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Balancing School and Part-Time Work: An Exploratory Study of Afghan Elementary School Students

Okul ve Yarı Zamanlı Çalışma Arasındaki Denge: Afgan İlköğretim Öğrencileri Üzerine Bir Keşifsel Çalışma

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Abstract

Prolonged conflict and socio-economic hardships have overwhelmingly impacted families in Afghanistan, coercing them to depend on their underage children as financial contributors. The current research explores the intricacies between elementary school students balancing education and employment in the Afghan context (aged 8-13) juggling both school and part-time jobs. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the study investigates the day-to-day experiences of these students employing a semi-structured interview and purposive sampling in accordance with Clarke and Braun's reflexive thematic analysis. The analysis identified three principal themes: challenges, experiences, and coping mechanisms. Students confronting challenges, irregular school attendance due to working demands, family financial issues, and psychological stresses. Their experiences indicate important physical and psychological toll which incorporates fatigue, and most importantly academic impediments such as missed assignments, and daily struggles. Task prioritization and time management are generally confined to the coping mechanism to overcome them. These findings provide a solid evidence base for tailored interventions and international aid to address and alleviate these students' burden. This research can contribute to a better understanding of the dual burden of labor and education confronted by Afghan children to spotlight the urgency for a thorough policy response.

Keywords: Balancing school and work, child well-being, underage child labor

Öz

Uzun süredir devam eden çatışmalar ve sosyo-ekonomik zorluklar, Afganistan'daki aileleri derinden etkilemiş ve onları, geçimlerini sağlamak için küçük yaşta çocuklarına ekonomik katkıda bulunma zorunluluğuyla karşı karşıya bırakmıştır. Bu araştırma, Afganistan bağlamında eğitim ve çalışma arasında denge kurmaya çalışan 8-13 yaş aralığındaki ilköğretim öğrencilerinin deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım benimsenerek yürütülen çalışmada, bu öğrencilerin günlük yaşantıları yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler ve amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak araştırılmış; veriler Clarke ve Braun'un refleksif tematik analizi doğrultusunda incelenmiştir. Analiz sonucunda üç temel tema belirlenmiştir: zorluklar, deneyimler ve başa çıkma mekanizmaları. Öğrencilerin karşılaştığı zorluklar arasında çalışma zorunluluğu nedeniyle düzensiz okul devamlılığı, ailelerin ekonomik sıkıntıları ve psikolojik stresler yer almaktadır. Deneyimler, öğrencilerin maruz kaldığı fiziksel ve psikolojik etkileri ortaya koymakta; yorgunluk, akademik başarısızlık, ödevlerin aksaması ve günlük mücadeleler gibi unsurları içermektedir. Zorluklarla başa çıkma stratejileri ise genellikle görev önceliklendirme ve zaman yönetimi ile sınırlı kalmaktadır. Elde edilen bulgular, bu öğrencilerin yükünü hafifletmeye yönelik özel müdahaleler ve uluslararası yardımlar için sağlam

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bir kanıt temeli sunmaktadır. Bu araştırma, Afgan çocuklarının eğitim ve çalışma ikiliği içinde karşılaştıkları zorlukların daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkı sağlayarak, acil ve kapsamlı bir politika yanıtının gerekliliğine dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Okul ve iş dengesinin sağlanması, çocukların iyi oluşu, küçük yaştaki çocuk işçiliği

Introduction

Afghanistan, a geographically landlocked country, has traditionally been vulnerable to foreign invasions because of its strategic and geopolitical positioning at the significant juncture of the Silk Road. The nation is characterized by diverse ethnic groups, each characterized by its cultural traditions and a solid dedication to independence. The pervasive state of unemployment and poverty within households has caused substantial socio-economic challenges, compelling children to participate in informal labor to fulfill their basic requirements (Mansoor, 2024; Rubin, 1989). similar point is also highlighted by (Ilyas et al., 2020) in the neighbouring Pakistan that numerous of youngsters are compelled to engage in informal labor due to restricted financial challenges of the family as means of economic contributors. The prolonged conflict since the (1978) soviet invasion, the civil war by the Mujahidin in 1994, and the US Invasion in (2001) War on Terror (WOT) has created a chaotic situation bringing along poverty, unemployment, and misery.

It has been reported that a substantial number of children, around 4.5 million, still need to be enrolled in educational institutions (Arooje & Burrige, 2021). This figure includes 2.3 to 2.6 million children who are of primary school age, as well as 854,000 to 984,000 children who should be attending lower secondary education (CSO, 2018b; Ministry of Education & UNICEF, 2018). Reasons vary for either dropping out or not attending school, including poor economic conditions, lack of security, and distance from schools. One of the significant reasons, and it is vital to mention, is that the price they are paying for dropping out or not going to school is to work and assist their families with financial support.

As per the law in Afghanistan, a person should be at least fifteen years old, but with the family's consent, 14 years can also work (Catani et al., 2008). Adolescence is a critical age and those adults play a crucial role in Afghanistan's future economic power and change, yet they often become victims of these situations. Many children in Afghanistan are forced to work before the age of 18, despite the Labor Law stating that the minimum age for employment is 18, and children under 14 are not allowed to work (Razjouyan et al., 2022). However, it is not unusual to find children below 14 working in different capacities, including in the carpet industry begging for money, auto workshops, sales workers, brick factories, or collecting bottles and cans from garbage dumps (Catani et al., 2008). As per UNICEF Annual report (2024), uncovers that 40% of children which counts as 3.7 million were out of school in Afghanistan comprising 60% girls.

The widespread of child labor in Afghanistan is significantly exacerbated by socio-economic challenges such as poverty and limited access to education (Kofol & Ciarli, 2017). Child labor is widespread in Afghanistan because of prevailing societal norms, economic circumstances, and a lack of knowledge; numerous families, particularly those led by women, depend on their children for financial support. According to Afghanistan's National Child Labor Strategy and Action Plan 2018-2030 (2019), Afghanistan's young population, forming 58.6% of the population under 19, poses a significant challenge to the country's labor force, as children aged five to 14 are forced into working as child labor, affecting their well-being and prospects. Despite the fact that Article 13 of the Afghan Labour Law (1999) states and safeguards children and youth from exploitation and forced labor, including child brides or grooms' labor exploitation (Safi et al., 2024)

Going to school and working is an area that needs to be thoroughly discussed or read more in scholarly discussions in Afghanistan. This study will explore how elementary school students

in Afghanistan manage going to school and working part-time. According to the United Nations on Economic Development (2023), "Around the world, some 160 million children work to earn a living instead of going to school. That is almost one in every ten children." Taking this into consideration in the Afghan context, in which people have witnessed long conflict and poverty, it is worth exploring how elementary school students who are underage are affected by those factors. According to the United Nations, poverty is seen as a violation of human dignity, including a state of inadequate resources to meet fundamental needs, restricted opportunities for education and healthcare, and unemployment. These circumstances result in insecurity, helplessness, and social marginalization.

In summary, investigating students' experiences managing part-time jobs with their academic responsibilities reveals various difficulties and ambitions. The primary objective of this study is to get an in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding the everyday challenges faced by underage children while also providing insights into the broader implications for educational policy and social welfare. Investigating this phenomenon requires a considerable amount of effort fuelled by the need to fully understand the social and intellectual effects experienced by individuals who simultaneously fulfill the roles of student and work.

Through analyzing the numerous factors which influences this complex balance, the objective is to provide significant perspectives that may guide educators, policymakers, and community leaders in developing innovative strategies that support and enrich the educational journey of these children. This study has an additional purpose, extending beyond pure academic research. It represents a major advancement towards developing a conducive atmosphere that elevate students' success in their academic pursuits and part-time work commitments. Consequently, it establishes the firm foundation for a more comprehensive and student-centric approach to education.

This research examines the complicated relationships involving the dual engagement of Afghan elementary school students in both formal education and part-time jobs. The study considers the historical challenges Afghans face, including economic instability and an essential portion of the unenrolled population in educational institutions. The primary objective of this study is to provide empirical data on students' experiences as they navigate the challenges raised by balancing their academic pursuits and other obligations.

1. How do Afghan elementary school students perceive school and part-time work?
2. How do family and community support systems affect students' well-being to manage this dual role?

Afghanistan's education system faces historical and cultural challenges, including war and political dominance. Conflict and power dynamics among stakeholders, including the government, religious institutions, and community-based organizations, shape the curriculum and educational framework for children and adolescents (Arooje & Burrige, 2021). Cultural norms and customs also limit educational opportunities for both boys and girls, particularly in rural areas (Bamik, 2018). The practice of coercing those children into part-time employment, with little attention paid to their education, stems from their parent's lack of education and the preference they are having to let their children contribute to their families for financial income. As Li and Qiu (2018) explored the impact of family background effect on student's academic achievements at the early phases of their life found that parent's active involvement enhances children's education opportunities and foster their academic achievements.

According to the International Child Labour (ILO) findings from 2010, almost 215 million children around the globe are affected by work. As cited European Commission, in (2020), 160 million children, comprising nearly 10% of the global population, were involved in child labour,

with 53 million not enrolled in school, posing challenges to their future employment prospects and overall life prospects. Besides, several studies on pursuing school and managing part-time job make life difficult for students' educational engagement, which affects several things for them such as well-being and performance, lack of sleep, reduced self-study time, overworking, missing school, missing school assignments, getting low grades (Chettri & Bhardwaj, 2022; Mitchell, 2020; Ngan, 2021; Nhi, 2022; Wadood et al., 2018). Child labour has emerged as a prominent issue of concern within the context of Afghanistan.

The nation has encountered a multitude of obstacles, including decades of conflict, socioeconomic deprivation, and insufficient educational opportunities, all of which contribute to the widespread child labour. According to Sim (2014), it has been determined that over a quarter, namely 25%, which is one out of four kids in Afghanistan, the age range of seven to fourteen, are actively involved in several forms of labour. According to Khadimi (2019), after the African region, the Asian and Pacific area, Afghanistan is categorized as the second largest nation in terms of child labour.

The concern of child labor in Afghanistan has remained unaddressed issue throughout several government administrations. Despite numerous so promises made by each upcoming government to uphold and preserve the rights and the privileges of the children but unfortunately none of the government succeeded in their promise (Barakzaei, 2024). This failure of those so called promises indicate larger systemic concern that has not been properly addressed. Child labor within the country is not only a matter of individual struggling a collective societal issue with far-reaching implications. It's prevalence especially in the urban area highlights critical societal and economic repercussions. Considering the social harms that the child labor occurring in the cities highlights the challenges that impacts both the child and the society significantly (Ahmadi, 2024). Moreover, the monetary contribution of child labor perpetuates poverty cycle loop, which affect the societal advancement and stability.

There have been mixed results regarding part-time jobs and academic engagement, but several researchers found negative impacts on part-time jobs and employment (Outerbridge, 2016; Cheng et al., 2009; Heise, 2024). As stated by Curtis and Shani (2002) that employment engagement of the underaged children has been linked to insufficient time span for school studies, which consequently leading to poor performance in academic activities and results. In order to enhance academic activities and outcomes which will have a positive impact it is paramount to minimize employment anxieties (Buse, 2024).

Trani et al. (2013) research focusing on multidimensional aspect of poverty among the children in Afghanistan employing the Alkire-Foster (AF) Method, which is an intuitive approach measuring multifaceted concepts such as poverty, vulnerability and welling highlights the relationship between education and poverty in Afghanistan. The study throw light on the lasting obstacles such as the high rate of low enrolment among females and younger children working out of school. Student children who work in brick kilns experience higher levels of depression, anxiety, fear, and mistreatment compared to non-working peers. Jafari et al. (2024) also discusses health impacts of underage children working in different places causing them chronic pain, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Those working underage children who works in brick factories and other places frequently feel the absence of support both from the family and peers, which leads an amplified feelings of hopelessness and insecurity (Pellenq et al., 2022).

Method

The current study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Afghan elementary school students who strives to balance school and part-time jobs to understand their experiences and the meanings they assign to their circumstances. A phenomenological investigation, according to Creswell and Poth (2016), exposes numerous

individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon and how they understand this notion or phenomenon as an everyday meaning. A Phenomenology provide reflective understanding of human experiences, rich understandings for education research, a holistic outlook, and high credibility due to its insightful methodologies and thorough approach to understanding experiences (Farrell, 2020).

This method provides the study with shared knowledge based on the lived experiences of primary school students navigating part-time work and school. To ensure a wide range of sample, The study uses purposeful sampling to select individuals aged 8-13 from Nangarhar and Kabul- provinces with the highest figure of child laborers. This study aspires to capture an enriching, detailed insights from their personal experiences and the meaning those children attribute to their context. Purposeful sampling is a research method in which the researchers deliberately choose participants and research cites to understand a central phenomenon. (Creswell, 2019). To assure numerous experiences, this study regarded factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, urban or rural residence, and while selecting participants, the nature of part-time work was regarded as one of the factors.

Data Collection Methods

This study employs semi-structured interviews for data collection. To understand fellow human being's, the researchers use semi-structured interviews which is a dynamic way of collecting data (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Huddleston et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews are dynamic for qualitative research due to their capability to elicit an detailed information and ensure flexibility (Ruslin, et al., 2022). Besides, Megaldi and Berler (2020) contend that semi-structured interview, despite its subject matter focus “topical trajectories” offered prior to the interview, facilitates an in-depth exploration for a discovery.

The researcher conducts one-on-one interviews with students in a condusive and confidential atmosphere. Unlike structured interviews, which have a fixed set of questions prepared before doing the interviews, semi-structured interviews allow researchers sufficient time to produce new questions based on the needs and as they occur during the interview. The interviews were open-ended questions to elicit their experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms for juggling education and jobs.

Ethical consideration was given high priority throughout the research process. Ethical approval for this study was sought from the Nangarhar University Ethics Committee, and approval was granted under the reference number EB/2023/1075. Prior conducting the interview with those children struggling with employment and work compulsions, ethical approval both informed consent from parents and assent from the children participant was obtained. The participants identity remained anonymous and their confidentiality was regarded throughout this study. The researcher also spends time in schools and students' workplaces, depending on the needs, observing students' everyday routines and interactions. It will also aid the researcher in taking field notes to record contextual factors and behaviours linked to balancing obligations.

Data Analysis

To systematically analyze the elicited data, the current study used reflexive thematic analysis, a way of analyzing data to understand the deeper and multifaceted data by exploring the children's first-hand experience that they have gone through while managing both school and their work commitments. By exploring children's opinion and lived experiences, reflexive thematic analysis captures an enriching insight from educational and psychology perspectives.

Thematic Analysis is used in the study to analyze the data: initially, the researcher will transcribe interviews and compile observational notes. Second, the researcher will look for

repeating patterns in the experiences, challenges, and techniques for managing education and jobs. Finally, coding will be used to categorize data and investigate relationships between themes in the study. Thematic analysis in this study primarily follows Braun and Clarke (2022) six-step theme analysis process to make conclusions and describe study findings.

Initially the researcher transcribed the interviews and observational notes, verifying that all the relevant data was properly included in its original form. Then going back and forth through the reading of the data, the researcher tried to identify the main themes and pattern that comes along the way in the data set. Later on, the researcher begun identifying and labelling them in specific parts/segments to understand the challenges, experiences, and coping mechanism in how they balance their work and school responsibilities. Subsequently, after the completion of the initial coding, the researcher conducts a systematic search for predominate themes highlighting the comparison of similarities and differences among the initial themes in establishing the main themes. Finally, after refining and reviewing the main themes in line with the research objectives, the final stage involves naming the themes and offering clear descriptions that capture their core essence.

Results

This research article addresses a range of challenging issues concerning child labor and underage children's schooling, with a primary emphasize on the experiences, strategies or coping mechanisms, and challenges working children confronts in balancing work and school. In this regard, the study applied semi-structured interviews with nine working children in Nangarhar and Kabul, two provinces with higher rates of working children. After data collection, the study applied thematic analysis, particularly (Braun & Clarke, 2022) six stages of thematic analysis. As a result, the study analysis came up with three main themes or areas of importance, as illustrated bellow:



Figure 1. Main Findings of the Study after the Analysis

Challenges:

Challenges are defined as hardship that these children encounter which prevent their ability to main a balance between school and work. Specially, numerous children are of the opinion that their employment isa source of substantial difficulty to keep that balance. For instance, one participant in this study, a 12-years-old who sells Bolani (a traditional Afghan street food) in Kabul, describe this challenge in the following way:

My work is my biggest challenge, as it keeps me away from school. I am physically, mentally, and emotionally not comfortable with this (a working student).

While this is one case, the study participants in other locations cited family financial issues, lack of motivation, and the mental burden of work as challenges that disrupt the balance between school and work. Though the majority of the participants in the study struggled to obtain this

balance, one child from Nangarhar, who worked as a shoeshine, viewed the combination work and schooling to be acceptable for him. He articulated satisfaction, with the opportunity to earn some amount of money while continuing his education. He said:

Well, I have a very productive balance of work and school. I am glad that I have the opportunity to work for my family, and I also cannot miss school at this age. I think about my family and school, so I get the balance. (a working student)

This case may differ considerably because of the country's socioeconomic context of and the size of the family. However, it is apparent that these children go through a lot of hardships, which they experience one of the utmost challenging stages of their lives as child labor. Such hardship and conditions negatively impact their holistic development, affect them mentally, physically, and emotionally, in addition to their cognitive load they confront.

Experiences :

The experiences to maintain balance between work and schooling encompasses the time commitment and intensity of their participation. On the one hand, this experience has been particularly difficult for these school attending children. Physical and mental fatigue often coerced them to scarily either schooling or work, yet they cannot forsake either. Schooling is depending on their ability to work; otherwise, they would be unable to attend the school. One of the working children illustrated the situation as in the following terms:

It isn't easy to both work and get an education. I feel tired when I work in the morning and go to school in the afternoon. I cannot concentrate and sometimes fall asleep, and my teacher gets angry with me. (a working student)

It leads to a harsh experience of early education at an early age. The study also finds that working children have experienced extreme burdens and are mentally engaged at the age they should have only been allowed to nurture holistically. It has been years since most of the study participants have worked. For most of them, this experience of life has turned into a daily routine. A vital incident is that most of these children have missed schooling two or three days a week because of their work. On the other hand, missing assignment, lack of class participation, and lack of concentration have also become their daily habits. One of the working children stated as follows:

This results in a harsh experience of early education at an early age. The study also finds that working children have experienced extreme burdens and are mentally engaged at the age when they should instead be allowed develop and nurture holistically. Most of this study participants have been working for years, with such challenging experience as it has become used to such routine daily. Notably, numerous children miss school 2-3 days a week due to their work commitments. Besides, certain other issues such as missing assignment, unwilling class participation, and lack of concentration has also become ubiquitous. A child worker articulated the situation as follows:

I missed so many assignments and skipped classes in the end. I felt very helpless and found it hard to find anyone to ask for help or support me in this regard. (a working student)

Coping Mechanism :

Coping mechanisms refer to any techniques or strategies that working children employ to balance their work and academic responsibilities. One of the most frequent responses from the working children in this study was the absence of specific strategies. The main approach they use to obtain balance is time management; however, this method is often unproductive due to their workload. For the majority, this encompasses waking up early in the morning to either start working or go to school as some schools in the Afghan public school system start in the afternoon. Consequently, those who work early have to attend the school earlier. One of the children said:

Well, I only have the option to manage my time by waking up early in the morning, and sometimes,

when I get too many assignments, I prioritize my tasks to overcome pending assignments. (a working student)

Prioritizing tasks means they sometimes sleep late at night to complete their assignments or make themselves sick (falsely) so they can finish their school assignments instead of working. One another way most of the children took use of it is to study while working, but it's only effective for those children who work selling stuff on the streets, rather than working within a store or shop. At this early age, they do not have any particular thoughts other than prioritizing tasks, waking up early in the morning, and studying while working.

Child labor has appeared as a significant issue with profound and unhealthy effects on children's development, considerably hindering their emotional, physical, and mental growth. It is also worth noting that child labor has become a serious issue leading to extreme effective on children's development (Kayen, 2023; Mihigo et al., 2024; Olivier & Eric, 2019; Weiner, 1991). It has several issues beneath the surface as we see these children go to work early. Family or, in most cases, parents forced work has been reported to lead them to work rather than school (Catani et al., 2008; O'Leary et al., 2018)

Here, the study intervened in the issue of both working and going to school. It was found that the challenges these children face are worse than what has been seen on the surface of the issue. A study by Corboz et al. (2019) found that most working children missed schooling, similar to what has been found in this study. Research conducted by Shah and Steinberg (2019) and Li and Sekhri (2020) uncovered that India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme indicates that increasing employment opportunities in certain districts may decrease school enrolment and increase child labor, as supported by studies. In most cases, working children find it hard or impossible to balance work and school. As a result, the ultimate option was to bunk or leave school to earn a smaller amount of money to support their family.

Working at this early age has been recorded as a harsh experience resulting from force. Children prefer school, fun, and peace over work, while families pressure them to take a side job with the school. Karaağaçlı and Camilleri (2022) argued that work at the age of school is forced either by parents or family. In plain words, it could be described as the harsh treatment of children in this part of the world. Using force to send children to work during childhood, which is considered a critical age for human development, has resulted in devastating effects on their mental health and psychosocial well-being (Ventevogel et al., 2013), mainly in the case of Afghanistan.

With a vast mental burden and physical fatigue, children in Afghanistan are limited to no coping strategies or specific techniques to strike a balance between work and school. They are only taking the support of anything under their control. However, in many cases, they even do not have those options mentioned in the findings; however, they do require external support from the government of the time and international communities to take them out of this miserable situation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude this study titled "Balancing School and Part-Time Work: An Exploratory Study of Afghan Elementary School Students" illuminates the multifaceted relationship while juggling between school and working obligations. The findings uncover the concerns that Afghan primary school pupils confront when working part-time, underlining the importance of tailored interventions and support networks. As we traverse the problematic balance between academic aspirations and economic duties, educators, policymakers, and parents must work together to create an environment where these students can prosper intellectually while meeting their socioeconomic requirements. Further study and the implementation of evidence-based techniques are critical to ensure that the education system successfully accommodates the different situations of these students, eventually contributing to their holistic development.

As we reflect on the study's findings, it is clear that a comprehensive approach is required to accommodate these students' complex requirements. Educational institutions should aim to establish environments that reflect these students' socioeconomic realities. Furthermore, governments should consider introducing measures to promote a healthy balance between academic pursuits and employment, ensuring that neither part jeopardizes these young learners' general well-being and development.

Ultimately, this study serves as a call to action for stakeholders to develop specific solutions to help Afghan primary school pupils negotiate the hurdles of balancing education and part-time jobs. By cultivating a supportive and flexible educational ecology, we may aim to improve these students' opportunities and resilience, creating a future in which both academic performance and economic responsibility are feasible goals. Future research also can focus on longitudinal studies that could uncover long-term impacts on underaged students' well-being, educational performance, and employment concerns. Also, conducting research with parents, school instructors, policymakers and other stakeholders could expose social and economic factors that compel underaged children to work. In short, these future research directions can provide us with a more inclusive understanding of this complicated issue and at the same time help us to find effective strategies for a supportive action plan for those children who juggle work and academic responsibilities.

This study has important implications for different stakeholders. First, policymakers must bring this urgent matter of child labor, the cracks of the matter which are poverty and little access to education especially those underage students who pursue both work and school. They can create opportunities to ease the burden but creating supportive assistance in school flexibility, vocational internships, and involving the families for social safety. On practical grounds, instructors play an essential role by offering students versatile learning methods demonstrating empathy, and most importantly understanding those students who require additional support. Lastly, International organizations like UNICEF and Save the Children could provide funding for educational internships, vocational training, and other alternative poverty reduction programs.

This study recommends a multi-perspective approach to tackle this issue. First, increasing investment in public education, especially where child labor is higher. Second, empowering underprivileged families can also alleviate this economic concern coercing underage students to work and pursue school. Finally, a community-based initiative that could provide public awareness and psychological support can empower children and families to prioritize education over work employment in those precious years of schooling.

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