

SUPPORTING ROMA CHILDREN THROUGH QUALITY ECD EXPERIENCES – BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFE-LONG SUCCESS

RESOURCES, EXPERIENCE AND APPROACHES FROM THE ISSA NETWORK

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Building on the belief that every child is entitled to stimulating early childhood experiences that lay foundations for further development, successful start of education and transition to formal schooling, the purpose of this paper is to explore what kinds of early childhood provisions would benefit Roma children, as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Europe, often subject to segregation and inferior quality of services that result in early drop-out and a deepening gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. Provisions of early education experiences should meet the rights and needs of Roma children as current citizens of our communities, countries, and global society. This paper offers recommendations on how early childhood education can make the situation more equitable for Roma children to realize their dreams, to reach their fullest potential and contribute to societies with the richness of their talents, abilities and skills. Recognizing that particular groups of population may need additional support and attention, extreme caution should be taken not to further add to marginalization and stigmatization. When looking at provisions of Early Childhood Development (ECD) services, we therefore need to make sure that inclusion of target groups' voices in the process takes into account that children's concepts of "the good life" are embedded deeply in dominant cultural, historical, and political concepts (Vandenbroeck, 2007). Recognizing that **nonformal, informal and formal education** are all key factors for meaningful learning, this paper looks at options through the formal educational system, as well as through nonformal routes, that provide for high quality developmental experiences for children, as well as the inclusion of their families' and communities' voices in the development of ECD programs and culturally appropriate support for the home learning environment.

Why a focus on early childhood development:

ECD as meeting place

Early childhood care and educational settings are being increasingly recognized as transitional places where family life meets the public environment. They "bring diverse groups together and have the potential for building bridges across socio-economic and cultural divides" (Vandenbroeck, 2006). As such, they are also places for promoting social justice concepts, social cohesion, and diversity, in compliance with the standing human rights declarations. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees the right of every child to be treated "without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status", and General Comment 7, recognizes and emphasizes early childhood as a particularly critical period for the realization of child rights.

Quality ECD experiences help children to be more successful in life

The importance of the home learning environment in the early years is widely recognized. Whether placing children in early childhood education settings helps them be more successful in life is still debated. What research (see EPPE and High Scope studies) has clearly demonstrated, however, is that when children have quality experiences in either the home environment or in ECD programs, they are more successful later on in school and in life in general (Sammons et al., 2007; Schweinhart et. al, 2005).

Environments (both in the home and in ECD programs) that provide **quality experiences** for children have several things in common:

- There is a high level of emotional connection between adults and children.
- There is high quality of interactions between adults and children that include building vocabulary and extending children's thinking.
- There is ongoing regard for children's interests and motivations.
- Equal attention is paid to the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, as they both are crucial for later success

In addition, high quality ECD programs offer support for the home learning environment, see parents, families, and community members as partners in their children's education and build on existing strengths. Other factors that define ECD as quality include: inclusiveness (equitable access to high quality services for all children), child-centered, child friendly pedagogy with the well-being, needs, and interests of the child as a central concern, highly qualified professionals, systems of supportive supervision and ongoing professional development for those that are working with the children, and stimulating, physically safe, and healthy learning environments.

ECD is informal, nonformal, as well as formal educational experiences

There is a tendency when talking about ECD, to think primarily about provisions in formal centers and to forget that the majority of educational experiences that children have are actually nonformal or informal.

Formal/center-based ECD can be defined as statutory forms of provision framed by statutory laws introduced and monitored by central or local authorities. This means that "formal ECD is part of the established system and is characterized by formally-trained teachers, an officially-sanctioned curriculum and standards, external monitoring and inspection, and ongoing financial inputs" (Jualla and van Oudenhoven, in press). Examples of formal ECD include center-based kindergartens and the 'downward-extended' classes of basic schools (preparatory year).

However, the interest in and support for ECD should not be restricted only to formal approaches – informal and nonformal ECD both have great potential in their own rights and can significantly enhance formal ECD. Resources available in the family or in the community should not be ignored, but built upon and enhanced. According to Jualla and van Oudenhoven (in press), "informal ECD takes place in the family, in the interaction between parents and children, among

the children, in the spontaneous encounters between people, things and the children, both inside and outside the house.” Education is happening and young children are learning all of the time, whether it is what society values or not, including what they see on television, what they hear or do outside with adults or with other children, the stories and messages they hear, etc.

Nonformal education includes activities that are governed by agreements, although the degree of nonformality may vary from rather loosely to strictly organized. They happen on a voluntary basis and without governmental interference, although they should function within the framework of the law. Some examples of nonformal ECD educational experiences include: parents' groups, play groups, home-based care, home-visiting programs, and community based programs.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each of these kinds of educational experiences. In formal experiences, children have more highly trained ECD professionals working with them. As a disadvantage, they may focus more centrally on children's age level cognitive development as an indicator of readiness for school (do they count, know their colors, their letters, etc.) Informal and nonformal ECD may focus the attention on the whole child, as there is no separation between development at the physical, cognitive, or social levels, and the emphasis may not be on cognitive development that can occur in formal settings. In nonformal and informal settings, there is a much greater possibility of having mixed age groups of children involved, allowing children to learn from other children more easily, as well as from adults.

Informal and nonformal provisions usually cost less per child than formal education provision. A children's television show can reach many children. Playgroups and home based care cost much less than formal programs. Informal and nonformal programs can also validate, build on, and further develop strengths that are already present in families and communities, because they arise from these very families and communities. Because of this, they can more easily answer to specific needs of communities, as well show a greater incorporation of diversity. Formal programs tend to promote the majority or dominant population's values of what knowledge and skills are important. Informal and nonformal settings adjust much more easily to the local context.

However, there is no doubt that quality is also a factor in nonformal and informal experiences as to whether they support children's development in ways that are socially, emotionally, and physically healthy and cognitively stimulating. This means that these experiences have to be developmentally as well as culturally appropriate for children. They have to approach the child in a holistic manner and offer children opportunities to co-construct knowledge in an active way. They also need to support the development of life-long learning competences.

It should also be noted that formal, informal, and nonformal educational experiences do and should reinforce each other. Knowledge and skills children gain should be transferable across all contexts in their lives. It is especially important that national or local authorities recognize the value of informal and nonformal provisions and experiences and offer the support they need.

In addition, more research is needed, especially for nonformal and informal education, in order to understand the variety of approaches, what can be done with little funding, and what elements that support access to quality educational experiences could be strengthened.

What are some major issues around ECD experiences for Roma children?

Attempts to improve access to education for Roma children in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) often involve segregating them into special education schools. This practice is clearly a violation of Roma children's human rights in that it does not provide them the opportunity to receive a quality education that ensures that every child is supported to reach his/her full potential. Some educators and policymakers claim that Roma children benefit from the smaller class sizes and more individualized attention that they receive in special schools, and also from policies which give financial support to parents of children with disabilities. A major issue in this practice is the manner in which Roma children are sent to such schools, mostly either having been labeled as "special needs" students or because they face linguistic barriers to education (their mother tongue being different from the language of instruction, to which most have limited or no exposure before beginning primary school). Such assessment methods can effectively justify discrimination and segregation, and can thus be considered a serious denial of human rights.

In a momentous decision for Roma across Europe, in the case *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic*, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2007 that segregating Roma students into special schools is a form of unlawful discrimination.¹ As stressed by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), the Roma Education Fund (REF), and the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) in the Amicus Brief prepared for this case, the assessment of children needs to follow international conventions and principles. According to the Amicus Brief, "special schools in Central and South-Eastern Europe are part of an educational context that perpetuates educational segregation of minority groups. Today, special schools represent a lower standard of education from which there are very few opportunities for re-integration into the mainstream, or for progression to higher levels of education, thus limiting children's future employment prospects." As stressed in the Amicus Brief, a fair and quality assessment

- evaluates both knowledge and psychology
- works in the best interest of the child, supporting his/her development not limiting it
- is child-centered and takes into consideration the developmental stage of the child
- is culturally and linguistically appropriate for the child

In addition to their placement in special schools, other situations that segregate Roma children from mainstream children in Roma ghetto schools or separate classrooms, should also be seen as discriminatory practice. According to Vandenbroeck (2007), services targeted at specific subgroups in society can unintentionally contribute to covert mechanisms of segregation in these societies.

For example, while welcoming efforts to reduce the gap in educational outcomes for Roma and non-Roma children, many question whether the practice of placing Roma children into

¹ Full text of the Grand Chamber Judgment available at: <http://www.errc.org/db/02/D1/m000002D1.pdf>.

preparatory or 0 year classrooms, where the majority of children are Roma, is not also a discriminatory act. In these kinds of situations, early childhood services for Roma children are often reduced to a focus on “school readiness,” neither looking at the circumstances and needs of Roma communities, nor promoting their voice in society. In most cases such programs for Roma children are neither child-centered nor respectful of the child’s language, knowledge, or culture. A focus on “school readiness” does not take sufficient account of a children’s rights perspective according to UNCRC General Comment No. 7, which calls on state parties to ensure that “all young children (and those with primary responsibility for their well-being) are guaranteed access to appropriate and effective services, including programs of health, care, and education specifically designed to promote their well-being.”

It is very important to keep in mind that ECD services need to start much earlier than at 5 years old before children enter school and need to be integrated. Neuroscience research has pointed out (Shonkoff et al., 2000) that the very early years are when the human brain and the biological pathways develop and set trajectories in health, learning, and behavior that last throughout life. Family poverty, low educational levels of parents, and social exclusion have all been shown to be indicators of high risk for infants and young children where primary health, social, and emotional development (mental health), cognitive development and language are concerned (Bennett, 2009).

What are the current needs of Roma communities in regards to ECD?

Promoting a holistic approach to ECD, in a presentation delivered at the Roma Decade Meeting² organized in June 2009 in Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, John Bennett stressed that several questions need to be answered in order to provide for ECD services that meet Roma communities’ needs:

- Are Roma families receiving the supports necessary – as the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires - to provide their children with an environment of stable and affectionate relationships that nurture development? Are there policies in place for Roma that promote maternal and infant health, support families in their child-rearing tasks, and later, that provide appropriate early development services?
- Are Roma families able to access essential infant health, early development, and education services available in that they are situated in ways that are easy for families to reach?
- Are early childhood services that are being provided appropriate to the needs of the Roma communities? In the planning and conduct of services, do they welcome diversity and involve parents and other family and community members? Are services of sufficient quality to ensure a fair start in life for all children and place them in a favorable position to continue in public education?

Research demonstrates that educational experiences which are of longer duration (meaning they begin much earlier in the child’s life), are of less intensity, and less frequency, give better long term results for success in school (and in life) than short duration and high intensity experiences. This means that the tradition of center based preschools or 0-year programs that are generally

² More information about this meeting may be found at: http://www.unicef.org/serbia/media_11970.html

part of the primary school provision can be supplemented or replaced with more innovative, flexible, and responsive provisions. They can become ongoing age- and culturally-appropriate quality ECD services from birth, that include informal, nonformal, and formal experiences and that provide support for transitions from nonformal to formal, and from kindergarten to school.

ISSA's recommendations for ECD services for Roma

ISSA recommends that various actions be taken whether in formal or nonformal situations, that would work to close the achievement gap between Roma and mainstream population children as well as that would ensure States' compliance with the UNCRC (and General Comment 7). Along the lines of the conclusions from the Roma Decade Meeting organized in Belgrade in June 2009 under the Serbian Presidency, ISSA's recommendations with regards to formal and nonformal ECD services for Roma children are:

- *ECD services should be integrated and provided for children starting at birth* in ways that are appropriate for the age of the child. For very young children, this means services for parents and families.
- *ECD provisions should be affordable and accessible for all families.* Subsidies should be given to attend formal preschool centers or other kinds of provisions need to be made available for Roma families.
- *ECD provisions should be responsive and closely linked with other services.* Preschools or other ECD programs should work closely with community groups and social services to ensure that efforts are coordinated, and that the school is truly responsive to community needs and interests.
- *ECD provisions should offer flexible programs that meet users' needs.* All-day access may not be what's needed for Roma families.
- *ECD provisions should be managed openly and with community and family input.* School management should become more inclusive of its community members.
- *ECD provisions should provide environments that are physically and emotionally safe and secure.* Teachers'/caregivers' attitudes are one of the most important determinants of teaching quality in terms of making children feel safe as well as setting high, but realistic expectations for children..
- *ECD provisions should use child-centered teaching methodologies and pedagogy.* Interactions should promote a positive sense of self and a sense of being part of a community. Building on each child's strengths is essential.
- *ECD provisions should involve parents and community members in a meaningful way.* ECD services need to strengthen links with parents and support them to create home learning environments that support children's development and learning.
- *ECD provisions should ensure that the curriculum reflects diversity.* A good curriculum not only transmits knowledge but also develops skills and instills social values.
- *ECD provisions should provide stimulating and democratic learning environments.* Children should not only learn about democracy but experience it through participating.
- *ECD provisions should use formative assessment as the basis for planning learning activities.* Plans should build on children's previous knowledge and be differentiated to provide for individual children's interests, needs, and learning styles.

- *ECD provisions should ensure that teachers have more than just the right qualifications on paper.* Teachers need to have a sense of social justice, a strong understanding of child development and knowledge of the families and communities in which they work.

Resources and approaches from the ISSA Network, supporting informal, nonformal and formal ECD provisions

The ISSA network offers programs, expertise and technical resources for providers of informal, nonformal and formal ECD provisions that provide assistance for meeting the above mentioned recommendations. These resources have been developed and tested by members of the ISSA network, in many cases in partnership with and support from OSI.

ISSA has several programs that provide training modules to help educators and other professionals work in contexts of diversity. These training modules go beyond mere tolerance of differences and aim at transforming schools and education systems to be more open to diversity and inclusion.

- *Educating for Diversity: Education for Social Justice Activities for Classrooms* presents classroom-based learning activities for early childhood educators to use in their work with children.
- *Education for Social Justice: A Program for Adults* presents the background to the subject, theory, and activities for educators and other professionals (such as health care workers, social workers, etc.) engaged in working with marginalized disadvantaged groups or populations.
- *Effective Teaching and Learning for Minority-Language Children*³ presents the background to the subject, theory, and activities for teachers of minority-language children who are learning a second language; These resources for preschool teachers promote the use of the children's own language and culture in the classroom.

ISSA has recently launched a revised version of its Pedagogical Standards, in a new publication to promote the importance of quality in ECD services, *Competent Teachers of the 21st Century: ISSA's Definition of Quality Pedagogy*⁴ The revised ISSA Standards are a tool developed within the network that set forth and elucidate ISSA's principles and values for teacher practices in the democratic classroom, school, and community. They serve as a foundation for understanding and recognition of high quality practice based on the principles manifested in the UNCRC and General Comment 7. The document is intended to help practitioners, preschool and primary school teachers improve their everyday performance through the principles of learner-centered interactive pedagogy, development of life-long learning skills, and cooperation with families and

³ These resources developed by ISSA with EU funding, have been selected by the European Commission to be included in a brochure "*Creativity and Innovation – best practice from EU programmes.*" From the 200 projects invited to compete to feature in this brochure, ISSA's project was chosen by a panel of independent experts as an example of best practice in the field of creativity and innovation. http://www.issa.nl/news_project.html

⁴This publication can be downloaded from: http://www.issa.nl/news_issa_launch.html

communities. The document serves as a basis for professional discussion, building and expanding partnerships, improving practices, and providing maximum support to all children to grow into strong and confident members of our societies.

Competent Teachers of the 21st Century consists of seven focus areas that promote practices guided by humanistic, socio-constructive principles, emphasizing developmentally appropriate practices and an individualized approach. At the core there is the idea that learning occurs in interaction and is a dialogue between children and adults, as well as between children, which is marked by respecting each other, stimulating and giving autonomy to the learner, and assuming that children are competent and full citizens even while they need support from adults. The seven areas are:

1. Interactions
2. Families and Communities
3. Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy
4. Assessment and Planning
5. Teaching Strategies
6. Learning Environment
7. Professional Development

All these focus areas emphasize social inclusion and diversity and guidelines are outlined on how to achieve them. The third focus area: *Inclusion, Diversity and Values of Democracy*, stresses that it is the responsibility of educators to promote “the right of every child and family to be included, respected and valued, to participate, to work toward common goals, and to reach their full potential”.

The principles which are at the basis of ISSA’s understanding of quality recognize and promote the important role of the professional as a knowledgeable, sensitive individual who guides and scaffolds children in their journey of exploration and learning and works in close partnership with families, as the first teachers of their children, and with communities as a natural resource for learning and inquiry.

In a recent study⁵ conducted on the use of ISSA’s previous version of its pedagogical standards between 2002-2008, the standards were found to effectively influence:

- Individual teachers and their daily classroom practices
- Existing education systems designed to prepare, improve and monitor teachers
- The development and institutionalization of new national education priorities, policies and practices
- Understanding of quality among different stakeholders

The ISSA network has also effectively used integrated teaching materials for extended early childhood programs of a less formalized nature in community-based programs and parent education. These resources, developed and implemented with support from and in partnership with the Open Society Institute (OSI) include:

⁵ The study is being carried out with support from and in partnership with OSI. Results of the study will be released in early 2010.

- ***Parenting With Confidence 0-3. Enhancing Children’s Development in the First Three Years***
- ***Parenting With Confidence 3-6. Enhancing the Development of Young Children***
- ***Getting Ready for School: Fun Activities for Caregivers and Children:***
 - **Children’s Materials**
 - **Parent Activity Guide**
 - **Facilitator’s Guide**

These materials were designed to create more effective home learning environments for families whose children do not attend formal preschools. The goal is to support and expand parents’ knowledge about, skills in, and practices with the development of their young children by:

- supporting parents in their child rearing efforts
- offering child development information and alternative parenting techniques
- fostering effective communication between parents and their children
- enhancing parents’ skills in providing rich child-learning experiences
- helping parents understand what kinds of skills children will need when entering school and how to support the acquisition of those skills

In addition, the materials include *A Guide to Training Parent Facilitators* designed to prepare parent educators to implement the modules with groups of parents. It consists of Fostering Optimal Adult Learning and Partnerships; Communicating with Parents; Group Facilitation and Management; and Process and Content.

ISSA also provides its ***Reading Corner Children’s Books***. This set of 32 books⁶ was created by authors and illustrators from the ISSA network. The books introduce topics such as friendship, family, sharing, helping others, etc. They support understanding of issues children face in their lives, such as how to handle change, how to rectify mistakes, how to express one’s opinion and communicate, as well as introducing children to more complex issues, such as poverty and loss.

Activity kits accompany some of the books under ***Opening Magic Doors: Reading and Learning Together with Children***.⁷ The activity kits are intended for caregivers and family members taking care of children ages 2-3, 4-5, and 6-8, but can also be used in group settings with children. Each kit includes an activity book and four different age-appropriate children’s books. The first chapters of the activity book put children’s early education and reading into context, and each subsequent chapter provides activities related to a specific children’s book included in the set.

ISSA’s core members, organizations implementing the Step by Step Program in CEE/CIS, have extensive experience adapting and using the resources above in both formal and nonformal settings. For fifteen years members of the ISSA network have worked to provide child-centered inclusive ECD services in formal education, in partnership with and support from OSI and other donors/partners. Many programs targeted specifically inclusion of Roma children in formal provisions. In addition, a number of ISSA Member NGOs have worked in Roma communities to

⁶ A list of titles is available on the ISSA Online Bookstore at http://www.issa.nl/rc_bs.html.

⁷ More information about the kits may be found at: http://www.issa.nl/rc_kits.html

provide training for parents and other community members on how to promote young children's learning and development. Being based in the community and run by parents and other community members, programs have been developed that are able to build upon what children already know and can do. These use local resources as learning materials, such as stories and games from the community, and are more flexible in establishing partnerships with other social services.

A program⁸ carried out by the **Step by Step Center for Educational Initiatives** in Bosnia Herzegovina, illustrates how an ISSA member offered high quality nonformal provisions to children and parents, adapting and using some of the resources from OSI and ISSA. The program provided workshops based on *Parenting with Confidence* and *Getting Ready for School* once a week for 10 months, to mixed groups of parents - Roma and non-Roma. *Education for Social Justice* (anti-bias program for adults) was also provided to all parents and teachers in the project. These personal development workshops helped all participants to bridge their cultural differences and respect each other. Children were also invited to take part in the program, spending some time with the parents and some time in a child-centered classroom environment, using principles which form the basis of the *Step by Step Program* and the *ISSA Pedagogical Standards*. In addition to the visible impact on children, the program led to the establishment of a formal network of trained facilitators and schools implementing such programs for parents. Pedagogical Institutes in communities where the program was piloted plan to integrate parenting workshops in their annual plans for extracurricular activities and to hire facilitators to conduct trainings for all schools in the district. The program raised awareness of and sensitivity to minorities and human rights among educators, school administrators and parents. A formal evaluation of this program is in progress and results are expected to be released in 2010.

For other examples of how ISSA members work to provide high quality formal and nonformal ECD services to Roma children and other disadvantaged groups, visit the members' websites⁹ or read *Building Open Societies through Quality Early Childhood Care and Education: Case Studies of the Step by Step Program*, published by OSI in 2008. This Compendium of Case Studies includes information about a project carried out in the Roma Settlement in Jarovnice-Karice by **Nadacia Skola Dokoran**, ISSA's member organization in Slovakia.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind that all children are entitled to high quality learning and development experiences which focus on the development of the whole child, ISSA's key messages with regards to promoting inclusive policies and practices for Roma children in the early years are:

1. Roma communities and families should be supported to nurture and expand the potential of their children and channel it to successful formal learning. Special emphasis needs to

⁸ See article by Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step. (2008). "Supporting Roma Children through a parent-school partnership project" in *Early Childhood Matters*. Bernard van Leer Foundation. For more information contact radmila@coi-stepbystep.ba.

⁹ Contact information for ISSA's members is available at: http://www.issa.nl/docs_pdfs/ISSA-Members-list.pdf

be placed on very young children (birth to 3) as this is the most critical time for their development. Comprehensive services should be provided that incorporate culture and the needs of the families, with the input of families and communities.

2. Preparation for school is not about a single year preparatory class – it is a blend of diverse forms and experiences of informal, nonformal, and formal education, building the basis for successful learning throughout life.
3. Placement of Roma children in special schools or any type of segregated programs is a denial of the right to an education which supports development to their full potential.
4. Caregivers, teachers, and decision makers with “right minds and hearts” will make a difference. Pre-service and in-service trainings are an ongoing requisite to develop competences to work in multicultural contexts. Policies that support this level of training develop quality practice for teachers/caregivers, thus benefiting all children.

Information on ISSA

International Step by Step Association (ISSA) is a membership organization that connects professionals and organizations working in Early Childhood Development (ECD). Established in the Netherlands in 1999, ISSA’s network today stretches across the globe. While ISSA offers general membership and information-sharing to all interested individuals and organizations, ISSA’s core members are non-governmental organizations, located in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Ten years after it was established, ISSA, continues building upon the substantial investment and success of OSI’s Step by Step Program in CEE/CIS and upon the vibrant network and movement resulting from this program, with the aim to improve the lives of children and their chances for success in life. Over the years, ISSA has grown to become the pre-eminent ECD network in CEE/CIS. While striving to continue to be at the forefront of innovations in early childhood care and education, ISSA is now positioned to broaden its membership, by engaging and supporting more civil society actors and national coalitions, in order to have strong impact at the national and regional level in pursuing the mission. Within its network, ISSA supports a wide array of programs that collectively provide a comprehensive set of educational services and advocacy tools intended to influence policy reform for families and children, with a special focus on the years from birth through primary school.

ISSA’s overarching goal is to promote inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for all children to become active members of democratic knowledge societies. ISSA does this through: raising awareness of the importance of quality care and education; developing resources; disseminating information; advocating; strengthening alliances and building capacity to create conditions where all children thrive.

For more information on ISSA visit www.issa.nl or contact Executive Director Liana Ghent at lghent@issa.hu.

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