

Quality Education Imperatives for Inclusive Basic Education: Moving Beyond the Rhetoric

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Abstract

Although quality education is central to both international and national education debates and practices in most countries, there exist reluctance and a snails-pace move towards rolling-out quality education in basic education for all. Needless to say, there exist disparities in the policies, equity and provisioning strategies of basic education for all learners. Most South American and South Pacific countries are battling to realize the Millennium Goals regarding this matter. Some African countries are neither doing well nor satisfactorily progressing in this regard too. Those that are better off have not begun to monitor and evaluate the quality of their basic education except ensuring that teachers do teach and learners do attend classes. The only quality control and measurement is through the mid-year and end of year examinations. This paper looks at quality in basic education for all as composed not only of the controls (assurance standards used) that are supposedly embedded within an institution of learning, but also perceives quality education as an imperative dimension of the teaching and learning processes, steeped in the knowledges (if I may) that are produced through basic education programmes, which entail amongst others – education for sustainability and indigenous knowledge systems, as knowledge types that enables learners to be worthy citizen. Hence, the argument that quality basic education for all should move beyond the rhetoric of unjust, ill-informed educational policies and the legitimization of hegemonic knowledge-types, but should engage open-ended and pluralist-enquiry alternatives through critical, exploratory and reflexive approaches within quality basic education practice.

Key words Basic education; quality education; education for sustainability; indigenous knowledge systems, inclusive education

Overview

Both national and international educational issues are not only complex and problematic to resolve, but also fall short of providing informed policy

guidance to transformative educational programmes regarding basic education for all. The continuous neglect of the girl child in education in some parts of the world, and blatant disregard to some of the needs of disabled learners in educational environments, amidst such international conventions, covenants, treaties and agreements (Dakar Declaration 1990; Millennium Goals 1990; World Declaration on Education for All and Framework For Action 1990; Dakar Framework For Action 2005), provide startling evidence of what still needs to be done in order to fast-track appropriate provisioning. Unprogressive paths, that are currently immanent in the praxis of education in most education systems of the world, mostly, in their management (policy included), provisioning, quality assurance processes, knowledge production processes, are steeped in non-progression strategies of operationalization. Such processes seem as '*doldrums of education processes*' or rather simply as hopeless speech – and therefore, rhetoric. Hence, the proposition of certain ways of moving forward out of this despondency within the views of the international instruments, as dictated by local contexts for quality education for all or quality fundamental education or quality basic education. note that education for all is an educational phrase indicative of inclusive education in all forms and for all levels. The concepts fundamental education and basic education are clarified further down in this paper.

Internationally, education for all is declared as a human right. The *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (UNESCO), in its Foreword (No Date: 1) states that *achieving the right to education for all is one of the biggest challenges of our times. The second International Development Goal addresses this challenge: universalizing primary education in all countries by 2015.*

This right cannot be denied to any learner, whether that learner is a child or an adult. Most countries of the world as signatories of international conventions and agreements have rectified policies that put the learner at the centre of social advancement programmes (Conference on Education For All 1990; Millennium Development Goals 1990; Dakar Framework For Action 2005). However, the implementation of such commitments is a concern.

Defining inherent concepts

In most countries of the world basic education is seen as an alternative to the colonial education system, hence and its content and process are expected to be contextually embedded. According to Chanana (2004), Mahatma Gandhi

is one of the proponents of basic education that focused on the rural poor and their needs. With a primary education curriculum that was crafts-based, vocational skills focused, and integrating life experience with classroom experience, thus emphasizing both learning by doing and the learner's use of local knowledge. President Julius Nyere (Cf Nyere in Akinpelu 1992: 120) also worked hard to introduce an anti-colonial education system in Tanzania. His self-reliance education system was based on the notion that the education of the African learner must enable her/him to function competently within the community. And that the provision of hegemonic knowledge types to the learner was to be done skillfully so that local knowledge is not marginalized or undermined because such knowledge carries the child's home and community values on which the child needs to draw experiences from for learning in the classroom. Importantly, the experiences of the learner were critical in the learning settings just like those proposed by Mahatma Gandhi.

According to the views proposed by these scholars, the scheme of education - basic education, is underpinned by local knowledge, which entails organic links with life experiences and work experiences (Cf Nyere in Akinpelu 1992; Chanana 2004). This view differs with the current notion of basic education which explicates basic education as the formal education system that renders non-formal and informal education as inadequate in preparing and cultivating required skills and competences by and for the workplace and society at large. Citing President Nyerere who revolutionized the social milieu of Tanzania by introducing what is called a sound education as opposed to the education system left by the British colonial regime; Akinpelu posits that for President Nyerere, a sound education system was supposed to cultivate *equality and respect for human dignity* (Cf Nyerere in Akinpelu 1992: 116). President Nyerere further advocated and emphasized the importance of a localized value system in learning that does not divorce the learners from their society, but that prepare the young and old to contribute to the wealth of society. To achieve such a fit, it meant that the education system was envisaged to be broad based in type and function. It had to acknowledge the knowledge and wisdom of other older people and that of younger people. Indicated differently, all groups of people in society were also expected to participate deliberately in their education. Needless to say, all knowledge, through basic education is essential for advancement

Chanana (2004: 16-17) alleges that basic education is also founded on rigorous principles of cognition, and that cognition as a process of rigour in thinking and action, involves abstraction; described as the ability to acquire knowledge through the process of reasoning, intuition or perception. As part

of basic education, individuals or 'collectives' (groups of people acting on a common goal) practice cognition everyday, because it encompasses not only their common life experiences, but also their practical and pragmatic needs, their aesthetic, speculative wonders and amazement of universal processes. Chanana further accept that such a basic education is neither primary, nor adult nor the typical extension of an educational system. Of note its that, basic education is practiced by and in all levels of education (for example, pre-primary, primary, secondary, etc) and that the inclusion of traditional knowledge in all forms of basic education is pivotal to learning and the work place.

Kabeer, Nambissan and Subrahmanian (2003: 16) see education as formal primary schooling and non-formal schooling. They further equate primary education to basic education and universal education. This observation seems to be inadequate since it does not indicate where secondary and higher education would fall, and the equating of primary education is also inadequate as we shall notice in this paper that basic education is broader in context than its restriction to formal primary schooling. According to the Wikipedia (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/basic%SFeducation>), basic education is an essential education and it is formal education deemed necessary for somebody to function properly in society, and it is regarded as priority for developing countries. The Wikipedia also concurs with Kabeer et.al. (2003: 16) that basic education is universal education. It is for the reasons pointed out above that in this discussion universal education is perceived as education practiced anywhere in the world because of its universal tenets that are applicable to humanity in general. And it is therefore, equated to basic education or fundamental education, and is the human right of all people. However, the perception espoused by the Wkipedia that basic education is formal education only, is seen as inadequate. The *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (<http://www.edu.fi/english/pageLast.asp?path=500>), attest to this view that basic education is also non-formal and information too. It goes on to say that it is made available to young children and adults, and provided through general upper secondary schools and adult centres for adult learners.

The *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (UNESCO) seem also to equate basic education to primary education for all and uses these concepts interchangeably. In this study however, these terms are not used interchangeably for reasons advanced further down.

To distinguish appropriately between basic and primary education, the following clarification from the World Declaration on Education for All (2000:7) is essential:

the main delivery system for the basic education of children outside the family. Primary education must be universal, ensure that the basic learning needs of all children are satisfied, and take into account the culture, needs and opportunities of the community (art. 5).

This document by UNICEF conclude by observing that primary education is the most important component of basic education and that primary education must be free and compulsory to all children (ibid: 7). An emphasis is placed on elements of availability, accessibility, acceptability, adaptability, which should also be included in the planning and implementation process. Just like primary being a component of basic education, so is secondary school and higher education. Concurring to this notion the *World Declaration on Education for All* (ibid: 8) stipulates that

if higher education is to respond to the needs of students in different social and cultural settings, it must have flexible curricula and varied delivery systems, such as distance learning; in practice, therefore, both secondary and higher education have to be available in different forms.

This observation regarding the obligation of higher education, cannot be viewed and be relegated to form only, but must also be seen as befitting primary and secondary schooling (high school education included) since these are perceived as components of basic education that elucidate the benefits of basic education as response to learners' needs in diverse socio-cultural contexts. The Wikipedia (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/basic%5EFeducation>), points out to some benefits of basic education, as the reduction of disease through the knowledge of hygiene and nutrition, reduction in unwanted pregnancies, and reduction in violence through increased understandings in non-violent ways to solve problems and mutual understandings between groups in conflict resolution. Needless to say, these can only be actualized through deliberate curricular in fundamental education.

In this paper I concur with the views of the *World Declaration on Education for All* (ibid: 8) that fundamental education corresponds to basic education and that by virtue of article 13 (2) (d), individuals who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education have a right to fundamental education or basic education as defined in the World Declaration on Education for All. The implication of this statement is that fundamental education or basic education is not restricted to formal settings only, but can also be offered in non-formal settings and by education service providers who are not necessarily belonging to formal education institutions.

Of note, this type of education could be provided through different modes besides the state. NGOs, non-formal, informal (home based) could all play a role in the fundamental education programmes. And the goals and content of basic education should include a broad based knowledge construction framework that encouraged open-ended enquiry approaches to meaning making ways, without marginalizing learners' experiences, their local knowledge and the work place knowledge. Continuous engagement of governments, civil society and labour on these issues is imperative in order to eradicate poverty and diseases through fundamental education/basic education.

Some barriers encountered by learners in basic education

The document *Economic and Social Council, Right to Education: Scope and Implementation* (Foreword), states that it is vitally important now for achieving the Dakar goals

in keeping with the commitments made by Governments for providing education for all, especially free and compulsory quality basic education. But in spite of such legal obligations and political commitments, millions of children still remain deprived of educational opportunities, many of them on account of poverty. They must have access to basic education as of right, in particular to primary education which must be free. Poverty must not be a hindrance and the claim by the poor to such education must be recognized and reinforced.

The views expounded in this statement are a clear indication of the seriousness of the nature of barriers in achieving quality fundamental education for all in the present. Governments seem to be in the drive seat of ensuring effective operationalization of the Millennium Target – to secure equal access to schooling regarding basic education for girls and boys. Some of the factors perceived as hindrance to quality basic education, are succinctly discussed below:

- **Equal schooling for girls and boys**

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The News Letter *Beyond Access: Gender, Education and Development, EQUALS*, (2005) commenting on the missed 2005 Target – to secure equal access to schooling for girls and boys worldwide – the new data from UNESCO shows that 94 countries have missed the target, rather than 71 as predicted last year (2004). Failing to meet the target means that the girl learners will continue to face challenges in formal schooling, and probably more challenges in the other non-formal and informal settings of their fundamental education. Access to schooling is critical if poverty and health issues (serious ills of society) are to be eliminated, especially amongst the most vulnerable members of society.

- **Undemocratic states and policy-corrupt states**

The 94 countries who could not meet the target are claimed to have a number of undemocratic processes that hinder them to realize this millennium development GOAL. Needless to say, those education systems in some of these countries are poorly resourced and managed. The News Letter for *Beyond: Gender, Education and Development, EQUALS*, (2005), further indicates that at the 2005 World Summit leaders of countries recommitted themselves to eliminate gender inequality and imbalance and to renew efforts to improve girls' education, and to enhance resources through EFA fast-track initiative (point 44 of World Summit outcome document). The recommitment of world leaders should be realized through their unwavering financial support to educational progress seeking justice in gender imbalances.

- **Unfriendly environments**

Basic education ought to be inclusive to all learners. In certain countries inclusiveness is perceived as mainstreaming learners with disabilities in the different formal schools with total disregard for the needs of such learners.

The classrooms are not suitable, the pathways, the toilets, etc, are actually asking these learners one question “what are you doing here? You are not welcome! Home environments either encourage or discourage advancement. So are most workplace environments.

- **Narrow mindedness in teaching skills**

Teaching and learning as a process has evolved since the days of the colonial master in most African countries, and the implication of this evolution is that we now live in an information age. So teachers who enable their learners to make sense of this huge knowledge basis (information), and assist them to be critical and reflexive learners, are not only helping learners with life skills, but are also assisting their learners to cultivate knowledge most critical to society.

- **Formal school curriculum marginalizing traditional ways of knowing or practices**

Chananan (2004) and Akinpelu (1992) claim that the school curriculum is very unfriendly to local ways of knowing that the learners bring into the school and classroom learning. Most school curricular view knowledge creation in perspectives that are West or Eurocentric oriented. This has even “convinced” most Africans that the learning of indigenous languages is not beneficial for development and a better quality of life for society. Maybe we need to seriously/rigorously enquire what we mean by quality of life. We need to ask ourselves whether quality is measured by Western standards or African standards, to be specific, by Euro-centric or contextual standards.

- **High costs of education**

In most countries of the world learners in primary schooling are obliged to pay school fees. The Educate to End Poverty (a Coalition on Women and Aids) made a call at the 2005 World Summit through its recommendations that the United Nations should call on rich and poor countries to oblige to certain agreements in order to achieve basic education; and one of the recommendations is that rich countries should “take immediate measures to eradicate child labour; and poor countries should “abolish fees for primary education in 2006, making education free and compulsory for at least 6 years and establish timetables for expanding free and compulsory education to at least 9 years” (The News Letter Beyond Access: Gender, Education and Development, EQUALS, (2005: 2-3). Probably most schools in developing

countries would argue that they survive on the very meager school fees paid in by learners; otherwise they would have to 'close-shop', since government financial support is just not enough.

- **Lack of appropriate learning devises**

In most schools in developing countries modern learning technologies are a luxury. Education ministries cannot afford these since they cannot even afford to have sufficient teachers in the schools and pay them a living salary. To complement this problem further is the issue of where the money will come from to pay for learning support resources. Although school fees does impact negatively on the learning of the child, it seems it does in many cases assist schools with meager funds deemed imperative for quality teaching and learning.

Quality basic education imperatives

The concept quality education seems to be complex and broad in its application. Varied meanings of this concept are immersed in contextual orientations. For example, if a person says the quality of the fruit dessert s/he is eating is excellent, probably s/he means that the fruits used taste good. Another person might say that the quality of paper used in a magazine s/he is reading is exceptionally good. However, in education quality is in a simplistic manner measured in terms of standards set and expected to be achieved. If learners achieve the set standards or outcomes, then the education officers are satisfied that their programme/s is/are of a/an good or acceptable or exceptional quality. However, the issue at hand is that quality is not only to be attained through quantifiable set standards, but must also be excellently disposed by persons who have been capacitated (acquiring capabilities) through enabling programmes offered through fundamental education.

The document – *Contributing to a More Sustainable Future: Quality Education, Life Skills and Education for Sustainable Development* (<http://www.edu.fi/english/pageLast.asp?path=500>), describes the vision of the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development as the cultivation of quality education, and that quality education means

An effective means to fight poverty, build democracies, and foster peaceful societies. Quality education empowers individuals, gives

them voice, unlocks their potential, opens pathways to self-actualization, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralistic world.

If fundamental education is to be of quality, then it is expected to provide society with enabling knowledge. Knowledge that enables people to make informed decisions, decisions to foster peace, to entrench democratic values, to provide opportunities in choices and freedoms, and provide broad, open-ended views on knowledge construction in a pluralistic world. In this paper the view pronounced about quality education is that, quality education does not only embrace quality assurance processes, but that it is also embedded in the enabling types of knowledges critical for people's advancement. It is therefore, imperative that the following reasons are advanced for the provisioning of quality basic education:

- **Quality basic education and Education for Sustainability**

What does education for sustainability entail? It is definitely not easy to provide an acceptable description of this concept, reasons being that this concept is embedded within development processes that started in the north and later moved to the south to prescribe how natural resources were to be utilized for the benefit of all. The irony of this observation is that the raw materials harvested in the south are then returned from the north in the form of expensive packaged goods, appropriately called 'African Colonisation' by Dr Kaunda, former president of Zambia (City Press October 23 2005). To the south such a process is unjust since the north continues in its unsustainable consumption patterns (consumerism) unabated. A good example, being the Kyoto Treaty which progressively culminated in a binding covenant for some countries. The Protocol also reaffirms the principle that developed countries have to pay, and supply technology to other countries (especially, developing ones) for climate-related studies and projects, over the 2008 to 2012 period (<http://unfccc.int/respurce/docs/convkp/>).

Why is education for sustainability perceived as a key concept for quality education? One reason is that explicated by the document *Contributing to a More Sustainable Future: Quality Education, Life Skills and Education for Sustainable Developmen*, that explains the vision of the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations' Decade of Education for Sustainable Development as quality education, and that quality education is

An effective means to fight poverty, build democracies, and foster peaceful societies. Quality education empowers individuals, gives them voice, unlocks their potential, opens pathways to self-actualization, and broadens perspectives to open minds to a pluralistic world.

Quality basic education therefore is steeped in types of enabling *knowledges* that societies need critically to build peaceful, poverty free and just societies where individuals and ‘*collectives*’ are seen as important role players.

- **Indigenous ways of knowing**

Indigenous knowledge has been ‘*peripherised*’ for a long period by the formal education system in most countries. Chanana (2004) attest to this critique that the formal system of education has failed all these yeas to incorporate traditional knowledge into the school curriculum. In so doing it stands to reason that, indigenous knowledge is marginalized whilst hegemonizing school based knowledge. Du Toit and Sguazzin (2000: 16) reiterate this view by emphasizing the need for socio-ecological (traditional ways of knowing if you may) contexts of schooling to understand the contexts and capabilities of learners in the teaching and learning setting. They further argue that knowledge that shapes our educational practice and our actions in the environment is socially constructed. Hence, the call not to marginalize knowledge constructed outside the boundaries of formal schooling.

Kom (2000: 2) seems to concur with the views of Chanana and, Du Toit and Squazzin by contending that

Knowing whether there exist in Africa (or anywhere in the world) not only the conditions but also, and more especially, the desire on the part of Africans themselves to create an autonomous framework for the validation and appropriation of a local body of knowledge, which could help them better to perceive their environment and construct a context for living which is suited to their own aspirations.

These views are pronouncing not only the aspirations of African people, but probably all people who aspire that Africans must create an autonomous framework for the validation and appropriation of a local body of knowledge. The implication of this notion is that, Africans themselves need to create and use their contextually based local knowledge to better their lives, without of course, relegating to oblivion the utilization of other knowledge types.

- **Open-ended approaches to knowledge construction**

Learning institutions are inclined to lean towards either an open-ended or closed knowledge inquiry orientation. Knowledge construction as a closed system perceive curriculum as a product, with a specified and bounded knowledge that does not allow the dynamic and progressive nature of knowledge construction. On the other hand an open-ended knowledge inquiry process perceives curriculum as an ongoing process, which is best refined and reflexively reviewed from within the process over time (Lotz 1999: 6).

The above views are an indication that basic education curriculum ought to be deliberative. Vast experience in curriculum matters does not ensure progressive and open-ended inquiry process, but need to be strengthened with deliberate efforts of engaging participation of practitioners in the field. In many case this might be negated by funding organizations who are mostly interested in 'education as a commodity' to be market driven. There are many difficult questions about curriculum development, which do not have clear-cut answers, which will need to be grappled with (deliberated on) as practitioners continue to seek better ways of approaching teaching and learning to enable all types of knowledge space in education.

- **Broad and deliberative knowledge construction approaches**

The processes of ensuring quality education at educational institutions would be failing society if not promoting the production of context based knowledge as one of the goals. Such a goal can be attainable within a broad framework of knowledge production that seeks to transcend hegemonic boundaries that marginalize certain types of knowledge and ways of knowing.

Within teaching and learning, curriculum processes should be deliberative, in ways that engages teachers and learners in educational matters (for example, content and outcomes). Let me explain the meaning of this view by sketching the teaching and learning scenario in most schools in Southern

Africa in the primary level – not that other levels are seen to be completely out of question.

The teachers are in most cases the sole ‘bearers’ of knowledge and the learners are the ‘empty vessels’ to be filled in with knowledge. This observation is also confirmed by Akinpelu (1992). Needless to say, in such a setting of learning, knowledge is engaged in a narrow manner and learners are not actively engaged in creating their own understanding of what they are learning about. Innovative and active learning strategies are critical in teaching and learning if depth in meaningful meaning making or knowledge creation, through participatory approaches is to be practiced beyond rhetoric grounds of social injustices in fundamental education schooling, disregarding the implications thereof.

Moving beyond the rhetoric: what are the implications?

For basic education to be practiced beyond the stagnation and unprogressive phase, which is characterized by the rhetoric unjust, ill-informed educational policies and the legitimation of certain knowledge types that are driven by the market economy, caution must be made to seriously consider some of the suggestions discussed below. Those who formulate educational policies to inform this process must consider:

- **Financial commitment**

The global community must commit funds to assist developing nations to redress and address unjust educational practices. Learners from poverty stricken backgrounds should be the focus of fundamental education if their parents’ cycle of poverty is to be ‘broken’. Otherwise such children will perpetuate the ‘poverty statuses of their families. Of note is also that the scrapping of school fees in primary schools and secondary schools will enable most girls to attend school, without their parents labeling them as money wasters. The attitude of teachers towards the learning of girls in the classroom needs to be transformed, in order to see girls as having the needed capability to master any subject content allowed to pursue. Adult learners also have a right to basic education. Within the limits of resources, they must be encouraged to participate in education in order to enhance their quality of life.

- **Determining realistic timelines for all initiatives geared to eradicate social injustices in schooling.**

Most of the commitments of nations towards the eradication of educational imbalances seem to be underpinned by open-ended time frames which allow too much time on the present imperatives guiding world states, especially those from developing nations. This issue also calls for deliberate policies to fast-track so-called 'non-formal schooling learners' of which, most of the out-of-school and adult learners fall. These learners must also take full advantage of their right to basic education. It should also be borne in mind that the enjoyment of the right to fundamental education is not limited by

age or gender; it extends to children, youth and adults, including older persons. Fundamental education, therefore, is an integral component of adult education and lifelong learning. Because fundamental education is a right of all age groups, curricula and delivery systems must be devised which are suitable for students of all ages (World Declaration on Education for All 2000: 9).

- **Learners who are disadvantaged by their circumstances**

There are various community organizations providing service to disabled learners. In most instances governments support such organizations and government schools in some countries have special facilities for disabled learners. Notwithstanding the fact that some countries prefer to mainstream learners with disabilities, there is total lack of sensitivity to the needs of such learners, especially regarding the unfriendliness of the school environment and facilities. Care should also be given to the various diseases manifested in different ways in schools, and that educators need to have contingency plans in place. Notwithstanding the fact that learners eligible to be accepted into mainstream schooling have the right just like any learner to enjoy her/his schooling rights, school personnel and learners in such schools need to be taught of the benefits and disadvantages of diversity, and that they need to learn to accept the other 'different' learners and help them to a better quality of life. Hence, it is also true for learners from minority groups, who must be protected by educators from being discriminated against and that their local knowledge, should be integrated in their learning.

- **Maximize the role of parents in the education of their children by educating them of their educational rights**

The role of parents in the education of their children cannot be overemphasized. And when parents relegate this obligation to the state, then things start to go wrong in the education process (in this case – teachers, learning support materials, children and parents. It is therefore imperative that parents involve themselves more conspicuously in the education of their children. Of course, some parents are not staying with their children since they are migratory workers themselves. Sometimes they are not even migrate workers, but they wake up very early in the morning and come home very late in the night. Such circumstances create problems for educators.

Needless to state that realizing this Millennium Development Goal, there should exist tougher measure to ensure that State Parties commit not only legally, but also by specifying time frames to implementation processes. And that open-ended and pluralistic enquiry alternatives that are underpinned by critical, collaborative and cooperative, exploratory and reflective approaches in quality education practices, are continuously encouraged and formatively monitored and evaluated.

Concluding comment

I want to conclude by quoting the words of Malcolm Gillis, President of Rice University, in Higher Education in *Developing Countries: Peril and Promise* (2000: 15) when commenting about the priority of higher education in knowledge construction, “today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth – or poverty – of nations depend on the quality of higher education”. I want to say that the wealth – or poverty of nations depend not only on the quality of higher education, but fundamentally on the quality of its basic education. Those cutting-edge qualities of our education that define and provide the necessary life sustaining capabilities need to be continuously cultivated in learners for the benefit of humanity.

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