

Social Studies Teachers' Perceptions about the Difficulty of Skills Development

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to determine the opinions of Social Studies teachers about teaching students the skills in the curriculum. Obtaining the opinions of Social Studies teachers regarding the acquisition of the skills in the program will contribute to the improvement of the infrastructure and practices of the skills that are difficult to acquire. A qualitative research method was adopted to collect data in the study. Consistent with the research method, a phenomenological approach was followed. The study group of the research consists of a total of 16 Social Studies teachers who are work in middle schools, 11 of whom are female and 5 of whom are male. A form containing both closed and open-ended questions prepared by the researchers was used as a data collection tool in the study. These data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis method. According to the findings of the research, among these skills, the ability to recognize stereotypes and prejudice (N = 12) and empathy (N = 8) are among the most difficult skills to acquire; cooperation (N=11) and social participation (N=9) skills were found to be in the category of skills that are most easily acquired. As a result of the research, it was seen that the skills that the participants had the most difficulty in acquiring were the ability to recognize stereotypes and prejudices and the skill of empathy, whereas they did not have difficulty in gaining cooperation and social participation skills. At the end of the research, the factors affecting the acquisition of skills were interpreted in line with the findings and contexts were established.

Key words: Social Studies, Social Studies Teachers, Skill Teaching

INTRODUCTION

In today's world where technological developments and information flow increase, social studies course aims to raise active and qualified citizens. For this purpose, social studies are not seen as a course with defined patterns, but as a course in which the individual reaches knowledge, learns on her own, and develops analytical and scientific thinking skills (Gelen, 2002).

Skill is the ability of an individual to accomplish a task or bring an action to a conclusion, depending on his or her personal predisposition and learning (TDK, 2023; Kaptan et al., 2007). The fact that skills can be acquired, developed and transferred to life is an important factor in making them a part of the learning-teaching process (Akbaba & Aksoy, 2019).

Skills Teaching and Social Studies

The skills and development of skills mostly depend on learning at the knowledge level. In order to develop a skill, more than one piece of knowledge must be put to work at the same time. With this information, a new structure can be created

and used. Successfully acquiring and developing a skill requires the use of more than one piece of information in the same sense (Tan & Temiz, 2003).

There are 27 skills in the Social Studies Curriculum (2018). It is known that these skills are described as 21st century literacies skills and have a feature that will improve students' characteristics in different areas such as historical thinking, perception of space, digital competence, and social participation (TTKB, 2023). It can be seen in the literature that there are studies on these skills in the context of Social Studies education. Among these studies, conducted with Social Studies candidate teachers, it was found that although the Social Studies Teaching undergraduate program was structured with 21st century skills, the candidate teachers were not provided with these skills during their education (Bozkurt, 2021) and the disciplines that the concepts that were abstract/difficult for them were related to (Ünal & Er, 2017). Çelik (2021) mentioned that there are not sufficient explanations and activity examples regarding literacies (digital, financial, legal, and political) and skills such as entrepreneurship and location analysis in the 4th Grade Social Studies

curriculum. In line with the opinions, he received from the primary school teachers included in his study, the researcher stated that the basic concepts underlying the skills remained abstract for students, there was insufficient course time allocated for the implementation of the curriculum, and there were problems in terms of teaching materials and teacher competencies. Altay (2020) and Doğan and Oruç (2022) conducted research on the basic skills included in secondary school Social Studies textbooks. Altay (2020) concluded that skills in textbooks are not distributed evenly across grade levels and the frequency of use of skills in textbooks differs from each other. Doğan and Oruç (2022) also found that there are problems regarding the acquisition and subject context in which the skills will be used. The opinions that Mutluer (2013) received from Social Studies teachers regarding skill teaching revealed that both teacher competencies and students' performance in the course can be effective in acquiring skills. In this context, in teaching skills-oriented subjects, it is necessary to carry out not only in-class but also out-of-class and out-of-school activities. As a matter of fact, Uslu (2021) stated in his research in the context of museum education that museum activities will develop students' patriotism and sensitivity to cultural heritage skills. In another study, Köse (2013) shared the idea that classroom or out-of-school activities carried out by student clubs will improve their skills in the field of interest.

The aim of this research is to determine the opinions of Social Studies teachers about teaching students the skills in the curriculum. As stated before, while the importance of skill teaching for the Social Studies course was discussed in the literature, it was encountered that the skills attributed to importance were limited to textbooks and the curriculum, and studies on teachers' opinions were related to the skills included in the 2005 Social Studies curriculum. The fact that educational activities related to the acquisition of skills are presented through individual studies makes it difficult to see a picture in terms of the whole of the skills. However, obtaining the opinions of Social Studies teachers regarding the acquisition of these skills will contribute to the improvement of the infrastructure and practices of the skills that are difficult to acquire. For this reason, the questions to be answered in the research were structured as follows:

- What are the opinions of Social Studies teachers about the difficult and easy skills they teach?
- What are the opinions of Social Studies teachers regarding the causality of the difficult and easy skills they teach?

METHOD

A qualitative research method was adopted in this research. In line with the research method, a phenomenological approach was preferred (Sop & Kozak, 2021). Phenomenological studies reveal the common meanings that participants create as a result of their experiences with the concept. Facts exist in various forms in our lives. However, these often cannot be named exactly. The most appropriate model that can be used to collect data for such situations is phenomenology (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011).

Study Group

In order to collect data in the study, a total of 16 Social Studies teachers, 11 female (68.75%) and 5 male (31.25%) working in Nigde City Center, were reached. The demographic characteristics of the participants are listed in Table 1:

The participants of the research consist of a total of 16 Social Studies teachers, 11 of whom are female and 5 of whom are male. While 3 of the participants have been teaching for less than 10 years, 12 of them have been teaching for 10 to 20 years and 1 of them has been teaching for more than 20 years. Almost all of the participants (except 1 teacher) are graduates of the Faculty of Education.

Data Collection Tool

A form consisting of open and closed-ended questions prepared by the researchers was used to collect data in the study. To test the validity of the developed form, the opinion of a field expert and a measurement-evaluation expert was consulted. In the first section of this form, there are questions regarding the personal data of Social Studies teachers. In the second part, the basic skills in the Social Studies Curriculum were listed and teachers were asked to mark the first five skills that they found most difficult and acquired most easily in their lessons. The skills which are listed in the research scale are: *research, perceiving change and continuity, critical thinking, financial literacy, observation skills, legal literacy, cooperation, using evidence, location analysis, spatial thinking, political literacy, social participation, using Turkish correctly, beautifully and effectively, perceiving time and chronology, environmental literacy, digital literacy, empathy, entrepreneurship, map literacy, communication, recognizing stereotypes and prejudice, decision making, media literacy, self-control skill, problem solving, drawing and interpreting tables, graphs and diagrams, innovative thinking*. They were also asked to express the reasons for the difficult and easy skills they acquired.

Data Analysis

The data obtained in the research was analyzed using the content analysis technique, which is one of the qualitative data analysis techniques. In content analysis, data are coded, themes are found, codes and themes are arranged, and finally the findings are defined and interpreted (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants

		Frequency	%
Gender	Female	11	69
	Male	5	31
Years of Service	1 – 5 year	1	6
	6 – 10 year	2	13
	11 – 15 year	5	31
	16 – 20 year	7	44
	21 – 25 year	1	6
Graduated Faculty	Faculty of Education	15	94
	Faculty of Arts and Sciences	1	6

For this purpose, inductive coding was first applied to determine the themes that emerged from the raw data without any predetermined structuring. In this process teachers' opinions were compared by the authors to determine areas of agreement and disagreement. The authors consulted frequently using the raw data until they agreed on naming codes and major themes before making final decisions. After then the main themes that emerged from inductive coding were identified.

FINDINGS

Findings regarding the skills that Social Studies teachers find difficult to acquire and the skills they acquire easily are listed below:

According to Table 2, the skills that Social Studies teachers emphasized most were the ability to recognize stereotypes and prejudice and the skill of collaboration. The skill of recognizing stereotypes and prejudice was stated as the most difficult (N = 12), while the skill of collaboration was

Table 2. Skills that are easily or difficultly taught by Social Studies teachers

Skills	Frequency	
	Easy (n)	Hard (n)
Recognizing stereotypes and prejudice	-	12
Partnership	11	1
Empathy	2	8
Research	5	5
Social participation	9	-
Drawing and interpreting tables, graphs and diagrams	2	7
Critical thinking	4	5
Using Turkish correctly, beautifully and effectively	2	6
Perceiving time and chronology	4	3
Map literacy	3	3
Observation	6	-
Communication	6	-
Financial literacy	1	4
Political literacy	1	4
Location analysis	2	3
Entrepreneurship	3	2
Environmental literacy	4	-
Perceiving change and continuity	1	3
Innovative thinking	1	3
Media literacy	2	2
Self-control	-	3
Problem solving	-	3
Spatial thinking	3	-
Using evidence	1	2
Legal literacy	-	1
Digital literacy	1	-
To decide	1	-

stated as the easiest (N = 11). In addition, empathy (N=8) and the skill of drawing and interpreting tables, graphs and diagrams (N=7) are at the top of the category of skills that are most difficult to acquire, while social participation (N=9) is at the top of the category of skills that are easiest to acquire (Table 3).

Talking about the difficulty of gaining skills, Social Studies teachers mostly emphasized the character traits of the students. They mentioned that there was difficulty in acquiring skills due to the students' character structure and developmental characteristics. Some of the participants thought that children take the easy way out. The participants' statements are as follows:

Students have low reading and research habits and often have a desire to access ready-made information in the shortest way (T7)

...There are difficulties in effort and struggle because our children are used to the easy way... (T10)

Some of the teachers also emphasized the weak motivation of the students. The following statements are toward this:

...They do not feel the need to directly accept the information they find and come up with new and different ideas. Producing new knowledge and thinking differently has become a waste of time for them. (T4)

...Since the new generation is used to preparation, we still have difficulty in teaching critical thinking skills. (T8)

Some of the teachers also stated that some skills were not suitable for the developmental characteristics of the students. Their expressions are as follows:

...Because students cannot make a habit of using maps, they cannot use the concept of direction appropriately in historical or geographical events. (T12)

...It is difficult to teach the skill of using evidence because doing research and examining it with scientific data is boring. I have difficulty teaching how to read tables and graphs because the student needs to both see the data in the table fully and interpret it. It seems complicated and high-level to the student. (T13)

A teacher who associated the difficulty of these skills with students' prejudices stated that... *Teaching these skills becomes difficult for me. Because they think that it is difficult, they are reluctant towards these subjects. (T16)*

It is also clear that teachers have problems with the content of the skills they have difficulty teaching. Regarding this, teachers who stated about the abstractness of concepts expressed it as follows:

Table 3. Frequencies of social studies teachers' opinions regarding the reasons for the skills they think are difficult to acquire

Why hard?	N
Character traits of students	8
Characteristics of skills	7
Family and social environment	6
Technology/media impact	6
Education system	1

Since students have not yet been able to move from the concrete period to the abstract period, explaining abstract concepts and students' understanding of these concepts negatively affects the process. (T14)

Explaining abstract concepts and retrospective topics do not attract children's attention. (T9)

A teacher's statements regarding the breadth of terminology were expressed as *Financial literacy, legal and political literacy have widely and abstract concepts. And also, this is a problem that students to have difficulty in learning...* (T2)

Another teacher emphasized the limited areas of use of skills with the statement *Some skills have narrow areas of use...* (T1)

Another reason why Social Studies teachers have difficulty in teaching students the skills is the family factor. Teachers stated that the negative impact of parents' attitudes and behaviors towards the child on the child's acquisition of skills.

... Students' self-control skills may be weak. This stems from families assuming responsibilities for their children. (T3)

...In addition, families' misperceptions about making the child feel valuable have resulted in a student profile that is selfish and lack of empathy. (T4)

Other emphasis of teachers regarding the family factor is that the dominant thoughts and life habits in the family are transferred to the child and the negativity of this situation. They stated this as follows:

Since the child comes with stereotypes from the family, it is difficult to change this at school. In general, it is difficult to convince an individual who believes in the ideas and thoughts of the family he grew up in, that the opposite of an idea he thinks is true is also true... (T6)

They are quite resistant to the skills and attitudes that are tried to be taught. I also think that this situation is related to the gradual change in family structure and life. (T15)

Teachers make references not only to the family but also to the social environment regarding the skills they have difficulty in teaching. In their discourses, teachers pointed out the relationship between the child's acculturation characteristics and skills through the social environment factor too.

...Of course, mass media are not the only factor in using our Turkish correctly. The socio-economic environment the student is in is also very effective. (T4)

...the environment and conditions of the environment I live in cause me to have difficulty in acquiring these skills. For example, I find it most difficult for me to gain the ability to use Turkish correctly, beautifully and effectively. Because the students' native languages are different, I have difficulty in adapting between the two languages. (T5)

Another difficulty that Social Studies teachers experience while teaching skills is related to *media tools*. Teachers state that media tools prevent students from studying and make them accustomed to convenience. Direct quotes regarding this situation are given below.

...The child who locks himself in front of the screen wants to achieve results in lessons without thinking or trying. This prevents critical thinking or innovative thinking... (T12)

Due to the development of technology and its easy accessibility, students try to obtain information directly on the internet instead of thinking about the questions and problems they encounter... (T4)

Digital addiction reduces the power of interpretation regarding time, space and change. All these cannot develop the feeling of empathy (T12).

Another problem that teachers express in the context of media is that students cannot use their native language because of are influenced by the media. Teachers' statements regarding this are as follows:

...In addition, the language used in mass media such as television and the internet has greatly weakened students' ability to use Turkish correctly, beautifully and effectively... (T4)

...Using wrong media also negatively affects students' ability to use Turkish correctly. (T3)

In addition to the difficulties related to skill acquisition that they evaluated in different contexts, the Social Studies teachers who participated in the research also have opinions about which skills are easy to acquire (Table 4).

Before participants mentioned student characteristics the most in terms of difficulties in teaching skills to students. But they mentioned student characteristics the most in terms of ease too. When we look at the teachers' statements in terms of the students' positive characteristics and the skills they can easily acquire, it is seen that the students' social aspects are strong remarkable:

...Since the majority of students are in constant dialogue with their friends and teachers, their constant communication strengthens their communication skills... (T2)

The students are self-confident, have sufficient competence and language skills to express themselves, and are good observers. (T7)

Children love spending time with their friends and taking justified pride in the final product. Children, who are very willing to do observation-based tasks and operations, also increase their desire and participation in the lesson when we direct the lesson to this area. (T11)

Participants stated that the skills that their students would acquire more easily if they evaluated their potential were the ability to use Turkish effectively, the ability to perceive space, and the ability to observe and research. Teachers' statements regarding this situation are given below.

Table 4. Frequencies of social studies teachers' opinions regarding the reasons for the skills they think are easy to acquire

Why is it easy?	N
Student characteristics	7
Family and social environment	4
Characteristics of skills	4
Technology	3
Material use	2
Education system	2
Not easy	1

...If students do a lot of reading, their ability to use Turkish correctly, beautifully and effectively can develop more effectively... (T2)

Children retain better memories because they use visual memory more clearly in perceiving space. Since Turkish is their mother tongue, they can use it beautifully and effectively. (T9)

Statements about the impact of environmental conditions on students, a teacher said that

The political and economic conditions of the country we live in inevitably make students ready to criticize, know economics, and understand politics. Teaching is easier when they come to class with these skills. (T13)

Social Studies teachers' references to the influence of family and other social environments on the ease of gaining skills towards to emphasize the effectiveness of the behaviors exhibited in these social environments on the child.

Their readiness levels are high because they see social participation and cooperation from both the family and the environment. (T6)

Since these types of skills are skills that students use effectively both in society and in the family, and because they are constantly exposed to them, they are easier to explain and understand by students. (T14)

Nowadays, since both families and the education system have a structure that enables children to be more enterprising and gives importance to democratic freedom of expression, we can provide these skills to our students more easily. (T8)

As seen in the above statements, it is seen that the participants do not evaluate student profiles independently of the social environment they are in. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the skills cause Social Studies teachers to have an attitude that these skills can be acquired easily. The participants' opinions about this situation are given below.

Since we use these skills a lot in daily life, it is easier to involve students in the lesson, to give examples about them in the lesson, and it is faster for the students to assimilate these skills. (T1)

Asking students to do research on a topic that interests them makes this easier. He questions by doing research and develops critical thinking skills. (T2)

Even though Social Studies teachers see technology as a disadvantage in gaining skills, they also pointed out the positive aspects of this factor in gaining skills. The participants' statements about this situation are given below:

...because technology and innovations attract their attention, the goal can be achieved quickly in this regard (T3)

...the fact that students have encountered extraordinary products in the media also makes our job easier. (T6)

Concepts that are easy to learn. Because students know how to use media under the influence of technology. (T12)

There are also statements from Social Studies teachers expressing the effectiveness of using materials on skill acquisition. Teacher discourses regarding EBA (the official Education Information Network of the Turkish Ministry

of National Education) as a digital-based material are as follows:

Students' research skills and questioning habits are strengthened by constantly doing research activities, thanks to both textbooks and EBA (The Education Informatics Network) content activities. The ability to draw and interpret tables, graphs and diagrams is fun, especially on geographical subjects, with visual materials, smart boards, EBA contents, acquisition comprehension tests and activities. It becomes one. Concepts become more concrete and understandable. (T2)

In line with the achievements in the Social Studies course, it is easier to acquire these skills by using materials. (T5)

One participant also, who pointed out that the curriculum has a spiral program structure, said:... *Although change in grade levels, including skills to each grade level has made it easier for teachers in terms of teaching. (T14)* statement reveals the positive effect of this feature in gaining skills.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this research, the opinions of Social Studies teachers were consulted regarding the ability of students to acquire the skills in the Social Studies curriculum in Turkey. The skill that Social Studies teachers in Turkey most agree on that they have difficulty teaching to their students is the ability to recognize stereotypes and prejudices. In fact, the skill that ranked second was the skill of empathy. It is difficult to separate these two skills from each other. Because both having stereotypes and prejudices and not being able to develop a sense of empathy are integrated problems in terms of social interaction. It is also possible for individuals who cannot empathize with any person or group to develop prejudices or stereotypes. In the research, it is seen that teachers' opinions about why these skills are difficult to acquire are mostly associated with the character traits of the students, the nature (content) of the subjects that are essential to the skill, and family/social environment factors. Leaving the context of the subject aside, the character traits of the students and the family/social environment variable are interconnected. Character traits are characteristics that can be shaped by experiences and have a strong connection with the individual's perspective. These characteristics are tested under various conditions, are reflected in habits and behaviors, and it is important whether they can be maintained consistently. For example, empathy, sharing and tolerance are such characteristics. These features are also values. The importance and responsibility of the family is great in recognizing and adopting values and therefore making prosocial behaviors a vital perspective for the child (Çakır & Doğan, 2022).

As a matter of fact, the most important social group that an individual belongs to is the family. Family is effective in the individual's acquisition of social identity and her inclusion in certain groups in terms of her identity characteristics. Ethnic or religious identity characteristics of individuals are shaped by the family. Such a formation causes the child to develop prejudices or stereotypes against different identity groups and to be unable to have empathic feelings. An

example of this is the findings of Ağgöl and Yılmaz (2023) in their study that primary school students' prejudices towards religions are shaped by family influence. Moreover, the different treatments shown by families while raising their sons and daughters can also lead to the development of gender stereotypes (Dökmen, 2009). This is possible both by the roles that parents undertake in the division of labor at home and by assigning responsibilities to their children according to their gender, which they include in this division of labor. For example, just as the mother takes on the responsibility of cooking, daughters are also given the responsibility of helping the mother with the housework. Such behaviors may cause the child to develop stereotypes and prejudices against those who are different from herself in terms of identity characteristics. There are also studies investigating the effect of family factors on the child's empathic skills. Kalliopuska and Titinen (1991) and Feshbach (1990) state that there is a direct relationship between the empathic skill levels of the parent and the child. Sayın (2010) also states that children who have high levels of acceptance/attention from their parents also have high levels of empathy skills.

It has been mentioned before that the *content* is also important in the skills that Social Studies teachers have difficulty in teaching. As a matter of fact, while the behaviors to be taught to the learner and the content related to them are arranged in a consistent manner, the development level of the student should be taken into account and the content should be presented in order from simple and meaningful wholes to more complex wholes (Duman & Peker Ünal, 2017). However, in the research, it is seen that Social Studies teachers emphasize that the content is not suitable for the developmental characteristics of the students and that the subjects that are based on skills are abstract and comprehensive in terms of terminology, which has a negative effect on teaching the skills to the students.

Another factor that Social Studies teachers draw attention to in the research regarding the difficulties experienced in gaining skills is the *media*. Based on the research group's views on the media, it can be said that the media confirms or reproduces prejudices and stereotypes. Just as the media reinforces certain social stereotypes and prejudices, it also has a feature that can direct social perception towards new stereotypes and prejudices. As a matter of fact, the media draws an image in line with the worldview with its ideological character and imposes on us how we should frame this image it portrays (or teaches) (Taylan & Barış, 2023). Ignoring the disadvantaged groups, making them a subject of negativity, making discriminatory characterizations, and carrying out hate speech by the media cause the existing stereotypes and prejudices in society to form and feed (Çelenk, 2010). The negative effect of the media on life habits in general causes difficulties in acquiring each skill. Of course, the impact of the media is not only related to this skill. The influence of different media organs is important in the behaviours experienced by young people today, such as alienation from their own culture and social values, violence, impulsive behaviour, addictions and aimlessness (Can, 2008).

In this research, it is seen that the skills that are most easily acquired by students are *cooperation* and *social participation*. The reasons why these skills are easy to acquire, just like the reasons why they are difficult, are associated with *the students' character traits, family and social environment, the content of the skill* and *the media*. In addition to the social characteristics inherent in humans, the education they receive formally or informally in the school environment has a great impact on shaping the character traits of students. As a matter of fact, the purpose of character education carried out by schools, as institutions where curriculum and these programs are implemented, is to develop the virtues and character strengths of individuals by imparting values such as responsibility, respect, honesty, kindness, fairness and cooperation (Yılmaz, 2021). Thus, the values that character education aims to impart have a structure that regulates social relations. For this reason, the characteristics expressed by the participants in terms of students' character traits, such as *effective communication, being able to express themselves, or being a good observer*, appear as an indicator that they are at a good level in acquiring skills easily.

The family and social environment factor that Social Studies teachers emphasize in terms of the skills that students acquire easily is due to the democratic features provided to students in these environments. It is a fact that in the modern social structure, families give their children more freedom to express themselves. Thus, children can express themselves well both in educational and other social environments. Being able to express oneself well is the basis for achieving a high level of social participation. As a matter of fact, Coşkun, Kodal and Ersoy (2022) state in their research that social participation means taking part in educational and social activities by teachers and students and improving their communication skills. Moreover, social participation has a great impact on the development of social responsibilities. Körükcü (2021) reference to social responsibilities towards the development of certain sensitivities and awareness in social life (such as gender inequality) can be associated with social participation in this context.

The references made by the Social Studies teachers of the research group to the positive aspects of the effectiveness of the media in gaining skills stem from the fact that the new generation is digital natives. As a matter of fact, digital tools and environments have an important place in daily life. Participants state that the fact that the new generation is much more competent and willing to use digital resources is an advantage in gaining some skills. Teachers have the opinion that digital materials developed and directed within the scope of the curriculum will contribute to the academic success of students at a higher level.

As a result, each skill has a certain impact on daily life. There is a need to develop certain skills regarding social life, such as recognizing stereotypes and prejudices, empathy, social participation and effective communication. In addition, financial, legal or political literacy skills are needed to be competent in economic life or the legal field. It is

essential for Social Studies teachers to make instructional plans, taking into account different variables in teaching these skills, in order to provide a qualified education. For this reason, it is necessary to enrich students' perspectives in skill teaching not only with in-class activities but also with out-of-class and out-of-school activities. Considering the effect of activities with parent participation in gaining skills, parents should also be included in some skill acquisition activities. And again, remembering that media is a dominant factor in gaining skills, attention should be paid to raising students as digitally fluent individuals. In this way, students will have a structure that can think critically and produce solutions to existing problems through digital resources, rather than a personality in which undesirable attitudes and behaviours develop due to the influence of the media. For future research, it may be recommended to measure the level of stereotypes and prejudices of individuals according to various variables, to conduct quantitative research on stereotypes and prejudices, to determine the causes of stereotypes and prejudices and to determine what is being done to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices in the curriculum of different countries.

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