Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of School Violence and Prevention

La mise en oeuvre de programmes de prévention de la violence à l'école selon le personnel enseignant et la clientèle étudiante

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Abstract

Emmet Fralick, 14, of Halifax, shot himself at home in April 2002. He left a suicide note saying he was tormented by bullies at school.

In November 2000, Dawn-Marie Wesley, 14, of Mission, B.C., hanged herself. She left a note naming three girls at her school she said were "killing her" because of their bullying.

High-profile cases like these have made the public aware of the horrific consequences of bullying and school violence and have left educators wondering whether our schools are safe places for students and staff alike. Although it is not clear whether violence in schools is actually getting worse, "many people perceive that it is" in European countries (Smith, 2003, p. 2). The spectre for violence in public schools is an issue that has generated public concern and directed research for over three decades. In 2003, according to U.S. national level data (NCES, 2005), six percent of students ages 12-18 reported that they had been afraid of attack at school or on the way to and from school; this number had decreased from 12 percent in 1995. The same data also suggested that female students and Black and Hispanic students were more likely than male and white students to fear for their safety and that urban middle and high schools are more at-risk for serious violence. In Canada, the U.S., and Europe to a lesser extent,

the reporting of violent incidents in schools permeates the media and the national consciousness as a major cause of concern. In 1999, Angus Reid conducted a telephone poll among a representative cross-section of 894 Canadian teens between 12 and 18 years of age. One third (35%) stated that violence has increased in their schools over the past five years. Four in ten (41%) said the amount of violence in their school has stayed the same, while 23% stated that it has decreased in the past five years. Younger teens, aged 12 to 15 (40%) are more likely than older teens to say that the amount of violence has escalated in their school over the past five years. Teens living in BC (40%), Alberta (39%) and Ontario (37%) appear to be more likely to say that the incidence of violence in their schools has increased in recent years.

Educators have good reasons to concern themselves with violence. The fear of violence gets in the way of the business of teaching and learning. Thus, there is an impetus for educators to evaluate individual school situations and to explore all the possibilities for reducing violent incidents in their schools. Research has shown a direct correlation between safe schools and positive learning experiences. Safer schools tend to be more effective schools, experiencing higher academic achievement and fewer disciplinary problems (Heaviside et al., 1998). Well-designed violence prevention programs can enhance students' learning, increase their self-esteem, and help them to bond with the school (Kenney & Watson, 1996).

Résumé

Emmet Fralick, 14 ans, de Halifax, s'est tué en avril 2002, en laissant une note imputant son geste à l'intimidation et à la persécution par ses pairs à l'école.

En novembre 2000, Dawn-Marie Wesley, 14 ans, de Mission (C.-Br.), s'est pendue; la note qu'elle a laissée disait que la persécution par trois filles à son école la "tuait".

Le nombre élevé de cas semblables, en particulier chez les filles et les élèves allophones, a porté le ministère de l'Éducation de l'Ontario à introduire une loi qui visait à créer un milieu sécuritaire dans les écoles (Ontario Safe Schools Act, 2000). L'article qui suit rapporte les résultats d'une étude qui examine, cinq ans après cette loi et à travers les perceptions du personnel enseignant et de la clientèle étudiante d'une école, l'état actuel de la violence dans les écoles ontariennes. L'étude rapporte également une évaluation par les participantes et participants de la nature

et du succès des programmes de prévention dans l'école sélectionnée.

Purpose of the Study

On December 14, 2004, the Ontario Minister of Education announced the formation of a new Safe Schools Action Team to implement the government's plan to make schools safer, including safety audits of schools, an anti-bullying hotline and anti-bullying programs in every school. The team will also review the Ontario Safe Schools Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000).

Sept. 21 2005 - A new Safe Welcome Program is being introduced across the province as the first in a series of initiatives this fall to make Ontario schools safer (Ontario Education Minister Gerard Kennedy.)

These announcements come five years after the implementation of the Ontario Safe Schools Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000) whose intent was "to increase respect and responsibility, to set standards for safe learning and safe teaching in schools." In 1999, a study conducted by Joong (1999) showed that the Violence Free School Policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994) that preceded the Act was not effectively implemented in some schools. Would the introduction of another piece of legislation have the same results? To date, no study has yet been performed to investigate how well the current Act is implemented in Ontario schools. In addition to the requirements of the legislation, schools introduced a variety of practices to improve school safety. These included the use of metal detectors, the presence of security guards, ID cards, dress codes, anti-bullying instructional programs, codes of behaviour, zero-tolerance programs, and peer mediation to name a few. However, were any of these initiatives having an impact or reducing the number of violent incidents occurring in Ontario schools?

The purpose of this study was to investigate teacher and student perceptions about whether the implementation of the Ontario Safe Schools Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000) in middle and secondary schools was making school a safe place. Using a selected sample of teachers and students, an investigation was conducted of the

perceptions of the current state of violence and the nature and frequency of violent acts in their schools. In addition, the study looked at student and teacher perceptions of the nature and effectiveness of any prevention programs used in the sample school. Results of this study were compared with a previous study performed by Joong (1999) on the implementation of Violence Free School Policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994).

Literature Review

Nature of School Violence

In an examination of violence in rural school districts in the U.S., Peterson et al. (1996) reported that 52% of teachers and administrators believed that violence was increasing at the middle and high school levels. The behaviours they perceived as escalating were not the types of deadly violence such as drugs, gang involvement, or weapons-carrying, but rather behaviours that indicate incivility, such as rumours, verbal intimidation and threats, pushing and shoving by students, and sexual harassment. Joong (1999) had similar findings on the nature of violence in Ontario rural and urban secondary schools.

Gangs and Violence

When Bibby and Posterski (1992) asked about the problem of gangs and violence in their study, Teen Trends, 48% of Ontario youth respondents claimed that gangs are a “very serious” problem and 35% knew of a victim. Matthew et al. (1992) defined a youth gang as “a group of three or more youths who band together for social, cultural, or other reasons and impulsively or intentionally plan and commit anti-social, delinquent, or illegal acts.” Schools are potentially excellent locations for gang activity as friendship and common experience already binds many young people. This creates a ready pool of victims for intimidation and extortion, and of buyers for drugs. Gangs have a deteriorating effect on schools and learning as their presence is

threatening and intimidating for others, who feel unsafe and edgy. Strategies for dealing with gangs in schools must include programs aimed at controlling gang activity; staff working with police, parents, school council, and the community; principals ensuring that students receive information about the consequences of belonging to a gang; and administrators standing up to gangs in pursuing the safety of the students and staff (Bibby & Posterski, 1992).

Effects of School Violence

Students who said they had been bullied in school on a weekly basis were 1.5 times more likely than those who were never involved in bullying to have carried a weapon and 1.6 times more likely to bring one to school. This group was also 1.7 times more likely to have been involved in four or more fights a year and 1.3 times as likely to have gotten hurt as a result (Debbie Viadero, Education Week, May 14, 2003).

Both bullies and victims of bullies were more likely than other children to be involved in fights and more often reported poor academic achievement. Bullies reported higher rates of tobacco and alcohol use and were more likely to have negative attitudes about school. Their victims, on the other hand, were more likely to report being lonely and having difficulty forming friendships (Darcia Harris Bowman, Education Week, May 22, 2003).

Perceptions of violence are significant because feeling unsafe is not conducive to learning or to teaching. Out of fear, some students avoid specific areas of the school, such as washrooms or certain hallways (Bastion & Taylor, 1991). Youths aged 8 to 15 ranked bullying as a problem in their lives (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Students who view themselves as targets of bullying show high levels of anxiety and depression that impede their school performance (Juvonen & Graham, 2001). Worrying about becoming a victim may cause some students to carry a weapon or to become offenders themselves (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Kimweli & Anderman, 1997). Teachers may hesitate to confront misbehaving students out of concern for their own safety (Kenney & Watson, 1996). Students who recognize this

concern are less likely to show respect and are more likely to be insolent, making good teaching almost impossible (Noguera, 1996). Clearly, there is much work to be done.

Reporting Violent Incidents in Schools

Brinkley and her colleagues (2003) surveyed 1100 students in the Mid-South U.S. on their knowledge of, and willingness to tell about, a possibly violent situation, their involvement in behaviours that are related to school violence, and their school's climate. About one-third of the students knew of a potentially violent situation and about three-quarters were willing to tell an adult. However, students who were involved in antecedents to violence and/or who had an unfavourable view of their school were much less likely to tell an adult about such situations.

School Violence Prevention

Faced with intense public pressure, school administrators are taking action and implementing programs designed to curb school violence. These programs include physical surveillance, punishing those who perpetrate violence, curriculum-based programs designed to address the precursors of violence, and conflict mediation and resolution. According to Juvonen (2001), there are over 200 recorded programs that try to address the issues surrounding safe schools. Some aim to boost a feeling of physical safety while others promote a psychologically safe school climate. Some are proactive in trying to prevent the development of violent behaviours by resolving incidents and identifying problem students, whereas others are reactive and are put in place once an act of violence has been perpetrated. Juvonen (2001) and Walker (1995) categorize programs into three types: those which enforce school policies related to student conduct, e.g. *zero-tolerance policies*; those which use instructional programs to teach proper behaviours and prevent aggression, e.g. character education and social skills lessons; and those which provide mediation programs such as conflict and peer mediation to resolve conflicts. Schools are

ideally positioned to teach students alternatives to violence (Walker, 1995). Skiba & Peterson (2003), heads of the Safe and Responsive Schools Project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, promote the use of school curricula as an alternative to violence. They suggest several actions:

1. Consider making violence prevention and conflict resolution part of the school curricula through integration and programs such as peer mediation, cooperative learning, and anger management.
2. In peer mediation, teach a cadre of student mediators an interest-based negotiation procedure, along with communication and problem-solving strategies, to help peers settle disagreement without confrontation or violence.
3. Most violent incidents or serious disruption start as less serious behaviour. They might have been de-escalated by early and appropriate responses at the classroom level.
4. Almost one-third of elementary students and about 10% of secondary students report being bullied. Teachers and administrators must take action to address bullying in their schools.

The literature review conducted for this study also included references to a variety of other school violence prevention strategies.

Policies-related strategies include these:

- Conduct a school safety audit (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994)
- Organize a crisis response team
- Deal with disruptive behaviours early
- Encourage parental involvement (Larson, 1994)
- Offer conflict and peer-mediation programs (Shepherd, 1994)
- *Classroom-related strategies* include:
- Offer an effective violence prevention curriculum (Drug Strategies, 1998)
- Consider the classroom as a community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994)
- Use classroom activities to promote safe schools (Ontario

Ministry of Education, 1994)

- Integrate violence-prevention skills in the curriculum (Prothrow-Stith, 1994)

Classroom activities and mediation programs in conjunction with school-wide efforts can greatly enhance the safety and well-being of a school. Violence prevention is an ongoing process in which positive behaviors are modeled and reinforced. Administrators and teachers must be sincere in their efforts to prevent violence and to alleviate students' fears, and they need to implement a variety of thoughtful programs. But do these programs work? According to Juvonen (2001), only a handful of violence prevention approaches have been evaluated, and even fewer have been determined to be effective or promising. This study will attempt to investigate the nature and effectiveness of violence prevention programs in Ontario middle and secondary schools.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study was administration of questionnaire surveys for teachers and students in sample schools. Questionnaires were adapted from the ones used by Skiba & Peterson (2003) in their Safe and Responsive Schools Project at the Indian Education Policy Center. Open-ended questions were added to elicit reactions to violent incidents that respondents had experienced, witnessed, or participated in as an offender. Twenty-four sample middle and secondary schools (twelve of each) from three school districts in Ontario were selected. Schools were selected based on urban/rural, socio-economic status, and school-type representations. In each sample school, 25 teachers and 100 students (grades 9-12) were randomly selected to complete separately designed questionnaires. In the middle schools, 12 teachers and 80 students (Grades 6-8) were selected. Questionnaires were administered in May 2004. Respondents were asked to provide a rating for their impressions of school safety, types and frequency of occurrence of violent incidents, and violence prevention programs at their school using a 5-point Likert scale (See Tables 1 to 3). There are a number of items for each impression.

Mean item scores and aggregated mean scores for each impression were calculated for teachers and students separately. Since most of the questions were derived from a previously validated study (Skiba & Peterson, 2003), little was done to verify the reliability and validity. Also, the use of questionnaires to ascertain levels of violence can only ever measure the extent to which respondents are conscious of their behaviour and experiences, and/or the extent to which they are able to admit to it, even in the form of an anonymous questionnaire. However, care was taken to have a number of items for each impression and aggregated means scores were used. Open-ended questions were analyzed separately using content analysis. Return rates for student and teachers were 75% and 50% respectively. Data were coded by category of respondents, school, gender, and grade to enable appropriate linkages of analysis.

Results and Discussions

General Impression of School Safety

In our sample, 62% of the students stated that their schools are often or always safe, 27% said that they felt safe sometimes and 11% reported that they rarely or never felt safe. Nearly 43% of the students and 20% of the teachers claimed that violent incidents always or often occur at their schools. Compare this data with Joong's study (1999) in which the percentages were 40% and 50% respectively; students' perceptions have not changed much, but teachers' perceptions did. Given that the teachers indicated that they perceive fewer violent acts occurring in the schools, it may be that fewer acts actually are occurring, or, since the students' perceptions were little changed, the acts are perhaps being perpetrated in areas not under teacher scrutiny or perhaps teachers are just not aware when violent acts are occurring. Further, fewer than half of the sample students (48%) and two-thirds (66%) of the teachers were happy with how their schools were dealing with violence. Table 1 lists the item scores (mean and standard deviation) of the general impressions of school safety as perceived by students and teachers. The aggregated mean

for this scale for students is 2.19 (standard deviation of .77) and teachers is 1.88 (standard deviation of .47). This indicates that both teachers and students perceived their schools to be often/always safe. Both teacher and student respondents stated that violent incidents sometimes occur at their schools and that they had mixed feelings as to how their schools were dealing with violence. Violence prevention is

Table 1: *General impressions of school safety (5-point scale)*
Always = 1 Often = 2 Sometimes = 3 Rarely = 4 Never = 5

School Safety	Student Mean	Student S.D.	Teacher Mean	Teacher S.D.
I feel safe before and after school in school building	1.87	1	1.42	0.73
I (Students) feel safe before & after school on school grounds	2.07	1.09	1.91	0.64
I feel safe on my way to and from school	1.92	1.09		
I (Students) feel safe in the lunchroom	1.84	1.12	1.66	0.67
I (Students) feel safe in my classroom	1.66	0.99	1.15	0.39
I believe that violent incidents do not occur at my school	3.17	1.12	3.18	0.89
I feel that this is a safe school	2.3	1.1		
I am happy with the way my school is dealing with violence	2.69	1.26	2.22	0.86
Aggregated Mean School Safety Score	2.19	0.77	1.88	0.47

an obvious area that schools have to address.

Main Causes of Violent Incidents

In the opinion of both middle and secondary students, the top five causes of violent incidents in their schools were bullying (61% of respondents), peer group pressure (60%), general put-downs (53%), frustration (48%) and racial conflict (43%). For teachers, the top five causes were peer group pressure (67%), bullying (65%), general put-downs (60%), frustration (59%) and lack of respect for property (55%). In Joong's study (1999), both students and teachers reported that the main causes of violent acts were general put-downs, peer-group pressure, frustrations and drugs.

General Impressions of Violent Incidents at Sample Schools

Table 2 lists the violent incidents that occurred at the sample schools as perceived by sample students and teachers. The aggregated mean for this scale for students is 3.23 (standard deviation of .83) and for teachers is 3.37 (standard deviation of .59). This indicates that both teachers and students claimed that violent incidents rarely or sometimes occurred at their schools. Verbal incidents such as arguments, insults, teasing and name callings were reported as occurring more often. This finding is consistent with Peterson et al. (1996) and Joong (1999). In this study, however, sample students also claimed that violent incidents that sometimes occurred include sexual and racial comments, inappropriate touching, drug sales, and students being beaten up. Teachers claimed that bullying sometimes occurred even though students claimed that they themselves were rarely bullied. Students claimed that gang violence is more of a problem than what the teachers reported. These findings are similar to those of Joong's study (1999). Despite change policies called for by the Ontario Safe Schools Act (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2000), not much has changed.

Table 2: *General impressions of violent incidents (5-point scale)*
Always = 1 Often = 2 Sometimes = 3 Rarely = 4 Never = 5

Violent Incidents	Student Mean	Student S.D.	Teacher Mean	Teacher S.D.
Arguments among students	2.03	1.1	2.65	0.89
Name calling, insults and teasing	2.06	1.13	2.56	0.8
Physical fighting at this school	2.84	1.1	3.22	0.84
Threats by student against another	2.85	1.26	3.31	0.81
Sexual comments by one against another	2.92	1.32	3.24	0.97
Inappropriate touch by one against another	3.04	1.38	3.62	1.14
Students are hassled by other students	3.05	1.29	3.08	0.74
(I saw) students being beaten up	3.17	1.29	3.55	0.84
Racial comments by one against another	3.19	1.31	3.44	1
Drugs sales on school grounds	3.44	1.56	3.28	1.14
Intruders caused problems at this school	3.6	1.35	3.74	1.07
Gang violence is a problem at this school	3.76	1.34	4.15	0.93
Robbery or theft over \$10 from (me) student	3.87	1.46	2.99	0.87
I heard that someone was threaten with weapon	3.81	1.36	4.2	0.91
(I) Student has been bullied by other students	4.05	1.25	3.04	0.85
Student was assaulted with a knife	4.07	1.31	4.45	0.88
Aggregated Mean Violent Incidents Score	3.23	0.83	3.37	0.59

School Violence Prevention Strategies

Teachers and administrators must address these violent acts. Violence prevention strategies implemented at the sample schools varied. Table 3 lists the ways sample schools were dealing with violence prevention as perceived by sample student and teacher respondents. The aggregated mean for this scale for students is 2.95 (standard deviation of .73) and for teachers is 2.66 (standard deviation of .49). This indicates that teachers felt slightly more positive about violence prevention strategies used by the sample schools. Students claimed that strategies were sometimes used, whereas teachers claimed that they were sometimes/often used. Consequences for violent acts and monitoring seem to be the predominant prevention strategies used. Slight discrepancies between students' and teachers' perceptions of prevention strategies such as enforcing classroom rules and code of behaviour, creating a positive school atmosphere, using classroom activities to promote peaceful coexistence, and teaching anger management skills were reported. Teachers claimed that these strategies were sometimes/often used, whereas students claimed that they were rarely/sometimes used. On the other hand, teachers claimed that parental and police involvements were used more often. Proactive strategies such as conflict resolution programs and using classroom activities to promote non-violent behaviours were sometimes used by sample schools. Two programs that were rarely used in the sample schools are training of a few mediators or peacemakers at the school and teacher in-service on violence prevention strategies. Numerous studies (Skiba & Peterson, 2003; Juvonen, 2001; Shepherd, 1994) recommend the use of conflict mediation programs, while other studies promote using classroom prevention strategies (Juvonen, 2001; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994; Prothrow-Stith, 1994; Drug Strategies, 1998; Walker, 1995). Skiba & Peterson (2003) suggest that by implementing programs that improve overall school climate and reduce minor disruptions, schools may be able to reduce the risk of more serious violent incidents. Survey results indicate that sample schools should try to implement some of these strategies outlined in the literature review related to these two approaches.

Violence Prevention Strategies	Student Mean	Student S.D.	Teacher Mean	Teacher S.D.
Suspensions	2.25	1.16	2.26	0.87
Detentions	2.33	1.3	2.55	1.1
Enforce school code of behaviour	2.37	1.2	1.98	0.77
Teachers enforce classroom rules	2.53	1.26	1.85	0.76
Principal/Vice-principal monitoring	2.57	1.2	2.55	1.03
Parent involvement	2.75	1.23	2.01	1.01
Teachers create a positive school atmosphere	3.03	1.27	1.85	0.6
Teacher monitors outside the classroom	3.14	1.28	2.76	1.24
Teach conflict resolution strategies	3.14	1.33	2.91	0.97
Police involvement with the school	3.24	1.27	2.8	0.88
Expulsions	3.28	1.33	3.36	1.05
Teach violence prevention strategies	3.4	1.39	3.13	1.06
Use classroom activities to promote peaceful	3.41	1.3	2.79	0.9
Teach anger management strategies	3.6	1.35	3.15	1
Train a few mediators or peacemakers at the school	3.69	1.41	3.52	1.2
Teacher in-service on violence prevention			3.63	1.28
Aggregated Mean Violence Prevention Score	2.95	0.73	2.66	0.49

Open-Ended Questions in Student Questionnaires

Sample students completed several open-ended questions asking them to describe violent incidents that they experienced and/or witnessed. The number of responses was limited but sufficient to be significant. Answers (based on high frequencies of responses) are described below:

Violent incidents that had happened to student respondents

Most incidents described involved bullying, fights, assaults, and sexual harassments. About half of these involved a gang of two to six students. The immediate reactions as reported by the students were varied. About half of the victims stated that they ignored the incidents, while the other half reported that they felt anger, hurt, and fear and/or were humiliated. A few yelled back at the perpetrator and/or told the teachers. Most victims did not report the incidents. After the incident, more than half of the students pretended that nothing had happened and about one-third told the administration. About one-quarter of the respondents wanted to fight back, a few did not care but most felt afraid and/or powerless, and some did not want to be in public alone. Most respondents that reported the incidents claimed that nothing happened or that they were not happy with how the incident was handled. Those who did not report the incident claimed that they did not want to make things worse, that the problem was not serious enough to warrant reporting, or they did not want the hassle. About 40% of the respondents claimed that the incident occurred again.

Violent incidents that student respondents had witnessed

Most incidents involved bullying, fights, assaults, and some drug-related situations. Students' immediate reactions were mixed. A third of the respondents stated that they were surprised/shocked/scared/frustrated, one-third of the respondents reported that they tried to break it up/get help and the other third claimed that they did not care

and among those some stated that they just watched. Many claimed that it was not their business or felt powerless or too scared to intervene. The effects on the bystanders after the incident varied. Some respondents reported no effect for the most part, while some said that they were scared that it may occur again and a few stated that they lost respect for the offenders. Most bystanders did not report the incident. Punishments for the perpetrators included detentions and suspensions. Students were divided on whether the incident was handled correctly when reported; most claimed that it was not their business to report, some were fearful, and a few just did not care. A few also claimed that nothing would have happened anyway.

Conclusions and Recommendations

On their own, schools cannot hope to solve the complex problems associated with violence. The authors believe that administrators and teachers are sincere when they state that they want to prevent violence and alleviate students' fears but results of this study indicate that sample schools have more work to do in implementing the Ontario Safe Schools Act (Ministry of Education, 2000). When we see that 40% of students claim that some type of violent incident occurs at their schools we feel that there is a clear message that all community education partners need to work together to create safer school environments. Glasser (1992) in his book *the Quality School* states that an effective school in which students are working hard at learning occurs in an environment free of coercion and adversarial relationships. Thus, it appears from our results that school violence will have an adverse effect on teaching and learning. It appears from the results of this study that policy-related prevention strategies, such as dealing with disruptive behaviours, are not effective in reducing the incidence of violent acts. Parents have indicated that a safe school environment is of utmost importance to them and that they are looking to the schools for information that would lead to parental understanding of what constitutes "violent" behaviour and how they as parents might work with their sons/daughters in dealing with "violent" events. Is it not time, then, to look seriously at developing and implementing a comprehensive safe school plan that includes policy-

related prevention strategies as well as classroom-based and mediation programs that will help students choose non-violent means to settle differences between their peers? Some of these strategies are outlined in the literature review (Skiba & Peterson, 2003; Juvonen, 2001; Shepherd, 1994; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994; Prothrow-Stith, 1994; Drug Strategies, 1998; Walker, 1995). Schools are ideally positioned to teach students alternatives to violence (Walker, 1995) and educators should take the lead in violence prevention. Research shows that early prevention offers the best hope for breaking the cycle of violence. Schools provide a logical, accessible place where young people can learn the skills to solve problems without resorting to violence. The life skills that prevent violence also go hand-in-hand with academic achievement. Teaching and modeling these skills can make schools safer and more effective, benefiting students, teachers, families, and the larger community. Violence prevention in schools should therefore be a joint effort among students, parents, teachers and administrators.

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