Supporting Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Youth Co-Production: An Exploration of Practitioner Views

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The UK Government's Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015), highlights the need for children and young people (CYP) to participate in decisions that affect their lives. However, concerns have been raised around failures to support those with SEND in participating effectively (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). In 2017, practitioners in the North West set up an interest group to explore practices around the participation and co-production with CYP with SEND, from which Participation Learning Events were subsequently created. Data from practitioners from two events, using World Café and storyboard methods led to the creation of *Principles of Co-Production: Practitioners' Perspectives* (see Figure 1) in order to fill the knowledge gap in this area, hoping these principles could be used to support their practice and that of others. The overarching principle includes the development of a co-production culture, which is supported by other principles of: understanding of co-production; developing engagement opportunities; accessibility and representation; evidence-based practice; creating sustainable systems; creating goals and assigning responsibility; reviewing goals and challenging practice; and sharing practice. It is hoped that these principles along with reflective questioning will support thoughtful discussions and, in turn, co-produced practices at individual and strategic levels. Research implications, limitations and areas for further research are considered.

Keywords: children/young people, special educational needs and disabilities, co-production, participation, voice of the child, youth work, educational psychology

Introduction

There is increasing interest in how we listen to and act upon the voice of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) following the SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015). Research highlights a variety of techniques and approaches to listening to children and young people on an individual level (Harding & Atkinson, 2009); however, there is little research into how we do this at a systemic level, such as how we develop and shape services and organisations.

In 2017, an interested party of practitioners came together in the North West to discuss how co-production was being implemented in their respective services and how ideas and practices could be shared. This led to the creation of the Regional SEND Co-production Steering Group and subsequently termly Participation Leaning Events for interested practitioners. The aims of the steering group and network events were: to support co-production at all levels; to set a programme of work; to influence policy and practice at local, regional and national level; and to identify and apply for funding where appropriate.

During two Participation Learning Events held in 2019, with support from a trainee educational psychologist at Manchester University, data was gathered from practitioners from local authorities, charities and organisations. Practitioners shared that they wished to find out what others were doing to support co-production with children and young people with SEND and what the facilitators and barriers were. They voiced the want to use this data to create principles that could be used as a foundation that provoked discussion between practitioners when supporting co-production.

Literature Review

Background and Legislation

Historically, it has been argued that children have been denied the right to make decisions about their lives (Cunningham, 1996). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) made participation a fundamental right of children (O'Donoghue et al., 2002). Articles 12, 13 and 14 state that children should have the opportunity to freely express their views on any matter affecting them and have their views considered (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). This concept is also referred to as a child's right to participation (Kellet, 2009; O'Donoghue et al., 2002). In England, this idea is supported by the Children and Families Act (2014), which stipulates the importance of the child in sharing their views and participating in decisions that affect their lives. The SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015) supports the co-creation and co-production of services and systems within local authorities, stating that local authorities must involve children and young people with SEND in the planning, publishing and reviewing of the Local Offer[1].

Definition of Co-Production

Despite the understanding that participation is necessary and mandated, how this is facilitated effectively or defined is still an area of limited knowledge. Participation itself is a contested concept, with queries around the extent to which participation is an active or passive process and whether it is enough to be present or if/how contributions must be acted upon (Kellett, 2010; Tisdall & Davis, 2004). Frederickson and Cline (2009) have proposed participation to be around the *principle* of a young person having the right to be heard but also the *practical* element of everyone being able to hear and act upon this information.

There is no clear consensus on what co-production entails (Brandsen et al., 2018). The SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015) suggests "Co-production" includes children, young people, parents/carers participating and having ownership in creating the Local Offer website. Within this research, co-production will be defined as "an equal relationship between people who use services and the people responsible for services. They work together from design to delivery, sharing strategic decision-making about policies, as well as decisions around the best ways to deliver services" (National Co-production Advisory Group, n.d., p. 1). This article considers that participation refers to the involvement of children and young people in decision-making, whereas co-production refers to the co-ownership within these decision-making processes.

Participation of Children and Young People

The right for children and young people to be heard within Article 12 of the UNCRC received the most controversy for fear it would undermine adult authority (Lundy, 2007; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). According to Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2004), this is because Article 12 is often violated and that children are given tokenistic opportunities to participate. In the UNCRC fifth periodic report, in 2016, participation remained a current issue, sharing that the UK Government needed to "establish structures for active and meaningful participation of children and young people", with particular attention given to "younger children and children in vulnerable situations, such as children with disabilities", ensuring that "children are not only heard but also listened to and their views are given due weight by all practitioners working with children" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016, pp. 6–7). There have been three identified reasons for adults not complying with the participation of children and young people, including scepticism around a child's capacity to have meaningful input; concerns around children undermining authority (particularly within schools); and that "compliance will require too much effort" (Lundy, 2007, pp. 929–930).

The Making Participation Work (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.) programme devised a *Participation Audit Tool* to support practitioners, councils and young people around strategic participation. The tool provides a framework in which practitioners can consider their successes, actions and challenges and develop a working strategy around participation, based on a set of principles created from the VIPER Project (a partnership project carried out by the Alliance for Inclusive Education, the Council for Disabled Children, NCB Research Centre and the Children's Society). The document provides examples of different aspects to consider in relation to participation such as the need for "shared values", "opportunities" and "structure".

Impact of Co-Production

Although legislation discusses the value of co-production, there is little research considering the impact co-production has on children and young people or practitioners working with them. Mayer and McKenzie (2017) investigated the psychological impact of co-production within the field of youth mental health. Service users shared that a key benefit of co-production was the positive impact it had on their self-efficacy and self-esteem and the importance of being "trusted equals" (Mayer & McKenzie, 2017, p. 1186). D. Burton et

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[1]The Local Offer is an online resource that sets out what provision is available across education, health and social care for children and young people in their area who have SEND (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015).

al. (2010) found, by conducting pupil-led research, that children were able to make a positive contribution to their setting whilst also developing their own skills and knowledge.

Participation of Children and Young People with SEND

Whilst there are clear legislative frameworks and guidance to make participation with children and young people a requirement, there is still a lack of confidence around the involvement of children and young people with SEND and how to promote their direct and active participation (Crutchley, 2017). Research has indicated that those who are often not listened to are children with SEND (Hamill & Boyd, 2002). Children with social, emotional, mental health needs, (previously described as SEBD [social, emotional and behavioural difficulties]), are highlighted to be "the least listened to, empowered and liked group of students . . . while the number of studies on student voice is increasing, those on the voice of students with SEBD are still very few" (Cefai & Cooper, 2010, p. 184). Research highlights a need to consider a range of ways of eliciting the voices of children and young people, particularly those infrequently heard (Grainger et al., 2005; Satchwell, 2019).

Practitioners' Experiences of Co-Production With Children and Young People

There appears to be little known research around practitioners' perspectives of co-production and indeed co-production with children and young people with SEND. Whilst it is important that perspectives of children and young people are gathered, it is questioned as to why, despite legislation and guidance of co-production and participation, there is still little research and knowledge within this field. Therefore, the following research questions were devised to address, in part, this gap:

> RQ1. What models of co-production are being used by practitioners supporting children and young people with SEND in the North West of England?

> RQ2. What are the facilitators and barriers to co-production from practitioners' perspectives within Local Authorities when supporting children and young people with SEND?

> RQ3. What do practitioners envisage will be helpful in supporting the development and sustainability of co-production with children and young people with SEND?

Methodology

Design of Study

A qualitative methodology was used to explore participants' views around co-production when working with young people with SEND. The current research is an exploratory study aimed at developing rich detailed knowledge in this area. Data was collected over two Participation Learning Events, four months apart.

At the first event, participants' journeys of co-production were investigated during two separate sessions. Within the first session, storyboard methods were employed as a tool for visualising and organising ideas whilst promoting discussion (S. Burton & Matthewson, 2015). It was felt that storyboarding would acknowledge the journey and progress participants had made around co-production, validate their efforts and highlight ways to move forward (Labacher et al., 2012). In the second session, data was collected using the World Café approach, as an interactive format that engages with small groups. Facilitators were used to encourage practitioners at each table to contribute both by talking and listening and to ensure that conversations developed and remained relevant to each topic (Brown, 2002). Participants were sent a list of the questions for the World Café session prior to the event. Information was recorded using post-it notes to summarise key points.

At the second Participation Learning Event, the data from the first event, which had been collated and analysed, was presented back to the participants. The researchers had organised the themes into a potential model and asked participants for feedback. Additionally, next steps around co-production were discussed, leading to the creation of the principles of co-production, presented in Figure 1. Information was recorded as ideas on post-it notes. All three sessions at both events lasted approximately one hour.

Sampling and Participant Recruitment

Purposeful convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. The Council for Disabled Children, who led the first event, contacted prospective participants via email to outline the aims of the research project. Participants varied in their professional background, including working for local authorities within the SEND departments or youth services and for private organisations and charities. If participants did not want to participate in the research, they were asked to contact the researcher before the event. Prior to the second event, participants were also contacted via email to explain the research. A follow-up email was sent after each event to ensure that participants consented to the data to be used. Around 60 participants were involved in the research.

Data Analysis Methods

Data obtained during all three sessions were analysed using content analysis (Robson, 2002; Robson & McCarten, 2016). This method was chosen as it allowed the opportunity to yield inferences from a range of data created from participants (Krippendorff, 2013), such as maps, pictures and images. In order to remain true to the focus of participation, an

inductive approach to analysis was applied, whereby themes were not influenced by pre-existing theoretical frameworks or preconceptions of the researcher but emerged from the data (Kondracki et al., 2002).

Findings

Data analysed from the two network events highlighted several areas that participants considered important to co-production. In the first session at the first event, participants were asked to share their journey of co-production through storyboards.Some groups chose to share their journey using pictures, metaphors and diagrams, whereas others shared their journey through written text alongside their top tips for co-production. Within the World Café session, although a variety of questions dominated the discussion, key themes were evident throughout. In the second Participation Learning Event, participants were presented with the themes in a potential model. However, it became clear that they felt a *model* was not appropriate and instead these themes should be changed to *principles* with reflective questions that practitioners can then use to consider their practice. Participants suggested that a model was too prescriptive as everyone is on their own journey of co-production and therefore guiding principles would be more valuable, as would be support for the development of a culture around co-production. When participants were asked about the *next steps* within this session, several participants explained that they would like the researchers to formally write up this research and publish these principles. Although they felt sharing it at this event and subsequent events would be useful in guiding their own practice, these principles could also be helpful to other practitioners in developing their and their organisations' co-production culture.

It was felt that this methodology allowed for the identification of facilitators and barriers to co-production and indicated future areas for development in this field. The key themes included: developing a culture of co-production; understanding of co-production; developing engagement opportunities; accessibility and representation; evidence-based practice; creating sustainable systems; creating goals and assigning responsibility; reviewing goals and challenging practices; and sharing practice. These themes have been placed in Figure 1 as *principles of co-production*, including the reflective questions to support practitioners in considering how these principles relate to practice. It must be noted that these results are provided by a range of participants in different organisations and services who are interested in co-production and participation; they are representative of a small group of practitioners within the North West and therefore subject to the local context.

These themes are discussed subsequently with corresponding quotes.

Developing a Co-Production Culture

The central theme from the data was around developing a culture and ethos of co-production. This theme was added at the second event as participants suggested that there needed to be an overarching theme that encompassed the others, which is why it is placed at the centre of the figure. Participants suggested that "co-production is a journey" and that by having this central theme as a principle in its own right it provided a means to reflect upon this journey, to "recognise that there are challenges" and to include that co-production is "everybody's business". By encompassing all the other principles, this suggests that, in order to develop a co-production culture, practitioners must consider all the other principles and reflect on how they can put each into practice. It is not a case of picking out principles and doing one at a time but instead thinking holistically about how they can be implemented together to create a culture of co-production. This highlights that co-production must be an integral part of thinking and practice at all levels of an organisation.

Understanding of Co-Production

Many of the participants were clear that co-production was important, yet there appeared to be uncertainty around what co-production entailed. Participants commented on co-production being "jargon" or a "vague term" with the need to understand "what co-production really is". Participants requested "training" or "sessions" on co-production to be available. The difference in understanding co-production between participants was attributed to varying "interpretation of the Children and Families Act (2014)". Therefore, the definition and, in turn, understanding is a key area for consideration when thinking about supporting co-production.

Developing Engagement Opportunities

A core principle of co-production was highlighted around children and young people being "willing to be involved and share their voice". Participants highlighted the need for engagement events to be fun in order to "incentivise children and young people to be involved" and to be during "evenings, weekends and holidays" to promote access and ensure co-production is "equally rewarding for all". Capturing the voices of children and young people that may not want to contribute to meetings, forums or events was highlighted. The idea of developing "virtual communities" through apps, social media and Skype was discussed. Consideration was given to how meetings are presented or data from children and young people gathered and the language used around this, offering ideas around "parties rather than meetings". A need for engagement opportunities to be "creative and social", a way of providing "new experiences" for children and

Figure 1

Principles of Co-Production: Practitioners' Perspectives

young people as a means of "starting a dialogue". Participants found it key that children and young people would be "engaged and enthusiastic", and an important part of this would be "finding out what children and young people want to talk about". To further promote motivation for children and young people's engagement, some participants shared ideas around introducing a "formal reward scheme for children and young people". Concerns were raised, however, around the time and funding required to set up and maintain such opportunities. Participants highlighted the value of going "into schools and speaking to their school council".

This suggests a need for providing creative and motivating opportunities for children and young people to be involved meaningfully with services.

Accessibility and Representation

Providing opportunities for ALL children and young people to share their voice and the importance of co-production being "equally rewarding for all" was shared. The importance of "reaching hard-to-reach groups" was raised and ensuring that all participants are working with "wide enough

groups to get a better representation" and not just working with a "few people with strong ideas". Concerns were shared around how to involve children and young people with "complex needs". Discussions further explored the accessibility of the term co-production and documentation, guidance and legislation. Participants spoke of being given "huge documents and told to make them 'child-friendly'" and the difficulties around this, as well as making communication accessible for children and young people. "Support for children and young people" was an identified barrier to co-production being successful and participants highlighted a need for the cost and resources for travel and personal care/support to be considered. Finally, participants shared the importance of recording what is "truly reflective of the contributions" not "what you think people may have meant" and equally giving children and young people the platform to share their own ideas rather than purely relying on "families choosing for the young people". Therefore, this study recommends that accessibility and representation is an essential aspect of the co-production process.

Evidence-Based Practice

Participants highlighted a concern around "how much evidence is there that co-production makes a real difference to the users' experience?" Others shared a need to "create an evidence base" and the value in measuring impact in order to ensure "continued funding". This suggests that there is a need to employ evidence-based practice where possible as well as attempting to add to the field of evidence.

Creating Sustainable Systems

Participants highlighted that local authorities "are having to do more with less" and co-production is "resource heavy" while "funding cuts" take place. Participants' discussions included a lack of "commitment" or "sign-up" for co-production and complications around "conflicting agendas". Concerns were further raised around "worries of tokenism", implying co-production may not always be meaningful. Participants highlighted a need for "sign-up from local authority strategic leads", "protocols and policies", "space", "capacity" and "commitment at all levels" to ensure that co-production is sustainable. Further discussions around the involvement of children and young people to be embedded in a range of processes including "panels", "tendering for short breaks", "interviews", "designing the local offer", "secret shopper", "work experience" and "take over day". This highlights some of the complexities around co-production and the need to not just have one-off events or consultations, but meaningful and long-term systems to support co-production.

Creating Goals and Assigning Responsibility

Having responsible individuals was highlighted, for example, an "engagement co-ordinator working with SEND schools to develop pupil voice" or "a dedicated participation lead that is ring-fenced for that work only" Conversely, it was also shared that co-production should be embedded within practice so that "it's everybody's business". In order to make progress with co-production, participants highlighted a need for "some authorities to recognise that they are at the beginning of their journey", but also a need for "support from strategic leads to ensure co-production becomes part of the corporate aims". "Local Authority area inspections" were highlighted as an opportunity to support the development of co-production. A final consideration was shared around the need for "financial investment" in order to "commission projects" around co-production. This suggests a need for co-production to be allocated to a specific person or persons in addition to it being an integral part of thinking and practices at all levels.

Reviewing Goals and Challenging Practice

Participants highlighted a need for co-production to be "re-evaluated" at regular points. It was further anticipated that regular reviewing would allow the opportunity to "identify challenges" whilst also setting "short-term and long-term goals". There was also discussion about "a need to challenge" where appropriate. A discussion about how children and young people could lead on "scrutiny meetings" was shared and the need to "challenge regional and national bodies" around their practice. Thus, reviewing and adapting practice is vital for co-production development.

Sharing Practice

Some participants shared the need to develop links to different groups and youth services as a means of "developing opportunities". Others discussed the need to "build relationships with practitioners" as a means of creating a shared understanding of what co-production looks like and "what questions need to be asked". It was further thought that this would allow the opportunity to "share ideas", "share good practice" and "develop future working" within local areas. There was also a shared benefit in local authorities "feeding back on work and projects". Some participants discussed the need for networking locally, for example, in clusters to "build on local practice". Developing a "regional strategy" in which "strategic leads sign up to action planning" was proposed. Therefore, many participants placed value on the knowledge, skills and ideas that they could learn and develop from other practitioners.

Discussion

RQ1. What Models of Co-Production Are Being Used by Practitioners Supporting Children and Young People With SEND in the North West of England?

The information shared by participants around models of co-production was unclear as evidenced by the theme regarding the understanding, guidance and definition of co-production. Whilst some participants shared their ideas around what co-production should look like, many were not able to share what definitions, models or framework of practice were being employed in their own practice or within their organisations. However, some participants reflected that they are at the "beginning of their journey". Consideration is given here to whether this is due to a lack of experience of co-production, a lack of support from the organisation or local authority or a lack of confidence around acknowledging what little co-production takes place. As there is little academic research and guidance around the implementation of models of co-production, it is not surprising that this was found.

The Making Participation Work programme (Council for Disabled Children, n.d.) devised an audit tool to support practitioners and local authorities with participation strategies. This document includes the following statement:

> Be honest about the challenges you face. Remember that challenges are not failures, all local authorities have them. Look for ways of working with stakeholders, including children and young people to overcome them. (Council for Disabled Children, n.d., p. 7)

It appears that a key part of being able to make progress around participation and move towards co-production is in acknowledging a lack of progress in this area and the importance of this.

The themes which were produced within the current research support the Council for Disabled Children's (n.d.) audit tool. The main difference between the two is the focus, as the audit reviews where an organisation is up to in developing and reviewing their participation practice, whereas the current research has attempted to create a foundation for discussions around co-production and, where applicable, has led to culture change. Therefore, using these documents concurrently to support the initial conversation and subsequent monitoring around participation and co-production may be more beneficial than using them individually.

Although it appears that models of co-production are not being employed within local authorities, participants commented on it being unhelpful to create or utilise such a model. Instead, participants felt that guiding principles were more valuable, and these could be used to support the development of a culture and ethos around co-production. It could be suggested that participants felt a model was something that could be *dipped in and out* of or that different aspects could be applied at different points — all of which is not synonymous with developing a culture of co-production. Many participants made reference to co-production being or starting to be an integral part of their practice and not something that could be seen as a *tick-box exercise*.

RQ2. What Are the Facilitators and Barriers to Co-Production From Practitioners' Perspectives Within Local Authorities When Supporting Children and Young People With SEND?

Within the current research, there were more barriers than facilitators expressed. This again could highlight a lack of confidence or progress within this area. Some of these barriers included "investment" from local authorities, particularly at a strategic level. This was represented by the "Creating Sustainable Systems" principle. Investment was discussed in relation to the need for co-production to be on the agenda with the commitment from all practitioners. It was also discussed in relation to resources, with the need to have resources available to make co-production accessible to a range of children and young people and for opportunities to be suitable and engaging whilst being in line with what children and young people actually want.

There was little evidence in the current research around what has worked previously, only ideas around what could/should help in facilitating co-production. Current research also provides insufficient understanding around facilitators and barriers to co-production. However, the Council for Disabled Children has provided a fact sheet around the barriers and solutions for promoting the participation of children and young people (Council for Disabled Children, 2017). Ofsted frameworks for SEND inspections within local authorities, which were developed with young people, focus upon engagement with children, young people and their families as part of those inspections (Care Quality Commission & Ofsted, 2017). It includes how well engagement with children and young people and their parents/carers takes place to inform strategic commissioning of services; how well individual children or young people and their parents/carers are involved in the needs assessment; and how well children and young people, and their parents/carers are communicated with. Following inspections, many local authorities have faced criticism from Ofsted around a failure to "effectively engage with children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and their families" (Care Quality Commission & Ofsted, 2017, p. 4). By Ofsted inspections identifying this area, it may support local authorities to invest in engaging more actively with children and young people and move towards an understanding and implementation of co-production and the culture that surrounds it. It has become evident, however, that although participants have some ideas around this, there is not enough practice-based evidence to create an evidence base for good practice.

RQ3. What Do Practitioners Envisage Will Be Helpful in Supporting the Development and Sustainability of Co-Production With Children and Young People With SEND?

Altogether, the information provided by participants indicates key areas that need to be considered to support sustainable co-production. Figure 1 details these themes as *principles* with reflective questions set out within a cyclical illustration with the overarching theme *Developing a Co-Production Culture* placed at the centre of this. Participants felt that this principle was at the heart of supporting co-production within services, and without this culture and ethos from practitioners at both an individual and strategic level work could not and would not be completed.

After the first event, a potential model was created and presented to participants. However, they suggested this was unhelpful due to its prescriptive and hierarchical nature. Practitioners acknowledged the current lack of evidence-based practice and ideas within this area and their want to plug this gap by creating something which could be useful and supportive to themselves and other practitioners. Therefore, they suggested that they would like the themes to become guiding principles that practitioners could reflect upon when employing any form of co-production with children and young people with SEND.

Further consideration was given to the levels at which these principles could be reflected upon. Participants suggested that they were not just to be reflected upon and employed at an individual level (working directly with a child or young person) but also at a strategic level (local authority, organisation or school level). It is proposed that there are certain aspects of all principles that require heavy investment and consideration at a strategic level for other principles to, in turn, be able to be successful at an individual level, such as the need for allocated time and funding. This reflects comments from participants around investment needed from strategic leads, the importance of joint working and the sharing of practice between authorities and services as well as the need to work towards set goals.

Implications for Practice, Reflections and Limitations

Moving forward, these principles and reflective questions could be used as a *starting point* for discussions on how local authorities, organisations and practitioners could consider their strengths, needs and the next steps around co-production. However, the difficulty of doing this at times when co-production with children and young people with SEND is not prioritised in services is noted. Therefore, it is important to establish what is a priority and, in turn, what the culture may be. It could be suggested that once this understanding is developed these principles could, in turn, be used to identify and reflect upon co-production generally. As cul-

tural change can be a complex process, these principles can also be used as a starting point for self-reflection, supporting practitioners to identify gaps within their own practice and how they may be able to fill these, before thinking about their service or organisation more widely. Furthermore, practitioners may share examples of their practice development with others within their service or organisation.

In line with co-production, it is also important to consider that these principles have been created with a small group of participants and, in turn, only represents their views. These principles and corresponding questions create a foundation for thoughts and reflections, and it is hoped that they will continue to evolve and develop based on the feedback from others. Therefore, the authors would welcome any feedback on these principles from other practitioners, particularly in relation to practice and implementation.

Alternative methods should also be considered in future research, which may provide greater detail around professional views, for example, interviews and focus groups. This would allow the opportunity to further discuss and reflect upon the ideas behind these principles and go beyond them.

Finally, in keeping with the ethos of the project, where possible, future research should consider discussing with children and young people with SEND these principles of co-production. The aim of the current project was to seek practitioners' viewpoints around co-production with children and young people, but for practice to develop it would be important to determine if these viewpoints are also shared by children and young people with SEND.

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