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Israeli principals' considerations regarding the actions they take to prevent student absenteeism

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ABSTRACT

Despite the high prevalence of student absenteeism and its wide range of negative consequences, the existing research on the role of school principals in combating student absenteeism is scant. The current study sought to understand the considerations of principals regarding the actions they take to prevent student absenteeism. Study participants were 22 Israeli school principals. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis revealed that Israeli principals rarely took actions whose direct aim was to combat student absenteeism. They viewed their impact on student absenteeism as indirect and focused on combating severe student absenteeism. Implications and further research are discussed.

Cumulative evidence indicates that student attendance is closely related to a variety of educational outcomes (García & Weiss, 2018; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). Student attendance is associated with better reading ability, improved academic performance, and higher prospects for on-time graduation, college enrollment, and future employment (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Robinson et al., 2018; Kearney et al., 2013). It is also associated with lower rates of class retention and dropout and reduced risk of alcohol and drug use, unwanted pregnancies, and crime (Bartanen, 2020; Smerillo et al., 2018).

However, every single day, hordes of students around the world do not come to school. Many of them are chronically absent, defined as students missing 10% or more of school days (Smerillo et al., 2018). In the UK, the percentage of enrollments in primary and secondary schools that were classified as persistent absentees in autumn/spring 2017/18 was 11.3%. This is higher than the equivalent figure of 10.4% in autumn/spring 2016/17 (National Statistics, 2018). In the U.S., one in five school students is chronically absent (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Over 8 million U.S. students miss nearly a month of school each year (Chang et al., 2018). Similarly, in OECD countries, 21.3% of students said they were absent from school for a whole day at least once in the two weeks before the PISA test (OECD, 2019). In some countries, a more significant share of students skips school. For example, the prevalence of high-frequency student absences in Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, and the Philippines was more than 30% (Pengpid & Peltzer, 2017). In Saudi Arabia, a third of middle and high school students were absent to a moderate or high degree (AlSayyari & AlBuhairan, 2020).

Despite the well documented negative influence of student absenteeism on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes (e.g., Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Robinson et al., 2018; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019) and its widespread prevalence (e.g., Chang et al., 2018; National Statistics, 2018; OECD, 2019), the available knowledge on the role school principals play in improving student attendance is meager. It has only recently been empirically examined whether principals have an impact on student attendance (Bartanen, 2020). The actions principals take to improve student attendance have scarcely been investigated so far (Childs & Grooms, 2018). Against the background of the paucity of research on

this issue, the current study seeks to identify the considerations of school principals regarding the actions they take to prevent student absenteeism, a topic that has not been researched so far.

Specifically, this study explores these considerations in Israeli school principals. The national school system in Israel serves about 1.4 million students (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Israeli schools are characterized by the type of organizational culture known by Cameron and Quinn (2011) as *clan culture*, which views the organization as an extended family, held together by loyalty, commitment and strong, close interpersonal relationships (Katriel, 1991; Shaked, 2019; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2009). Although absenteeism in Israeli schools has decreased somewhat over the years (Ben Rabi et al., 2014), its extent in Israel is almost twice the OECD average. The percentage of Israeli students reported that they had skipped a day of school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test was 38.4% (OECD, 2019; There is no information on the differences between the Israeli educational subsystems). The goal of this study is to explore Israeli principals' considerations regarding the actions they take to reduce student absenteeism rates.

Theoretical background

How principals influence student learning

To enable an understanding of the considerations and work of principals to improve student attendance, this section briefly reviews existing knowledge about the impact of principals on student learning and academic success. Research has known for quite a few years that among all school-related factors that influence student performance, leadership is second only to classroom teaching. The effect of leadership on students learning accounts for about a quarter of the total school effects (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Most of the effects of school leadership on student learning quality and achievement are indirect, utilizing variables that mediate the improvement of teaching and learning (Robinson et al., 2008). Researchers point to specific mediators that link school leadership to student academic performance. These mediators have significant, usually direct, effects on students, and they are relatively impactable by principals. The mediators fall under four paths – rational, emotional, organizational, and family (Leithwood et al., 2020, 2010), presented next.

The rational path refers to the knowledge and skills necessary for teachers to teach well, such as content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, content specific pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge and knowledge of learners. This path includes the mediators of classroom instruction, teachers' use of instructional time, academic press and disciplinary climate (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Hendriks & Scheerens, 2013). *The emotional path* refers to inherent mental qualities, feelings, and affective states or reactions of teachers (both individual and collective) forming the nature of their educational work. This path includes the mediators of collective teacher efficacy, teacher commitment and teacher trust in others (Goddard et al., 2004; Ross & Gray, 2006; Sun & Leithwood, 2017). *The organizational path* refers to school characteristics that organize and give a pattern to the relationships and interactions among school members. This path includes the mediators of safe and orderly environments, collaborative cultures and structures, and the organization of planning and instructional time (Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). *The family path* refers to the educational environment in the student home. To advance knowledge and character development, parents must work productively with schools for the benefit of their children. This path includes the mediators of parent expectations for children's success at school, forms of communication among parents and children in the home and parents social and intellectual capital about schooling (Goodall, 2017; Gordon & Louis, 2009).

While a large body of literature explores the link between effective school leadership and higher student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2020), the influence of principals on student attendance has hardly been investigated so far (Bartanen, 2020). Inasmuch as the adverse effects of absenteeism on student learning bother both researchers and practitioners around the globe, filling this gap is extremely important.

Principals' influence on student absenteeism

Student absenteeism is a puzzle composed of multiple pieces (Brundage et al., 2017). Many non-school-related variables are associated with higher rates of student absenteeism, including low socioeconomic status, poor health, nonstandard parental work schedules, changes in adult household composition, residential mobility, and extensive family responsibilities (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; García & Weiss, 2018; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). At the same time, quite a few school-related variables also are associated with student absenteeism, including harsh disciplinary measures, bullying, unsafe school building conditions, and lack of adequate transportation (Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Simons et al., 2010).

The literature provides convincing evidence that teachers have a significant influence on student absenteeism and explains what measures teachers use to improve student attendance (Aucejo & Romano, 2016; Gershenson et al., 2017; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017). Students taught by more capable teachers were less likely to miss school due to unexcused absences and suspensions compared with students taught by less capable teachers in the same school (Backes & Hansen, 2018). Positive relationships with teachers are essential for developing students' sense of belonging and feeding a desire to attend school every day (Gehlbach et al., 2012). Teachers may increase student attendance by cultivating a passion for learning, increasing student engagement, and emphasizing the importance of regular attendance (Kelly, 2012). Another way teachers may increase student attendance is by influencing parents' attitudes toward school attendance and punctuality, as parental involvement is considered treatable (Gershenson, 2016).

Until recently, however, very little research has inquired into principals' influence on student absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Gullatt & LeMoine, 1997). Based on 11 years of statewide data from Tennessee, Bartanen (2020) explored what effect principals have on student attendance rates. His findings show that principals have a substantive impact on student attendance: moving from 25th to 75th percentiles in principal quality lowers the rates of student absences by 0.8 percentage points, which means that on average, each student in the school adds 1.4 days of attendance. Moreover, principals' influence is even higher in high-poverty and urban schools, where chronic absenteeism is more common. This pioneering study revealed that principals contribute to increased student attendance. However, the actions principals take to accomplish this goal remained unexplored, motivating this study to inquire into the considerations of principals regarding the actions they take to decrease student absenteeism.

Method

When a phenomenon is not well defined and the available knowledge on that phenomenon is limited, qualitative methods are helpful (Taylor et al., 2016). Therefore, the current study was qualitative to describe in detail the actions principals take to increase student attendance.

Participants

Participants' selection for this study was both opportunity-based and purposeful (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Fellows and students of the author recommended possible participants. Thus, it was an opportunity-based sampling. Four participants recruited other participants from their acquaintances, which also made it a snowball sampling. However, since this method might be biased and create a sample that has a resemblance of tendencies, a purposive sampling technique was also utilized in this study, where the goal was to have the sample similar to the larger body of Israeli principals. Due to significant differences between the two sectors consisting the Israeli school system (Arar & Abu Nasra, 2019), principals from the Arab sector, which constitutes about 25% of the total system, were not included in this study, and will be the subject of a separate study. Therefore, the principals recommended for participation in the study were included only if their participation matched the characteristics of the population of school principals in the Jewish sector in Israel in terms of gender, age, years of experience, education, and school level.

The population of Israeli principals consists of 67% female principals and 33% male principals. Principals have an average of 11 years as a school leader, and their average age is 50. Regarding their education, 8% of principals do not have a college degree, 35% have a bachelor's degree, and 65% have a master's degree or higher. As for the school level, 61% of principals work in elementary schools, while 39% work in middle and high schools (Capstones – The Israeli Institute for School Leadership, 2012). Accordingly, the current study involved 22 principals, 15 females and seven males. Participants had 3 to 26 years of experience as principals ($M = 11.18$, $SD = 6.64$). They were between 33 and 64 years old ($M = 49.76$, $SD = 4.34$). One principal had no academic degree, seven principals held a bachelor's degree, 13 principals held a master's degree, and one principal held a PhD. They worked in elementary schools ($n = 13$), middle schools ($n = 2$), and high schools ($n = 7$), working in all seven Israeli school districts. Based on what is known in the literature (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019; García & Weiss, 2018; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019), attention was given to the socio-economic background of students to whom each school catered.

Data collection

The data were collected by the author through semi-structured interviews. A list of questions was prepared in advance, in consultation with three principals. However, the interviews also included questions flowing from previous responses when possible. As principals, most of the interviewees were verbal and spoke fluently, so the interviews proved to be like conversations, or even monologues, rather than a “ping-pong” of questions and answers. Questions were asked such as: *What are the actions taken at your school to prevent absences?; What do you think contributes to reducing the rate of student absences?; Who is responsible for student attendance at your school?; To what extent are you involved in the absence treatment?.* Interviews, which generally lasted one hour, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As with any self-report, the current method offered little control over the possibility that respondents might provide socially desirable responses. Moreover, the current method has led to a reliance on perceptions of actions, which are often difficult to ascertain in terms of their alignment with reality, and are often difficult to standardize to cull into findings. Further research using techniques such as direct observation may complement principals' self-reporting with more objective data on their actions to reduce student absenteeism. Interviews with others who either oversee the work of principals or those who serve under them (teachers, counselors, school staff) about the principal's actions designed to combat student absenteeism may also complement principals' self-report.

Data analysis

Data analysis, conducted by the author, was a three-stage process – sorting, coding, and categorizing. First, the necessary sorting was performed (Miles et al., 2014), seeking out the relevant utterances that might represent actions taken by principals to improve student attendance. At the second stage – coding – each segment of data (utterance) was coded according to the aspect it represented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This step was data-driven and not theory-driven because I did not use a priori codes but rather inductive codes that were developed by directly examining the data, grounded in the various perspectives articulated by participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). After having captured the essence of the statements in the second stage, in the third stage – categorizing – similar utterances were assembled into clusters in order to generalize their meanings and derive categories. These categories form the basis of the findings section.

To ensure authenticity and credibility of the findings, follow-up interviews were conducted, as appropriate, to clarify questions that arose during a review of interview transcripts. In addition, the member check method (Koelsch, 2013) was used. All interviewees were asked to check both accuracy and interpretation. All participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they could

leave the study at any point (no one left). They were assured of confidentiality (pseudo-names were assigned) and were asked to provide written consent, based on an understanding of the research aim.

Findings

During the interviews conducted for this study, participants described very few actions they did, the direct aim of which was to prevent student absenteeism. Although they attributed great importance to student attendance, they found it difficult to point to actions they took to address this issue. Data analysis revealed three reasons why principals hardly take actions to directly and proactively reduce student absenteeism: (1) principals believed that student attendance improved by addressing organizational characteristics of the school; (2) principals saw the prevention of student absenteeism as the responsibility of teachers; and (3) principals thought they should only intervene in severe cases of student absenteeism. The following sections present these reasons, supported by excerpts typifying participants' own voices.

Influencing organizational characteristics

The first reason principals only engaged in a few actions that were directly and proactively aimed at preventing absences, found during interviews with study participants, was their belief that the way to reduce student absence rates was primarily by addressing key organizational characteristics of the school. Put differently, this category is about the belief that the principal should not engage in absences themselves, but rather improve aspects pertaining to all school activities. Under this category, principals described themselves as investing in improving organizational characteristics of the school, which in turn improve student attendance. This notion was mentioned by 19 participants.

Principals believed that in order to reduce absenteeism, students' positive feelings about the school should be fostered. "Obviously, students who hate their school will be late and absent more. My role as principal is to ensure that every student, from their subjective point of view, feels good here" (Diana, an elementary school principal with seven years of leadership experience). "I believe that students can love school if the school loves them. Our school is dedicated to creating a warm, caring environment, which makes students want to come to school regularly" (Rachel, a middle school principal with 14 years of leadership experience). Specifically, principals underlined the significance of students' sense of belonging. "I think absenteeism prevention starts with feelings of connectedness, which we cultivate with great effort" (Patricia, a high school principal with 16 years of leadership experience). "Students who feel like outsiders are more likely to skip school days. It is our responsibility to change it" (John, a high school principal with nine years of leadership experience). The principals who mentioned the sense of belonging were both high school principals. It is possible that when students are a little older the discourse on the sense of belonging is more explicit. In addition, principals emphasized the issue of safety. "One of the most important things I do to prevent absences is to ensure the protection of students from violence and bullying, because students affected by physical or emotional harassment are at risk for poor attendance" (Margaret, an elementary school principal with 21 years of leadership experience). More broadly, they linked school climate to student absenteeism: "The positive atmosphere here, which does not happen on its own, leads students to come every school day" (James, an elementary school principal with six years of leadership experience).

Principals ascribed much importance to good learning experiences. "I spend a lot of time improving the quality of student learning. If learning is boring and exhausting – they will try to come as little as possible" (Anne, an elementary school principal with 17 years of leadership experience). "To improve student attendance, we design learning experiences that improve student performance" (Cynthia, a middle school principal with 13 years of leadership experience). Particularly, they stressed the need for tailored learning. "A 'one-size-fits-all' approach cannot be used for students at risk of truancy" (Esther, an elementary school principal with 12 years of leadership experience). "An individualized learning plan that outlines personalized learning goals is very important for preventing absenteeism"

(Ruth, an elementary school principal with five years of leadership experience). Tailored learning was mentioned by elementary principals only, perhaps because this issue is emphasized in Israel mainly in the context of elementary schools. A sense of success is also very important: “Students who feel successful in school are more likely to attend school regularly” (David, a high school principal with two years of leadership experience).

Teachers’ responsibility

One more reason principals only dealt with a few actions whose direct purpose was to prevent absences, revealed in this qualitative study, was that they believed that absenteeism prevention is mainly a teacher role. Importantly, principals have not shifted the blame to teachers to absolve themselves of the problem on the grounds that it is the responsibility of the teachers; They truly believed that teachers hold the bulk of the responsibility in this matter. This notion was mentioned by 17 participants.

Principals placed great importance on teacher-student relationships, particularly in schools serving student from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. They saw teachers as responsible for developing a close relationship with their students. “I expect my teachers to have personal competencies because a strong relationship with a teacher is critically important to how often students come late or skip school days” (Megan, an elementary school principal with nine years of leadership experience). “When the teacher earns the trust of the student and the student feels supported, challenged and confident, the chance that the student will regularly attend school is high” (Barbara, a high school principal with four years of leadership experience). “The teachers who are good at building relationships with students improve student attendance (Charles, a high school principal with 19 years of leadership experience). Interestingly, principals often described themselves as instructing teachers on how to develop healthy positive relationships with their students. “I do not allow teachers to say: ‘If my demands don’t seem to you, no one is forcing you to be here.’ Why push students out? Why undermine their affiliation with the school?” (Sarah, an elementary school principal with 26 years of leadership experience). “I required all teachers to undergo professional development on teacher-student relations. To me, this is the basis for the entire teacher’s work, including preventing absences” (Rebecca, an elementary school principal with six years of leadership experience).

Principals also expected teachers to use data on student attendance, mainly in schools serving student from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. “Teachers can improve student attendance by looking at the information they have about their students” (Lisa, a high school principal with four years of leadership experience). “When teachers collect attendance data, it gives them a way to understand how often, when, and why students do not come to school” (David, a high school principal with three years of leadership experience). “Student attendance data helps teachers make connections that lead to insights and improvements. It has an important role to play in helping all students succeed in their own individualized ways” (Diana, an elementary school principal with seven years of leadership experience).

Involvement only in serious cases

Another reason principals were only concerned with a few acts whose direct object was to combat absenteeism, which was found in the current study’s data analysis, was their belief that their primary job in preventing student absenteeism was to be personally involved only in acute situations. This notion was mentioned by 19 participants.

Principals, mainly in elementary schools, described themselves as responding to student absenteeism events when they got worse. “When it comes to extreme cases, I am personally involved in the whole process with the teacher and the school counselor” (Noah, an elementary school principal with 10 years of leadership experience). They claimed that as principals they focused on the more problematic cases. “I may not be involved in the processes that every student goes through, but I am involved

in five percent of the most complex cases. This is true in all areas and is true of absences as well” (Emily, an elementary school principal with three years of leadership experience).

Principals intervened in severe cases of student absenteeism because they saw themselves as highly capable of communicating well with parents. “In many cases, the parents of children who are often absent are not easy. Teachers may not always have effective conversations with such parents. From my extensive experience with parents, I’ve learned how to talk to them” (Kate, an elementary school principal with 14 years of leadership experience). Principals also intervened in severe cases because of the need to interact with external agencies. “In cases where absenteeism is serious, we report to the school superintendent and work in collaboration with the local authority. In such cases, I am obviously involved” (Robert, a high school principal with 21 years of leadership experience). Moreover, principals considered themselves to be familiar with the rules and procedures relevant to exceptional cases. “Teachers do not always know what is allowed and what should not be done in such cases. My role is to make sure we always follow our school district’s policies and procedures” (John, a high school principal with nine years of leadership experience). In addition, tackling complicated cases of student absenteeism requires extraordinary decisions or resource allocation, which make the involvement of the principal necessary. “In cases of continuous absenteeism, we sometimes need to transfer a student from class to class or to provide individual assistance. These are decisions that only I as a principal can make (George, an elementary school principal with seven years of leadership experience).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to identify the considerations of school principals regarding the actions they take to prevent student absenteeism. Qualitative data suggested three reasons why principals rarely take actions, the direct aim of which was to combat student absenteeism: (1) they believed that to reduce student absenteeism, some organizational characteristics of the school should be addressed; (2) they perceived the prevention of student absenteeism as the responsibility of teachers, who are well positioned to achieve this goal; and (3) they believed that their job in preventing student absenteeism came down to involvement in severe cases.

The first two reasons are interrelated, suggesting that principals perceive their influence on student absenteeism as indirect. As aforementioned, the contribution of principals to student learning quality is mainly indirect. Principals bring about an increase in student achievement through mediators that connect their leadership to student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2008). However, we can distinguish between two levels of indirect influence. When it comes to student achievement, principals do not directly improve student learning, but are often involved in directly and proactively establishing the conditions for this improvement (Robinson et al., 2008). They are consciously engaged in actions designed to create the educational infrastructure that allows the immediate impact of teachers on student learning and results (Leithwood et al., 2020). In the context of student absenteeism, on the other hand, this study implies that principals’ view of their impact as indirect makes them think that there is no need to do anything to improve it. They see student attendance as something that will improve on its own and do not pay much attention to intentionally creating the conditions needed for this improvement.

Moreover, Leithwood and his colleagues (Leithwood et al., 2020) classified the mediators, which link school leadership to student learning, into four paths – rational, emotional, organizational, and family. While the indirect influence of principals on student test scores is largely based on the *rational path*, including mediators such as of classroom instruction, teachers’ use of instructional time, and academic press (Heck & Hallinger, 2014; Hendriks & Scheerens, 2013), and the *emotional path*, including mediators such as collective teacher efficacy and teacher commitment (Ross & Gray, 2006; Sun & Leithwood, 2017), this study’s findings suggest that for student attendance, the *organizational path*, which deals with relationships between school members, is very important. Principals considered students’ feelings of connectedness and healthy relationships with their teachers as the primary channels for improving student attendance. This path may be more meaningful as a factor if it is interacted with principal/school demographics, as explained below. Quite surprisingly, the *family*

path, which is about the educational environment in the student home, did not particularly stand out in the utterances of this study's participants. Principals hardly described themselves as communicating the importance of good attendance to parents, calling for further research on the role of principal-parents relationships in improving student attendance.

The third reason why Israeli principals rarely took actions whose direct aim was to prevent student absenteeism, found in this study, was their belief that they should only intervene in severe cases of student absenteeism. Principals were only involved in tertiary prevention, designed to cope with an ongoing and profound absence, rather than primary prevention, designed to prevent absenteeism before it ever occurs, or secondary prevention, designed to stop the expansion of absenteeism that is at its beginning. While principal proactivity is one of the key determinants of effectiveness of schools functioning in complex environments (Fidan & Balci, 2016), this behavior reflects a reactive approach to the leadership challenge of improving student attendance.

The data for this study were collected in the Israeli school system. As mentioned above, student absenteeism rates in Israel are very high compared to the OECD average (OECD, 2019). One may claim that the findings of the current study explain these high rates: insofar as Israeli principals are insufficiently involved in actions, the direct aim of which is to improve student attendance, the absenteeism rates are relatively high. In addition, the clan culture of Israeli schools (Shaked, 2019), which prioritizes a family-like feel (Cameron & Quinn, 2011), may explain the importance Israeli principals attributed to a sense of belonging, a welcoming environment and positive teacher-student relationships. Further research, in other countries around the world, is required to understand the link between principals' actions to combat student absenteeism and the national context (Hallinger, 2018).

In addition, the findings suggest that principal/school demographics, which were used to select the participants for this study, may explain principals' attitudes toward student absenteeism. For example, as we know that school levels are significant in the context of student absenteeism (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019), high school principals were the ones who attached importance to students' sense of belonging, perhaps because the discourse on the sense of belonging is more explicit when students are a little older. At the same time, elementary school principals were the ones who placed importance on tailored learning, perhaps because this issue was emphasized in Israel mainly in the context of elementary schools. Regarding the socioeconomic status, which was found to predict student absenteeism (Gershenson et al., 2017), principals of schools serving student from lower socioeconomic backgrounds ascribed importance to teacher-student relationships, while principals of schools serving student from higher socioeconomic backgrounds expected teachers to use data on student attendance. An in-depth understanding of the relationship between principal/school demographics and principals' attitudes toward student absenteeism requires further research. Particularly, further research will help to explore the differences between principals in terms of gender, experience, and education, which were not found to be significant in this study, but might emerge in a study using a larger number of participants. Differences in leadership style also are worthy of research attention. Quantitatively exploring the correlations between different principals' actions to combat student absenteeism and student attendance rates would be very useful.

Moreover, this study involved an assessment of behavior at a one time period. However, some school years may be prone to a certain behavior, driven by the frequency of absenteeism incidences and principals' efforts to address them, which may be quite different from others. Therefore, longitudinal research is needed.

Practically, this study recommends principals to more actively prevent student absenteeism. They have to take actions whose direct purpose is to improve student attendance, such as creating a principal-led team overseeing student attendance, fostering a system of student attendance incentives, and communicating the importance of good attendance to parents. For this to happen, the principal's role in preventing student absenteeism should be discussed in various stages of principals' educational careers, such as preparation programs, mentoring programs provided to beginning principals, and professional development as principals.

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