

## **Early Childhood Teacher Competencies: Perspectives of Educational Leaders of Public and Private Sector in Karachi**

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### **Abstract**



*In Pakistan, various teacher development and professional competency model exist and have been presented. However, there is a lack of a competency model for teachers of early childhood care and education (ECCE). This research study was an attempt in initiating a formal discourse regarding how school leaders perceive ECCE teacher competency (TC). The study approached an exploratory qualitative study with the intent to understand the perspective of educational leaders from the public and private sector pertinent to ECCE-TC. Four school leaders, two from each sector respectively were approached to share their perceptions regarding the same. The researchers used an in-depth qualitative interview with a help semi-structured interview topic guide. The findings reveal that ECCE is a specialized field and that there is a need for ample work to be done to recognize this field. The data also revealed that there are discrepancies concerning recruitment criteria, teacher appraisal and credits for continuous professional development. More so, there is a need for national level agenda to address the gaps of competency and licensing framework. We present a policy recommendation as closure of this paper for Pakistan to have a task force on ECCE with the relevant field experts who could contribute with their pragmatic experience and align Pakistan ECCE landscape with global standards.*

**Keywords:** ECE Teacher, Competence Framework, Child Development

### **Introduction**

Early childhood development (ECD) is strongly connected with economic stability and development. Pakistan is a developing nation and has experienced political instability, corruption, targeted terrorism, lack of political will to change, gender disparity, inequality and growing financial disparities. ECD can have a long-term impact on Pakistan and any nation's societal benefits if the government and people prescribe to ECD for the betterment of their future citizens and families (Jenkins, 2014). Teacher competency is linked to positive student outcomes. Teacher competence provides a sense of empowerment and professional self-affirmation that positively influences teacher motivation and student learning outcomes (Kunter, et al., 2013). Teacher training and continuing professional development play a critical role in enhancing the teacher's competencies and repertoire and impact, thus affecting the quality of instruction, teacher-child relationship, leadership development and curriculum development. Highly qualified teachers can help children from multiple backgrounds and learning needs succeed in school (Ray, Bowman, & Robbins, 2006). Effective early childhood development (ECD) programmes, in the pristine time of life, develop character and shape the personality of an individual (Tufeyl & Altaf, 2010). The importance of ECD has garnered center stage in the context of developing stronger, more successful nations (Britto, et al., 2017). ECD could significantly impact the personality traits of individuals and lay the foundations of character traits such as resilience, cooperation and empathy (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006).

### **Literature Review**

Early childhood education (ECE) is an important agenda in public policies for most countries around the world. Countries that are economically stable and progressive have well-laid criteria and programs for teacher qualifications and competencies that ensure quality care and learning experiences in the

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ECE classrooms. The focus on teacher competencies enables and empowers schools and teachers to understand the development of the body and mind of the child and provide appropriate guidance and direction to develop knowledge, attitudes, skills and competencies necessary for a promising future. ECE teachers are expected to create a safe and secure environment for growth, exploration and learning, leading to curious minds for creative problem solutions. ECE teachers must be trained and qualified to take on the noble task of teaching children as little as six months to six years. They must be receptive to the children's needs and understand the developmental milestones to be able to plan, design and adapt the curriculum for meaningful learning (NAEYC).

The ECE teacher according to many types of research perused is no ordinary teacher. He/she has certain intentionality and approach to teaching and learning that makes his/her practice effective and result-oriented (Burchinal, Hyson, & Zaslow, 2008; Vidmar, 2010; Allen, Kelly, & National Research Council, Knowledge and Competencies. In Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation, 2015). While the core competencies of knowledge and skill are enlisted in most guidelines and teacher training models, the ability to connect with the children and their families, create a thriving, happy, safe and secure environment, developing skillset and repertoire for using strategies for effective learning (Allen, Kelly, & National Research Council, 2015). In most statement of core competencies, teachers are expected to foster socio-emotional development of the children in their care and other such competencies that involve caring for the entire being of the child. To note, many statements have loftier goals and ideals for the teacher that call upon the innate will and quality of being a teacher (Spirakus, 2018).

While perusing core competencies of ECE teachers, the similarities are almost universal, with the teachers' abilities to connect with the children and their families; positive interaction and guidance for children and their families; noble personal and professional behaviour; effective classroom management and administrative skills; ability to conduct research and improve the curriculum and learning experiences, and such like (Bellm, 2008). A most noteworthy feature is the level of growing competencies based on progressive qualification or certification and training to match job titles and professional growth (Bellm, 2008).

NAEYC offers a comprehensive conceptual framework that stems from developing a teacher's repertoire for a skill-based, research-driven, intentional profession of making a difference in the lives of children (Willer, 1994). NAEYC credits the standards as a vision to ensure excellence in ECCE. Furthermore, the qualifying standards are a set of shared values that promote professionalism and bring the teaching community on a common platform with diversity and inclusion, shared family values, community and cultural context and respect and value for research to advance practice (Lutton & Ahmed, 2009; NAEYC, 2009). According to the NAEYC position statement, teachers are expected and trained to

1. Promote child development and learning;
2. Build family and community relationships;
3. Observe, document and assess learning;
4. Use developmentally effective approaches to connect with children and their families;
5. Use content knowledge to develop appropriate curriculum; and,
6. Grow in professionalism (NAEYC, 2009).

There are ten standards for preparing teachers for teaching in Pakistani classrooms (MoE Pakistan, 2009). The standards include a comprehensive teacher training requirement that is synonymous with some of the best frameworks worldwide. All ten standards have sub-parts of

1. Content knowledge and understanding
2. Teacher disposition, personal beliefs, behaviours, attitudes and values leading to teaching philosophy
3. Skill-based performance and output

The ten standards include:

1. Competent knowledge of the subject matter to take up with children
2. Understanding of child developmental milestones
3. Religious and ethical inclinations, knowledge and beliefs
4. Understanding and competence in planning curriculum experiences, using instructional techniques and strategies
5. Understanding and implementation of assessment for learning

6. Creating a conducive learning environment
7. Effective communication and proficient use of information communication technologies (ICT)
8. Collaboration and partnerships with various stakeholders including parents and community
9. Pursuit of continuing professional development qualifications and training to stay updated
10. Teaching English as a second or foreign language

The teacher competencies in England determine the high quality of learning and pedagogical practices (Wall, Litjens, & Taguma, 2015). Research impacts the teachers' practice and makes a relevant change in the ECCE schoolroom. The competencies include professional knowledge; understanding of learning theories, pedagogical and personal beliefs and inclinations to teaching.

One of the most comprehensive frameworks for ECCE teachers is available in the ECCE teacher competency framework for Southeast Asia (SEA). Based on four core competencies of content knowledge, pedagogic practice and assessment; establishing a positive environment for nurturing children with safety and security and promoting health, nutrition and inclusiveness; engagement and collaboration with stakeholders such as parents and including important networks to support and promote ECCE; and continuing professional development (UNESCO, 2018). The ECCE teacher is required to

1. exhibit a practical understanding of children's holistic developmental needs for learning based on competent theory, research and practice;
2. facilitate child development and learning through instructions, learning environment, assessment and other tools and techniques;
3. establish a nurturing and caring learning environment, safe and secure for the children to explore and succeed in learning;
4. promote health, nutrition, safety and protection for children to thrive and enjoy learning;
5. engage families and various key stakeholders in the learning process to make the experiences more meaningful and impactful; and
6. network and collaborate with other relevant stakeholders to promote ECCE, advance in research and improve the teaching practice and outcomes,
7. leading to continuing professional development.

The role of an ECE teacher is also similarly defined in the country of India. The role of the caregiver or ECE teacher is to observe the children and identify their needs and capacity for development to be able to design the learning experiences. The responsibility of the ECE teacher includes planning developmentally appropriate activities that stimulate creativity, imagination and desire to learn and excel. Interaction with the children is expected to be warm and caring, to develop positive relationships and create a nurturing environment among children and adults giving care. Teachers are expected to develop and sustain supportive partnerships with parents and families to extend effective learning beyond the school. ECE teachers are also expected to plan assessments and determine the growing levels of competencies in children (Ministry of Women and Child Development).

There are eight domains in the Early Childhood Educator Competencies in the state of California. The competencies range from

1. knowledge and awareness of child growth and development; child observation and development;
2. learning environments and curriculum;
3. positive interactions and guidance;
4. understanding and inclusion of family and community in the child's growth, learning and development;
5. provision of health, safety and nutrition;
6. able demonstration of professionalism, pursuit of professional development and leadership; and,
7. administration and management (Bellm, 2008).

The ECE competency profile of Nova Scotia, Canada is similar to California, USA's eight domains and the other frameworks discussed earlier. The profile includes an understanding of child development; building relationships; inclusion, diversity and equity; the ability to create conducive

learning environments; assessment and documentation; health and safety; and professionalism (Nova Scotia Child Care Association, 2019).

Teacher competence impact on childhood; teacher competencies are particular self-evident qualities or assets unavoidable for instructing experts to make an encouragement, student favorable climate. Enable a child to the development of ECCE child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in order to build a solid and robust foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

### **Study Objective**

To explore the perspective of school leaders regarding the requirements of ECCE teachers skills, knowledge, aptitude and competencies.

### **Research Question**

- a. What are the perceptions of school leaders regarding ECCE teacher competency?
- b. What knowledge, skills, and attitude do they expect ECCE teachers to have?

### **Methodology**

The qualitative exploratory study was conducted in Karachi, Pakistan. Four participants participated, two from the public-school sector and two from the private school sector, participants were selected through purposive sampling. The data was collected through meetings. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis. All participants were informed that their participation would be voluntary and that will have full right of refusal and withdrawal. Participants were also informed that they will be interviewed and that the data will be recorded. This was the student-led research project hence the approval of synopsis was sought from the education department independent research study committee.

### **Findings:**

The competency of the teacher is recognized as a skill and knowledge that enables the teacher to support optimal early childhood development. The results of the research revealed eight broad areas of competence that school leaders saw as the most essential competencies for ECCE teachers.

### **Context Knowledge:**

ECE teacher context knowledge is the reference as concepts of theories of different categories of teacher knowledge, such as knowledge of content, knowledge of pedagogy, knowledge of curriculum, knowledge of learning and knowledge of learners' style, knowledge of contexts of schooling, school pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge of educational philosophy. The teacher should know how to teach, what to teach and when to teach. The teacher should have an understanding of the curriculum, standards and learning outcome of early child education. ECCE teacher job is very challenging as, a teacher is developing a child's learning and understanding skills, preparing the child to interact socially. A teacher is the first person after home, parents and family therefore, the teacher should have a strong understanding of ECE context knowledge before becoming into an ECCE class. Following are the responded responses;

“The most important is basic knowledge dose the teacher has; the basic knowledge does not mean that you have a degree bachelor in education or masters in education. I would say even a teacher who has completed their A-level, or is 18, 19, 20, if they are passionate to teach. A teacher who has less subject knowledge can have in-house training and every school should have in house training so actually..” (respondent, private sector).

A teacher should be active, have enthusiasm and a passion for children of that age, can attract children easily, a teacher with vast context knowledge can create an effective learning environment. Teachers having both abilities to teach and express along with context knowledge can lead to achieving learning goals in ECCE. The teacher should be able to collaborate and coordinate with parents, family or guardians regarding the education status of the child.

### **Knowledge of Child Development Pedagogies**

ECCE teaching pedagogical practice are strategies that teachers use to teach early age children in ECCE class. The teacher of an early age child is considered as a role model for a child as it is the very first time a child is going to school after home, a child spends their 4 to 5 hours with ECCE teacher. The teacher's behavior should be nice, kind and friendly. Following are the given responses;

“Teaching pedagogy is basically for the early childhood teacher the very first thing that she needs to do in her class, each time when she meets with students every morning, she needs to build the repo throughout the day.” (respondent, private sector)

The analysis shows that teachers should have pedagogical skills so that they can maintain a learning environment for a child, the teacher can draw and explain daily routines to students. Teachers can be trained in this regard. A set protocol should be followed, teacher's guide and manual will also be very helpful. Teachers can provide a play-based learning environment to develop child interest in learning. develop critical thinking in children through asking questions. Early age child likes to explore more and more, the teacher provides situational knowledge according to the child interest.

#### **Skills in Designing Children's Assessments**

A data gathering process is used by teachers to help customize early child performance by a teacher. This process helps teachers, parents and management to understand the holistic development of the early age child. ECCE child is too young to have paper-pencil submissive assessment.

Teachers can monitor, how the children are learning as they teach, using observation, questioning strategies, class discussion, circle time, groups or the whole class, teachers can adjust the process by supporting or challenging students as needed. The process provides a clear picture of the child which is called assessment for learning or formative assessment.

"ECCE child cannot be assessed at this age, secondly if teacher's competence in assessing child is lacking, we can train them. Teachers from urban areas can perform well in observation but in rural areas it is difficult to find teachers that have an understanding of child observation for assessment. No paper-pencil assessment should be conducted in ECCE class. The teacher should observe the child, make reports and profile. Observe children 's participation in class activities, for that proper training should be provided to the teachers". (respondent, public sector)

Two teachers in every class, having 26 children, teachers need to have substantial work in school, to check the child's understanding regarding subject knowledge and if the concept is not understood, the teacher can plan to teach the concept to the child. Our data shows that formative assessment can be performed in ECCE class by a teacher. This age child is not ready for summative assessment.

#### **Understanding of child development and learning styles**

ECE teacher competence is considered as skill and knowledge that enable a teacher to maximize children learning in the classroom. Teachers having expertise in a wide range of context knowledge. Have skills in classroom management, plan activities and strategies for effective learning in the classroom. ECE teachers can develop holistic learning in a child through creative and critical thinking and problem- solving based activities, which develops self-confidence, decision-making abilities. Develops learning environment as per their age level. Following are the given responses;

"In schools now they pick up the best kids and they then work on them which I feel is not a challenge at all, we need to bring kids of a different box of life, then work toward learning goals. Normally, we see the curriculum is too heavy that playtime is shortened to 20 minutes of physical education class. In my opinion, the syllabus should be concise enough for the student to grasp it easily." (respondent, private sector)

The responses show that teachers should have the ability to develop holistic learning through curriculum, manuals and guides. However, a teacher may develop physical, emotional and social abilities in a child as well. Play-based activities develop a child's interest in word learning, the child is learning indirectly. A teacher should have the competence to understand child learning standards and learning outcomes on provided context knowledge. These are competencies related to ECCE teachers theoretical and practice-based knowledge and understanding of child development and learning.

#### **Skills to Facilitate Child Development**

These are competencies related to ECCE teachers' strategies to facilitate child development and learning, including the use of assessment tools, techniques, and results to support child development and learning. Teachers may develop play-based activities and teaching and learning strategies that encourage child creativity, critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving and develop children to be active learners.

"It is an important competence that the teacher should have context knowledge and an educational background. In urban areas, teachers have good command but in the rural areas, teaching ECCE children is more challenging, rural sector has a lack of resources. If a teacher

is well trained and has the competence to teach, understand child psychology, a teacher is a friend and a role model for them” (respondent, public sector).

ECCE teacher is the role model for a child if a teacher has good understanding of learning concepts, it will support the child to develop socially, emotionally and physically. The above statement shows that teachers from different environments have different strategies of teaching as per the area culture and society. In this regard, teachers should be provided with proper training and guideline, teacher should be able to understand child psychology, child learning ability which will lead to child development.

### **Knowledge, Understanding and Skill to Manage and Develop Conducive Learning Environments**

ECCE teacher may establish a learning environment that helps in the developmental need of children. Teachers should develop a classroom environment as per child’s age group, just as outdoor learning areas in a school’s facilities should be a safe, clean and conducive environment that develops cognitive, physical and social learning.

The child’s learning starts from the entrance of the schools where they learn visually. The school environment and classroom are one of the most important sources of learning. Therefore, teachers may plan the environment as per the concept thought in the class. Following are the given responses;

“Teacher should demonstrate the learning which is taking place in the learning environment. Basically, things have to be done practically for the children to understand how it works because until the children don’t see it and do it for themselves, changes in learning achievement will not be there so the learning environment is important” (respondent, private sector).

Nevertheless, different domain teachers will develop different learning environments as per the need of the child. Teachers should develop learning corners where they can explore and learn. Teacher should provide a safe and healthy environment where they feel comfortable and like to spend time learning.

Teachers having context knowledge and pedagogical competence can develop an effective learning environment as per the age level of a child. Therefore, it is the teacher’s responsibility to develop learning environment not only in the class, the learning environment in the school boards and lobbies.

### **Commitment to promoting health, nutrition, safety and protection**

This competency is related to how teachers create environments which are encouraging for children, teachers do plan strategies, to develop child health and nutrition routines on a daily basis which can be shared with parents, family and guardians. A teacher should have the competence to develop a safe, and protective environment where a child feels comfortable. Following are the responded responses;

In order to maintain child health, teachers must share and explain what is healthy food and what is junk food. Teachers should develop time table for eating, have coordination with parents in this regard so that children can have healthy nutritious habits which further lead to child health safety and protection.

“We have provided manual regarding health, nutrition and protection but when we look into the rural areas such as Thar, their children have different environment and eating habits so we have to train teachers to develop healthy habits as per their area.” (respondent, public sector)

It is a very important part because most of the time teachers are not well trained for this. They should know how to involve the children in healthy eating habits and hygiene. So, that sometimes, teachers can create a very home-based environment and starting developing small dining table in a school with the different desk and the tables and create a friendly environment, children can have lunch along with the teacher. The teacher and children sitting and eating together motivate children to eat healthy food, it also creates a safe and protective environment.

### **Teacher Engagement and Collaboration and Network**

Teacher should have competencies to working with children’s families and caregivers as partners in ECCE. Teacher may build trust and rapport with parents and family; teacher should be cooperative and understanding. Teacher may involve parents and grandparents in classroom activities. Following are the responded responses;

“Engagement with the parents is of utmost importance as after the parents, teachers and school leaders are the primary caregivers in most cases. Hence, a strong teacher and parent

partnership and early childhood teachers should have the competency for the same. More so, it is important for teachers to be regularly connecting with the parents in order to provide them with their children's development and growth trajectories and milestones. Besides parents, early childhood teachers should also have strong networking skills with their fellow teachers. Peer learning is one of the most important indicators in the early child teacher training and its benefits are explained very well in the educational researches." (respondent 1, private sector).

Without, connecting to the stakeholder it is not possible to bring development in a child. Teacher should understand that stakeholders are almost everyone, the teachers, the watchmen, the parent, sibling and grandparent, they all are a major part of a child's safety health, hygiene, personality development, academic development and turning a child into a good human being and a good citizen.

### **Continuous professional development**

The competent ECCE teachers can demonstrate their commitment to improving themselves and the practice of their profession as ECCE. Teachers having professional ethics, standards, professional behavior and having continuous growth in planning and participation, can reflect on their teaching practice. This kind of enthusiasm can improve the practice of early childhood care and education. Following are the given responses;

The level of education is very important because if you are hiring a teacher who is a masters or graduate then she or he can perform well as per comparison to those teachers who are only matriculated or intermediated so education level is very important. The teachers in urban and rural area were a different experience within different areas slum area. For Public sector, education level may be upto graduation at least. A teacher with a professional degree is also competent. If she does not have a certificate, the teacher can be trained." (respondent, public sector).

During an analysis it has been found that in Pakistan, there are two types of ECCE teachers, one in urban areas and the other in rural areas. Both the teacher's learning capacity and teaching practices are slightly different from each other, they perform as per area culture and environment. At the same time, in Pakistan, there are two school systems, public and private, both the sector's ECCE teaching practices are different from each other. In the public sector, schools are still struggling for good teachers in both urban and rural areas, due to lack of teacher training and learning environment. Thus, ECCE curriculum 2017, teachers guides, manuals are available for support. However, in the private sector teaching strategies are different because of fewer qualified teachers, in house teacher training, school's curriculum, lesson plans, teachers guides, manuals and technology based learning methodologies.

### **Discussion**

This research was conducted to explore ECCE teacher competence in ECCE classroom as early child learning abilities are developing every day, they learn at their own pace according to their interest level and learning style. Children in the early stage experience development its physical, cognitive, emotional, social and motor development. In this regard, ECCE teachers play a vital role in child life therefore, ECCE teacher should be competent enough to build child academically, socially and emotionally, the literature confirms (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, 2011). The research question was to explore the perception of ECCE school leaders regarding ECCE teacher competency, ECCE teacher academic background ,teachers' professional competencies and overall expectations from an ECCE teacher.

The finding of this study revealed the commonalities and individualities of ECCE teacher competency both public and private school sector, both sectors expect the teacher to have expertise in ECCE context knowledge, awareness and understanding of ECCE curriculum 2017, ECCE teaching pedagogic skills, teaching strategies in the class as per child age level, teacher understanding as a whole in terms of holistic development and learning (Curriculum for Early Childhood Care and Education , 2017), teacher ability to develop safe and protective learning environment. A teacher is expected to have strong communication and coordination with parents, family, community and stakeholders for the improvement of child learning, health and nutrition. A teacher should be a good observant to understand child's learning through environment, maintain records and profile of the

child as per the performance in class and group activities. The teacher should have professional certificates in ECCE.

When comparing our results to those of older studies, teacher competence is considered in the term of qualification and a professional degree (UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) Geneva, Jordan Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programmes , 2006) , teacher context knowledge, understanding of ECCE curriculum, teaching skill, and historical development of the child (United Nations Educational, 2018). it must be pointed out that since the 20<sup>th</sup> century Pakistani government started recognizing the importance of early childhood education. In this regard, many documents were developed. Teacher's professional development training were provided in order to build teacher competence. However, the literature identifies that teachers should be provided with professional development training on a regular basis (Karila & Kupila, 2010).

This is an important finding in understanding of ECEC teacher competency framework in the Pakistan context based on this research question, what global frameworks on ECCE teacher competency tell about ECCE teacher skill set and competencies and how much is it aligned with the Pakistan context? The result is based on analyzed international documents and participants from the public and private sectors.

This section can be summarized as per the findings that in Pakistan public and private both somehow applying teaching competence strategies, but at the time of hiring these ECCE teacher's competencies were compromised they believe in professional development. However, data shows that teacher competence framework should be developed and supported at the time of ECCE teacher recruitment. The study on ECCE teacher competence framework identifies that teachers must have context knowledge in order to understand child holistic development and learning (Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, 2018), teacher have pedagogical skills to support child's learning, teachers can facilitate child development and learning socially, emotionally and physically (Galser & Zikuda, 2008), teacher develops learning environment to make child comfortable, safe and protective (United Nations Educational, 2018). The teacher should have the competence to observe child learning and assessment, should be able to report and identify the improvement area of child or teaching.

Furthermore, ECCE teacher competence is considered as professionally as, the teacher should have strong communication, coordination and networking skills in order to guide parents, family, community and stakeholders. Teachers understand the importance of health and nutrition (UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE) Geneva, 2006) and the most important is ECCE teacher professional development and personal growth (Karila & Kupila, 2010). Moreover, the ECCE teacher competence framework is available internationally, followed by multiple countries and can be considered as a benchmark for developing the ECCE teacher competence framework according to the Pakistan context, that should be applicable to both urban and rural areas of Pakistan. However, Pakistan is struggling in the implementation of ECCE teaching standards in both public and private sectors.

### **Study Limitation**

COVID-19 was one of the major limitations as managing the pandemic, lockdown, work from home, homeschooling and hygiene was something new and challenging. A major source of limitation in this researcher is age group is limited, participants are limited, number of samples is less, only one location was targeted in Pakistan, finding of literature was limited. This research has a big scope, it is recommended to explore more in this area on other locations of Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

Hereafter, it can be concluded that an ECCE teacher competence framework is required to support the educational leaders to provide quality early childhood teaching and for the institutions to provide quality teacher training. There is also a need to study the phenomenon both quantitatively and qualitatively to facilitate both urban and rural areas in a larger population in a similar context and develop a national competency framework for Pakistan. The finding of the study identifies ECCE teacher's competence level is low which need to be developed through professional development training program. Policy implications are needed to be made so that early childhood agenda can be scaled up. It is recommended that Pakistan to have a task force on ECCE with the relevant field experts who could contribute with their pragmatic experience and align Pakistan ECCE landscape with global standards.



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