



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt
agus Oideachais na Luath-Óige

**Submission to the Educational Disadvantage Committee,
January, 2003**



INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE] is an initiative of the Department of Education and Science and has been established jointly by St. Patrick's College of Education and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The Centre is the forerunner of the Early Childhood Education Agency, which will be set up as described in the White Paper on Early Education, Ready to Learn.

While the Centre has a brief to consider the development and educational needs of all children in Ireland within the ages of 0-6, children at risk of educational disadvantage and children with special needs are a priority concern; “... *the diverse needs of disadvantaged children and children with special needs will form part of the starting point [for the work of the Centre]*” [CECDE, 2001, p. 9].

‘... [C]onsultation and networking are seen as a prominent part of almost all of the Centre’s work,...’ [Ibid. p. 8] and we are mandated to ‘... *forge close links with other agencies...*’ [Ibid. p. 8]. Our programme of work makes particular mention of the Forum to Address Educational Disadvantage and specifies *that [s]taff from the Centre will play an active part in this forum*’ [Ibid. p. 13].

Further to this *[t]he Centre will be working towards a co-ordinated strategy for provision for disadvantaged children and children with special needs which has links between the early years sector and schools and between providers, communities and specialist units within government departments and other state agencies.*’ [Ibid, p.14]. The work of the Centre will cover both the voluntary/community sector and the Infant classes in Primary schools, as well as all other settings where young children are cared for and educated.

In this submission we propose three main pillars in addressing educational disadvantage among young children;

- ✚ Early identification and support.
- ✚ Investment in personnel.
- ✚ Promotion of common cause across the entire early years sector.

Early intervention¹ is still at a very early stage in Ireland, and the promotion of debate and consultation is vital to the development of a cohesive, effective system. The trajectory of progress must be clear and all involved must be able to endorse it. This is too important to risk continuing fragmentation and piecemeal development.

SECTION 1 EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT

Disadvantage

Disadvantage is ‘... a complex phenomenon resulting from the interaction of factors that are usually construed as economic, social, cultural and educational’ [Kellaghan *et al.*, 1995, p. 17]. The sheer number of risk factors associated with a family’s experience will have an effect on the child’s future. Not only that but ‘[d]ifferent sources of risk may interact to have very destructive effects on children’s prospects...’ [Blakeslee, 1997, p. 2].

Early Years

In recent years research into brain development in young children has confirmed something that early years practitioners have known for a long time – that the earliest years of a child’s life are the most crucial. The interaction between a child and her/his environment, even from before birth, provides the foundation on which all future development builds. [See, for example National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000].

Each child’s growth and development is dependent on the nature and quality of her/his interactions with the environment into which s/he is born. For the newborn and very young child, that environment is mediated by her/his parents. To support children means to support their parents. ‘*The family generally affords the best environment for raising children and external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community*’ [National Children’s Strategy, 2000, p.5].

Parents, especially those experiencing a range of stress factors, need consistent support and outreach. Every child born should, as a right, have the support and care s/he needs to ensure s/he is nurtured, loved and kept safe. These earliest experiences are – just as the opposite is the case – the foundation for secure, healthy children.

¹ In the context of this submission, early intervention means interventions in the early years of a child’s life intended to alleviate educational disadvantage.

Stressed family settings, as Leseman has described [Leseman, 2002. See also Waldfogel, 2000.], will not provide young children with the type of experiences which will be of optimum benefit, citing ‘... *abundant evidence for a strong causal relationship between stressed family environments in early childhood and poor mental and physical health of the offspring later in life*’ [Leseman, 2002, p. 13]. This being the case, the earlier children at risk are identified, the better.

Timing of intervention

For the most part we think of early intervention in educational disadvantage as beginning around age three with pre-school services. But ‘*Zigler, talking about Head Start, has succinctly expressed the problem: ‘We simply cannot inoculate children in one year against the ravages of a life of deprivation*’ [in Reynolds *et al*, 1997, p.16] – a fact of which practitioners are very well aware.

In fact supports and intervention should begin at birth, if not before. There is evidence to support the efficacy of intervention that begins even before birth. A study of the Elmira home visitation experiment found that ‘... *the investment in the family, from the perspective of government spending alone, was recovered for families of low socio-economic status before the children were four years old*’ [Olds *et al*, 1997, p.48]. The Memphis home visitation program which set out to replicate the Elmira project found that ‘*[t]he effects of home visits were greater for children born to women who had been identified as having few psychological resources – an assessment based upon measures of intelligence, mental health, and ... self-efficacy ... the ability to cope effectively with a wide range of challenges and stresses ...*’ [Ibid. p. 49].

While there is further evidence also from Europe [Hanrahan-Cahuzak, 2002], Ireland has its own model of a home visiting programme, the Community Mothers Programme [CMP]. The CMP has been evaluated [Molloy, 2002], and while there are some concerns about the reliability and validity of the evaluation [Hanrahan-Cahuzak, p. 49], the results are promising. For example, while the scheme supports families on the birth of the first child, the beneficial effects have been shown to persist to the advantage of subsequent children [Molloy, 2002, p.44]

If we needed further justification for offering supports even before birth, it is to be found in the evidence for the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. It is suggested that, in order for intervention to be lasting and effective, it will have to be in place over two to three generations to, literally, break the cycle. “... [I]t is clear that by the time of a woman’s first pregnancy important risk factors have already been established, some of which may not be amenable to intervention in a single generation” [Chapman and Scott, 2001, p.318. See also Corcoran, 2000]. To alleviate disadvantage in the next generation of children, we have to support their parents and grandparents in their lives as children. “In order to fully address the issue of childhood disadvantage, a broadening of the time frame of intervention to include women’s health status prior to conceptions is needed” [Chapman and Scott, 2001, p.305].



One of the great strengths of early home visitation is that it supports the family, in particular the mother, in developing the skills and environment which will best provide the child with the kind of interactions we know will stimulate optimum development. The Community Mothers, for example, are, by definition, part of the same communities as the families and children with whom they work. With the support of the Public Health and Family Development Nurses they are in an excellent position to assess need through non-intrusive observation.


Early Identification

In order to be able to intervene early and effectively, identification is the crucial issue. Support cannot be offered unless the need is identified, and we cannot be satisfied at the moment that our ability to identify children at risk of educational disadvantage is effective. Kellaghan has outlined the difficulties which arose with the Breaking the Cycle rural scheme. Based on the assumption that the children for whom the intervention was intended ‘... attended small schools ...’ [Kellaghan, 2002, p. 25] the scheme was limited to small schools. It was discovered in the course of the evaluation that the intended targets of the intervention were, in fact, attending larger schools in small towns.

We cannot afford to let children down in this way. We each have only one childhood. The National Children’s Strategy Engine for Change proposes a model ‘... to empower people at local level who are directly involved with the delivery of services to children.

The key elements in the framework are:

-  *Managing the change through new national level structures*
-  *Delivering the change through improved local structures*

 *Promoting the development of human resources'*

[National Children's Strategy, 2000, p. 26]

We now have plenty of new national level structures, and many models of local level structures. [For e.g. see Cullen, 2000a, 2000b, 1997. Integrated Services Initiative, 1997. Molloy, 2002.] Surely the time is now right for the type of '*... integrated needs analysis ...*' [National Children's Strategy, 2000, p. 5] the National Children's Strategy cites in one of its operational principles?

The work of the Educational Disadvantage Committee will be of huge importance in advancing progress in the identification of educational disadvantage in the lives of children, and in progressing provision for those children. Early intervention will be a crucial part of that provision. It is hardly necessary to reiterate the importance and efficacy of early childhood intervention, except to restate the position of the White Paper on Early Childhood Education; '*... [T]he benefits of early childhood education are more significant for children who are disadvantaged*'. [Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 11] and to suggest that intervention in educational disadvantage needs to identify and engage with children and families from birth.

We do not need any more pilot projects on intervention or integration. We have all the models we need. We need to join all these dots together on foot of the experience and expertise we have both nationally and locally. We need to identify needs at birth through local and individual knowledge, provide services to families and children on the basis of the child's right to support, and continue that support for as long as the child needs it.

SECTION 2 QUALITY

Components of quality provision

However it is also true to say that '*... while disadvantaged children may benefit disproportionately from high quality care, they also appear to suffer disproportionately from exposure to low quality care*' [Currie, 2000, p. 26]. Provision is not enough. At the moment, though, much of the funding available, for example through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme [EOCP], relates to the provision of places only, with minimal requirements regarding the training of staff or the provision of appropriate curricula.

‘... the provision of places is not sufficient, in itself, to achieve developmental/educational goals, which are basic to the alleviation of disadvantage: the State must be concerned with the developmental experiences of the children who fill these places and must ensure that the provision is actually helping in the achievement of the developmental/educational goal.’ [Government of Ireland, 1999, p, 65].

Quality provision is the basic minimum requirement for intervention. The development of quality standards for the entire early years sector, and *‘... support[ing] providers in relation to compliance with quality standards ...’* [CECDE, 2001, p. 11] will be a core activity for the CECDE.

Quality can be used as something of a catchall concept. It can be reduced to check lists of cleaning activities which are easier to monitor than the *‘... more dynamic, intangible aspects of quality such as interaction between adults and children and the developmental appropriateness of activities and expectations’* [Hayes in Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 53].

While it is important to provide safe and clean environments for children, the point at which the child experiences the intervention being made is at the point of contact with the adult in whatever setting educational provision is made. *‘... [T]he most important aspect of childcare quality is the nature of the interaction between the teacher and the child. Small group sizes, better teacher training ... make positive interactions more likely’* [Sawhill, in Preface to Currie, 2000]. While it is very important to invest in appropriate materials and equipment, the most important type of investment is in the training and development of the personnel delivering the intervention.

Qualification and Training

Issues relating to qualification and training are sometimes thought to be more relevant to personnel working in the community and voluntary sector, but these are live issues across the entire range of provision for young children. For example, while initiatives within the Primary Sector are technically staffed by teachers with appropriate qualifications, currently many persons working in the system are untrained.

Further, in the In-service provided to facilitate the introduction of the Revised Curriculum, there was no dedicated provision for Junior Classes. The White Paper states '*...[T]he skills required for teaching infants are not the same as general teaching skills in all respects*' [Government of Ireland, 1999, p. 30]. However, current in-service provision does not address the particular needs of teachers working with the Junior Classes. Neither is there any dedicated in-service to address the needs of teachers working with children experiencing educational disadvantage. In-service for Early Start personnel is infrequent and sporadic. '*[Early Start] in-career support has continued on a piecemeal basis and in my view has been inadequate to the needs of the programme*' [McGough, 2002, p. 80].

The Primary school system is where the State has so far concentrated its investment in interventions in educational disadvantage, and the approaches taken through these interventions will possibly be the models for developing interventions throughout the sector. But we must not continue the pattern of interventions which do not address the need to support changes in methodologies and teacher behaviours.

'This neglect of concern for the role of teaching is evident in the ways in which we continue to provide intervention programmes which look to schools and teachers to address children's problems of low achievement and early school leaving but do not acknowledge that changes of emphases in relation to curriculum content, and changes in teaching approaches and methodologies, may be necessary qualities of the intervention' [Ibid, p. 73].

Issues of qualification and training are relevant to all sectors where early interventions happen. All personnel working with young children at risk of educational disadvantage should have access to ongoing training, to opportunities for acquiring appropriate qualifications and to recognition for experience gained in the field through experience and specialisation.

Opportunities and obstacles

Education, training and professional development opportunities for those who work with children from birth to six years are as diverse and varied as the range of early years settings that exist in Ireland. These settings include; infant classrooms in primary schools, full day care services including centre and home based settings, Montessori schools and playgroups. Primary school teacher training has been to degree level since the mid 1970's,

and whilst we argue that in-service training for Infant and Early Start teachers is inadequate, there is a standard level of in-service available to all qualified teachers.

The situation for personnel working with children in settings other than primary school is not so straightforward or standardised. Degree and postgraduate level programmes in early childhood studies have only been available since the mid 1990's. Currently, approximately 175 places per annum are available on degree programmes and demand vastly outweighs this capacity. The majority of education and training for early childhood care and education (ECCE) personnel therefore is offered by education and training providers whose courses may be nationally or otherwise accredited to sub degree level or which, indeed, may not have any recognised accreditation at all.

There has been a great deal of effort and commitment given by ECCE personnel in Ireland to improving their own level of education and training. In 2002, the National Coordinating Childcare Committee published a Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners [NCCC, 2002]. This document represented the culmination of a comprehensive and lengthy consultation process and outlined the core skills and knowledge appropriate to each occupational profile within the sector. In addition it set out for the first time the agreed core values that should underpin practice of all personnel.

The document recognised that demands upon ECCE personnel were becoming increasingly complex and acknowledged that all professional practitioners involved in the development and delivery of education and care services for children in Ireland must be prepared to meet the challenges of the future. For example, commitment to a holistic approach to the delivery of education and care services for children requires that perceived dividing lines between care and education must disappear. If the "Whole Child" perspective taken in the National Children's Strategy is to be realised then integrated service delivery is essential. This will require practitioners to be able to work as part of a multidisciplinary team of professionals. This has obvious implications for the future development of education and training programmes.

The NCCC [2002] document acknowledged that a great deal more work needed to be undertaken with regards to the education, training and professional development of ECCE personnel and it also identified a number of issues which needed to be addressed to facilitate such progress.

These issues can be grouped under the following headings;

- ✚ Access
- ✚ Transfer
- ✚ Progression.

Access

Measures to promote lifelong learning have become a key feature of policy commitments in education and training. Achievement of greater access, recognition, progression and mobility for learners has been identified as central to the promotion of lifelong learning. The Qualifications [Education and Training] Act, 1999, provides the legislative framework to ensure that learners, who have previously been marginalized by the education system, are afforded such equal opportunities. It requires that education and training providers facilitate learning opportunities that are accessible to those who can benefit from them in a flexible manner, enabling learners to learn the right skills at the right time at a pace and in a manner that meets their needs. Many personnel working in ECCE settings could be described as ‘marginalized’ learners. For example, many women returning to work after rearing families are core staff in early childhood services. A proportion of these women may have left school early, many without qualifications and in some cases having had negative experiences of the education system [OMNA 2000].

In addition, many ECCE services are very small and located in isolated or rural locations where public transport to courses is limited and where staff cannot be released to attend. Staff of Irish language services cannot access a higher education course in Early Childhood Care and Education through Irish and there are no modular degree programmes. Barriers to access manifest themselves in many ways. However, regardless of the guise that they take, it is essential that they are overcome before any progress can be made towards raising the level of education, training and professional development of ECCE personnel.

Transfer

Realisation of a lifelong learning agenda is dependent on the development of new ways of thinking about the nature of learning. In particular it is important to acknowledge that learning can be ‘life-wide’ as well as ‘lifelong’. This means that learning takes place as a result of experiences that do not always take place in educational settings. The concept of transfer is related to the idea that all learning should be recognised and given a credit value

so that it has currency within the education system. Once the learner has acquired credit, it should then be possible to transfer this credit from one learning situation to another.

‘Credit-based qualifications can facilitate flexible models of provision and provide a mechanism for facilitating recognition of learning achievements and the transfer of credits gained to new contexts. Thus articulation between different pathways within the education and training system is facilitated’ [Boland, 2001, p.3].

There are many implications of such a credit-based system for the ECCE sector. It would provide for the introduction of essential mechanisms for the accreditation of prior learning, work based training and flexible learning options such as modularisation. It would also allow personnel to move from one area of expertise to another related area, where common core skills and knowledge are identified, e.g. early childhood care and education, primary teaching, paediatric nursing and social work. All of these initiatives are vital if the ultimate goal of a highly trained multidisciplinary workforce working with our youngest children is to be realised.

Progression

The issues of access, transfer and progression are closely intertwined. However, there is an important dimension to the progression issue that has major implications for the future development of ECCE personnel. This is the relationship between further and higher education. It was regrettable that the Qualifications Act 1999 stopped short of removing this highly artificial divide in the education system. However, Ireland is far from unique in this regard and many other countries continue to grapple with the problems that such a perceived divide creates. These are mainly caused by the difficulties experienced by those who have ‘further’ education qualifications accessing ‘higher’ education courses.

If we refer back to the description of the qualifications profile of ECCE practitioners who have, in the majority, come through the further education system, it is clear that this issue requires urgent attention in the ECCE context. For example, at present there is no standard process for allowing those who have achieved a FETAC Level two qualification (the most commonly held, nationally recognised qualification amongst ECCE personnel outside primary schools) to gain access to the existing degree programmes. Whilst

individual institutions have made efforts for facilitate such access, it is vital that the statutory bodies involved move to make these practices standardised across all settings.

Another aspect of the progression issue is related to continuing professional development. Professional practitioners must be able to access opportunities to refresh, renew and update their skills and knowledge. Professional progression may not involve acquiring a higher level of qualification but rather a deepening level of expertise. Mechanisms to facilitate such progression will require regular opportunities to participate in reflexive group activities that are recognised and expertly facilitated and which, if desired, can contribute to the achievement of higher-level qualification.

The issues that have been addressed briefly above are at the heart of the future development of early childhood care and education in Ireland. As Oberhuemer and Ulich [1997] argue, in the context of early childhood provision, *'decisions made about staffing are decisions made about quality'* (Oberhuemer & Ulich, 1997, p. 59) and in the context of educational disadvantage the implications of these decisions are even more significant.

SECTION 3 PROMOTION OF COMMON CAUSE ACROSS THE ENTIRE EARLY YEARS SECTOR

Diversity and consistency

The early years sector in Ireland has developed in the absence of a national vision of what provision for our youngest children should resemble. In particular, provision for children experiencing or at risk of educational disadvantage prior to entering Primary school, has been very poor. The State's involvement was limited to the Rutland Street Project, until the inception of the Early Start Pre-school Project, which is still in pilot phase. Funding is also now available for childcare places for disadvantaged children under the EOCP, but this funding is not tied to educational provision.

Because there has been no unifying principle guiding the development of the early years sector we now have a wide range of types of provision, but, perhaps paradoxically, this is one of our great strengths. The diversity of our provision has come about in response to the needs of various sectors, and is to be encouraged.

Diversity needs to be supported by common high standards and quality, and it is in this context that the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education will provide a

Quality Framework, at the same time as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] is developing its Framework for Early Childhood Learning.

Providers in the private, community and school based sectors have shown their commitment over the years to providing the best for the children in their care, and will undoubtedly continue to do so within the curricular and quality frameworks.

Further steps

However our commitment to cohesion must go further than this, in particular in terms of early and continuing interventions in educational disadvantage. There are two points to be made here.

✚ Firstly, services must be made available to children in need in a cohesive and continuous fashion based on early identification of needs as discussed in Section 1.

✚ Secondly, communication and mutual respect and understanding must be fostered and achieved among the many different providers in the myriad of settings in which early education takes place. This includes, of course, in the home with parents.

So all those involved in the provision of services, in particular early educational interventions, should have a sense of common cause as part of seamless provision to meet a child's needs.

“At the level of ECEC-systems design coherence and continuity between simultaneous and successive contexts of development should also be strengthened. This concerns in particular the transitions between home and ECEC-provisions, the transitions between different successive ECEC-provisions, and the transition of ECEC provisions to primary school. Discrepancies between the most important contexts of development and learning, and early frequent interruptions may render the developmental and learning processes less effective” [Leseman, 2002, p.40].

Currently there are many issues that inhibit the development of a cohesive approach to the provision of early educational interventions.

The general perception of where the early childhood sector ends and begins, which type of provision belongs where, and how different groups identify themselves is at an early stage of development. To date there has been no encouragement of a strong identity for those working with children in the 0 – 6 age range. For example, junior and senior infant classes belong, in the general perception, to the formal school sector. However, as Infant teachers already know, and as the White Paper on Early Childhood Education [1999] recognises, infant classes are different from older classes. Infant classes provide a transition into formal schooling, but while ‘... *children come to school with a variety of educational experience, both from the home and from pre-school education* [t]here is a need for a continuing process whereby the child’s experience in the infant classes interacts with the developmental experience of home and family’ [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999, p. 10] and by implication with pre-school provision.

The lack of communication between school-based providers and, in particular, community providers means that many children in disadvantaged areas or other situations of disadvantage are making the transition into school from community or other playgroups with no communication between the school and the provider. Given the lessons outlined by Leseman [2002] we can assume that these discontinuities are not conducive to effective interventions.

Interventions occur in many settings outside the school system in terms of pre-school provision. Early Start caters for a small number of children in a relatively small number of disadvantaged areas. There is no school based pre-school provision for the majority of children at risk of educational disadvantage, and community playgroups are local responses to the needs of the community’s children. Any measures to support early intervention must take account of this fact, and supports must be offered not only to school-based interventions but also to all those who provide services to meet the needs of children.

This will include supporting the training and qualification needs of the sector as discussed in Section 2. It will also include the provision of resources to support developments under the quality and curriculum frameworks.

If the personnel working with the children in the delivery of educational interventions are the most crucial element of a quality service, then mutual respect among all groups, a

recognition of commitment, interest and effort among practitioners in all sectors will be prerequisite in the development of flexible, cohesive and nurturing responses to our most vulnerable children.

Possible solutions

Encouraging trust between the various groups, providers, philosophical perspectives, methodological approaches and between those with different types of qualifications and backgrounds will be the most effective way of developing the cohesion of the early years community. Those observing the current situation recognise that lack of communication and opportunities to share experiences, concerns, information and so on are at the root of the issue.

Opportunities for this type of exchange, then, are a first step in developing a cohesive national early years sector. We must look to our national structures to initiate and facilitate contacts within the sector. For example, while the Forum on Disadvantage held in St. Patrick's College in July 2002 under the auspices of the Educational Disadvantage Centre was not specifically focused on early intervention, many opportunities arose for exchanges between those with an interest in the sector, and anecdotal evidence indicates these exchanges were predominantly positive.

The Educational Disadvantage Committee could similarly provide opportunities for promoting communication and understanding. The Consultative Forum held in Dublin Castle in November 2002 was an excellent example of bringing together a wide range of interested groups. The small group sessions were very productive, and early intervention emerged as a fundamental value across all sectors.

On that basis, and in the interests of the 'coherence and continuity' which is so desirable, the next Forum could have a sidebar, so to speak, for practitioners and parents with an interest in early years' intervention in alleviating educational disadvantage. There will be challenges associated with freeing up practitioners from the voluntary and community sectors, and teachers from Early Start and Breaking the Cycle infant classes, but these are the people, along with parents, with insight into the needs of young children. These are the people who know the challenges and who will meet them.

The work of these practitioners has an enormous impact on the effectiveness of intervention programmes in the Primary School, and this needs to be recognised as the specialist work it is, and given space accordingly. It requires well resourced national initiatives like the Educational Disadvantage Committee to be proactive in this area, and to make the promotion of the efficacy of the early years sector in early intervention a reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The CECDE recommends the following:

- ✚ Further research into early identification and intervention for all children in need in Ireland, from birth.

- ✚ The Educational Disadvantage Committee should, in all its deliberations and recommendations, give dedicated attention to early childhood development and education.

- ✚ Each meeting of the Educational Disadvantage Forum should gather together representatives and practitioners from a wide range of settings within early childhood development and education for discussion and consultation.

- ✚ The Educational Disadvantage Committee must consider all early childhood settings in its deliberations, not just school based initiatives.

- ✚ Given that the membership of the Committee is set by statute, and that there is no representation from the early years sector, the Committee must consult widely with stakeholders within the sector.

- ✚ The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education is responsible for coordinating educational intervention to address the needs of children from birth to 6 years. It is important that the Educational Disadvantage Committee and the CECDE consult comprehensively to promote effective, seamless intervention and to avoid duplication.

CONCLUSION

This is a very promising time for all those with an interest in intervening in educational disadvantage. The Committee on Educational Disadvantage is a most welcome development and all those working in the sector have high hopes for its success. In particular it comes at a crucial time for the development of a coherent system of intervention for young children.

Early intervention needs the attention and expertise of the Committee in its own right. However, further interventions during childhood and later will be more effective if they build on quality work in the early years. Quality interventions in the early years can help ensure that later interventions are not – to mix metaphors - reduced to mere fire brigade actions closing the stable door.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education looks forward to the Committee's involvement in the future of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector.

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