



## ROLE OF FAIRY TALES RECEPTION IN DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING OF PRIMARY SCHOOL LOWER GRADE STUDENTS

**Želimir Dragić<sup>i</sup>**

Faculty of Philosophy,  
Teacher Education Study Programme,  
Banja Luka University,  
Bosnia and Herzegovina

### **Abstract:**

Continual development of critical thinking of students is one of the crucial tasks of efficient teaching. Without constant encouragement of students' critical thinking, there is no gaining their intellectual independence in the process of acquiring, deepening, expanding and creative application of knowledge. The paper explicated possibilities of using fairy tales reception for the purposes of encouraging and developing critical thinking of primary school lower grade students. Dynamics of fairy tales narration, their overall structure, but also the development of this literary genre (from the folk genre, over the authorial one strongly relying on the oral, to the authorial with much more authenticity) are extremely compatible with the outline that the literary reception theory defined for reception process. In addition, the reception process that we formulate methodically in teaching (forming expectations' horizon, presenting predictions and assumptions, reading and assessing aesthetic distance) has been recognized as a framework system of critical thinking: evocation, understanding of meaning and reflection.

**Keywords:** the reception theory, fairy tales reception, critical thinking, a student, mother tongue and literature teaching

### **1. Introduction – on the literary reception theory**

The term reception originates from the Latin word *receptio*, and it means acceptance or a possibility of acceptance. From the aspect of the theory of literature, this would mean

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [zelimir.dragic@ff.unibl.org](mailto:zelimir.dragic@ff.unibl.org)

reader's acceptance, receiving, understanding, experiencing and evaluating artistic elements in direct contact with literary work, without any intermediaries. Scientific reflection on reception of literary works began only in the sixties of the twentieth century. And until then, it was a glossed over and avoided topic. Since then, the relationship between an author, literary work and its consumer has been established as communication and aesthetic reception in many literary theories. The literary reception, apart from accepting and experiencing the work (which are in the focus), also refers to students' independent perceiving of the work value, as well as critical and research action of students.

Creator of reception theory is Hans Robert Jauss. Later, Jauss's teaching was accepted by another member of the Constance School, Wolfgang Iser. Jauss's reception theory (1982) quickly caught attention of the language and literature teaching theoreticians because of the determinants on literary text in which the readers override the so-called undetermined points in accordance with their readers' experience and affinity, and also with the time they live in. *"Jauss has revitalized the role of a reader and determined its dynamic character, and thus has been given the possibility of processual and eventual perception of complex relationships in a triangle author-work-reader, as a factor that will be a binding element of aesthetic and historical dimensions of literature"* (Vučković, 2006, p. 10). A new literary text is not a novelty for a reader that appears in the information gap. On the contrary, the reader will receive the text on the basis of already existing abundant knowledge, the structure of which can be accurately identified within three key components: distinction between poetic and everyday language, relationship between the themes and forms, knowledge of literary genres and types (Vučković, 2006). A new reading should result in determining aesthetic distance – a novelty that the literary work accomplished. To make the reader able to identify the aesthetic distance before, during and after the reading, he/she should think (co)creatively and critically. The theory of reception thoroughly describes the very act of reading (Iser, 1978) as well as the role of a reader in that process (Iser, 1974).

Literature teaching in lower grades of primary school brings into focus the dialogue between literary work and a student as a reader. It places it before learning of history and theory of literature, and thus also modernizes these two important questions: first, the question of reception and action of literary text onto students in accordance with their age and conditions in which they receive the literary work, and, second, the question of emotional and rational abilities (observation, imagination, empathy, inference and judgement, critical and creative thinking...) through which literary text becomes the subject of aesthetic enjoyment and knowledge (Bajić, 2007). Reception gives an active role to the reader to create new meaning of text depending on

their personal, social, and cultural values (Kemelbekova, Shengelbaeva, Mukasheva, Kopbayeva, 2014) and to build reception experience based on their own conscience (Yanling Shi, 2013). Readers' reception and its buoyancy enhance the literary text, giving it a new co-creative dimension. Through reception of literary work, students are actually in an active constructive-critical and co-creative relationship with it, which requires critical production (Pavlović Babić, Krnjajić, Pešić Matijević, Gošović, 2001) as a reception product. Students' approach to independent viewing of literary text value is not possible until reception process has been performed and the text has not triggered them for emotional-thinking responses and mutual coaction. The meaning and essence of literary work reception is in its function to continually deepen and enrich readers' cognition.

Reception theory has significantly stimulated the role of subjectivity in studying literary work, allowing readers' responses to be important for determining the value of the text. This theory activated readers' response to text and additions to the points of indeterminateness. Such readers' response (partly filling in) has not been generally accepted in the literature science or in methodology of teaching, i.e. it has not been taken without reservation. Readers' co-creative intervention in the teaching process is desirable today and we encourage it, but with great extent of caution and with careful consideration of integrity of literary text as an aesthetic object.

Through emphasizing subjective responsiveness, the receptionist theoretical structure has become important for teaching since it allows the principle of individualization and it permits linking of text to students' life experiences (of course - and previous literary knowledge). Some contemporary ways, such as cognitive criticism, are even more supportive of readers' involvement. Thus, *"cognitive criticism, supported by neuroscience, has shown that the brain, through recently discovered mirror neurons, reacts to fictional worlds (descriptions, events, characters) as if they were real"* (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 8). A number of more recent works supports the thesis that we really respond to fiction as if it was a different reality (Zunshine 2006; Keen 2007; Vermeule 2010). Since *"our involvement in fiction is a natural activity, directed towards understanding of the world"* (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 9), we observe fiction reading as an integral part of the learning process and we recognize the possibility of critical thinking development in this reading. Reception is a guide in further contemplative-critical activation and literary co-creation of primary school lower grade readers. Literary text influences the reader's taste and their attitudes, stimulates sensibility and develops abilities of comprehension, judgment and aesthetic evaluation.

## 2. Literary-artistic values of fairy tales and their reception in primary school lower grades

Fairy tale is a very old literary genre, and what makes it particularly important in children's literature is its timeless acceptance. Here we are counting on the fact that both folk and classic authorial fairy tales today have almost the same versions as they had a few hundred years ago, and the children happily listen to them and read them. We regard the classic fairy tales to be the stories such as Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Little Red Riding Hood and others (Zipes, 2006, p. 210). Surely, apart from these versions, there are many others, altered and adapted for picture books, comics, films, etc. The fact that fairy tales have survived many centuries and that they are still read (and watched) today supports its importance for adapting readers to the environment (Zipes, 2006). Today, it is almost impossible to observe a fairy tale in a simplified manner as a typical story from fantasy literature. There are many types and subtypes, different versions and variants in which even a category marvellous (Vuković, 1996) is not unambiguous. What is certain and important for studying fairy tales in the context of critical thinking development is that *"fairy tales have always been "true" metaphorical communication and reflections of personal and general experiences, customs of their times, and civilization process"* (Zipes, 2006, p. 42). The name fairy tale (Serbian, *bajka*) draws the roots from the Old Slavic language heritage. The word *bajati* (English, *to incant*) means to put charms on, cast spells and fictionalize. A fairy tale is something, that even Vuk<sup>ii</sup> used to say, *"what cannot be"* (Milinković, 2012). "Over the years fairy tales were associated with untruths or "stupid" female stories" (Zipes, 2006, p. 52), which has reproached the true value of this literary genre. Mythos that dominates over logos in fairy tales has a strong influence, especially in childhood. However, it seems that the need for mythos does not go away with growing up, so that *"through fantasy we have always understood the meaning of the world, and not through reason"* (Zipes, 2008, p. 1). Popularity of fairy tales is probably in the deepest connection with that they are those *"fantasies about fulfilling wishes in which characters get what they want and are happy with that"* (Nodelman, 2008, p. 81). In that sense, their educational role could be discussed, but this discussion was in advance condemned to impossibility of obtaining a definite answer. If a fairy tale truly offers only idealized fulfilment of wishes and separates a child from reality, then it is not a suitable read for learning perseverance and struggle, understanding limitations and obstacles, etc. It is also a fact that in classic fairy tales,

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<sup>ii</sup> Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (Tršić, 1787 – Vienna, February 1864) was the first [Serbian philologist](#) and [linguist](#), reformer of the [Serbian language](#), collector of folk poetry and author of the first Serbian language dictionary. Vuk is the most significant persona of the Serbian literature in the first half of the nineteenth century.

many experts see the mirror of society that nurtures passivity and obedience. Thus, fairy tales such as Cinderella or Snow White “*can function as confirmation of safe passivity*” (Nodelman, 2008, p. 48), which socially superior classes can use as a factor for preservation of established order.

Though it most commonly speaks about good and evil, a fairy tale tries to conceal the evil by placing it outside of human community. From the earliest human community in which it was conceived, to the present day, a fairy tale represents an indispensable basis on the growing up path of a child. Since the beginning of its journey, fairy tale has been embracing countless human preoccupations, specifics of time and space, beliefs and customs reflected in various colours of fairy-tale motifs (Krešić, 2014).

Many authors have emphasized the role and importance of a fairy tale for development of the children's thinking. It speaks in its distinct language which merges the actual and fantastic world, good and evil, it helps a child (a student) to overcome fears that the adult world evokes in them. What is almost certain is that a child, by reading fairy tales, learns about some relationships between good and evil, justice and injustice, it learns about human qualities such as boldness, perseverance, hoping, believing in good and similar. “*Fairy tales enrich the life of a child and give it a magic quality precisely because a child does not know exactly how the stories performed their miracle over them*” (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 33). They surprise with their miracles and combinations, play children's imagination and thoughts and bring them to life, provide space for children's fantasy and playfulness, stimulate creativity and allow the child to critically relate to them (both in the period when their parents read fairy tales before their bedtime and during the classes of literature teaching). “*Through fairy tales, a man speaks with the intention to reveal himself and the accompanying elements of life, disclose troubles, initiate happiness even though it is short-lived and the road to it is uncertain*” (Smiljković, 2013, p. 17). Children who did not listen to stories and fairy tales in their childhood have remained deprived of their personal emotional experience and imagination (Zipes, 2010), but also of a subtle way of getting acquainted with the values, norms and attitudes of the community in which they are growing up (Vasilj, Visković, 2014). “*By its artistic value a fairy tale enables development of students' imagination and actually it sharpens their attitudes towards the right and wrong, the condemning of bad human behaviours and sympathy towards human nobility*” (Milutinović, 2003, p. 119). A fairy tale is a complex narrative composed of a series of cognitive-conflicting motifs out of which the main one must have the character of a wonderful one. In fairy tales lives a whole world made of unreal and unnatural beings such as: serpents, giants and colossi, elves, fairies, dragons, witches and wizards. In addition to the existence of these characters, a man is

inevitably in the centre of a dynamic plot. In order for him to succeed and survive in such a complex world, he must have exceptional abilities and powers (to be stronger than a dragon, faster than a bird...). In fairy tales there is overlapping of the past, the present, and the future.

Due to its all particulars, the teachers should create adequate conditions and methodological structures for reception of a fairy tale. A teacher should diligently prepare in order to challenge, and then determine the students' reception readiness and direct it on independent experiencing of the work, while respecting individual reception abilities of the students. Since fairy tales are perceived and understood on the basis of students' previous knowledge and experiences, the teacher determines abilities of the student in terms of this.

The language of fairy tales is often a source of figurativeness; hence, some fairy tales are not read before the children reach the stage of abstract operations, observed in the context of Piaget's theory (Piaget, Inhelder, 1978). Through active and creative literary teaching of primary school, lower grade students, it is necessary to prepare the students for reading skills based on coaction of sensual and logical cognition and emotional-rational engagement. Only strong reception of fairy tales and deep aesthetic-critical experience further ensures durability of retaining their world and their meanings in students' consciousness.

### **3. The concept and essence of critical thinking in teaching**

In critical thinking *"for each setting arguments and counterarguments are presented, that is, a well-supported reasoning; an opinion that is not stereotypical..."* (Pedagoški leksikon, 1996, p. 254). Critical thinking is multifacetedly linked with other types of more complex thinking (creative, logical). *"Critical thinking is a rational reflective thinking focused on deciding on what to believe in or what to do"* (Ennis, 1993, p. 180). Fostering of criticism is an essential component of gaining intellectual independence of students in the process of acquiring knowledge. *"Critical thinking is an opinion of higher order or well-supported opinion that enables students attentive reading, analytical discussion and clarity of exploring thoughts in a written form"* (Peko, 2001, p. 121). It is a fundamental cognitive process, and its studying is one of the important missions of contemporary education (da Silva Almeida, Rodrigues Franco, 2011). Critical reasoning and inference are developed when the students distinguish contradictions, recognize false assumptions, discover implicit ideas and identify absurd situations (Ilić, 2012). Critical thinking of primary school lower grade students is particularly pronounced when they are in a position to assess independently and bring their own judgement of the value. Such an opinion is the

ability to understand and verify the read, to provide critical reflection or to dispute it, but also to think freely about the read.

Thus, critical thinking can be viewed as *“an independent, active and organised cognitive process aimed at increasing the degree of understanding of the subject of knowledge”* (Mikanović, 2014, p. 241). *“In order to develop the critical thinking ability in students, it is necessary to keep freeing their opinion of egocentrism, and subsequently also of sociocentrism”* (Ilić, 2012). Critical thinking implies that students sometimes go further beyond active search for information and do something more: merge and combine what they learn with their own experience and the previously learned, draw conclusions, construct new examples, imagine and propose new solutions for potential problems, investigate causes and consequences, etc. *“The critical thinking skills can be grouped into two large areas - a critical reception area (reading and writing) and a critical production area (independent or guided production)”* (Rajčević, 2014, p. 368). Facione (2011) points out that there are six intellectual abilities in the fundament of critical thinking, namely: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. This form of students' thinking induces creativity and autonomy, but also a sense of success when experiencing achieving a solution for particular problem. The basis for development of critical thinking of students' is the development of decentring in thinking, i.e. the ability to consider an occurrence or an object not only from one's own angle, but from a multitude of other angles and from different positions.

#### **4. Development and encouragement of critical thinking of primary school lower grade students in literature teaching**

The Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking (RWCT) Programme is theoretically based on the receptionist approach to text (Crawford et al., 2005). Development of critical thinking is viewed in the context of learning that passes through three stages: evocation, understanding of meaning and reflection. Learning new content (concepts or processes communicated in linear or nonlinear text) goes through these three stages, and a student is in the position of an active individual that in certain phases performs the following in this order:

1. Evokes previous knowledge,
2. Understands new material in their context and
3. Reflectively thinks about the new knowledge, i.e. brings it in conjunction with the previously known.

Thinking critically in this context means *“to think about our own ideas and reasons that are essentially our points of view and to reflectively evaluate our ways of decision-making or problem solving”* (Crawford et al., 2005, p. 4). Accordingly, critical thinking implies a

triad structure of the cognitive process. Evocation, understanding of meaning and reflection are the elements of that structure, thus during the teaching *"much care has been taken on what an individual already knows (evocation), on how they understand the newly read material (understanding of meaning) and how they value the learned in terms of possibilities for inference, application, assessment, etc. (reflection)"* (Vučković, 2010, p. 219). Problem-based learning or problem solving is always related with cognitive engagement, and *"the link between the actual world and its fictional representation always creates a cognitive gap that requires engagement of numerous cognitive and metacognitive skills"* (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 27)

It is important to evaluate these decisions later, to assess their suitability, extensiveness and practical usability. In this way, students will better understand the subject of cognition, because new facts are given an adequate context. These facts are linked to the existing knowledge, their mutual relationship is established, and later their practical applicability and purposefulness is examined.

When we ask students to distinguish what is relevant from the irrelevant, to view the consequences, to express their doubts, to decenter, to infer and to classify, then we encourage them to think critically. *"Critical thinking of students of younger school age can and should be developed through referring students to thinking operations, but also through creative and research activities in which thinking activity of the student becomes expressed"* (Milenović, 2014, p. 383). A good teacher can contribute to the development of critical thinking by supporting and encouraging students' initiative, curiosity and independence. In addition, the teacher can stimulate the students' critical thinking through the freedom of expressing opinions and raising as many different questions and tasks as possible in teaching literature as possible.

Teacher's ability to predict, find and encourage effective forms of educational and training communication of students with the aesthetic world of literary work contributes in particular to the successful teaching of literature in younger school age. It is important to pay attention that the students do not fall into the trap of expressing their personal criticism and inadequate arguments instead of expressing critical thinking. In order to avoid this, before starting the work on specific topics, the teacher can determine which knowledge is necessary, what the students already know about it and what can this knowledge be related to. There are a number of creative exercises and techniques that stimulate and develop the critical thinking of students in lower grades of primary school. The questions asked within each technique are the key elements that encourage the students' critical thinking.

Encouraging critical thinking of primary school lower grade students lays foundations for the students' autonomy and rationality in reflection and sound criticism, which is particularly significant in contemporary circumstances, bearing in



mind that young people are faced with various challenges of contemporary life (Marin, Halpern, 2011). In order to develop and subsequently also encourage critical thinking of a student, it is necessary to encourage the students' spirit, to free ideas, to free their oral and written speech, to enable them to listen and accept somebody else's attitude and opinion, and to carefully explore and evaluate their arguments.

### **5. Reception of fairy tales in creative exercises as an aspect of encouraging critical thinking of primary school lower grade students**

Assimilation, empathizing and identification with the literary work are the reception processes of a receiver through which they experience and understand the text. *"Encouraged to have their own view and further develop artistic world of the literary work, such a student experiences reading not only as a teaching assignment, but also as a spiritual necessity and aesthetic enjoyment"* (Bajić, 2007, p. 148). Fairy tales are the favourite read of the primary school lower grade students (Vuković, 1996; Zipes, 2006) and this is why they need to be approached by respecting their inner and essential properties. This approach requires a good professional-creative activity of the teacher who needs to "unlock" a fairy tale first, i.e. to enable reception of the fairy tale, and then to encourage students to actively and creatively reflect on its sense and meaning and to reflect on it critically. There is no ready-made workflow that would lead the students to the level of thinking critically, but there is a certain set of circumstances and possibilities that can stimulate development of critical thinking of students.

Literary communication with fairy tales in literature teaching in primary school lower grades can be enhanced by functional-creative exercises through which the students' revelatory-creative action is directed, while developing the ability of critical thinking. Reading with predicting further action in literary text is one of the modes of thinking engagement of students and creative exercise that extraordinarily motivates students to interact with literary text. *"Prediction during reading is a factor that brings dynamics into the process itself. By placing hypothesis about the unread part of the text, the recipient intensifies their interest and engagement - they want to check whether their expectations have come true or not. Certainly, observed in the terms of reception, the work should not fully fit into readers' expectations - the unexpected part creates aesthetic value. Precisely that what surprises us during the reading, which we have not sensed, is the greatness determining the work as innovative"* (Vučković, 2010, p. 219). Reading in sequels with predicting can be categorized as creative reading, and *"creative reading involves revealing new ideas and links in the text, their application in new situations in different ways, wittiness in predicting new ideas and events, finding distant and unusual principles and relations between facts of different meaning"* (Ilić, 2013, p. 55). The second creative exercise, discussion on

the read literary work, is an exercise model directly linked with the critical attitude of students towards the values of the contents in the read literary text and perception of partially hidden meanings in it, which is achieved by critical reading of the text. Although many authors make rather convincing assumptions and assertions about what happens in interaction of the work and the reader during reading, the ones who, like Maria Nikolajeva, assert that we still do not know enough about *"the child's cognitive involvement in fiction or influence that fiction has on young readers"* (Nikolajeva, 2014, p. 11) are not uncommon. However, the very assumption that we are creating a mental image from fictional, linguistically transmitted representation, the image that is further operable as if it were a part of an actual experience (Stockwell, 2002), allows us to view the experience of reading - not identically - but nonetheless in accordance with other learning experiences.

These two exercises enable us to also encourage those uninterested students to participate actively and give their contribution to the lessons. When it comes to preparing teachers for the school reading or specifically for analysing the fairy tale *Black Lamb*, applying the reading exercise with predicting further action in literary text and discussion on literary work through problem questions, it is necessary for the teacher to parse the fairy tale, i.e. divide it into certain number of logical units. These units should be determined based on the dynamics and chronology of important events in the fairy tale. In our case, the Black Lamb fairy tale is best divided into four units. The first unit begins from the part when the emperor's son swore that he would not marry until he dreams of a girl who will tell him that she will be his, and that she will give him a son with a shimmering star on his forehead, and it ends with the act when the girl gets engaged to the emperor's son. The second unit begins by announcing the good news of the young man to the emperor and preparing for the celebration, and it ends with the news from the sisters that his fiancée escaped home. The beginning of the third unit refers to the departure of the young man to the mountains in search of his fiancée, and it ends with the scene how they both fall dead to the ground. The last (fourth) unit begins by reappearance of the woman into the young man father's dream and by giving him instructions on how to rescue his son and daughter-in-law, and it ends with the wedding and birth of the son with a golden star on his forehead. Under each unit (sequel) there is a table that may look like this (three tables are needed).

**Table 1:** Possible outline of the work table for students

What do you think will happen next in the fairy tale?	State your evidence and convictions for such a prediction?	What has actually (in essence) happened?

Before reading the fairy tale, the teacher should explain the sequence of teaching activities. A few minutes is enough for reading each unit, taking into account the silent reading speed of a fifth grade student. After reading the first unit, students express their attitude (prognosis or prediction) by filling out the first two columns in the given table. Then they turn the second page and read the second fairy tale unit. After reading the second unit too, they return to the previous unit and fill in the third column in the first table and then complete the first and second columns below the second unit. They work the same way to the very end of the fairy tale reading. As we see, the students read the fairy tale by parts (in sequels) and received it partially. After the students' reading in sequels, it is desirable that the fairy tale be read once again as a whole, because of its more complete reception. This can be done by the teacher or one of the students in the class. After these activities, the teacher discusses the task that they had during the reading with the students. Accordingly, the students read the given tables individually as they filled them out. Opinions, predictions and arguments that the students have written are jointly assessed. Upon the discussion and the students' assessment of the sequence and predicting events in the fairy tale, the teacher raises several problem questions:

1. How do you interpret the two older sisters' treatment of the youngest sister? Give an explanation!
2. What do you think how would the end of this fairy tale would look like if that same woman had not appeared in the emperor's dream?
3. In case that you expected a different end of this fairy tale, describe it and give an explanation. Why did you imagine it like that?

After that, the teacher opens the discussion, and the students answer questions, express their opinions and critical attitude towards certain details in the fairy tale that are the product of their own reception. The ability of students to read freely and receive the fairy tale during the literature teaching classes, to freely present their personal view and experience and defend it tolerantly in front of fellow students in the classroom through conversation and exchange of arguments, contributes to intensifying the development of critical thinking and the co-creative relationship of the student towards

the literary work (in this case the fairy tale). The experiences that a fairy tale evokes in emotional and thinking layers of a student's personality represent powerful emotional and thought triggers of further interpretation course of its analysis and interpretation. Through such receptive communication in literature teaching, the students of younger school age are enabled to acquire the key thoughts and messages that the literary work offers in an interesting way, while simultaneously developing their contemplative-critical and creative potentials and aesthetic-artistic sensitivities.

## 6. Conclusion

Reception of fairy tales in younger grades of primary school takes an important place in intensifying the development of critical thinking of students, forming positive personality traits and taking a humanistic attitude towards the world in which they live. Fairy tales run the students' fantasy, and by playing and bringing to life the children's imagination, they encourage self-engagement, creativity and critical attitude of students towards the literary-artistic complexity of elucidating the actual and possible social reality. This is why teachers' ability to predict, invent and encourage efficient and developmental-stimulating forms of educational-training communication of students with aesthetic values of fairy tales is very important in teaching literature in younger classes.

Through reception of fairy tales specifics, the lower grade students establish an individual-revelatory and communicative-constructive-critical relationship with them. This way, reception of fairy tales simultaneously inspires intense experience, contemplative-critical activation and literary co-creativity of younger school age students in literature teaching. There are creative exercises for this purpose, within which reception-revelatory and contemplative-critical activities of students in literature teaching are stimulated and directed. A quality application of creative exercises can improve efficiency of literature teaching in primary school lower grades which is reflected in a more complete reception of fairy tales and other texts, stimulation of more powerful experience, understanding, co-creativity, and contemplative-critical assessment of primary school lower grade students.

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