

# The Educational Resettlement of Refugee Children

## Examining Several Theoretical Approaches

Amy B. Lerner

### Introduction

Each year, approximately 100,000 refugees arrive in the United States (Refugee Council USA). Nearly half of these arrivals are children. The number of refugees worldwide has more than sextupled since the 1950s, and according to the United States Committee for Refugees & Immigrants (USCRI) this number is expected to continue to grow in coming years (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; United States Committee for Refugees & Immigrants, 2009). Despite this recent history and future expectations and predictions, no formal framework currently exists for integrating refugee children into American schools.

Commonly, refugee children entering the school system in this new country are placed either in first grade (regardless of their age) or in a class that corresponds to their chronological age (Szilassy & Arendas, 2007). Both options present problems.

When refugee children are placed with younger classes they may experience social and emotional difficulties because of the differences that exist in the development of children of unlike age groups (e.g., physical and cognitive development). When refugee children are placed with children of a different peer group these dissimilarities can exacerbate resettlement stress (Szilassy & Arendas, 2007).

On the other hand, those refugee children placed in classes with students their own age are unlikely to be able to keep up with schoolwork without intervention, as refugee students typically do not have the “prerequisite academic experience in the course subject matter” (Roxas, 2008, p. 6). Further, the vast majority of refugee children do not speak the language of their new country and thus require English as a

Second Language (ESL) assistance, which many schools lack the resources to provide (Roxas, 2008).

Research has shown that educational resettlement in the U.S. is, for the most part, far from successful. Why, then, have we yet to institute policies and practices that address issues pertaining to the educational integration of refugee children? What new knowledge and perspectives would help researchers and educators approach this problem?

### Developmental Niche Theory

Super and Harkness’s (1986) developmental niche theory suggests that culture intersects with child development in three systems: the child’s physical and social settings, the customs and patterns of child-care, and the psychology of the caretakers. With the refugee child in mind, all three of these systems merit consideration.

As issues of acculturation are central to challenges of resettlement, we ought then to look at the educational resettlement of refugee children from the perspective of the developmental niche as well as related theories. The purpose of the following discussion is to examine several culturally informed frameworks that may be applied to issues surrounding the education resettlement of refugee children in America.

In this article I seek to shed light on the implications of these perspectives for policy and practice, and to bring forth new questions that challenge the ways in which researchers currently view the development of refugee children.

### The Nature of the Refugee Experience

The first step in examining education resettlement issues is to ask what, precisely, we mean by “the refugee experience.” Lustig (2010) answers this from an ecological perspective: “the refugee experiences a series of interrelated events, interactions,

and challenges that Brofenbrenner’s ecological model of development helps to clarify” (p. 242). Lustig explains that “aspects of the refugee experience may vary widely.... but are characterized in all cases by certain chaos-generating physical and emotional universals: deprivation, upheaval, fear, uncertainty, and loss” (p. 242).

Research has helped demonstrate these “chaos-generating” effects on the psychological development of refugees, particularly with regard to academic achievement and psychopathology. For example, Leavey, Hollins, King, Barnes, Papadopoulos, and Grayson (2004) found that refugee children are likely to have many risk factors for academic failure and psychological distress, while researchers Beiser, Dion, Gotowiec, Hyman, and Vu (1995) and Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson, and Rath (1986) discovered that behavioral problems, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are all common among refugee students.

Similarly, Roxas (2008) found that refugee students often experience rejection, isolation, lower achievement scores on standardized tests, and higher dropout rates. While the existing research is rife with Western psychological perspectives, there has been very little investigation of cultural issues surrounding the resettlement of refugee children.

### Ecological Systems Theory

Again referencing Brofenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, Lustig concludes that “the upheaval and uncertainty of the refugee experience fundamentally threaten the microsystem” (p. 240). The microsystem, involving those closest to the child, encompasses structures and people with whom the child has direct contact. Lustig further explains that refugee children’s parents “may be compromised in their caretaking abilities, proximal processes may be diminished in numbers and effectiveness” (p. 240).

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*Amy B. Lerner is a Ph.D. student in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.*

This is just one example of the many ways in which “refugee-ness” means interferences in the bi-directional influences of the microsystem and, consequently, in healthy development overall for children. In many ways we can see how “key aspects of development, such as education, work, or interactions with family, are sacrificed to stay alive” (p. 243).

This claim by Lustig is further supported by LeVine’s (1974) model, which suggests a hierarchy of goals in which survival and physical well-being are first and foremost. LeVine argues that only after these basic life needs are met can further personality development, such as self-fulfillment, occur. This process may significantly impact the development of refugees who have endured—and may still be undergoing—experiences of struggling for survival.

Others have argued that culture and child development are intertwined. In a recent interview, psychologist Barbara Rogoff said, “The study of culture and development go together: Culture is best understood historically... Development is best understood culturally; all people develop in the context of particular times and places” (Glaveanu, 2011, p.410). If we accept Rogoff’s argument, what does this mean for refugee children and their development post-resettlement?

### **Upended Cultural Environment**

Refugee children who are resettled in the U.S. have often come from a refugee camp, prior to which they have likely been “on the run” in various countries, or in their country of origin (Henry, 2009; Mollica, Donelan, Tor, Lavelle, Elias, Frankel, & Blendon, 1993; Steucker, 2006). The very nature of what it means to be a refugee implies having one’s life—including one’s cultural environment—upended. It implies a transitory lifestyle in which there exists a great deal of uncertainty.

The customs of refugee families will likely change from one generation to the next after resettlement—and exposure to new mores—in the U.S. How do refugee children form a cultural identity? Are aspects of their home cultures maintained? Are their home cultures rejected because of painful memories? Do they cling to aspects of their home culture and refuse to adapt to their new culture in protest of forced resettlement (or for other reasons)? Studying the refugee experience entails deconstructing issues of identity and adaptation from a cultural perspective.

Current literature informs us that the

unique defining characteristics of refugee children—their backgrounds and the cultural identities they bring with them—are not typically appreciated in American schools (Malkki, 1996; Moselsson, 2011). Refugee children are expected to leave behind their past lives, to shed memories of their previous experiences, and to quickly assimilate into American culture (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; McBrien, 2005). Yet, as experience demonstrates, assimilation is not the most appropriate acculturation process for refugee children.

### **Integration as Optimal Acculturation**

In order to examine approaches to the educational resettlement of refugee children and suggest changes to practice and policy it is useful to first understand processes of acculturation. Resettlement takes many forms.

Cross-cultural psychologist John Berry (1974) has developed a widely accepted strategies model that examines such processes (McBrien, 2005). In his model, Berry labeled four types of acculturation: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. Assimilation occurs when immigrants openly embrace their new culture and reject their previous culture; separation is evident when the opposite takes place, i.e., when immigrants entirely reject their new culture and embrace their previous culture. Marginalization occurs when the refugee rejects both their new and previous cultures. Integration—the ideal or optimal form of acculturation—entails embracing components of both new and previous cultures.

### **Cultural Upheaval: Insights from the Literature**

#### **Implications for Child Rearing and the Parent-Child Dynamic**

All types of acculturation may present problems and disrupt the healthy development of refugee children. Lustig points out that “relocation could be associated with difficulties in either grieving the loss of the native culture (i.e., cultural bereavement) or adjusting to the new culture” (p. 246). McBrien (2005) discusses “cultural dissonance” wherein “children acquire the language and skills of their new culture more quickly than their parents do, resulting in family conflicts” (p. 332).

Similarly, Zhou (2001) points out that because children acquire language faster, they often become translators for their parents, and thus a role reversal can

take place. “Such role reversals between children and parents create identity confusion and conflict between the generations” (McBrien, 2005, p. 330; Zhou, 2001).

According to Quinn (2005), one of the universals of child rearing is for caretakers to establish experiential consistencies. In the case of refugee parents, this universal may not always be possible. Acculturation, for refugee families, may mean the disruption of child-rearing practices. Quinn discusses the notion of a child-rearing model that, like cultural knowledge, is “deeply ingrained, indeed embodied, in us” (p. 488).

Quinn describes, as well, a communal phenomenon in many cultures, a “pattern of child rearing to which a child is exposed [that] is even more regular because it extends beyond the primary caretakers and beyond the household to a larger community of child rearers, all of whom share, to a great extent, a common cultural model for child rearing and common strategies for its implementation” (p. 488). Again this communal pattern may be problematic in the case of refugee children in the U.S., as the culture of the refugee child’s home environment is likely incompatible with the American culture of the child’s school community.

Quinn also presents vignettes from several cross-cultural studies of child development that “illustrate how child-rearing practices are engineered to make the child’s experience constant” (p. 484). This is a very interesting point when it comes to refugee families. Constancy in child rearing in the case of refugee families is not often an option. Refugee parents are forced into less than ideal child-rearing situations and continue to struggle with maintaining their cultural child-rearing practices once in the U.S.

Relevant here is an example of what I learned at a recent meeting led by a local refugee health agency. Residing in my area is a large population of refugees from Southeast Asia. In these families’ culture, physical punishment is the norm. Further, the father is considered the household leader, and it is unacceptable for children to speak back to their parents. This, as you can imagine, is not the cultural norm in most American households, where physical punishment is frowned upon, if not illegal, and where children may wield power in the household, or, at the very least, speak back to their parents on occasion.

For these refugee families there may exist a power shift as children adopt the customs of their new culture more quickly than do their parents. Not only do these

children become interpreters for their parents of the new American ways, but they also become aware of their rights as a child in America. In the meeting I attended, for example, a common situation discussed was that of children threatening to call child services on their parents.

Quinn (2005) provides examples from cross-cultural studies of the reactions of child-rearers when they are confronted with violations of their traditional cultural model. They “insist on, or persist in, enacting [their] own cultural model” (p. 487). LeVine (1974) also presents an additional cultural model in his theory of parental behavior. He describes “cultural software” which is comprised of goals, scripts, meanings, and rationales that direct behavior.

So what happens when refugee child-rearers try to maintain their cultural models upon resettlement in the United States? The example provided above illustrates how the cultural model of child rearing in these families may be incompatible with the acceptable model in their new culture. So why does it matter if the new and old cultural models for child rearing are incompatible? Because resettlement can threaten previous cultural models, it can lead to problems in the home environment that can significantly impact the child’s development and success in school.

The constancy of the family cultural model is vitally important for child development. A central component of this model includes “continuity over time,” which refugee caregivers are often unable to provide because of the conflicts between their traditional culture and the new culture they find in the U.S. (Quinn, p. 487). This is part of the reason it is critical for us to try to understand refugee children’s cultural backgrounds.

### **Implications for Child Development, Including Identity Issues**

The staggering number of young people whose lives have been irrevocably altered by war and its aftermath raises important questions about the developmental trajectories of these children and the environment in which they attempt to live, function, and grow up. The impact on normal developmental process is significant. (Lustig, 2010, p. 239)

It would be useful to dig deeper into this impact on development. In developmental science, no one theory accurately captures all aspects of child development. However, we do know, largely thanks to Bowlby’s (1988) work on attachment, that children benefit from stability as “they

develop a sense of themselves as competent and of the world as safe and nurturing” (Lustig, 2010, p. 243).

Lustig further references attachment theory with regard to refugee children. If subjected to “disordered attachment styles early in life,” Lustig would “expect to find neurobiological correlates to the challenges of the refugee experience” (p. 245). We should not take this to mean that refugee children are permanently damaged by their experiences. What it does mean is that these children are an at-risk population that deserve careful educational consideration.

Some may consider the term “at-risk” an unconstructive “label,” but in this case it may be purposeful. Both DiNocola (1998) and Kinzie (2001), among others, have pointed out that assumptions about development, normality, and psychopathology are culturally embedded. If we wish to suggest changes to American practices and policies, we must use language understood by our culture.

Questions pertaining to attachment are not the only considerations at hand. The process of acculturation can disrupt many other aspects of child development. For example, researchers Garbarino and Kostelny (1996) have used Erikson’s theory of personality development as a means of understanding the identity development of child refugees. Erikson (1950) outlined eight stages of human development over the lifespan. Each of these stages contains a key developmental challenge. Each of these challenges is tied to cognitive, emotional, and social development processes.

Gabarino and Kostelny note that children in refugee circumstances “face special challenges in meeting Erikson’s stages” (p. 36). They conclude that the trauma refugee children experience might impede their progress through key developmental phases. Lustig, Kia-Keating, Knight, Geltman, Ellis, Kinzie, Kean, and Saxe (2004) elaborate: “Wartime experiences of mistrust, self-doubt, and inferiority exacerbate the psychosocial crises that occur during normal development” (p. 2).

Lustig (2010) cites yet other consequences of the refugee experience, arguing that it “may also affect moral development....refugee children may lose trust in authority figures who are unable to provide for their basic needs or who themselves are engaged in perpetrating atrocities” (pp. 245-246).

Eisenbruch (1991) has also applied Erikson’s theory to understanding the experiences of refugee children. Eisen-

bruch argued that what refugee children experience should be understood as cultural bereavement, which he defined as mourning the loss of home, family, friends, routines, and other cultural familiarities (Eisenbruch, 1991).

Further implications for child development center not only around the disruption of critical stages in developmental theory, but also around how we conduct research in the field of developmental science. Such research discusses identity in terms of variables such as gender, age, socio-economic status, and race. Whiting (1976) states: “Little attempt is made to understand the individual experiences the packaged variables imply—to understand the processes by which individuals growing up in one or the other group develop different profiles of behavior” (p. 306).

Further, Whiting points out that because these variables are not broken down into components, “the identification of groups labeled by dimensions such as social class, urbanity, modernity, etc., is problematic” (p. 306). Therefore, Whiting calls for researchers “to put an effort into unwrapping these packaged variables” (p. 303). He asks us to think about the components of these variables. What about them accounts for differences? It may be especially important to try and unpack answers in the case of refugee students, who have extraordinarily complex backgrounds and identities. “Packaged variables” may fail to capture important nuances, including, in the case of refugees, the interplay among multiple cultures and identities.

Considering the variable of age, which “implies changes in the size of the body, neurological changes, modifications in life style, changes in activities and spheres of social interaction,” Whiting (1976) asks, “If one could vary these experiences would age in years and months still be the best predictor?” (p. 308).

Let us take an example provided earlier. We recall that research has shown that practices for resettling refugee children result in their often being placed in the first grade, regardless of their age and without regard for their social and emotional needs. Apart from skill level, this practice blatantly ignores life experiences. When we take into consideration the educational background of a refugee child being placed in an American school, we must also consider education in terms of all that a child can bring to the classroom. In this sense, these children might be much more advanced than their American-born peers. What unique contributions

(e.g., demonstrating a constructive and resourceful use of materials) might they bring to the classroom?

### **Further Implications of Identity Development**

Further implications can be seen in terms of identity development. Weisner (1996) argues, “culturally-provided settings” make “self-understanding and esteem...possible” (p. 307). For Weisner, the most important factor in child development is “to give the child a specific culture in which to mature and develop” (p. 305). He goes on to describe what he means by a “cultural place”—“the cultural beliefs, practices, meanings, and ecological setting characteristic of members of that community” (p. 305). What does this mean for refugee children whose experience of “cultural place” has been shattered? How can we provide for their development, given the many shifts in their cultural environments? Should there be a specially created culture for refugee children with similar discontinuities in their backgrounds, who are being resettled together?

Weisner (1996) also acknowledges that “the cultural place... is not routinely thought-about... in most of the developmental sciences” (p. 306). Quinn (2005), however, explains that “cultural models are cognitive schemas that members of some group or class of people share. They are learned through experience, just as are other cognitive schemas” (p. 478).

Refugees from various places have unique sets of experiences, yet there are commonalities—“cultural schemas”—that all groups of refugees share. One of these is likely the experience of displacement, of forced relocation. Likewise, Steucker (2006) found that despite the varying experiences of refugee children, there are some “similar challenges that characterize the lives of those who have come to the United States seeking peace and safety” (p. 1). Henry (2009) also named oppression, loss, and persecution among the similar experiences refugees face.

I would hypothesize that refugees who flee particular circumstances may have much in common. For example, those who endured ethnic cleansing in Burma may have had similar experiences in their country of origin, and may have been placed in the same refugee camp, where again, they navigated like circumstances. Taking into consideration Weisner’s and Quinn’s arguments, should we consider establishing a policy in the U.S. that would enable groups of refugees from similar backgrounds to

be resettled near one another? Would this enable refugees to have a “cultural place” for themselves amongst a larger American community? Would this facilitate integration—the ideal acculturation process—as opposed to separation, marginalization, or assimilation?

In line with these thoughts, it would be beneficial to examine cultural schemas within refugee groups. Quinn explains, “one common kind of cultural schema is a cultural solution to a task that members of a group routinely perform, and that, once invented, is transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation” (p. 479). In the case of refugees, the literature tells us common tasks involve moving and dealing with hardship, such as hunger, poverty, and physical and emotional trauma (Henry, 2009; Mollica, et al., 1993; Steucker, 2006).

How members of a particular refugee group chose to cope with such events may become a solution that is culturally influenced and widespread among that refugee group. For example, many from Southeast Asian cultures are loathe to talk openly about feelings and do not accept mental health practices (Uba, 1992). Therefore, they may cope with stressful events by dealing quietly with (or denying or ignoring) issues and/or refusing mental health services in resettlement. Such strategies, based on cultural attitudes, are often passed on from refugee parents to children.

In American resettlement practices, we must make attempts to understand and respect the refugee’s cultural beliefs and customs. What policies can be put into place that allow for the maintenance of such cultural practices while attempting to help these families successfully integrate into American culture?

### **Implications for Placement of Refugee Children in a New Normative System: School**

One of the greatest challenges for those concerned with the successful integration of refugee children in the U.S. pertains to induction into the American school system. Schools play a critical role in culture and child development and are, across cultures, heavily relied upon to socialize children (Moselsson, 2001). Schools assist children in creating a national identity and provide for them values and beliefs that accord with their cultural environments (Malkki, 1995; Sinclair, 2002).

Refugee children often have experienced a collapse of the school community in their country of origin and “find themselves

ensconced in a new imagined community (resettlement phase), passing through other communities along the way (conflict phase and temporary settlement phase)” (Moselsson, 2011, p. 2). The disjuncture that occurs as a result of these changes needs to be addressed by the new school community, yet this seldom happens.

As we know, dramatic discontinuities are not conducive to healthy child development. This is why, some might argue, we need to incorporate elements of a refugee child’s culture into the school and classroom community. For example, teachers could introduce a unit on the child’s home country, where ethnic foods, clothing, language, art, traditions are presented. The child could then have the opportunity to share aspects of his or her cultural background with classmates.

There are many other issues to be addressed with regard to refugee children’s transition into American schools. Because this process of acclimation is “mediated by a variety of intracultural and intercultural factors, a major problem is that these factors generally remain confounded or interact with each other” (Portes, 1999, p. 491). The phenomenon is so complex and imbued with unknown variables that most of the research conducted with refugee children in schools examines but a limited number of factors.

Research conducted with refugee children tends to focus on psychological factors, indicating an all too prevalent Western perspective. This is because, Moselsson (2011) argues, in Westernized cultures “schooling and psychology act as technologies of power that mold socially acceptable behaviors” (p. 4). She goes on to point out that “schools are an important site for cultural hybridity and identity struggles...[and] schools, in concert with traditional psychology, act as technologies of power that seek to create ‘docile bodies’ and hence miss many opportunities for cultural hybridity and assistance to the refugees” (p. 4). In explaining how students fit into groups on account of their identified set of characteristics, she highlights a process that is nothing more than simple labeling—with the goal of standardizing, separating, and individualizing.

In this sense, refugee children are treated exceptionally poorly by the American educational system; they are expected to function like most other students, yet are often categorized as lesser—as victims, foreign, different. McBrien (2005) also notes that “discriminatory practices

on the part of teachers and peers increase the refugee students' isolation... discrimination often stem[s] from a lack of accurate information and from cultural misunderstandings" (p. 352).

Perhaps this is why the literature has pointed to the fact that refugee children are not only frequent victims of bullying, but also that these children believe that

their schools do not take sufficient actions against bullies (Candappa, 2001).

Overall, far greater attention needs to be paid by American teachers to the needs of refugee children who are placed in their classrooms. Table 1 offers, as a place to start, a series of recommendations for teachers with a particular focus on attitudes and practices that will be inclusive of

and responsive to refugee children, refugee parents, and the total school community.

## Ameliorating the Effects of Cultural Upheaval and Dissonance

### Considerations for Changes in Policy and Practice

Many considerations have been raised throughout this article. Because research on the educational resettlement of refugee children is scarce, we are left with many unanswered questions. But we do see an important recurrent theme—the critical need to understand the cultural backgrounds from which refugee children come.

Recognizing this need may be the first step toward changing practice and policy. We must then ask how their new cultural contexts can support these children in their development. Keeping in mind many of the theories and arguments presented in this article, we must think broadly in formulating questions and deeply about the purposes of our research.

When we are forced to think concretely about the future of policies, practices, and programs concerning refugee children, we would be wise to take Rogoff's (2011) advice:

... a key feature of putting ideas into practice is to adapt them to local circumstances. Programs cannot be 'one size fits all.' A relative feature of designing programs is to include the people for whom the programs are designed, as contributors in the planning as well as implementation of the programs. (p. 416)

We must aim to design more inclusive social and educational policies and practices.

Characteristics of Rogoff's (2011) theory of intentional community participation call for the investment of time, effort, and risk-taking; the need for observation; and a focus on guided participation. Might we consider these principles when we think about changing current practices and policies? Can we develop new policies and practices that encompass these features?

Using this approach, we might call for research that observes refugee children's cultural communities, and that attempts a deeper, more comprehensive picture of these children's lives both pre- and post-resettlement.

Further, we could suggest training for teachers that emphasizes scaffolding techniques, and create new outreach programs that devote time, energy, and resources to working with refugee children during their acculturation process.

### Table 1 Recommendations for Teachers Who Have Refugee Students in the Classroom

*These recommendations are offered as a starting point for teachers with a particular focus on attitudes and practices that will be inclusive of and responsive to refugee children, refugee parents, and the total school community.*

Don't panic!

Contact the school's ESL teacher and seek out other potential resources in the school and district (for example, the school librarian may be able to help research a child's native culture).

Remember, you are not alone—it's okay to ask for help.

Teach emotions.

Utilize basic sign language.

Display positive body language.

Engage in social games.

Use art and dance activities.

Learn a few basic words in the child's native language.

Use children's literature to help all students learn about the refugee experience.

Use a lot of social skills activities.

Label classroom objects in both English and children's native language(s).

Assign peer buddies.

Give children supplies and school pictures to take home.

See if interpreters or other students speaking the child's language are available to help out.

Don't assume anything about a child's past—try to keep an open mind about where a child may be coming from and remember that even among refugee children and cultural groups there will be differences.

Get to know each child individually.

Be observant.

Use a lot of group work activities.

Seek out local tutoring programs (colleges and universities often have public service programs that may be a great resource).

Work with other teachers and school administrators to establish meaningful policies for grading and testing.

Conduct home visits.

Give refugee children special tasks to elevate them among their classroom peers.

Use modeling and role-playing techniques.

Take some time to get to know each individual child's background and culture (this will help you gain insight into the child's behaviors—for example, you might learn that in the child's native culture, children do not look adults in the eye because it is a sign of disrespect).

Send materials (such as permission slips) home in the family's native language.

Allow children to use their native language in school.

Don't worry about getting a new refugee child up to classroom speed immediately—adjustment takes time; there may be many gaps to fill and you will learn about those needs over time—be patient (with yourself too!)

See if you can find help (e.g., a teacher's assistant), especially for the first few days of having a new refugee child in your classroom, so that you can spend some time working one-on-one with the students (this might involve showing them how to use the restroom, how to handle a book or pencil, etc.).

Smile a lot! (Smiling is universal).

Just as programs cannot be 'one size fits all,' research practices should also be tailored. When we examine how refugee children are faring in American schools, we must avoid "methodocentrism" (Weisner, 1996). More ethnographic and qualitative research is needed to examine these children's environments and understand the cultural context.

We can no longer merely report on how these children perform on standardized tests, but must rather turn our attention to the reason for prevalent outcomes (which we already know are unsatisfactory). Why are these children performing poorly? What is going wrong? What are the factors that cause these children to struggle or meet with success in their school community, classroom community, and larger community? This needs to be examined and deconstructed carefully, from a cross-cultural perspective.

Only by understanding the entire picture can we begin to determine useful recommendations for policy and practice.

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