

Exploring Teachers' Views on Including Children with Special Educational Needs in Greece: Implication for Inclusive Counseling

Kourkoutas, E.¹, Stavrou, P.-D.^{2,3,*}, Loizidou, N.⁴

¹Department of Primary Education, University of Crete, Rethymno, Greece

²Department of Psychology, University of Athens, Athens, Greece

³Laboratory of Clinical Psychology, Psychopathology and Psychoanalysis (PCPP), University Paris Descartes, Sorbonne, Paris, France

⁴Department of Primary Education, University of Frederick, Nicosia, Cyprus

*Corresponding author: pstavrou@otenet.gr

Abstract As the model of inclusive education gains ground over the approach of special classrooms and special schools, the percentage of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) attending regular classes along with their typically developed peers gradually increases. Under this scope, teachers and school psychologists are required to broaden the spectrum of their knowledge and skills in order to provide a supportive classroom environment that could foster the academic and social inclusion of students with SEN. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore, through semi-structured interviewing, the views of 30 Greek teachers, working with SEN students aged from 7-12 years old, on inclusive education. The content analysis of the data revealed that, according to teachers, the factors favoring inclusion revolve around building a strong relationship with the child, family and professionals working in the school context, as well as adequate information and training concerning SEN. On the contrary, factors hindering inclusion mostly concerned practical difficulties, such as overcrowded classrooms, delayed diagnoses and lack of reliable measures of evaluation. Overall, although Greek teachers appeared to be favorable towards inclusive education, they seemed to underestimate some aspects of inclusion practice regarded as key elements by the contemporary literature. What emerged from this study, was the need for additional training, psychosocial support and psychoeducation of Greek teachers working in the field of inclusive education.

Keywords: *inclusive education, students with Special Educational Needs, teachers, qualitative approach, semi-structured interview, content analysis*

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1. Introduction

Over the past 20 years, the percentage of students with Special Educational Needs (SENs) and various disabilities/disorders who have been attending schools and classes together with typically developed peers has gradually increased. As the percentage of the former over the latter has risen, the number of special education teachers, regular teachers, and school psychologists qualified to provide inclusive services must also increase [9]. Teachers should be well-trained in order to be able to acknowledge the unique characteristics (at individual and contextual level) of their students with SENs and work with them to enhance both their psychosocial and academic skills [24]. When teachers are adequately trained and sufficiently supported, they can plan and implement successful educational programs that address

their students' individual strengths, needs, and vulnerabilities [20,24].

Moreover, an increasing number of researchers are drawing attention to innovative intra- or extra-curricular programs that enable teachers and parents, with the mediation of other professionals, to address the social, emotional, and learning needs of pupils with SENs/difficulties, in a way that differs from classical clinical practice [resilience], [4,8,21,22]. In fact, traditional SE theory and practice emphasizes the individual-based intervention policy overlooking the dimensional and developmental/transactional aspects of children's problems/dysfunctions.

One of the basic premises of Inclusive Education is that schools should become places where all children, with and without special educational needs, can freely play, learn, perform, and interact in constructive ways [16]. Moreover, it is believed that children should be taught in educational environments that permit them to fully

develop their social-emotional and academic competencies. Inclusive education focuses on organizational, structural, and cultural changes within school contexts and education policy in order to respond effectively to social-school exclusion of pupils with various difficulties [1].

Children at risk of, or diagnosed with SEN (and especially those with social, emotional, and behavioral problems) should have easy access to specialized school-based assistance focusing on an inclusive perspective in order to overcome internal limitations or external barriers [16]. Children with problems who are provided such supportive educational environments are more likely to internalize positive social-emotional and academic experiences [26]. When they are well-supported by caring and enthusiastic teachers or by specialized professionals, such students are at significantly lower risk of developing mental health problems during adolescence.

Overall, even today in many regular school contexts, children with various forms of SEN encounter significant risks and obstacles in their quest to cultivate personal abilities, as well as to be adequately included. Therefore, it is imperative for schools to radicalize their inclusion policies and curricula by linking emotional development skills with established learning and teaching processes.

1.1. Theoretical Background and Rationale of the Study

Research suggests that resilient classrooms and skillful, well-supported teachers working in a collaborative perspective with students, parents, and professionals may foster nurturing relationships even with the most troubled children, enabling them to be successfully be included in the school context [8,10,26]. A positive relationship with a supportive teacher in combination with an early specialized intervention and effective teaching methods can help such students develop additional academic and adaptation skills [2,5].

Special educators or teachers' special assistants in ordinary classrooms play a crucial role in providing an emotionally receptive and supportive environment, and specific learning and teaching assistance for children with various disorders and/or SEN [11].

A recent study on promoting inclusion and resilience in children with SEN/disabilities has emphasized the huge gap between what research reports, and what professionals want to know and learn about when working in the challenging, complexity of situated practice [14]. Authors of this study believe that the research world must do more to answer the questions of teachers and practitioners who support children and young people with disabilities and SEN. Researchers also need to think of ways to capture the views, needs and experiences of children and young people with disabilities to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of their interventions [14]. Indeed, many SE and Inclusive programs are bottom-down implemented within school contexts without considering and accurately evaluating the real needs, potential, and difficulties of each school's particular teaching staff and SEN population, and contextual strengths and barriers.

In addition, many researchers experience high levels of stress when they have to deal with students with serious

SEN, and mostly with problematic behaviors or challenging reactions [12]. Even teachers who are committed to inclusive education may feel exposed to high stress as they find themselves ill-prepared to deal with the challenges of their students' social-emotional and behavioral problems [9].

In order to get a better insight of the contextual problems and barriers as well as of their training and work variables, we have attempted to explore their personal experiences and opinions about their inclusive practice.

Studies concerning teachers' attitude with respect to inclusion, have concluded that the effectiveness of any inclusion method largely depends on the positive attitude teachers need to develop toward the inclusive practices [6]. Studies have shown that teachers' attitudes towards SEN students and towards inclusion are strong predictors of the success of inclusion, it is evident that positive perceptions regarding inclusive education act as facilitators in implementing inclusive strategies, whereas, negative teachers' perceptions and attitudes act as obstructive factors to inclusion [3,8,19].

The initial purpose of this study, in addition to exploring the conceptions of Greek SE teachers about their work experiences, was to compare these findings with the findings of a similar study in the Italian school system. In this paper we only present the first phase of this research. In fact, this research is part of a broader project of comparative research in Italian and Greek school contexts regarding issues related to students with SEN inclusion.

In Greece children with SEN, after being diagnosed, are assigned to special (containing) classrooms. It seems that Special Education teachers (SEs) encounter a series of difficulties in attempting to successfully serve those students.

A previous study conducted by Vlachou [27] endeavored to show that special education classes of the containing type do not really serve the purposes of inclusion, as they are based on the deficit-centered model. In addition, the study of Gerassis [13] revealed ambivalent views regarding teachers' role in promoting inclusion of students with various forms of SEN or disabilities in Greek schools. Many of the teachers were in favor of including in ordinary classroom children with mild difficulties/ SENs, while a high percentage of teachers have highlighted the limits, barriers, and difficulties in working with students with more serious disabilities within the ordinary school context.

Another recent study in Greece, revealed that teachers expressed generally neutral attitudes towards the practice of inclusion, except for students with social difficulties, for whom they seemed to adopt a more favorable attitude, as illustrated by relevant research [25]. According to the authors, these attitudes seem to derive from the absence of qualified special education personnel, problems concerning the organization and function of Greek Public Diagnostic and Assessment Centers, shortage of materials and technical infrastructure and inadequate support services in order to meet the demands of the process of inclusion of students with special educational needs [25].

In another recent study, Greek teachers were less willing to adapt their teaching methods to everyone's needs and take initiatives to prevent the marginalization of

children with SEN/ disabilities [15]. Greek teachers also underscore the need for constant collaboration of all stakeholders in order to enable the school inclusion of students with difficulties. Authors of the study highlight the little satisfaction that Greek teachers report concerning the assistance provided to them by the state, as to effectively work with SEN students [15].

In the past we have conducted a series of studies and action research intervention projects, which provided us with a significant amount of primary data and information regarding the way ordinary classroom teachers function in their everyday practice with pupils displaying various forms of SEN; and also the specific strategies they use to manage a wide range of challenging issues. Those data, combined with clinical findings, allowed us to formulate certain important suggestions about the most efficient counseling strategies and interventions, based on an inclusive perspective.

The findings of this study would allow us to broaden our perception about school-based counseling interventions serving pupils with SEN.

2. Method

2.1. Aim and Study Design

To pursue the priorities indicated above, we opted for a qualitative approach that enables us to give voice to the SE teachers and to identify the difficulties they're experiencing in supporting students with SEN. We were also interested in exploring their notions about the general process of inclusion implemented for such students, and about the strategies regularly used for that purpose.

Actually, the general aim of this study was to identify factors contributing to effective practice by SE teachers in supporting the inclusion of pupils with SEN aged 7–12 years.

We opted for a qualitative methodological approach as we are convinced that teachers working with “difficult or demanding” cases of pupils, who are continuously facing a whole range of challenges, would be more at comfort to express their views in detail within the framework of a relationship founded on trust. Qualitative approaches, if conducted by experienced researchers, can tackle and deepen various aspects of the teaching and psychoeducational procedures, more effectively than traditional questionnaires or surveys might do. In addition by opting for a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach we tried to gain an in-depth understanding of learners' lived experiences.

Specifically, the rationale for the research project was to

- identify the range of problems and difficulties SE teachers encounter in their everyday work regarding material facilities and relations with other educators and with the school,
- identify the range of deployment of SE teachers for SEN pupils,
- identify difficulties related to the diagnosis and management of pupils with SEN,
- identify the main barriers to the successful implementation of inclusion practices for SEN pupils,

- identify factors related to successful cooperation (or difficulties) with outside (non-school) agencies/professionals involved in the work with SEN pupils,
- identify the range of strategies and interventions being employed in the schools and considered important for fulfilling the inclusion policy/project,
- identify specific aspects of perceived effective educational or psychosocial practice to support inclusion,
- identify the perceptions of SE teachers regarding the role and work of senior school staff, ordinary classroom teachers, non disabled pupils, parents and local authorities as to the success of policy, practice and of the approaches utilized.

2.2. Sample

The study involved rural areas and also large urban centers in the regions of Crete, Greece (Heraklio, Rethymno, Chania) and Thessaly, Greece (Larissa, Trikala), and was undertaken by researchers who were familiar with working in the SEN field.

The initial research involved a survey that was sent to 80 SEs of whom 60 responded, representing a return ratio of 75%, followed by a more in-depth study of 30 of the respondents, using semi-structured interviews.

2.3. Procedure

2.3.1. Initial Stage of the Study

In the survey sent to schools, SE teachers were invited to report the most challenging topics and issues they think that should be discussed during the interviews (some examples: difficulties related to diagnosis, treatment, etc). In fact, as previously mentioned, the *data generation* was done by using semi-structured, phenomenological individual interviews. The in-depth interviews used in our study were constructed on the basis of a series of research findings at international and national, local level in order to better capture the variability and particularity of the dynamic interactions between students and with problems and their teachers, as well as the lived experienced and ideas/ beliefs of teachers related to a series of school issues, such as available specialized support, training and so on. The following questions were posed at the beginning of each interview in order to enable a focused and meaningful interaction on critical school/classroom issues: “*how difficult is for the today's teachers to work with disruptive or challenging students*”/“*do students' behavioral emotional or academic problems represent a serious challenge/burden for the classroom functioning and the classroom teacher*”.

Two experienced researchers and counselors were recruited to conduct the in-depth explorative interviews. Data was transcribed in a more structured and extended way after each interview based also on the researchers' notes taken during the interview. Transcribed data was categorized by two independent raters. Content discussion and interpretation was drawn upon the general framework of discourse analysis on the role of personal narrative and

its meaning in the way reality is perceived and constructed by the person.

During the initial stage of the study, the issues indicated below were reported by the participants as being essential, meaning that they should be discussed during the interview process:

- Issues related to practical problems and lack of physical facilities (88%)
- Issues related to the management of difficult behavior and of critical situations arising in everyday school life (74%) (e.g. hyperactive, aggressive children)
- Issues related to the lack of specific curricula or teaching material that can help SE teachers form a coherent educational program to successfully address the pupils' complex learning needs and difficulties (65%)
- Issues about the discrepancy between theory and practice, in training courses or seminars (65%)
- Issues related to the ministry of Education policy concerning SE teachers and Inclusive policy issues (64%)
- Issues related to the establishment of a reliable cooperation with the SE School Counselor (49%)
- Issues related to cooperation or relational problems with the school (senior teachers or classroom teacher) (48%)
- Issues related to the relation with families; parental responses to advice offered by SE teachers, or attempts for cooperation (46%)
- Issues related to the establishment of reliable cooperation and relationship with the child (28%)
- Issues related to bureaucracy, or to medical and other necessary examinations, and to available professional support services (15%)

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Topics Discussed in the Interview Process

It is important to note that during the interview process, several additional issues, considered in contemporary literature as very crucial for the inclusion process also emerged. Actually, both theoretical and empirical literature, and also the authors' professional experience, were employed to generate additional questions that tapped into issues identified as essential for the success of inclusion projects. Teachers' perceptions were somehow "positively challenged", in the sense that SE teachers were invited to discuss issues that had not been included in the initial survey (e.g. the importance of using psychoeducational techniques targeting pupils' social-emotional needs; partnership work with external professionals).

These issues focus in the following areas, among others: the school culture and role in the promotion of inclusion policy and practice; the family role and involvement in the treatment / inclusion project; the evaluation of the quality and of the outcome (successful or not) of the educational services provided; the position and the role of SE teachers within the general school system and the possibility to promote alternative inclusive

practices; the potential of SE teachers to influence the school culture and organization of individual schools towards an inclusion perspective.

In general, themes and topics that were discussed in detail during the interview process include (among others):

- (a) School staff perceptions and opinions about the inclusion of children with various types of SEN. These include: the way school staff members interpret the implementation of inclusion policy and the quality of implemented practices in order to support SEN pupils in school;
 - their sense of being efficient as a team in this implementation;
 - their personal opinions about education and teaching (pupil-adapted versus curriculum orientation);
- (b) Teachers' interventions in the ordinary classroom: the way teachers deal with inclusion in their actual practice;
- (c) The school's functioning as a systemic organization: the structures and support functions the school has arranged in order to facilitate the implementation of inclusive practices.
- (d) The types and forms of methodological approaches and educational strategies SE teachers use in their practice; the way they decide specific educational interventions; the material they use; their sources of information and professional development;
- (e) The types of psychoeducational strategies and discipline, and the psychosocial interventions they use in order to address their pupils' social-emotional needs or behavioral difficulties; the theoretical background of their methodological choice and tactics used; the outcome of their intervention regarding social-emotional or discipline problems;
- (f) The relation of SE teachers with the rest of the educational staff; their involvement in the school activities;
- (g) The quality of relationships with parents and the common procedures they use to make contact and to establish reliable cooperation with parents; the way they involve parents in the inclusion project;
- (i) The number and type of interventions they are likely to implement together with the classroom teachers in order to promote the inclusion culture and thinking within the school units;
- (j) The type of psychoeducational programs they tend to implement in order to strengthen the classroom integration of pupils with SEN, and their bonds with their classmates without SEN / disorders;
- (k) The type of available specific support, by psychologists or SE counselors (which emerged as an issue of central importance);

3.1.1. Factors Positively Contributing To the School Inclusion of SEN Pupils (According To SE Teachers)

Factors considered by SE teachers as contributing to the successful implementation of educational strategies and the classroom reintegration of SEN pupils were the followings:

- (a) Relations with the child (97%)

- (b) Adequate awareness/information regarding the special education practice (95%)
- (c) Adequate diagnosis (85%)
- (d) Good relations with the parents (78%)
- (e) Adequate support/ reframing/ cooperation with other professionals (67%)
- (f) Adequate cooperation with the classroom teacher (66%)
- (g) Continuous training/ bridging the gap between theory and practice (training seminars) (65%)
- (h) SE teachers' independence to work autonomously (55%).

3.1.2. Factors Hindering the School Inclusion of SEN Pupils (According To SE Teachers)

The factors advanced by SE teachers as undermining the successful implementation of educational strategies and the classroom reintegration of SEN pupils were the following:

- (a) High number of children diagnosed as pupils with SEN and limited resources (e.g. lack of time, overcrowded classes)
- (b) Delay of diagnosis delivery and lack of specific intervention guidelines for very difficult cases, by the Diagnostic Centers (KEDDY) officially charged with this function; inadequate evaluation reports by the DC (KEDDY) in some cases;
- (c) High number of pupils with serious social-emotional, and behavioral problems;

During the interview procedure, most SE teachers recognized the importance of the following directions:

- (a) additional strategies to influence the school community inclusion ethos, and the typically developing students' perceptions of SEN, and to reinforce positive relations among all students (raising awareness of all pupils to their classmates' difficulties and capacities);
- (b) the need to develop more reliable measures to evaluate the work with pupils with SEN;
- (c) the need to develop holistic strategies and programs that reinforce the social-emotional skills of pupils with SEN;
- (d) the need to actively seek collaboration with external professionals or the assistance of school psychologists;
- (e) the need to follow additional training, specially on topics related to psychosocial strategies and programs that enhance the skills of children with SEN;
- (f) though many SE teachers were reluctant to include all children with SEN/disabilities in the mainstream classrooms, some SEs acknowledge the importance of developing real inclusion practices and a new education policy/culture;

3.1.3. Evaluation of the Research Project by SE Teachers

In a brief evaluation feedback (using an open questionnaire), 29 out of 30 SE teachers who were involved in the interviews responded and 97% of the respondents agreed that the research project had been very interesting and useful – thought provoking, as it gave them the opportunity to discuss and reflect on crucial issues regarding their work.

Many SEs reported that this research also allowed them to consider and reflect on issues that are usually underestimated or put aside by SE teachers and school staff. It is worth noticing the response of a teacher describing such phenomena:

"... I believe that many of my colleagues are content to work alone ... they prefer not having any kind of evaluation for their job ... I'm not saying they do bad work, but I'm sure most of us don't promote a cooperative perspective in our intervention ... we are limited to implement certain strategies we believe to be good, but we miss a global view of children's problems and of the school's role".

One third of the sample has clearly stated that this research project helped them to realize some additional aspects of the inclusion project and to evaluate differently the weight of some variables.

Eight of the SE teachers reported during the interview process, and some of them also wrote in the final evaluation report, that many of the issues discussed were intentionally put aside because of some SEs' reluctance to deal with them.

4. Discussion

Many of the SE teachers seem to underestimate some aspects of the inclusion practice that are regarded as key elements in contemporary literature – research (e.g. involvement of the family in the inclusion process; regular and reliable cooperation with ordinary classroom teachers; social inclusion of pupils with SEN)

Many SE teachers seem to confine their work within the SE classroom and essentially focus on learning support;

Many are not aware of the importance of establishing productive cooperation – partnership with external professionals, though some have reported lack of information and collaboration by specialists when families actually consult such professionals;

Some SE teachers (7 of 30) acknowledged that their personal priorities do not include continuous professional training and development; many of them (20 of 30) openly expressed the desire to regularly attend additional specialized training and seminars to increase their professional skills, though they report many practical difficulties for that;

Although most of them admit that psychosocial interventions targeting the social-emotional aspects of the SEN pupils' functioning are crucial for their development, very few were able to describe concrete strategies to promote their students' social-emotional skills or reliable strategies to serve these purposes.

Some SE teachers talked about behavioral strategies but most focused on the importance of having good/supportive relationships with the children to reduce their disruptive behavior;

Issues related to cooperation and partnership with senior school personnel, the rest of the educational staff, and especially with professionals or SE counselors and the Official Diagnostic Center (KEDDY), though reported as essential, seem not to be part of their everyday concerns or practice. This might be related to cultural issues and to the

prevailing culture/mentality in the Greek educational system, where teachers are not accustomed to teamwork;

Most SE teachers are not aware of the problems related to classical psychiatric classifications; they are likely to consider pupils with SEN as homogenous categories and use general syndrome terms to describe the pupils' difficulties/disorders (e.g. ADHD) in all cases, without questioning the origins of such classifications, the contextual causes of the difficulties and the resulting practices; though many SE teachers recognize the traumatizing, destabilizing, and family conditions of cases of emotional behavioral disorders (EBD), many of them are not able to make the connection between pathogenic conditions in the family and the children's EBD or school adjustment problems (e.g. they continue to talk about syndromes or "innate pathological cases", as if the children's social-emotional functioning and reactions are unrelated to the way they were raised and educated);

Most SE teachers do not challenge prevailing/dominant (deficit centered) conceptions – models regarding the way pupils are categorized; differently stated, most SE teachers are not at all skeptical of the traditional ways of treating (e.g. separating pupils with SEN from pupils without SEN; providing segregated treatment outside the classroom). In addition, they don't seem aware of the new approaches in the area of inclusion and childhood disability (e.g. ecosystemic and holistic character of the inclusive practice; contextual transactional character of many of the social-emotional problems; partnership work); they rather seem to adhere to the conventional mode of special education.

Many SE teachers reported that after the interview they started questioning some of their ideas, or recognized that many of the issues suggested by the researchers are essential for the inclusion project.

5. Summary and Suggestions

This study is embedded in the tradition of research in inclusive education, as it combines both an action research aspect/orientation (researchers maintain an active role in the investigation process and not a neutral position) and a classical content analysis of the data gathered. The interpretation of data is also based on contemporary problematic related to inclusive practice research and theory and to alternative approaches of childhood disability (based on a different paradigm) [18].

From a wide range of gathered information about SE teacher's conceptions on various aspects of the inclusion process, we focused our analysis on the following issues (among others): (a) the philosophy and orientation of the intervention models; (b) the taxonomy/diagnostic philosophy/approach; (c) the existence of alternative models of considering SEN/disability (e.g. holistic contextual view of the child, a strengthening-based approach, the resilient model of SEN/disorders); (d) the partnership work with parents and professionals; (e) the full inclusion of pupils with all kinds of disabilities (including pupils with extended forms of disability, issues considered as key elements by the contemporary inclusive education theory.)

Clearly it is encouraging that most teachers of our sample recognized the importance of establishing a

supportive and nurturing relationship with SEN pupils that, somehow, can enhance the children's inhibited capacities and reduce their disruptions and school exclusion.

On the other hand, many teachers fail to recognize and mostly to work in the perspective of the contemporary inclusive education (I.E.); most SE teachers of our sample ignore basic ideas of I.E. and see their intervention in terms of a purely specialized technocratic strategy; though all of them recognize the particular nature of their role, most of them are still likely to work with the deficit-based model and in the traditional disability perspective (the problem is within the child and the family); according to their reports, within the special classroom they tend to use strategies that may strengthen children's capacities and enhance/foster a better academic inclusion of the SEN pupil, but on the other hand they fail, for a variety of reasons, to actively seek to work in a partnership perspective with all involved professionals and parents, and to play a vital role in the promotion of the inclusion culture within school units.

Furthermore, only a few teachers of our sample seem to be adequately positioned and trained to deal with situations that are beyond the narrow context of their role, and even fewer are prepared to develop stable relationships with parents of children with serious SEN, especially when they have to deal with issues related to school inclusion and teaching students with difficulties [9].

We fully recognize the importance of specialized knowledge (e.g. clinical psychology) in the field of SEN, but we consider it is extremely important to integrate any specialized intervention within the frame of a holistic inclusion project which involves a partnership work and the (emotional and professional) coaching/ support of teachers and parents.

Interdisciplinary teams who fully adhere to inclusive principles may support SE teachers and classroom teachers to develop/foster more inclusive and collaborative attitudes rather than the traditional (medical/psychiatric) views of childhood SEN/disorders; working in an inclusive counseling perspective with the educational staff, the parents and the child may create conditions that favor the success of inclusion projects within schools for a wide spectrum of SEN. The positive experiences of teachers who have successfully applied the inclusion practice in difficult cases of children has proven to be a real promoting factor for the inclusion ideas within educational community.

5.1. Limitations of the Study

Though the interview as research method may enable us to gain important insights into the subjects' experiences, and to reveal unexplored aspects of the subjects' thinking, feeling, acting, and functioning, it is difficult to generalize available findings and it is therefore a method that is essentially based on self-reports and not on methodical outside observation.

In our study, interviews allowed us to arrive to different conclusions than the ones derived from the pilot study survey; it also allowed us to discuss with SEs aspects and topics of the inclusion project which had been omitted by them or of which SEs were not even aware. Such findings can lead us to formulate certain important conclusions about practical and theoretical issues related to the field of

SEN, and guide future research, professionals' training and school projects' implementation related to IE.

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