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Educational poverty, digital and cultural divide: Some reflections from a case study

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Abstract

The pandemic has highlighted and accentuated some potential risks and critical issues already present in several educational contexts: the widening of educational poverty, the increase in the digital and cultural divide and the expansion of learning loss and of the implicit and explicit early school leaving. In this regard, the case study developed in a period just prior to the pandemic, on the one hand, has highlighted some critical issues of the teaching–learning relationship, while, on the other hand, it has deepened the strengths concerning the teaching–learning relationship in order to improve learning to learn and learning to teach for students and teachers in contemporary complexity. The results show that facing the current complexity means understanding the cultural aspects that guide today's ways of learning and teaching based on technologies. The relevance of these aspects concerning meanings and practices of teaching and learning is understandable, taking into account the rapid and profound changes in the current world in which we live. In summary, the results of this educational research on the analysed teaching and learning practices can be useful both to treasure today's lessons learned and to copy the unexpected changes that each crisis proposes like the current one.

Keywords: *educational research, teaching practices, cultural background, digital literacy*

Introduction

The impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has increased inequalities, especially for children and young people in conditions of educational poverty (The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Taking into account recent statistics (UIS-UNESCO, 2020), Save the Children (2021) estimates that until 2021, approximately 9 million children have been excluded from the education and training systems, both for reasons related to access to the education system and because of school dropout and early leaving. At the same time, compared to the 10% benchmark set by the European Commission (EC, 2015), the percentage of *early living from education and training* (ELET) in Italy was around 16% in 2019, with an European average of 10.1% (Eurostat, 2020). Similarly, Eurostat statistics (ibidem) for *not engaged in education, employment or training* (NEET) show the European average at 16.4%, with Italy at 27.8%. In addition to what is reported by the Education Development Trust, UNESCO (2021), the INVALSI tests for 2021 (INVALSI, 2021), carried out after the pandemic, have highlighted both a loss of learning in students and the growth of the phenomenon of implicit early school leaving.

In this regard, the most recent studies on the educational impacts of COVID-19 highlight how distance learning cracks up perceptions on psychological and emotional distress among college students during COVID-19 pandemic (Hasan & Bao, 2020), together with students' burnout due to online learning affecting social connections and motivation (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2020). Consistently, the study carried out by SIRD (Batini et al., 2021) identifies some relevant difficulties for students involved in distance learning, taking into account teachers' viewpoint: attention, motivation and participation. These studies underline the top structural barriers encountered by students during distance learning: Wi-Fi quality, finding a quiet space and finances (Pokhrel et al., 2021). Considering the relevance of these issues, students have been exposed to activities that put them at risk of school dropout with the consequent increase both in educational poverty and in the exacerbating educational and social inequalities (Azevedo et al., 2021; Save the Children, 2021). Moreover, most of these studies and reports focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on distance teaching and learning suggest some recommendations for teachers and students about the use of online educational tools for improving their digital skills. In

fact, the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) equipment for distance learning is a structural factor connected to several cultural factors inherent in the digital skills for both educators and students, capable of promoting their acting competently (Doucet et al., 2020). Firstly, learners with a fixed mindset find it difficult to adapt and adjust to a new learning environment, which increases their demotivation and lack of participation with a consequent poor acting competently (Pokhrel et al., 2021). Moreover, the most relevant key topics address teachers' training on remote instruction, teachers' needs for additional support and ICT equipment.

In summary, COVID-19 has only worsened the condition of educational disadvantage already present also due to structural gaps (e.g. equipment and access to ICT for school and families, finding quite spaces, finances, etc.) and cultural ones (e.g. differences in the cultural mindset and digital skills between teachers and students, digital skills, suitable pedagogies for distance learning, etc.) (Mascheroni et al., 2021).

Although absolute poverty is a complex concept, considering the debate on its indicators (Save the Children, 2014, 2021), the specific reference to early school leaving and dropout is reasonable based on the fact that students' capabilities depend on both their cultural mindset and the economic, social and cultural opportunities in a specific context. This is to say that individual capabilities for students and teachers are combined in relation to those of the context as deprivation/abundance of opportunities (Nussbaum, 2012).

From this point of view, it is necessary to explore and reflect on the cultural mindset of signification and symbolisation of the educational relationship with the context in students and teachers. These cultural factors in relation to the capabilities of contexts can hinder or foster their way of thinking and acting competently (Le Boterf, 1994).

In contrast, some structural factors in a specific context are connected to the digital divide with reference, for example, to equipment and access to ICT for school and families, Wi-Fi quality, finding a quiet space and finances (Pokhrel et al., 2021; Mascheroni et al., 2021; Doucet et al., 2020). At the same time, with cultural factors, we refer to the digital skills of students and teachers as well as their cultural representations and mindset on the teaching–learning relationship and on the use of ICT (Fernández-Cruz & Fernández-Diaz, 2016; Falcinelli & Limone, 2014; Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013).

Still in relation to the contingent pervasiveness of distance learning, the phenomenon of educational poverty can be understood in terms of digital and cultural divide with reference to both structural factors (e.g. access to ICT equipment of schools and families, etc.) and cultural factors (e.g. digital competence and digital media literacy for teachers and students, etc.) (Caena & Redecker, 2019).

Considering the structural factors, in Italy, four families out of 10 believe that their children have not been able to follow the distance lessons since the beginning of the lockdown (Save the Children, 2020). At the same time, only 30.2% of young people involved have high digital competences, while two thirds have low or basic competences and 3% have none (ISTAT, 2019). Also, the data presented in 2021 confirm this critical trend which was due to the pandemic (ISTAT, 2021).

In contrast, related to the cultural factors, as Fernández-Cruz and Fernández-Diaz (2016, p.97) specify, '*La mera presencia de recursos tecnológicos en los centros y las altas capacidades de los alumnos de la «Generación Tecnológica» o «Generación Z», no son suficientes para desarrollar en los alumnos la competencia digital. La clave fundamental viene determinada por las competencias tecnológicas y pedagógicas de los docentes*'[1].

From this point of view, this firstly cultural and then technological gap requires teachers to rethink teaching methods and strategies for dealing with the way today's students learn and will continue to learn, redirecting the meaning attributed by students to school, study and learning. Starting from this last consideration, today's educational challenge concerns the opportunity to deepen through educational research, students' and teachers' representations and practices of learning and teaching processes. The understanding of the cultural factors that guide the way of teaching and learning in a competent way, in the case of digital competences and digital media literacy, is nowadays central (Robinson, Di Maggio & Hargittai, 2003). In this regard, reflecting on teachers' practices on the one hand and understanding how today's students learn on the other hand can counter phenomena of educational poverty such as explicit and implicit early school leaving and dropouts connected to digital and cultural divide. By the way, some recent scientific evidences confirm that the risk factors able to increase dropout and early school leaving are both ascribed (socioeconomic and cultural background), contextual ones (school context) and individual factors (intrinsic motivation to continue to learn, disposition to learn, attitudes and opinions towards teachers, school, etc.) (Le Rose & Sacco, 2018).

In consideration of what happened during the pandemic, the unexpected change is not only technological and infrastructural, but also, above all, a cultural change that concerns how nowadays teachers teach and also how students learn. Based on the fact that educational poverty is connected to combined capabilities – structural factors specific to the context and cultural factors of students and teachers referred to the daily representations and practices of teachers and students – this work intends to explore, from the point of view of teachers, how nowadays teachers teach and also how students learn.

1. Case study

'*A case study is a problem to be studied, which will reveal an in-depth understanding of a "case" or bounded system, which involves understanding an event, activity, process, or one or more individuals'* (Creswell, 2002, p. 61). The ana-

[1] 'The mere presence of technological resources in the centres and the high capacities of the students of the "Technological Generation" or "Generation Z" are not enough to develop digital competence in students. The fundamental key depends on the technological and pedagogical skills of teachers'.

lysed case study, part of an international project, aims to explore the cultural and situated meanings attributed by teachers to their daily practices in the classroom, with reference to 'learning to learn' and starting from their idea of learning.

The case study shows some suggestions for understanding what teachers refer to when speaking of contemporary changes that occurred in the teaching–learning relationship, how their students learn and continue to learn and the value attributed to school, considering the impact of the above-mentioned cultural changes.

Exploring the representations and practices of teachers and their views on how students learn and can learn to learn is useful for understanding, from a cultural perspective, how teachers thematise the differences between students of yesterday and those of today (Stringher, 2021; Patera, 2020).

2. Methodology

In line with the research objective (Stringher, 2021; Stringher et al., 2020) and following a cultural perspective (Bruner, 1992), a qualitative research design has been defined (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). A semi-structured interview outline has been adapted to and used in all the countries participating in the international research project based on nine common thematic units to be explored consistently with the specific research objective (Brito Rivera, Torti & Ferraz de Carvalho, 2020).

For the case discussed here, the analysis was carried out on the first of the nine thematic units of the interview and focused on the research question, *What kind of opinions do teachers have about any differences found between the students of yesterday and those of today?* (Patera, 2021) Any differences pointed out by the interviewed teachers between the two generations of students can highlight how the meanings and practices of the teaching–learning relationship are changing from their viewpoint, as well as their opinions on how students learn and, at last, how they can continue to learn throughout their lifetime.

For the international research project, the research group conducted 123 interviews with teachers from the above-mentioned countries (Stringher et al., 2020). Therefore, this paper discusses the analysis of 40 interviews with Italian teachers of public schools and, in particular, of classes with 5-, 10-, 13- and 15-year-old students. In particular, with reference to school levels, the teachers are distributed as follows: Childhood (five teachers), Primary (10 teachers), Lower secondary (13 teachers), Upper secondary (12 teachers) (Patera, 2020; Stringher et al., 2020; Stringher, 2021).

A finalised (non-probabilistic) sampling was used, selecting the schools to be involved, both for the ease of access by the researcher and as they are considered experts on the topic for that context (Patton, 2015).

The methodology used for exploring the first dimension of the interview presented here is qualitative (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) with an exploratory research strategy and an inductive analysis strategy.

The analysis technique is interpretative (Kuckartz, 2014) with 'Thematic Coding' (Creswell, 2015) using MAX-QDA Analytics Pro 2018.

The analysis procedure followed these steps (Patera, 2020):

- iterative and in-depth reading of the interviews;
- coding of extracts of the interviews in sub-codes, which were then grouped into higher thematic codes (HTCs);
- grouping of HTCs into qualitative themes (QTs) with consistent and homogeneous meanings and
- setting up of interpretative analytical categories (ACs) for the QTs.

3. Results

As the first result of the Thematic Coding, Table 1 shows five HTCs, 12 QTs and 29 ACs, which saturate the interpretation of the 302 interview extracts encoded for the four school grades (Childhood, Primary, Lower secondary, Upper secondary). Due to the lack of space, the 54 sub-codes for labelling extracts of the interviews have not been reported. It should be noted that some ACs (marked with empty grey boxes) are not present in all school grades. In Childhood, in fact, some QTs and related ACs are obviously not present (Study method, Reading and understanding, Reasoning and processing, etc.) due to its specific characteristics.

Table 1. HTCs, QTs and ACs by school grade

Total per HTC	HTCs	QTs	ACs	School levels				No. extracts per HTC	% Extracts per HTC
				Childhood	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary		
	1 Students according to the teachers	Motivation to learn	1. Difficulty in coping and solving problems	n/a	3	n/a	n/a	3	
			2. Enhanced motivation, thanks to relationships with teachers	n/a	n/a	7	10	17	
		Concentration and attention	3. Traditional teaching does not encourage attention	1	n/a	9	n/a	10	
			4. Difficulty maintaining concentration	n/a	5	n/a	4	9	

Total per HTC	HTCs	QTs	ACs	School levels				No. extracts per HTC	% Extracts per HTC
				Childhood	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary		
	1 Students according to the teachers	Reading and comprehension	5. Skim reading as quick and superficial reading	n/a	9	3	2	14	
		Reasoning and processing	6. Difficulties in reasoning and processing	n/a	4	4	6	14	
		Study method	7. Change in the study method	n/a	2	3	7	12	
		Emotional dimension	8. Increase in situations of emotional fragility	4	n/a	1	n/a	5	
			9. Need for emotional support from teachers	n/a	3	n/a	4	7	
		Memorisation	10. Problems related to memorisation	n/a	4	2	n/a	6	
			11. Mnemonic method inherited from previous school cycles	n/a	n/a	n/a	6	6	
HTC 1	*1*	*7*	*11*	*5*	*30*	*29*	*39*	*103*	*34.1%*
	2 Relationships	Relationship Parent/teacher	12. Interference of families in teaching	7	5	6	8	26	
			13. Delegitimisation of the teacher's role	6	4	4	11	25	
			14. Parents' justification of their children's behaviour	4	3	n/a	4	11	
			15. More effective educational alliance with foreign parents	n/a	n/a	2	n/a	2	
		Relationship Students/ teachers	16. Devaluation of the teaching profession	1	2	n/a	n/a	3	
			17. Need to make the students protagonists	n/a	n/a	6	6	12	
			18.Empathic skills' development in teachers	n/a	n/a	4	3	7	
HTC 2	*1*	*2*	*7*	*18*	*14*	*22*	*32*	*86*	*28.5%*
	3 New technologies	Usage of new technologies	19. Student involvement and interest in technologies	3	6	4	6	19	
			20. Increase of groups working with technologies	n/a	4	3	3	10	
			21. Impact of technologies: reading, understanding, elaborating	n/a	4	2	3	9	
			22. Reflections of teachers on the use of technologies in teaching	n/a	3	3	2	8	
HTC 3	*1*	*1*	*4*	*3*	*17*	*12*	*14*	*46*	*15.2%*
	4 Role of the school	Value given to school and teachers	23. Decreased interest towards school	5	5	11	11	32	
			24. Diminished teacher's role	n/a	1	2	4	7	
HTC 4	*1*	*1*	*2*	*5*	*6*	*13*	*15*	*39*	*12.9%*

Total per HTC	HTCs	QTs	ACs	School levels				No. extracts per HTC	% Extracts per HTC
				Childhood	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary		
	5 Teaching	Teaching according to the teachers	25. Reshaping of teaching (with active methodologies)	n/a	n/a	5	1	6	
			26. Rethinking classroom time management	2	3	4	1	10	
			27. Setup of engaging and challenging educational activities	n/a	n/a	n/a	1	1	
			28. Attention paid to the needs of the students	n/a	3	6	1	10	
			29. Rethinking of mnemonic learning	n/a	n/a	n/a	1	1	
HTC 5	*1*	*1*	*5*	*2*	*6*	*15*	*5*	*28*	*9.3%*
Total	5	12	29	33	73	91	105	302	100%

ACs, analytical codes; HTCs, higher thematic codes; QTs, qualitative themes

Overall, the HTC most represented is 'Students according to teachers' with 103 extracts corresponding to 34.1% of the total interviews. For this HTC, seven QTs and 11 ACs have been formulated, which saturate the interpretation of the 103 corresponding extracts.

The second HTC is 'Relationships' with 86 extracts (28.5%), then 'New Technologies' with 46 extracts (15.2%), 'Role of the school' with 39 extracts (12.9%) and, finally, 'Teaching' with 28 extracts (9.3%). Most of the extracts have been encoded in Upper secondary (105 extracts) and Lower secondary (91 extracts), then Primary (73 extracts) and, lastly, in Childhood (33 extracts) schools.

The ACs in which a greater number of extracts have been encoded for the four school grades are highlighted in Table 2. The computation of the average is carried out as follows: (Total no. of extracts per school grade/total no. of ACs per school grade), so as to balance the different absolute values found. Each AC has been assigned a number, as presented in Table 1. The ACs below the average is not shown in Table 2, but have been analysed nonetheless.

Table 2. ACs most represented for each school grade

School grade	Average no. of extracts per AC for school grade	ACs selected by the number of extracts > average																	
		8	12	13	14	23	4	5	6	10	19	20	21	2	3	17	25	28	7	11
Childhood	3.7	X	X	X	X	X														
Primary	3.8		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X							
Lower secondary	4.3		X			X								X	X	X	X	X		
Upper secondary	4.6		X	X		X			X		X			X		X			X	X

In summary, the ACs most represented and common in all school grades are 'Interference of families in teaching' and 'Decreased interest in school', to be considered as teachers' opinions on the value given to school by today's parents and students.

Moreover, the second result is the co-occurrence map (Fig. 1) of the QTs found in the 40 interviews. The co-occurrences are identified by a black line connecting the QTs; the greater thickness of this line indicates a higher number of co-occurring extracts for the linked QTs, while the size of the graphic symbols refers to the number of extracts encoded in the corpus of interviews analysed for each QT (greater the size, greater the number).

Figure 1 shows that when teachers talk about the QT 'Value given to the school and teachers', they directly associate opinions referring to the 'relationship with students and parents', as commented for the ACs mainly represented in every school grade and common to all school grades. This QT refers to the teachers' opinions regarding both the 'emotional dimension' of the students and their low 'motivation to learn'. These last two QTs are also co-occurring with the opinions expressed by teachers on the importance of reflecting on teachers' own practices: 'teaching according to teachers'. This QT co-occurs with 'memorisation' and 'concentration and attention' of the students also in reference to 'reading and understanding' and 'reasoning and processing'. These last four QTs co-occur with 'use of new technologies', to which teachers associate 'motivation to learn' and 'study method'.

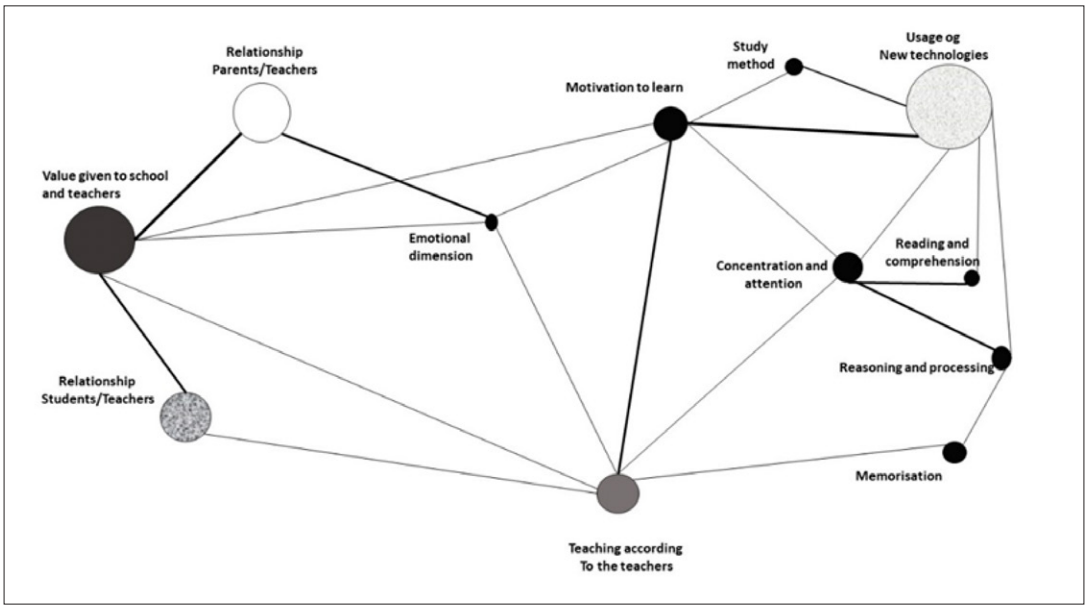


Fig. 1 Map of the co-occurrences of qualitative themes

The qualitative deepening of the ACs set up on the QTs gives back a few considerations. In general, teachers highlight some characteristics of today's students attributable to changes in their way of learning also connected to the reflection on the need to adapt the way of teaching. According to the teachers, in fact, today's students need continuous encouragement and emotional support from the teachers, so that they can become active, involved and *motivated to learn*.

This aspect is addressed in the Lower and Upper secondary using reflective teaching methods to promote motivation to learn as well as *concentration and attention***.** According to teachers, another difference found between today's and yesterday's students lies in the difficulty of *reading and comprehension*. In Primary, for example, the use of *skim reading* is highlighted due to a low competent use of new technologies affecting, among other aspects, 'learning to learn' in its cognitive and meta-cognitive dimension (ability to decode a task). In Lower secondary, another critical difference is in *reasoning and elaboration*. A further difference, transversal to school grades, is the *study method* and the *emotional fragility* of students. If in Primary, teachers argue that today's students have difficulty in *memorising***,** in Upper secondary, this is the most consolidated way of learning as inherited from previous studies.

With respect to *relationships* (*parents–teachers* and *students–teachers*), in today's students is transversely detected the delegitimisation of the teacher's role, both through greater interference of families in teaching and through the justification by parents of their children's behaviour. According to the teachers, this aspect is also linked to the *role of schools* attributed by parents and students. School is no longer perceived as a social mobility elevator across generations and this is one of the causes of the students' tuning out, thus becoming a limit to the desired increase of their involvement and motivation. On the *usage of new technologies*, almost all of the interviewees underline that today's students show greater interest in multimedia ways of using and producing contents, even in study groups.

In summary, the interviewed teachers offer reflections on the need to enhance their professional practices in order to fully grasp the educational opportunities connected to a conscious and competent use of technologies by both the students and the teachers. In conclusion, beyond these analysed aspects of *teaching*, the teachers agree transversally to the four school grades on the fact that today it is necessary to use active teaching methodologies to improve students' involvement and motivation to learn. This is possible, taking into account their needs and cultural characteristics, despite the constraints connected to the reorganisation of teaching and time management in the classroom.

Discussion and conclusions

Some QTs produced by the analysis, such as 'Motivation to learn', 'Concentration and attention' and 'Value given to school and teachers' are relevant both to what emerged in the international context (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2020) and to an Italian study (Batini et al., 2021). These aspects are considered among the main impacts produced by distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, however, also has an impact on the 'Emotional dimension', as also found in other studies (Hasan & Bao, 2020).

Moreover, 'Teaching according to the teachers' explores the perceived teachers 'challenge for reducing the cultural gap between the ways in which students learn and the ways in which teachers teach, as well as the meanings and practices related to the relationship of teaching–learning for teachers and students. From this perspective, reducing the debate on educational poverty only to structural factors (e.g. ICT equipment, etc.) inherent in the digital and technological divide means not grasping the importance of considering teachers' and students' mindsets and representations able to act competently in an educational context (Nussbaum 2012). Mindsets and representations affect the way in which students and

teachers mean and act in them (Le Boterf, 1994). Different mindsets and representations is what can be understood as a cultural divide (Banks, 2001; Caena & Redecker, 2019; Fernández-Cruz & Fernández-Diaz, 2016) and which concerns how students and teachers symbolise their contexts and attribute meaning to their way of learning and teaching (Mascheroni et al., 2021).

In a nutshell, the results show that learning to learn and, even more, learning to teach are addressed for the exploration of the cultural coordinates of the teaching and learning processes through technologies, taking into account meanings and practices in a cultural and generational perspective (Van Dijk, 2020; Rivoltella, 2008).

For this reason, '*Teaching strategies need to change, along with the competence profiles teachers need to develop, so as to deploy innovative pedagogies and empower responsible learners'* (Caena & Redecker, 2019, p. 356). In this regard, ICT for education can be intentionally used by the teacher in well-planned settings of media education for both enhancement of the digital competence and understanding of the cultural models that guide teaching and learning in a competent way within the teaching–learning relationship (Garavaglia & Petti, 2020).

Encouraging students to improve and manage their learning primarily means exploring the cultural and situated coordinates and mindsets of today's student generation, also proposing a range of teaching strategies consistent with the meanings and the learning practices they put in place (Di Pace, 2020).

From this perspective, the educational challenges for the reduction of digital and cultural divide as preconditions of dropout and school leaving (a part of educational poverty) can be thematised in terms of both how students can continue to learn and how teachers can continue to teach. These cultural aspects are still to be explored through educational research on teaching and learning practices in order to treasure the lesson learnt from the current situation.

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Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in this work are attributable exclusively to the author and do not in any way commit INVALSI. In citing the contributions contained in the article, it is, therefore, not correct to attribute the arguments to INVALSI or its management.

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