

## Chapter 2

# Main Approaches to Education Quality

**Abstract** Classic pedagogic thought is concerned with *good education*. Since the 1980s, however, *quality education* has become the watchword. What exactly is “quality” in education? We may distinguish two principal approaches: the human capital approach and the human rights approach. The human capital approach to education quality is supported by a neoliberal conception of the school’s mission and of the identity of the teaching profession, based on quasi-market principles. The human rights approach to education quality is inspired by the normative content of the right to education, as internationally agreed, reflecting human rights values and principles. Quality education is a complex concept, with material and non-material dimensions, resulting from the interaction between tangible and intangible ingredients. While there is no recipe or ready-to-wear approach to producing quality education, there are principles universally valid and applicable, forming a common pedagogic heritage of Humankind amply consecrated by the Ethics of the Right to Education. In addition, every country can learn from the most exemplary ones.

**Keywords** Education quality • Human capital approach • Human rights approach • Complex concept

Classic pedagogic thought is concerned with *good education*. As Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) taught (1803): “It is through good education that all the good in the world arises” (p. 15). At present, *quality education* is the watchword, having become a leitmotif of political–pedagogic rhetoric, both at international and national levels.

It was only at the beginning of the 1980s that the word “quality” began to impregnate the discourse on education, under pressure from economic concerns, following the recession of the late 1970s (see OECD 1989). Nevertheless, quality

education had already been addressed by the main instrument of International Education Law<sup>1</sup>: the Convention against Discrimination in Education (UNESCO 1960)<sup>2</sup> that refers to education quality three times. For example: “For the purposes of this Convention, the term ‘education’ refers to all types and levels of education, and includes access to education, the standard and quality of education, and the conditions under which it is given” (Article 1.2). Also in the Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (ILO/UNESCO 1966)<sup>3</sup>—which is the main international instrument concerning basic and secondary education teachers—the word “quality” appears six times (referring to education and teachers). For example: “[A]s an educational objective, no State should be satisfied with mere quantity, but should seek also to improve quality” (10.g).

What is exactly “quality” in education?

The first United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education (Katarina Tomaševski, 1998–2004) highlighted in her Preliminary Report to the former Commission on Human Rights (E/CN.4/1999/49, para. 13)<sup>4</sup>:

A definition of people as human capital obviously differs from defining people as subjects of rights. The contrast between the human rights and human-capital approaches is best illustrated by taking children with physical and learning disabilities as an example. The former may be excluded from school because providing wheelchair access, for example, might be deemed too expensive; the latter may be excluded from schooling because meeting their learning needs is deemed not to yield a sufficient marginal return on investment. This type of reasoning obviously challenges the very assumption of human rights, namely the equal worth of all human beings.

In another Report (E/CN.4/2000/6),<sup>5</sup> she observed: “The human-capital approach molds education solely towards economically relevant knowledge, skills and competence, to the detriment of human rights values. [...] A productivist view of education depletes it of much of its purpose and substance”.

We may, therefore, distinguish two main approaches to quality education: the human capital approach and the human rights approach.

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<sup>1</sup> International Human Rights Law is a new branch of the International Law, which developed after World War II, concerned with human rights. International Education Law, broadly understood, may be thus defined: it is the branch of International Human Rights Law whose scope is the right to education—its origins, normative sources, mechanisms of protection, case law, content, doctrine and political–pedagogic implications as well.

<sup>2</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12949andURL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPICandURL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12949andURL_DO=DO_TOPICandURL_SECTION=201.html).

<sup>3</sup> [www.unesco.org/education/pdf/TEACHE\\_E.PDF](http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/TEACHE_E.PDF).

<sup>4</sup> [www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/TestFrame/6a76ced2c8c9efc780256738003abb8?](http://www.unhchr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/TestFrame/6a76ced2c8c9efc780256738003abb8?OpenDocument)  
OpenDocument.

The mandate of Special Rapporteur is one of the extra-conventional mechanisms (*Special Procedures*), that is, not based on a treaty, created by the former United Nations Commission on Human Rights to examine, monitor and publicly report on either the human rights situation in a specific country or territory (country mandates) or on human rights violations worldwide (thematic mandates). The Commission was replaced with the Human Rights Council in 2005.

<sup>5</sup> [http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/alldocs.aspx?doc\\_id=1920](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/alldocs.aspx?doc_id=1920).

## 2.1 The Human Capital Approach to Education Quality Undermines Human Worth and Dignity, Tends to Dissolve the Integrity of the School Mission, and Disfigures the Uniqueness and Fullness of the Teaching Profession

The *human capital approach* originated in the human capital theory elaborated in the 1960s at the University of Chicago, especially by Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz. It is an economic approach, reducing education quality to utilitarian and quantitative indicators, regarding human beings principally as tools of economic productivity and competition. As Joel Spring (2000) remarks, the “human resource and human capital model of schooling” treats students “as a resource to be developed for the good of the economic system” (p. 148). That is the neoliberal approach.

“Neoliberalism” is a term coined by the German scholar Alexander Rüstow (1885–1963) in 1938. While, in general, it is not always well defined, the term became frequently used as a pejorative against the ideology advocating a minimal State in favour of a greater role for the private sector in the economy. Neoliberalism presents itself as an ideology of liberty and social progress but is, in reality, an economic fundamentalism of unbridled market freedom, commanding deregulation, privatization and disinvestment in public services. Its productive effectiveness is brutally destructive for human beings and their environment. It is a dictatorship of the economy, reductive of human beings to work force and consumers, their utility counting for more than their dignity. Its world is a market without borders nor scruples nor sense of the Common Good, through the weakening and submission of States. It is the drive of an “ultra-liberal financial and deregulated globalization”, as an important report prepared for the French President (Védrine 2007, paras. 3 and 19) reads.

In short, neoliberalism is a *market religion* whose dogma is *competitiveness* and whose virtue is *profit*. Its dehumanizing logic is, at best, compatible with dictatorships more economically efficient than democracies. At worst, it is potentially as barbarous as Nazi biologism. Indeed, when it refers to people as “human capital” and “human resources”, the neoliberal terminology carries a gloomy resonance, as Supiot (2005) remarks:

The language of the Third Reich was the crucible of notions such ‘human material’ that reduce the world of human beings to that of things. [...] Far from having disappeared after the war, such schemes of thought remain alive today. The talk is no more about ‘human material’ but about ‘human capital’, using, unknowingly, Stalin’s vocabulary. (p. 105)

The neoliberal tide flooded the education field too. It is alleged that introducing market or quasi-market principles into the education system—privatization, competition, testing, etc.—increases its efficiency and promotes freedom of choice for families concerning the type of school wanted for their children. Such ideological views are not validated by facts, as an OECD Report (2014) concludes:

Since the early 1980s, reforms in many countries have granted parents and students greater choice in the school the students will attend. Students and their families are given the freedom to seek and attend the school that best serves students’ education needs; that, in turn, introduces a level of

competition among schools to attract students. Assuming that students and parents have all the required information about schools and choose schools based on academic criteria, the competition creates incentives for institutions to organise programmes and teach in ways that better meet diverse student requirements and interests, reducing the costs of failure and mismatches.

[...]

However, cross-country correlations in PISA do not show a relationship between the degree of competition and student performance [...].

On the other hand, the results indicate a weak and negative relationship between the degree of competition and equity.

Among OECD countries, systems with more competition among schools tend to show a stronger impact of students' socio-economic status on their performance in mathematics. [...] his finding is consistent with research showing that school choice—and, by extension, school competition—is related to greater levels of segregation in the school system, which may have adverse consequences for equity in learning opportunities and outcomes. (pp. 53, 58)<sup>6</sup>

### Summing up:

[A]fter socio-economic status is accounted for, private schools do not perform better than public schools; and schools that compete with other schools for students do not perform better than schools that don't compete. Thus, the cross-country analysis suggests that systems, as a whole, do not benefit from a greater prevalence of private schools or school competition. (p. 104)

Other telling findings, in this connection, are the following:

- *Selection and sorting of students*

Policies that regulate the selection and sorting of students into schools and classrooms can be related to performance in various ways. On the one hand, creating homogeneous student populations may allow teachers to direct classroom instruction to the specific needs of each group, maximizing the learning potential of each group. On the other hand, selecting and sorting students may end up segregating students according to socio-economic status and result in differences in learning opportunities. Grouping higher-achieving students together limits the opportunity for underachieving students to benefit by learning from their higher-achieving peers. In addition, if student sorting is related to teacher sorting, such that higher-achieving students are matched to the most talented teachers, underachieving students may be relegated to

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<sup>6</sup> PISA is a triennial international comparative survey administered by OECD since 2000. While originally developed as an instrument for OECD countries, in PISA 2012 participated around 510,000 students representing about 28 million 15-year-olds in the schools of 65 countries (all 34 OECD member countries and 31 partner countries), representing more than 80 % of the world economy. As reads the Report of the PISA 2012 Results:

“What is important for citizens to know and be able to do?” That is the question that underlies the world’s global metric for quality, equity and efficiency in school education known as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA assesses the extent to which 15-year-old students have acquired key knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in modern societies. The assessment, which focuses on reading, mathematics, science and problem-solving, does not just ascertain whether students can reproduce what they have learned; it also examines how well they can extrapolate from what they have learned and apply that knowledge in unfamiliar settings, both in and outside of school. This approach reflects the fact that modern societies reward individuals not for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know. ([www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-I.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-I.pdf))

lower-quality instruction. Student selection and sorting may also create stereotypes and stigmas that could eventually affect student engagement and learning.

[...]

PISA 2012 results, like those of earlier PISA assessments, show that, in general, school systems that cater to different students' needs by separating students into different institutions, grade levels and classes, known as stratification, have not succeeded in producing superior overall results, and in some cases, they have lower-than-average and more inequitable performance. (pp. 76, 104)

- *Grade repetition*

Grade repetition occurs when students, after a formal or informal assessment, are held back in the same grade for an additional year, rather than being promoted to the next stage along with their peers. This practice is usually perceived as an extra opportunity to fully acquire the required knowledge in order to move forward. However, research has consistently shown that grade repetition does not provide greater benefits than promotion to the next grade (Brophy 2006).

[...]

In addition to the financial costs, grade repetition widens inequities because the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who repeat a grade is higher than the proportion of advantaged students who repeat a grade. Students with low socio-economic status, low-educated parents or immigrant backgrounds, and boys are significantly more likely to repeat a grade than other students (OECD, 2011b). Grade repetition tends to widen the achievement gap between those who are held behind and their peers.

[...]

Indeed, students usually perceive repetition not as an enabling opportunity but as a personal punishment and social stigma and may be further discouraged from education. Grade repetition is a source of stress, ridicule and bullying by others, negatively affects self-esteem, and increases the likelihood of high-risk behaviours, school failure and dropout. (pp. 76, 78, 79)

- *Tracking students*

The impact of the socio-economic status of students and/or schools on performance is stronger in school systems that sort students into different tracks, where students are grouped into different tracks at an early age, where more students attend vocational programmes, where more students attend academically selective schools, and where more students attend schools that transfer low-performing students or students with behaviour problems to another school. (p. 79)

- *School vouchers in Sweden*

In the early 1990s, Sweden introduced major reforms to decentralize primary and secondary education to municipalities. In 1992, the government introduced a voucher programme enabling families to choose among public and private schools, known as independent schools.

[...]

Evidence of the impact on academic performance shows slight positive effects, although these are insignificant for students with low-educated parents or those from an immigrant background. The programme has also resulted in more segregation between schools (Nicaise et al., 2005). (p. 64)

- *Early childhood education*

The benefits of investing in early childhood education and care are seen in the performance of 15-year-olds in PISA.

Students who had attended pre-primary education for more than one year outperformed the rest; in many countries, the difference is equivalent to more than one school year, even

when taking into account the students' socio-economic background. There is, however, considerable cross-country variation on the impact, which may be explained by the quality of the education provided. Insufficient investment in early childhood education and care can lead to childcare shortages, low-quality education, unequal access and the segregation of children according to their family income—which, in turn, leads to inequities in schooling outcomes later (OECD, 2006). (p. 69)

In short, according to the Summary of 2012 PISA Results published by OECD<sup>7</sup>: “Although poor performance in school does not automatically stem from disadvantage, the socio-economic status of students and schools does appear to exert a powerful influence on learning outcomes” (p. 13). For example, “a more socio-economically advantaged student scores 39 points higher in mathematics—the equivalent of nearly one year of schooling—than a less-advantaged student”. In addition, “students who reported that they had attended pre-primary school for more than one year score 53 points higher in mathematics—the equivalent of more than one year of schooling—than students who had not attended pre-primary education” (p. 12). Furthermore: “*Stratification* in school systems, which is the result of policies like grade repetition and selecting students at a young age for different ‘tracks’ or types of schools, is negatively related to equity; and students in highly stratified systems tend to be less motivated than those in less-stratified systems” (p. 24). In a letter addressed to the OECD General Secretary, commenting on the 2012 PISA results, the General Secretary of Education International (the largest international federation of professional organizations in the education field) concluded: “There is little difference between the performance of schools in the private sector and the public sector when the social background of students has been taken into account”.<sup>8</sup>

As far as testing is concerned:

Critics argue that standardised tests may reinforce the advantages of schools that serve students from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds (Ladd and Walsh, 2002; Downey, Von Hippel and Hughes, 2008), or that teachers may respond to accountability measures by sorting out or retaining disadvantaged students (Jacob, 2005; Jennings, 2005). Standardised tests might have the adverse effect of limiting school goals to passing or proficiency on particular tests and focusing instruction on those students who are close to average proficiency and ignoring those who are far below or above the average (Neal and Schanzenback, 2010). (p. 67)

Besides dogmatically presuming the superiority of private over public schools, neoliberal education politics tends to dissolve the integrity of the school's mission and to disfigure the uniqueness and fullness of the teaching profession into the economic–professional dimension of education. *Standardized testing* is enthroned at the *school altar* as a *god* whose *priests* are teachers and whose *last judgment* sends some schools and teachers to heaven and the others to hell.

The biggest school-cheating scandal in the history of the USA, revealed in 2011, should be sufficient to make clear the potential of perversity and to discredit such policies. In the Atlanta school system, nearly 180 teachers have been implicated in

<sup>7</sup> [www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> [http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/Circular\\_PISA2012\\_E.pdf](http://download.ei-ie.org/Docs/WebDepot/Circular_PISA2012_E.pdf).

it and 35 teachers and administrators were indicted on charges of racketeering and corruption, in March 2013, among them the former Superintendent (Beverly Hall), once a national star for turning around test scores. For boosting standardized test scores, they fixed incorrect answers. According to the investigation Report,<sup>9</sup> the main causes of the scandal were the following:

- The targets set by the district were often unrealistic, especially given their cumulative effect over the years. Additionally, the administration put unreasonable pressure on teachers and principals to achieve targets;
- A culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation spread throughout the district; and
- Dr. Hall and her administration emphasized test results and public praise to the exclusion of integrity and ethics.

The neoliberal education politics has neither legitimacy, nor success, nor future. Referring to USA, Margaret LeCompte (2009) affirms: “It could be argued that destruction of the public school system was the intent of neoliberal educational reforms from the beginning” (p. 50). David Hursh (2007) concludes:

Given what the aforementioned research tells us about the processes of schooling when systems of testing and accountability are created—the curriculum is narrowed and simplified, students who score low on tests are abandoned, poorly constructed tests lead to mass failures, and students are pushed out of schools—it should not be surprising that the achievement gap is growing larger rather than smaller. (p. 508)

In sum: “Market-driven educational reforms tend to deny that differences exist between corporations that process raw materials and institutions whose ‘raw materials’ are human” (Ichilov 2009, p. 43). As a consequence, “the meaning of education is controlled by the market, not by the democratic purposes of education, not by a child-centred approach, or by the right to education” (p. 37).

## **2.2 The Human Rights Approach to Education Quality Highlights the Normative Content of the Right to Education that Is not Whatever Right to Whatever Education, but the Right to an Education as a Fundamental Human Right and as a Global Public Good**

As a UNESCO Report (UNESCO 2000) observed, at the end of the twentieth century:

While it is apparent from the foregoing chapters that there has been a great deal of progress worldwide over the past half century towards implementation of the right to education in terms of access to education, it nevertheless remains that the vision that came to be embodied in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was not just a quantitative one. It was also a qualitative one concerning the purposes and hence contents of education. (p. 74)

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<sup>9</sup> <http://ftpcontent.worldnow.com/wgcl/apsfindings/Volume%203%20of%203.pdf>.

In this light, we can understand why the expression “everyone has the right to education” does not mean the same thing as to have “the right to an education” or “to be educated”. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989)<sup>10</sup>—that is the most universal human rights treaty, being already in force in 194 countries—was a landmark for the mainstreaming of education quality required by the right to education. The Committee on the Rights of the Child stressed in its first General Comment (CRC/GC/2001/1),<sup>11</sup> referring to the Convention, that “article 29(1) underlines the individual and subjective right to a specific quality of education” (para. 9), which “reflects the rights and inherent dignity of the child” (para. 2).

The human rights approach to education quality reflects, therefore, human rights values and principles. It crosses the normative, programmatic and other texts adopted by the International Community since the beginning of the 1990s. “Quality education for all young people: Challenges, trends and priorities” was the theme of the 47th session of the International Conference on Education, held in Geneva in 2004.<sup>12</sup> *A human-rights-based approach to education for all—A framework for the realization of children’s right to education and rights within education*—is the title of an edition prepared jointly by UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund) and UNESCO, published in 2007. “It identifies *rights-holders* (and their entitlements) and corresponding *duty-bearers* (and their obligations) and works towards strengthening the capacities of rights-holders to make their claims, and of duty-bearers to meet their obligations” (UNICEF/UNESCO 2007, p. 116).

The human rights approach to education quality echoes, for instance, in the conclusions of the OECD Ministers of Education meeting, in Paris, on November 4–5, 2010 (“OECD Education Ministerial Meeting—Investing in Human and Social Capital: New Challenges”),<sup>13</sup> when they stated: “Education is a public good”. It has not merely economic goals but aims at “equity” and “social cohesion” too. It contributes to “health, civic participation, political engagement, trust and tolerance”. Moreover, “non-cognitive skills such as creativity, critical thinking, problem solving and team work are important for both economic and social

<sup>10</sup> [www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> [www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(symbol\)/CRC.GC.2001.1.En?OpenDocument](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(symbol)/CRC.GC.2001.1.En?OpenDocument)

Each State Party to the core human rights treaties is under an obligation to submit regular reports to Committees of experts that supervise how the rights are being implemented. The Committees are widely known as ‘Treaty Bodies’ or ‘Treaty Monitoring Bodies’. General Comment or General Recommendation is a Committee’s interpretation of the content of a treaty provisions, either related to a specific article or to a broader thematic issue. They often seek to clarify the reporting duties of States Parties and suggest approaches to implementing the human rights concerned.

<sup>12</sup> [www.ibe.unesco.org/en/areas-of-action/international-conference-on-education-ice/47th-session-2004.html](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/en/areas-of-action/international-conference-on-education-ice/47th-session-2004.html).

<sup>13</sup> [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/53/16/46335575.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/53/16/46335575.pdf).



outcomes”. A broad vision of quality education is proposed in the Council of Europe “Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on ensuring quality education”<sup>14</sup>:

Considering that while access to education is in itself an important right, the true value of this right can only be realised if education is of adequate quality and if learning opportunities and arrangements enable pupils and students to complete their education in reasonable time and under conditions conducive to quality education. [...]

6. For the purposes of this recommendation, ‘quality education’ is understood as education which:
  - a. gives access to learning to all pupils and students, particularly those in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, adapted to their needs as appropriate;
  - b. provides a secure and non-violent learning environment in which the rights of all are respected;
  - c. develops each pupil’s and student’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential and encourages them to complete the educational programmes in which they enrol;
  - d. promotes democracy, respect for human rights and social justice in a learning environment which recognises everyone’s learning and social needs;
  - e. enables pupils and students to develop appropriate competences, self-confidence and critical thinking to help them become responsible citizens and improve their employability;
  - f. passes on universal and local cultural values to pupils and students while equipping them also to make their own decisions;
  - g. certifies outcomes of formal and non-formal learning in a transparent way based on fair assessment enabling acquired knowledge and competences to be recognized for further study, employment and other purposes;
  - h. relies on qualified teachers who are committed to continuous professional development;
  - i. is free of corruption.

The respective “Explanatory Memorandum” of the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice<sup>15</sup> comments:

The recommendation is mainly concerned with defining the principles of public responsibility and recognises that various countries may choose to exercise this responsibility in different ways. It also recognises that public responsibility may be exercised directly by the competent public authority or authorities or by another body—public or private—mandated to exercise the responsibility on behalf of the competent authority. In the latter case, public responsibility is delegated but not abdicated: the competent public authority may withdraw the mandate of the body exercising public responsibility on its behalf and will have a duty to do so should the body to which responsibility is delegated exercise it irresponsibly or in other ways unsatisfactorily.

<sup>14</sup> <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=2014671andSite=CM>.

<sup>15</sup> [https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM\(2012\)121andLanguage=lanEnglishandVer=addfinalandSite=CMandBackColorInternet=DBCDF2andBackColorIntranet=FDC864andBackColorLogged=FDC864](https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?Ref=CM(2012)121andLanguage=lanEnglishandVer=addfinalandSite=CMandBackColorInternet=DBCDF2andBackColorIntranet=FDC864andBackColorLogged=FDC864).

In light of the normative content of the right to education, as internationally agreed, quality education is therefore a complex concept, with material and non-material dimensions, such as:

- Material dimension: availability (both physically and economically), accessibility and equipment of safe, healthy and functional educational settings; financial and human means; teaching/learning resources; teachers' pay, etc.
- Non-material dimension: respect for the cultural, social and individual diversity of students; non-discrimination, inclusiveness and equity; school leadership and discipline; curricular relevance regarding the needs and interests of students, the characteristics of communities, the problems of societies and of Humankind; a good *ratio* of teacher/students; evaluation methods; teachers' personal qualities, motivation and competence, etc.
- Aesthetic dimension: the educational influence of the beauty of the material and immaterial forms mediating the right to education, including the education setting's architecture, as well as the educators' appearance, communication and personality.

Consequently, quality education results from the interaction between tangible and intangible ingredients, making it difficult to find stark measurable correlations. "Education remains very much a black box in which inputs are turned into outputs in ways that are difficult to predict or quantify consistently" (Pearson 2012, p. 7). Schools are complex and dynamic environments.

While there is no recipe or ready-to-wear approach to producing quality education, there are principles universally valid and applicable, forming a common pedagogic heritage of Humankind amply consecrated by the Ethics of the Right to Education. In addition, every country can learn from the most exemplar ones.

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