflecting on a time when the PCSC made a difference in pupil learning at the school, we heard that the PCSC was very active in mobilizing parents in surrounding villages to support the construction works at the school and ensuring that children in the surrounding villages attended school. The Works Committee was put in place to spearhead the construction works and reported to the PCSC. Some respondents hinted that the period 2018 – 2020 was very successful for the school as there was a lot of effort from the parents and PCSC in encouraging each other to contribute their labour, cash and agricultural produce to establish their school. There was a strong sense of ownership, a case in point, is when some tins of paint missed from the storeroom. The community demanded that those charged with the responsibility knew where the paint was and demanded replacement. The paint was secretly brought back to the storeroom. Some participants reported that the school faced serious challenges from 2014 -2015. Teachers were not supported by the community, as a result teachers withdrew their labour and the school almost closed. The PCSC recruited two sets of teachers who deserted the school due to inadequate support from the community. Teacher absenteeism was high during this period; pupils would report to school and not be attended to by teachers. Informed that sometimes the pupils would be waiting in the school up to 10.00hrs without learning then they would be released by the PCSC Chairperson.

Much of the activities of the PCSC are centered on construction works. Currently the school does not have toilets and water points in the school. At the time of the visit, the PCSC had suspended the digging and building of pit latrines due to the rainy season. Some parents interviewed hinted that they had problems in attending school meetings as they wanted to concentrate on working in their fields. The school also has plans of sinking a borehole in the school to supply

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water in the school. Pupils draw water across the Chama road in the neighbouring villages. The PCSC has plans of building a 1x3 classroom block to increase classroom space for Grades 5, 6 and 7. If this classroom block is not built, pupils from this school may have to attend these grades in the neighbouring schools that are far apart.

The welfare of volunteer teachers appears to be another major challenge of the PCSC. Currently, there are three volunteer teachers at the school. The DEBS office has seconded a trained teacher paid by the Ministry of Education. The two volunteer teachers are paid by the community through PCSC. At the time of the visit the teachers had not been paid and it appeared the PCSC had not collected enough money to pay the allowances of teachers and the Watchman. During focus group interviews with PCSC members and some parents, it was reported that most parents could only make their contributions after the harvest. The poverty levels appear relatively high in the Chandeke community as most households depend on subsistence farming.

In terms of teaching and learning materials, the school appears under resourced. Informed that the school sometimes depends on borrowing learning and teaching materials from neighbouring government schools. The supplies from the Ministry of Education appear inadequate in meeting the growing numbers of pupils in the school (Kalimaposo, 2010). Observed that teachers sometimes improvise learning materials using local materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

48 participants were involved in this study. For head teachers, teachers, educational administrators and civic leaders, English was used as a medium of communication. For parents, members of the PCSC and traditional leaders, Chinyanja was used as most parents could not understand English very well.

During interviews with the PCSC members in the two schools, some members struggled to articulate their understanding of the role of parents and the PCSC especially in School A. The following roles were mentioned;

- School development and infrastructural development
- Contributing towards volunteer teachers' incentives
- Collaborating with volunteer teachers to enhance children's learning.
- Encouraging parents to send their children to school.
- Fostering good parenting
- Provision of teaching and learning materials
- Attendance of school events
- Encouraging parents to teach their children at home

The role of the PCSC in sampled schools mainly focused on infrastructural development of the school and mobilization of the community for material contributions and labour to the school.

The study revealed that the PCSC meetings were irregular. The meetings were facilitated by the PCSC chairperson and

the head teacher as secretary. Construction meetings were compulsory for all members of the community and failure to participate in community construction without any acceptable reason attracted a fine of a chicken or confiscation of household goods such as buckets or pots. According to the PCSC such fines or charges forced people to participate in most of the construction activities at the school. The PCSC had the authority of the Chief or Village Head men.

At one school it was observed that the PCSC was not working in collaboration with the community. Lack of consultation between the PCSC and the general community stifled active participation as members of the community felt sidelined in decision making. Communication break downs between the PCSC and the community needed attention.

The community school volunteer teachers are mainly hired from the community on voluntary basis and a large proportion of these volunteer teachers are untrained. These volunteer teachers receive a small allowance (cash) or payment in-kind in form of agricultural produce such as bags of maize from the contributions of the community through the PCSC. Due to unfavourable working conditions, retention of community school teachers is extremely low.

Some community schools are grossly under resourced in terms of learning and teaching materials due to the failure of the PCSC to actively engage members of the community and other stakeholders. The inadequacy of basic teaching and learning materials compromises quality of education delivery, this concurs with Kalimaposo (2022).

It was observed that improvisation of learning and teaching materials using local resources was rarely done in schools. INSET activities for the untrained volunteer community school teachers such as Teacher Group Meetings were rarely done in both schools. Lack of water and sanitation facilities in the schools posed danger to the children. In both schools the toilets made of pole and mud had collapsed during the rainy season. The PCSC at one school was trying to mobilize the community to dig a traditional bore hole and construct new toilets at the time of the visit.

School attendance appeared irregular at one school. It was observed that some parents only allowed their children to attend school on particular days in the week. Girls were sometimes withdrawn from school to help in household chores, caring for the sick and siblings while boys were required to help in cattle herding or gardening (Sakala & Kalimaposo, 2018). The PCSC encouraged parents to send their children to school. Parents who resisted were reported to the village headmen or the chief. Some key informants interviewed in School A reported that decisions made by the PCSC were never implemented. The community was mobilized to mould 10,000 bricks which were later given to a local church without the knowledge of some PCSC members and the local community. The PCSC in School A did not have a lot of confidence in their volunteer teacher due to his low qualification. The teacher was a Grade 9 drop out.

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The community preferred Grade 12 school leavers who deserted the school due to unfavourable working conditions.

The PCSC in School B appeared comfortable with three Grade 12 untrained volunteer teachers and one seconded trained teacher who was acting as Head teacher. The only challenge was raising funds from the community to pay volunteer teachers. The seconded teacher was paid by MoE. At the time of the visit the volunteer teachers had not been paid for two months.

The study concluded that parental participation in community schools focused more on infrastructural development rather than quality of education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Ministry of Education and other stakeholders should support Community schools by providing adequate learning and teaching requisites in schools.
2. The Ministry of Education should consider increasing the number of seconded trained teachers from public schools to community schools.

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