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Educational and spatial justice in rural and urban areas in three Nordic countries: a meta-ethnographic analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a meta-ethnographic analysis of educational research from rural and urban areas in Finland, Norway and Sweden following the reorganisation of educational supply there in line with market policies. Edward Soja's concept of spatial justice shapes the analysis. Using meta-ethnography, we try to present a contextualising narrative account of spatial justice and injustice in the education systems in the three countries. Thirty-one Nordic ethnographic publications (a mix of monographs, book chapters and articles) have been used in the meta-analysis. Just over half of them come from Sweden, and most are from urban education studies. The other half are relatively evenly divided between Norway and Finland. All were published between 2000 and 2017. Sweden represents an extreme position in relation to the new politics of education markets. Its promotion of school choice and schools-for-profit has attracted significant attention from ethnographic researchers in recent decades and is given particular attention in the article.

KEYWORDS

Democracy; participation; market reform; marginalisation; ethnographies

Introduction

In this article, we explore the Nordic education model and some of its challenges in relation to concepts of educational justice and the notion of consequental geographies within the concept of spatial justice articulated by Soja (2010). Consequental geographies are dialectical. They are both the geographical outcomes of social and political processes and a dynamic force affecting these processes (Soja, 2010, p. 2). They provide therefore a theoretical lens for analysing education politics and their outcomes, and they have been used in the article to analyse the current geo-politics of educational reform in the Nordic countries. The social justice theories of Iris Young (1990) have also been applied in the analysis which has been driven empirically by the combined methodologies of ethnography and meta-ethnography. Ethnographic research from predominantly but not exclusively rural areas have been given particular attention.

As is the case also internationally, Nordic rural areas and their schools are less often researched than urban ones and knowledge about them and the educational spaces and places within them is more limited (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009). There has

been a tendency towards metrocentricity (Farrugia, 2014) that we attempt to a degree to redress. Inequalities and problems of democracy in rural areas will remain unacknowledged if they continue to be ignored, and research will both slant and hamper theoretical developments by twisting problems of educational equity, justice, participation and democracy towards urban geographies and their demographics (Öhrn & Weiner, 2017). Our hope is that by exploring research on rural spaces and comparing what we find with the results from urban educational research, we can move beyond our current scientific understanding of educational justice and equality in education in the Nordic counties to another, more general level. As does Massey (1994) we conceptualise rural and urban spaces and places as interdependent. We view places and their politics as articulations of spatial relations that reflect place differentials of power through differences concerning access, equity, representation and regulation.

Delineating rural and urban places and spaces

When making our analyses, it became very apparent how definitions of urban and rural areas and places are difficult to pin down (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014; Roberts & Cuervo, 2015). The classifications that are used in educational research are not always fully consistent with an analysis of power, either theoretically or in relation to official political classifications (Corbett, 2015a, 2015b). Often there is even a lack of clearly articulated and theoretically informed definitions (Bagley & Hillyard, 2014). The concept of an urban area generally means a place that is city-like or something that belongs to a city space or region. But there have been different ways of formally defining rural areas (cf Helminen et al., 2014; SKL, 2016; Solstad, 2009). In the research we have read we can identify three basic types of areas where education has been ethnographically investigated in relation to aspects of rural space. They are:

(1) Intermediate rural areas that have a low-to-medium population density and diversified employment in the primary sector (basically agriculture, fishery, forestry and mining); in the secondary sector (industrial production and refining); and in the tertiary sector (tourism, service industries/public sector work) and are also situated at some distance from more populated settlements (e.g. 45–50 minutes minimum travel time by car or public transportation, whichever is quicker).

(2) Sparsely populated areas comprising one or more very small settlements with economic activity mainly located in the primary sector and sometimes in tourism.

(3) Peri-urban metropolitan areas. These are primarily residential spaces on the perimeters of a highly populated urban area. They exist as a separate residential community (sometimes referred to as suburbs) within relatively close commuting distance to the urban centre. They can and do vary considerably in terms of social class composition and forms of employment.

In international research a fourth area is also common: specifically peri-urban rural areas. These are places with a growing population largely employed in the tertiary sector outside the area. The residents often have medium-to-high income levels and are

located close to a relatively densely populated town. Although these types of (leafy suburban) areas do exist in the three countries studied here, they are not common, and we were unable to find ethnographic studies of education in relation to them.

Methodology: from ethnography to meta-ethnography

As stated earlier the research used for the present article is mainly meta-ethnographic. It has involved two things in particular. The first was to identify research that examined education ethnographically, meaning *in situ* through long-term observations and involvement intended to re-theorise education from the bottom up, based on long-term engagement and multiple methods of data production. Beach (2017) describes this research as normally involving the following:

- The direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher in everyday life
- Learning from the activities of participants and interactions with them in context
- A focus on a particular case in depth or a strictly limited number of such cases
- High status given the accounts of participants' perspectives
- A spiral of data collection, hypothesis building and theory testing
- Examining relationships between macro- and micro-sociological perspectives

This kind of research is particularly strong in providing details from within everyday contexts and interactions that may be downplayed or ignored by other research. It also situates "ordinary" people and their life stories at the nexus of history and biography, which, as Corbett (2015a) suggests, is an important strategy for shifting our understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of educational processes towards a participant perspective.

Meta-ethnography tries to make use of this research by examining the products from a number of specifically focused ethnographies. It is an example of what the anthropologist of education Margret Eisenhart (2017) has recently referred to as a multi-scale analysis, which involves searching for and identifying patterns in cultural processes described in individual ethnographic case studies, with the intention of producing broad generalisations based on the findings and products of fine-grained local investigations. In the present instance this has involved the following five steps:

(1) Identifying a relevant sample of ethnographic research products that express interest in questions of educational justice in rural spaces.
(2) Reading these texts carefully to identify their main concepts.
(3) Checking the relevance of each concept, first within and then across the individual studies to identify possible links between them.
(4) Analysing the links using theories of spatial justice as a foundation for identifying themes and patterns in terms of cultural processes.
(5) Making a general claims narrative about these processes.

Defining the focus of the synthesis and locating relevant studies formed the first key steps. Tables A1–4 below present an outcome overview. They include lists of the

analysed ethnographic research (Table A1) and presentations of Nordic and international reference texts that have been consulted but have not actively driven the analysis (Tables A2 and A3).

The next step was the meta-analysis itself. This involved reading the selected ethnographic research (Table A1), identifying key concepts, and producing thematised descriptions of them. These were then explored for possible overarching ideas about educational and spatial justice in the three countries. These themes, subthemes and ideas were used to try to generate a line-of-argument narrative, which then forms the main outcome from the research process. Nordic and international research (Tables A2 and A3) and two previous meta-ethnographies in this field (Table A4) were used for triangulation purposes.

The identified line of argument has been classified under two subtitles. These are (1) Marginalisation and spatial justice and (2) Urban and rural differences and continuities. They are presented below followed by a discussion of some of the main points.

Marginalisation and spatial justice

As described in the ethnographies in Table A1, both Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish government authorities have recognised the need to protect and provide key services to local communities and to consider local schools as valuable resources. However, recent turns towards market politics in education seem to have challenged these commitments. For instance, in Finnish rural research the dwindling availability of schooling in sparsely populated areas has been noted, along with the weakening of local school networks and the closing down of small village schools (cf. Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Tedre & Pöysä, 2015), which has been remarkable in Finnish society since the global recession in the early 1990s (Käyhkö, 2016). Even vital rural schools in Finland have been closed down since the elimination of state subsidies in 2006 and the decentralisation of state power in favour of municipalities (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2009; Harinen, 2015; Käyhkö, 2016).

With the exception of Denmark this tendency to close many small local schools has also been noted in the Nordic context in general. For example, Tomi Kiilakoski's research, conducted in the rural areas of the Barents region, points out that the network of secondary and especially vocational education is gradually centring on big cities and forcing young people to move away from their home regions (Kiilakoski, 2016). Recent budget cuts are further aggravating this situation. Åberg-Bengtsson (2009) and Solstad (2009) have also considered these issues in Sweden, Norway and beyond. As Farrugia (2014) did later, they described this situation as leading to an obligational mobility in education as a social imperative in many rural areas that reflects material inequalities and symbolic hierarchies between these areas and others.

Economic pressure and the structure of the labour market and educational opportunities were identified as the primary cause of new conditions of mobility (Solstad, 2009). However, school closure is an ongoing question for many, if not almost all, small schools in sparsely populated areas (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009). And whilst mobility can be a resource for some, it is not so for all. Travelling long distances to school always has a negative impact on student health (Kvam, 2013; Solstad, 2009) and of course, those who already suffer from some kind of mobility challenge, such as a physical disability,

are the most negatively affected (Kiilakoski, 2016). Moreover school closures in rural regions mean there will be an increase in urbanised commuting patterns and significant differences in school choice possibilities between and across rural and urban municipalities.

Kiilakoski (2016) categorises the imperative of mobility in daily distances, youth cultural distances, the impact of leaving on peer and family relations and the necessity of leaving as a personal task. This research points out that many young people are basically forced to move to urban areas owing to the unavailability of education and employment in sparsely populated areas (Johansson, 2017; Rönnlund, Rosvall, & Johansson, 2017; Rosvall, 2017; Vaattovaara, 2015)). But researchers have also noted that the educational system in the cities might even require distancing oneself from one's cultural background in order to be successful (Lanas, 2011).

This is a well-known feature in and component of education and social reproduction (at least since Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) and was identified in urban educational ethnography in respect to issues of class, race and gender in England in the 1980s by, amongst others, Mac An Ghail (1988); in respect to class and gender in England and Finland by Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma (2000); and in Norway by Arnesen (2002). It affects people from rural and certain peri-urban metropolitan areas particularly harshly (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Beach, 2017; Johansson, 2017), through the diminishing possibilities of educational choice and the difficulties of positive association with a school culture (Arnesen, 2002; Rajander, 2010).

Territorially stigmatised areas have been seriously affected by this hammer of this kind of spatial inequality, according to Borelius (2010) and Sernhede (2007), which has also been exacerbated by market politics in recent years (Bunar, 2008, 2010). There are gaps between those who succeed in school and those who do not, and these gaps are widening and becoming more spatially concentrated around particular types of places and regions in Sweden (Beach, 2017; Beach, Dovemark, Schwartz, & Öhrn, 2013; Borelius, 2010; Öhrn, 2011, 2012; Schwartz, 2013), in Finland (e.g. Harju-Luukkainen, Vettenranta, Ouakrim-Soivio, & Bernelius, 2016), in Norway and in rural regions (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2009; Harinen, 2015; Käyhkö, 2016), where more students than ever now leave compulsory school without full qualifications (Arnesen, Lahelma, Lundahl, & Öhrn, 2014; Bakken & Elstad, 2012).

Finland is again interesting to consider here. Despite its highly mediatised success in the PISA rankings, Finland shows the largest gap in the OECD countries between achievements and school satisfaction by region, and its dropout and unemployment figures are noted as particularly high in poorer economic and sparsely populated areas (Salmela-Aro, 2012). Borelius (2010), Lundberg (2015), Lindbäck and Sernhede (2013) and Trondman, Taha, and Lund (2012) all identify this tendency in Sweden as well, and thus as Egelund and Laustsen (2006) suggest, we have to consider that there may also be some common trends in these respects in the Nordic countries (also Arnesen et al., 2014).

Four clear themes characterising these developments have emerged in previous research (Beach, 2017; Beach et al., 2013). These themes have been derived specifically from investigations in peri-urban metropolitan regions, but they can also be seen in a slightly refracted sense in the research on education in rural areas too (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Solstad, 2009). The themes are (1) territorial stigmatisation, (2)

material hollowing out and social deprivation, (3) the flourishing of discourses of cultural deficits in specific places; and (4) the linking of these discourses to describe the people from these places in ways that can dramatically affect their social and educational life opportunities (Schwartz, 2013).

However the above investigations also connect to a further point. This is namely the creative responses of young people whose lives and life-spaces have been ethnographically shared and reported on, where it has been very clear that the young people from the areas studied were far more creative and capable of learning than they were portrayed as in official educational political discourse, the media and formal school statistics (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Beach et al., 2013; Öhrn, 2012). Moreover, not only did these channels fail to acknowledge the abilities of these young people or give any significantly positive recognition to them or the places they came from (Beach, 2017), the reverse was the case. Statistics showed the students to be educational failures and policies described their failures in terms of shortcomings in the places they came from and the people in those places (Lindbäck & Sernhede, 2013: Lundberg, 2015; Schwartz, 2013). These disparaging kinds of discourses have also been taken up in international research. For instance, in rural Canadian areas Corbett (2015a, 2015b)) showed that official policy recommendations for children and youth were based on defective views both of locations and of the individuals in them, whereas the actual performances of youth in the schools concerned were predominantly positive.

Urban and rural differences and continuities

One thing we have found through this meta-ethnography and have described so far is that rural and some peri-urban metropolitan regions do tend to suffer spatial injustice. According to ethnographic studies, the people in these areas as a rule recognise this injustice and want to take societal action to make something positive out of their school opportunities. They show great interest and engagement in matters and concerns of their local school, and they are also found to be more than capable of contributing to innovative education alternatives that are of mutual advantage to learners, schools and their communities. However, these characteristic are not always given attention in official policy, which often seems to be based instead on a notion of deficiency concerning the places in question.

Students in rural and peri-urban schools are in fact quite conscious of these matters and consistently point to power relations which they, as youths living in particular areas, have experienced, and that suggest to them that they are not only seen, but also treated as subordinate to people elsewhere (Öhrn, 2012; Schwartz, 2013; Trondman et al., 2012). Yet at the same time their social relationships with others seem to be difficult for them to understand in sociological terms such as class and gender.

Particularly in rural areas family relations over generations are considered to be more visible and they often take precedence over class, which seems to represent more of an abstract category. People in the local area know whose daughter or son you are, and even who your grandparents are and these identifications are used in different situations to explain and talk about educational and social differences rather than social class (Holm, 2008). However, social class has also more seldomly been analysed in rural

studies than in urban, and thus its importance in rural contexts might be underestimated.

The position of schools in the neighbourhoods to which they belong is also useful to consider here. Sometimes a locale will be recognised as containing highly valued spaces, and rural schools in particular often position themselves by means of material and social references to their surroundings (Johansson, 2017). Rural school teaching has been explicitly identified as connected with local values, history, traditions and labour markets. For instance, students are given assignments that target the local labour market, and local assets are promoted as being valuable in terms of sustainability. Research conducted in Finland and Norway has highlighted village schools as producing and maintaining social and cultural capital for the communities of which they are a part (Autti & Hyry-Beihammer, 2014; Kvalsund, 2009). Making links of these kinds is very rare in peri-urban metropolitan schools, where the outside-school spaces are almost always only referred to as a threat to educational performances (Lundberg, 2015; Schwartz, 2013) and are widely seen as essentially hyper-ghettoised places (Beach, 2017; Öhrn, 2012).

These differences do not mean, however, that the schools in the sparsely populated/ rural and peri-urban areas are always positioned either positively on the one hand or negatively on the other compared to urban and/or peri-urban area schools. In fact, in both cases there are many examples in which pupils/students and teachers present their schools and their neighbourhood in rather appreciative terms in comparison to how others describe them, despite the presence quite often of statistically very poor school results (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Beach, 2017; Sernhede, 2007). Concerning rural areas there is an interesting example of this from Sogn og Fjordane, a county in western Norway. This area and its schools have been researched in a co-operative project involving five Norwegian universities (University of Agder et al., 2014). The results show that the students in the area have high-level results in relation to their social background despite this part of the country having low-economic development. The area itself is also appreciated. The people there jokingly refer to themselves as lucky losers.

The research also shows some criticism by rural and peri-urban youths however. Concerning rural youth these often refer to common urban values, directions and norms, and how these are manifest in education and in society at large, whilst young people of colour from territorially stigmatised areas describe how prevailing social conditions make them feel like foreigners outside their neighbourhoods; they notice that their treatment is different from that accorded people from other places (Lindbäck & Sernhede, 2013; Lundberg, 2015). Youth from rural areas thus criticise the urban lack of understanding of rural material conditions, including people's dependency on nature for food, livelihood and well-being to supplement the often rather modest rural incomes and extended economic demands from education centralisation (Johansson, 2017).

These tensions can be understood both historically and geographically (Kvalsund, 2009; Solstad, 2009). The Nordic countries have many areas where there are few school choices (Bunar, 2008, 2010), as this is largely an urban phenomenon. Market policies seem to be ill-fitting with respect to local conditions and needs. Spatial inequalities have intensified following the introduction of free school choice (Bunar, 2008, 2010; Öhrn,

2011), due to identifications of potentially rich market cores for making worthwhile economic investments (Beach, 2017). At the same time local people are not simply lying down like sacrificial lambs to the contexts and circumstances. They recognise the challenges which their areas have to deal with and they also value their neighbourhoods and try hard to obtain value from the educational opportunities offered by the schools there.

Discussion

The concept of Nordic has been used to denote both an identity and a model of a peaceful social democracy in which all, regardless of socio-economic background, gender and sexuality, or place of dwelling, are meant to be treated equally (Öhrn & Weiner, 2017). But on reflection we have to ask whose interests are really reflected in and protected by the Nordic model when inequities and uneven value appreciations such as the ones we have described continue to exist? In this article we have highlighted and discussed points from the ethnographic studies we have read and analysed. We have particularly emphasised the spatial and geographical aspects of inequity in educational systems, using the notion of spatial justice (Soja, 2010). We have found that there is a problem of metro-centricity and that spatial injustice seems to be apparent to a significant degree. We also found that the market politics recently introduced into schools are having a worsening effect on inequalities, particularly for people in rural and economically poor peri-urban metropolitan areas (Beach, 2017).

Common arguments relating to these issues often point to the Nordic education model as having been transformed in recent decades from unified systems (particularly at the 6–16 common compulsory school level) with high policy ambitions for full social inclusion and equity (Antikainen, 2006) to systems that are now run on a decentralised basis with increased individual responsibility and freedom of school choice for education consumers. Denmark has always had some measure of free choice in these respects. The goals for education are set by national governments that are then realised by public and private school providers based on competitive resource allocations related to recruitment and financing through voucher systems (Lundahl, 2016; Wiborg, 2013). This is the same in all areas, both rural and urban, but it is having uneven effects with escalating inequities. A critical spatial perspective allows an understanding of the materialisation of these processes in different geographical contexts.

The research we have done here both confirms and disputes this argument. Equity in terms of the quality and availability of educational choices is aggravated by market politics, and this has a bearing on concepts and the possibilities for social and spatial justice. But market politics did not cause these inequalities. They were there all along, if at more tolerable levels. Territorial stigmatisation and isolation have always been characteristics in the Nordic policial geographic and sociological landscape but with bearable material conditions. Things have changed drastically in these respects in recent years (Beach, 2017).

A recent analysis of the Nordic situation by Lundahl (2016) supports this idea, at least indirectly. As Lundahl suggests, the Nordic countries still show some evidence of having more equal provision of education at all levels than many in many other countries, but there is a part of the history of the model, along with a number of

significant recent changes, that make it doubtful whether we can speak of a model in a common interest. There have always been differences between different areas and the schools in them, and although the Nordic educational systems still demonstrate a number of common inclusive traits and continued extensive public funding, decentralisation and various neo-liberal policy measures have been applied which have undermined aims for equity. There is a "disquieting trend" today from extended social and ethnic divisions and an increasing gap in educational performances between rural and urban areas (Lundahl, 2016, p. 9). However, what is also apparent, not the least in the ethnographic studies we have read for the present analysis, is that the introduction of market politics, which was presented as an economically effective and efficient solution to redeem educational justice and inequality, was a totally (and perhaps even deliberately) false policy promise. Indeed, as suggested elsewhere, such as by Bunar (2008, 2010)), and as pointed out in Beach (2017), market politics and the privatisation of services have significantly added to spatial inequalities in educational availability and consumption for many individuals and groups, instead of providing affordable and effective welfare solutions for these already experienced difficulties (Beach, 2017; Schwartz, 2013; Wiborg, 2013).

Recent ethnographic research has concentrated especially on Sweden, as is the case in the present article. Sweden is at one extreme with respect to expressions concerning the value of school choice and market competition (Wiborg, 2013), whilst in Norway and Finland, plans to initiate market reforms similar to those in Sweden have been more restrained and in a way therefore also perhaps less interesting (Arnesen et al., 2014). However, some decentralisation and public choice has developed even there, for instance in so-called profile schools and classes, which middle-class parents are able to use whilst the lower socio-economic classes become subject to the negative effects of these choices (Arnesen et al., 2014; Kosunen, 2014; Rajander, 2010; Seppänen, 2006).

Through relations between class and spatiality and rural availabilities of choice options (which are primarily urban phenomena), the effects are also substantial with respect to spatial justice (Johansson, 2017). In urban school districts local politicians have been described as fearing that wealthy parents would move their children to other schools, leaving their school with a reduced number of particularly high-performing students and consequently, at risk of reduced enrolments and budgets (Öhrn, 2011). These things have affected the micro-politics of schools through such decisions as not to mix children from various areas in classes despite the criticism of this idea from both students and teachers.

As described by Öhrn (2012), young people from territorially stigmatised urban areas, but now also, according to the present review, rural ones (Åberg-Bengtsson, 2009; Solstad, 2009), are often characterised on the basis of local identities that are used as explanations for educational failure and other difficulties (University of Agder et al., 2014). Indeed, such conceptualisations are at the very core of current political decisions and policies about pupils who need help with language and motivation or because of their said uneducated and educationally uninterested parents (Schwartz, 2013).

However, these pupils, who are socially constructed as impossible, failing and hopeless (Lundberg, 2015), certainly do not appear as hopeless and impossible by ethnographic research. Rather, the reverse is the case, such that as also summarised by Beach (2017) the "hopeless label" seems to have been both ideologically and politically

generated in order to doubly localise (conceptually and spatially) the difficulties of performance in a particular spatially related way as a consequential geography. The youth concerned clearly did not fit this description. As Wacquant (2008) observes, aggressive stigmatisation now even affects the Nordic societies, which were previously described as resisting the rise of advanced marginality. Official policies simply do not usually match local conditions and needs. In fact, as suggested by Åberg-Bengtsson (2009) in relation to small schools and rural areas, along with Beach (2017) and Sernhede (2007), concerning territorially stigmatised peri-urban metropolitan areas, current policies may stubbornly distort issues, impose new problems on communities and their schools, or add to existing ones. The key themes connected with this problem have been identified for the present article:

(1) Marginalisation, spatial injustice and the problems of policy inaccuracy. As suggested by Corbett (2015a, 2015b)), people in marginalised places (and the places themselves) are often stigmatised, blamed for their problematic conditions and treated differently to people in other areas
(2) Discourses of cultural deficiency concerning the people from places which are suffering (Corbett, 2015a) which in turn can lead to an (often further)
(3) Material hollowing out of these regions, not least through the movement of commodified labour opportunities to other areas, thereby creating even harsher times for these communities to endure

The creation and/or exacerbation of hard times in difficult areas is particularly problematic in the new era of market politics, according to Beach (2017), as it adds to the difficulties market investors have in identifying return value possibilities in the areas concerned, and without recognised return values, investors will, according to the logic of the market, not invest. However, there is also a further – and highly significant – point emerging from the present investigation. It is that as literally all of the ethnographic research examined makes very clear, people in the areas researched were far more creative and committed to education than they were portrayed as being in political discourse, in the media, and in formal school statistics. This makes the said market politics into something that is not only unfair, but also a significantly spatially unjust consequential geography as well.

Conclusions

The inhabitants from remote, sparsely populated rural areas and peri-urban metropolitan suburbs are often referred to as having educational difficulties and deficiencies due to their backgrounds, family attitudes towards education and sometimes their culture and that these things lead to the educational nequities they find themselves confronted by. However, the research examined for this article suggests that this is not the case. Instead, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) suggested earlier in a French context, the main problem seems to be the spatial justice in Soja's sense (2010), which is very often socially and geographically distinct, with injustices and inequalities being often concentrated in particular kinds of places, rather than being evenly dispersed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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