Examining Preservice Teacher Knowledge and Competencies in Establishing Family–School Partnerships

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Abstract

A research study including 200 preservice teacher candidates in their junior and senior years of study at a public state university in Pennsylvania examined their knowledge and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships. The study found that preservice teacher candidates were aware of the many positive outcomes and barriers associated with establishing family–school partnerships, that their knowledge and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships was limited, and that their perceptions of family–school partnerships were traditional in nature. The results suggest an inconsistency between current federal and state legislative initiatives and accreditation standards requiring greater levels of family–school partnership practices and the scant time and resources offered to address the topic in one teacher education program.

Key Words: preservice, teachers, candidates, pre-service, knowledge, competencies, skills, university, college, preparation, family–school partnerships, family, families, home, schools, collaboration, practices, education, parents, students, Epstein, framework

Introduction

According to Hiatt-Michael (2006), in the United States, many major initiatives woven into the fabric of our educational system at the local, state, and national level, designed to promote positive outcomes for children, focus

on family–school partnerships. For example, the importance of such partnerships was accentuated by the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2002), along with guidelines from professional associations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2003, 2005), the Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2002). These legislative initiatives and guidelines provided parents with the right to know what is happening in schools (Henderson, Jacob, Kernan-Schloss, & Raimondo, 2004). However, despite these initiatives and a wealth of evidence documenting the positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships, research suggests that most college and university teacher education programs do little to prepare teachers to understand and establish relationships with families (Black, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Graue, 2005; Kirschenbaum, 2001; Martinez, Rodriguez, Perez, & Torio, 2005; Nieto, 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005).

One can argue that the content espoused by teacher education programs speaks to the value placed on certain topics and competencies. Scholars examining the importance afforded to family–school partnerships in teacher education programs paint a bleak picture (Harris & Jacobson, 2005; Weiss et al., 2005). For example, with the exception of early childhood education and special education, few teacher education programs provide any meaningful coursework or projects on issues relating to family–school partnerships (Epstein, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2001). Further, in California, issues surrounding family–school partnerships are rarely explored in teacher education programs and are often only considered after teachers are on the job. Even then, only a select few schools that adopt the Beginning Teacher Support Activities (BTSA) program are encouraged to consider family involvement issues. Therefore, many new teachers are ill prepared to resolve the cadre of issues they are sure to face as new teachers dealing with family–school partnerships. Lacking adequate content knowledge and teaching competencies focused on establishing family–school partnerships, preservice teacher candidates draw upon what they already know, which often mirrors their own personal school experiences (Epstein et al., 2002; Graue, 2005; Graue & Brown, 2003; Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

My own personal undergraduate teacher education program in the early 1990s offered no specific coursework and very little content on developing meaningful relationships with families. I recall the overwhelming fear experienced during my initial interactions with families. This fear was born of ignorance. As a result, during the first few years of my teaching career I did little to engage families in meaningful ways. It was as if I was hiding under my

desk trying not to make any major mistakes that might raise the ire of families. Instead of building bridges with families, I was building a wall to insulate myself from them. At that time, the majority of my interactions with families were scripted and traditional and included common activities like parent–teacher conferences, meet the teacher night, and open house.

When I began graduate studies in early childhood education, I enrolled in two courses: The Educational Role of the Family; and Families, Schools, and Community Resources. Both drastically altered my approach to understanding and engaging families. I remember thinking that if I had explored such content and competencies as an undergraduate, my first few years engaging families would have been more meaningful and productive, a finding supported by Uludag (2008). In response to my own personal experiences and feelings of inadequacy in engaging families as a new teacher and the current research documenting the shortcomings of many teacher education programs to adequately prepare teacher candidates to establish family–school partnerships, I conceptualized a research study to unearth preservice teacher candidates' knowledge and competence in establishing family–school partnerships.

Review of the Literature

Benefits of Establishing Family–School Partnerships

When parents and schools work well together the results are impactful (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Developing and sustaining family–school partnerships has been associated with positive outcomes for students and improving satisfaction for both parents and teachers (Epstein, 2005; Forlin & Hopewell, 2006). These findings have remained steady despite the fact that families and schools have transformed over time.

The positive outcomes associated with fostering family–school partnerships include: (1) higher academic achievement (e.g., Cox, 2005; Henderson et al., 2004; Jeynes, 2005); (2) student sense of well being (Berger, 2008; Mendoza, 2003); (3) better student school attendance (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007); (4) better student and parent perceptions of classroom and school climate (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005); (5) positive student attitudes and behaviors (Christenson, 2004; Henderson et al., 2007; Jeynes, 2007); (6) student readiness to do homework (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Shumow & Harris, 2000); (7) increased student time spent with parents (Henderson et al., 2007); (8) better student grades (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007); (9) higher educational aspirations among students and parents (Grant & Ray, 2010; Henderson et al., 2007); and (10) increased parent satisfaction with teachers (Grant & Ray, 2010).

Further, Carter (2002) examined research over a decade on the effectiveness of school-based family–school partnership programs impacting student outcomes and family behaviors and summarized twelve key findings: (1) family involvement has a significant positive impact on student outcomes across the elementary, middle school, and secondary years; (2) the student outcomes improved through family involvement varied according to family culture, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic background; (3) family involvement at home has a more significant impact on children than family involvement in school activities; (4) the nature of family involvement that is most beneficial to children changes as they reach adolescence; (5) family involvement in early childhood programs helps children transition well to kindergarten and elementary school; (6) family assistance with homework can be beneficial, but parents may need guidance to work effectively with children; (7) the ways in which culturally diverse families are involved in their children's education may be different from those of other families; (8) promising outcomes in both mathematics and literacy are realized when children's families are involved in the educational process; (9) the most promising opportunity for student achievement occurs when families, schools, and community organizations work together; (10) to be effective, school programs must be individualized to fit the needs of the students, parents, and community; (11) effective programs assist parents in creating a home environment that fosters learning; and (12) teachers must be trained to promote effective parent/family involvement in children's education.

There are many factors influencing the development of family–school partnerships, and school practices are among the most important (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Although school-level efforts to increase family involvement are a step in the right direction, there is growing evidence that connecting families and schools will be a formidable challenge if preservice teacher candidates receive little to no instruction on fostering family–school partnerships in their teacher education programs (Uludag, 2008). The literature reveals a variety of barriers that impede family–school partnerships from reaching their full potential (Redding, 2005), but this paper focuses on those addressing inadequate preservice training.

Lack of Preservice Training

Research investigating preservice teacher candidates' beliefs about the importance of family involvement and their confidence in effectively involving parents indicate that many teacher preparation programs are not highly effective in helping to develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that empower new teachers to confidently and competently engage families in the process of educating children (Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Flanigan, 2005;

Giallourakis, Pretti-Frontczak, & Cook, 2005). In short, it seems that all too often, preservice teacher preparation has not equipped student teachers to translate effectively what they have learned about engaging families into the professional repertoire they bring to their classrooms.

Although most educators agree that family involvement is important, few enter their profession knowing how to develop excellent partnership programs. In recent years, researchers have stressed the importance of providing preservice teacher candidates with focused education and high quality experiences in preparation for their work with families (Abrego, Rubin, & Sutterby, 2006; Baum & McMurray-Schwarz, 2004; Graue, 2005). This involves not only focusing preparation efforts on the skills and strategies needed as teachers strive for mutually beneficial relationships with families, but nurturing the essential dispositions necessary to accomplish this goal (Swick, 2004). These dispositions include developing a positive attitude toward families and the family, embracing an empowerment perspective of parents and families, engaging them as partners, valuing and supporting the cultural and social diversity of parents and families, committing to effective communication, and envisioning the teacher as a lifelong learner.

Preservice teacher candidates must know why family involvement in schools is vital to their learning before entering the workforce and also realize that family involvement now may be very different from the time when their parents were involved in schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Further efforts are necessary before teacher educators can feel confident that their preparation in working with families is adequate or, preferably, exemplary.

Family–School Partnerships Defined

The research used to support policies throughout America to strengthen partnerships between home and school center on the idea of parent involvement. Prominent in this field of study is researcher Joyce Epstein and her framework of six types of parent involvement which provides a comprehensive scaffold for understanding the various ways parents can be involved in the educational process (Epstein, 1995). The six specific types of involvement outlined in Epstein's framework include *basic obligations of families* (Type 1), *basic obligations of schools to effectively communicate with families* (Type 2), *involvement at the school building* (Type 3), *family involvement for learning activities at home* (Type 4), *decision making, participation, leadership, and school advocacy* (Type 5), and *collaborations and exchanges with the community* (Type 6).

Due to its broad appeal, many scholars have used this framework as an analysis tool in their respective research studies, and I follow in their footsteps. Overall, Epstein's framework of parent involvement incorporates a broad array

of activities encouraging meaningful partnerships between home and school ranging from general support to active involvement. Further, this framework describes roles that are comprehensive, well defined, and concrete.

Methods

This research study was conducted at a public state university located in Pennsylvania. Participants responded to four open-ended questions created by the researcher. The questionnaire was used to generate data on preservice teacher candidates' knowledge and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships.

Participants of the Study

Participants of the research study included exactly 200 preservice early childhood, elementary, and dual early childhood/elementary education teacher candidates from a public, state, rural university located in Pennsylvania. The vast majority of students, 90%, were seeking the dual early childhood/elementary education certification, with 5% seeking early childhood certification, and 5% seeking certification in elementary education. Further, 60% of the participants were in their senior year of study, while 40% were considered juniors. A majority of the participants, 92.5%, were female, while 7.5% were male. In addition, 97% of the participants were Caucasian, 2% were Latino, and 1% were African American. While many studies in the research literature focusing on family–school partnerships (de la Piedra, Munter, & Girdon, 2006; Flanigan, 2007; Hindin, 2010; Jones, 2003; Sutterby, Rubin, & Abrego, 2007) highlight minority/diverse populations and those taking place in urban/suburban school settings, this study sheds light on an often neglected group and setting in the literature, majority preservice teacher candidates from rural settings. While our world and country continue to become more diverse and greater numbers of families continue to migrate to urban centers, it is important not to marginalize those populations and geographic environments not representing these current trends.

All of the students were enrolled in classes taught by the researcher and were selected to participate in the study due to that fact. Further, all participants completed the questionnaire during the first one hour and fifteen minute class of the semester, prior to any discussion concerning family–school partnerships.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire containing four open-ended questions was developed by the researcher and sought to unearth preservice teacher candidates' knowledge

and competencies in establishing family–school partnerships in four specific domains: the positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships, the barriers impeding family–school partnerships, the specific content knowledge and teaching competencies in establishing family–school partnerships gained in recent coursework, and practical strategies to employ as new teachers in creating such partnerships. The research questions included:

1. What are the most positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships?
2. What are some barriers impeding family–school partnerships?
3. What specific content and competencies have you learned in your undergraduate coursework for establishing family–school partnerships?
4. As a new teacher, what would you do to promote meaningful family–school partnerships?

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1990) define the analysis of data as the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and reconstructed in new ways. Responses to the four questions were used to generate data in an attempt to understand preservice teacher candidates' views and beliefs concerning several aspects of establishing family–school partnerships. Data analysis proceeded in five phases: (1) initial reading; (2) second and third readings to begin to extract themes and patterns; (3) creation of meaningful categories and subcategories; (4) construction of data displays; and (5) reporting of initial findings.

During the initial reading, all data were read in their entirety in order to develop a holistic sense, as well as to check for information that might have been missing. The responses to the four questions were all read a second time to begin to extract themes and patterns. Epstein's conceptual framework was used to assign units of meaning to the descriptive information collected during the study. The codes used included Epstein's six distinct types of parent involvement. Then data were cut into segments, each containing potentially important aspects, and labeled by broad category. Next, the themes and patterns were examined within each category. Similar responses were counted to identify the prevalence and consistency of occurrences of specific topics. Various data displays and concept webs were constructed and altered by the researcher throughout the course of analysis to help view the findings in context.

At the completion of the analysis phase, an outline was developed to frame the study in an effort to develop a clear picture of the preservice teacher candidates' perceptions of family–school partnerships. The findings formed the foundation for the outline. Data were then cross-referenced to the outline and that provided the primary conceptual structure for the study.

Results

Preservice teacher candidates' responses to the four questions have been synthesized here into tables denoted by the questions that head each section.

1. What are the most positive outcomes associated with establishing family–school partnerships?

Although the participants were not familiar with the research literature highlighting the positive outcomes associated with fostering family–school partnerships, their responses mirrored what many research studies had found. Two themes found in responses to the first question were that the vast majority of positive outcomes identified by the participants were non-academic in nature, instead highlighting attitudes, behaviors, self-esteem, aspirations, perceptions, and school attendance. Further, the teacher candidates articulated positive outcomes across an array of stakeholders including children, parents, and teachers. A summary of their responses is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Positive Outcomes of Establishing Family–School Partnerships

Positive Outcomes Associated with Establishing Family–School Partnerships	% of Preservice Students Mentioning this Outcome
Positive Student Attitudes and Behaviors	100%
Improved Relationships with Parents	96%
Higher Levels of Academic Achievement	84%
Higher Levels of Parent Satisfaction with Teachers	75%
Student Sense of Well-Being	74%
Positive Student/Parent Perceptions of School	69%
Student Readiness to Complete Homework	66%
Higher Levels of School Attendance	34%
Higher Educational Aspirations for Students	14%

2. What are some barriers impeding family–school partnerships from taking place?

Preservice teacher candidates identified various barriers that kept family–school partnerships from reaching their full potential. The barriers identified emanated from both the home and the school and were both logistical and psychological in nature. Logistical barriers are defined as external circumstances faced by both teachers and parents that stand in the way of developing family–school partnerships. On the other hand, psychological barriers include a variety of internal feelings and personal experiences that affect the attitudes

of both parents and teachers concerning family–school partnerships. Again, although not familiar with the research examining the barriers impeding home–school partnerships, the barriers identified by the participants mirrored many identified in the literature. Table 2 summarizes the barriers identified by the preservice teacher candidates.

Table 2. Barriers Impeding Family–School Partnerships

Barriers Impeding Family–School Partnerships	% of Preservice Students Mentioning this Barrier
Pressed for Time (both parents & teachers)	95%
Lack of Training & Professional Development (teachers)	64%
Cultural Differences (between parents & teachers)	56%
Lack of Transportation & Child Care (parents)	50%
Language Barriers (between parents & teachers)	43%
Intimidation Factor (between parents & teachers)	35%
Socioeconomic Status (parents)	28%
Past Negative School Experiences (parents)	27%
Education Levels (parents)	10%

3. What specific content or competencies have you learned in your undergraduate coursework for establishing family–school partnerships?

Just over 40% of the preservice teacher candidates in their junior and senior years of study reported learning no specific content or teaching competencies concerning the development of family–school partnerships in any of their classes. On the other hand, nearly 60% of the participants explored some basic strategies highlighted in Epstein's Type 2: Communicating and Type 3: Volunteering categories. However, preservice teacher candidates offered strategies that were general, vague, and traditional in nature. For example, when describing what they would do to encourage parent involvement in the Type 2: Communicating category, participants shared "keep open communication," "parent conferences," "keep parents informed," "open and end on a positive note," "send home letters," and "be mindful of your words." In a similar vein, the preservice teacher candidates found Type 3: Volunteering activities to be a vehicle for engaging families, but few specifics were offered beyond "encourage volunteering." Table 3 summarizes the percentages of participants who explored specific strategies for developing family–school partnerships throughout their teacher education coursework.

Table 3. Students Identifying a Strategy/Competency Learned by Particular Type of Parent Involvement

Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework	% of Students Identifying a Strategy/ Competency Learned in a Particular Type of Parent Involvement
Type 1: Parenting Basic Responsibilities of Families	0%
Type 2: Communicating Basic Responsibilities of Schools	59%
Type 3: Volunteering Involvement at and for the School	59%
Type 4: Learning at Home Involvement in Academic Activities	0%
Type 5: Decision Making Participation and Leadership	0%
Type 6: Collaborating with the Community	0%

4. As a new teacher, what would you do to promote meaningful family–school partnerships?

It is not surprising that the participants, having had limited training in establishing family–school partnerships, also espoused limited strategies for engaging families as they planned to enter the teaching profession. Fully 100% of the preservice teacher candidates mentioned involving families through Type 2: Communicating and Type 3: Volunteering activities similar to the ones summarized in question three. These opportunities may reflect the involvement histories of the preservice teacher candidates themselves as they traversed through the educational system. In addition, 39% of the participants planned to engage families in Type 4: Learning at Home activities through "sending home projects for the family to work on together" and "assigning consistent homework to reinforce what is learned at school." Table 4 summarizes the types of involvement that preservice teacher candidates would employ to encourage family–school partnerships.

Table 4. Students Identifying a Strategy They Would Employ as a New Teacher by Particular Type of Parent Involvement

Epstein's Parent Involvement Framework	% of Students Identifying a Strategy to Employ as a New Teacher in a Particular Type of Parent Involvement
Type 1: Parenting Basic Responsibilities of Families	0%
Type 2: Communicating Basic Responsibilities of Schools	100%
Type 3: Volunteering Involvement at and for the School	100%
Type 4: Learning at Home Involvement in Academic Activities	39%
Type 5: Decision Making Participation and Leadership	0%
Type 6: Collaborating with the Community	0%

Discussion

An analysis of the preservice teacher candidates' responses to the four research questions posed in the study highlight a disconnect between the perceived positive outcomes associated with fostering family–school partnerships and the lack of necessary skills and competencies required to actualize such positive outcomes. Emerging from this research study are several recommendations for preservice teacher candidates and teacher preparation programs training such candidates to establish family–school partnerships.

Altering Teacher Preparation Program Curriculum

The lack of training on working with families for preservice teacher candidates is a cause for concern (Ministry of Education, 2005). Altogether, over 40% of the participants reported learning no specific skills or competencies concerning the development of family–school partnerships in any of their coursework. This was not surprising as there was no specific course focusing on the topic offered to the preservice teacher candidates. Therefore, many of the participants espoused limited views of family–school partnerships.

However, on a positive note, nearly 60% of the study participants reported learning skills to encourage effective communication between home and school and ways to encourage involvement through volunteering. Although

communicating and volunteering are necessary components in a comprehensive family involvement approach, they are considered traditional in the research literature. Therefore, due to the limited and traditional views espoused by the preservice teacher candidates, it could be argued that a course exploring family–school partnerships would prove beneficial (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Some might view this suggestion as naïve due to the course load already required in many states, but in January of 2010 the Pennsylvania Department of Education mandated changes to the state certification system for all early childhood, elementary, and special education students. The new certification guidelines now require all undergraduate early childhood and special education majors to enroll in a three-credit class focusing on home, school, and community relations.

Coursework focusing on family–school partnerships has the potential to positively influence preservice teacher candidates' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward engaging families. For example, Katz and Bauch (1999) found that new teachers who received formal training through coursework felt well prepared and engaged in a wide variety of parent involvement practices. It is imperative that teacher educators ensure that issues of family involvement are effectively embedded within subsequent courses. Embedding these important concepts throughout teacher education programs of study ensures that the transformation of preservice teacher candidates' beliefs about families will continue (Deslandes & Lemieux, 2005).

An additional necessary component of any coursework exploring family–school partnerships is fieldwork. To help preservice teacher candidates address their concerns and become more comfortable interacting with families, they should take an active role in a variety of field placements (Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002). For example, in a study including 223 preservice teacher candidates, Uludag (2008) found that candidates reported that their perceptions about parent involvement were most influenced by their experiences in the field. Until student teaching, most preservice teacher candidates have little contact with parents. The quality of fieldwork can be enhanced by initiating contact with parents, writing newsletters, planning and implementing a family activity, and participating in parent–teacher conferences. Although these activities typically occur during student teaching, trying them out sooner can prove valuable (Tellez, 2004).

Reflection on the Role of Family–School Partnerships

Reflection on identity is an expanding field of study in teacher education, and this work asserts that what preservice teacher candidates learn in their teacher education program is influenced by several factors including past

experiences, personal beliefs, and the content and experiences in the professional preparation program (Graue, 2005). For this reason, Graue and Brown (2003) believe that teacher education programs focusing on family–school partnerships must include what the preservice students know, think, and feel about establishing partnerships. Becher (1986) also stressed the importance of putting students in touch with their personal feelings concerning family involvement by stating, "It is only when teachers become aware of their own fears, concerns, and negative feelings that they are able to rationally eliminate them and to develop more effective strategies" (p. 109).

In order to develop mature beliefs and attitudes about developing and sustaining family–school partnerships, preservice teacher candidates need ample time for the transformation to occur. When the topic is not explored, afforded sporadic coverage, or put off until the completion of a program, we forfeit a vital opportunity for students to struggle with their strongly held beliefs and practices. In the absence of reflection, students may never move beyond engaging families in more traditional involvement roles of general support similar to Epstein's Type 2: Communicating and Type 3: Volunteering categories.

View Family–School Partnerships Through a Broad Lens

Often teachers and schools view family–school partnerships from the self-centered perspective of "what can you do for me." In their book, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family–School Partnerships*, Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) grapple with the political nature of family–school partnerships. The authors believe that teachers and schools encourage or discourage certain forms of involvement depending on the immediate "payoffs" the various participants are attempting to achieve. For example, if teachers are concerned with encouraging family involvement aimed at improving student achievement, they would encourage activities taking place at home. Whereas, teachers concerned with boosting their image and the image of their school would encourage activities taking place at school. A formidable challenge facing university faculty is shifting preservice teacher candidates' self-centered views of family–school partnerships to a more collaborative view of families as their child's first and most prominent teacher. Families need to be involved in ways that are beneficial to teachers and schools but also in ways that are meaningful to children and parents as well.

Results from the study suggest that the preservice teacher candidates espoused somewhat limited and traditional views concerning the establishment of family–school partnerships. This was not surprising due to the scant amount of instructional time given to the topic throughout the required coursework, a common problem highlighted in the literature (Epstein & Sanders, 2006;

Ministry of Education, 2005; Uludag, 2008). Suggested content to assist preservice teacher candidates in viewing family–school partnerships broadly may include: historical and philosophical perspectives of family–school partnerships; critiques of prominent family–school partnership conceptual frameworks; traditional and non-traditional views of family–school partnerships; assumptions, attitudes, and professionalism concerning family–school partnerships; positive outcomes associated with family–school partnerships; barriers impeding partnerships; federal and state legislation impacting family–school partnerships; national and professional organizations and accrediting body standards addressing family–school partnerships; and a variety of strategies for establishing and maintaining family–school partnerships.

In addition, preservice teacher candidates should be required to explore a variety of activities like designing family action plans, developing a philosophy of working with diverse families, designing an electronic community resource directory, creating a web-based workshop relating to family–school partnerships, developing a file of articles beneficial to families, and analyzing a variety of teaching cases related to family–school partnerships.

Final Remarks

Despite the fact that many of the study participants had little to no coursework on developing family–school partnerships and the fact that they espoused somewhat limited and traditional views and strategies for establishing such partnerships, I was struck by the fact that they possessed positive, professional attitudes and motives for engaging families as highlighted in Table 1. This was encouraging because it suggested that many preservice teacher candidates were preconditioned to engage families even prior to entering the field. Just imagine the possibilities if, in addition to offering a course on the topic, the importance of establishing family–school partnerships was infused throughout the entire teacher preparation program. Perhaps then the vital relationship between home and school would be transformed from competing spheres of influence to mutually complimentary ones (Epstein, 2005).

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