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**Mihaela Gabriela Neacșu & Florentina Bucuroiu**

# Teachers' Perceptions about the Social Education of Young People in the Current Context of the Romanian School

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## Abstract

### Keywords:

social education, social pedagogical program, strategies for socio-educational intervention

The article presents the results of a psycho-pedagogical study focused on the problem of social education in school, and on the identification of the perceptions of some teachers from the Romanian pre-university education regarding the knowing of the realities of the school life, of the manifestations of the risk behaviours in school and outside it, of the strategies and actions that can determine positive behavioural, attitudinal and/or operative changes, contributing to the formation and development of some individual and group behaviours that are desirable through formal or non-formal educational means. The article is a comprehensive synthesis of the evolutionary process of the social pedagogy paradigm across the world and within our country, and it invites to reflection on the identification of those effective modalities of socio-educational intervention in school in response to the pressing problems that the Romanian school faces today.

## Zusammenfassung

### Schlüsselworte:

Soziale Erziehung, sozial-pädagogisches Programm, sozio-erzieherische Interventionsstrategien

Der Artikel stellt die Ergebnisse eines psychopädagogischen Studiums dar, das sich auf die Problematik der sozialen Erziehung innerhalb der Schule bezieht, und auch auf die Identifizierung des Wahrnehmungsvermögens mancher Lehrkräfte aus dem rumänischen Unterrichtswesens, hinsichtlich der Erkenntnis der Realität im schulischen Leben, des Risikobenehmens innerhalb und außerhalb der Schule und der Erkenntnis bestimmter Strategien und Handlungsmaßnahmen, die eine Umgestaltung in der Verhaltensweise, in der Stellungnahme und/oder eine positive Handlungsweise bewirken können; durch diese Erkenntnis wird zur Ausbildung und Entwicklung von einer wünschenswerten Verhaltensweise-individuell und in Gruppen- durch formale und nonformale Erziehungsmittel beigetragen. Der Artikel beschreibt zusammenfassend den Entwicklungsprozess des Paradigmas der sozialen Pädagogie in der Welt und in unserem Land, somit wird man zur Überlegung aufgefordert, was die Identifizierung jener konkreten Vorgehen zur sozio-erzieherischen Intervention in der Schule betrifft, als Antwort auf die dringenden Problemen, die heutzutage der rumänischen Schule gegenübergestellt werden.

## 1. Introduction

The school as a space for socializing, learning desirable behaviours, training/ developing key competences, as well as for experimentation and various exploratory endeavours contributes intentionally, systematically and voluntarily to the construction of the social identity of the youth, to affirming their autonomous and creative personality through the implicit values, attitudes and norms created in the classroom and beyond, through the daily interactions between students, between teachers and students, between teachers and parents or between teacher-students and representatives of the school and/ or of the local community. Through the diversity of socializing opportunities present in the class of students and at the school level and/or outside its walls, young people practise certain behaviours, are put into different situations and acquire skills of integration and

coexistence with others within the school community and society.

Cucoș (2017) considers that "morality and civics can be discussed in school, but they are formed or consolidated in real-life situations, through community action and interaction. One must conceive formative instances so as to continue, to enhance and to stimulate the emergence of new types of youth's skills" (p. 112). Therefore, the essential task of the school is not only to provide young people with information and knowledge from various fields of interest and to teach them skills, abilities, habits and competences but, above all, to prepare the youth for life in society. In the opinion of Professor Păun (2017), "...school cannot function solely in the paradigm of responses to social demands. It must influence and cause changes at the societal level, play an active role in this regard." (p. 119).

But how can school influence and determine these changes at the societal level? Hämäläinen (2003) believes that social pedagogy can decisively influence social circumstances and that social change can be induced. Moreover, Thiersch (2005) considers that social pedagogy, acting as a third socializing setting, after family and school, involves a certain amount of work of social education and social networking. According to Lorentz (1994), social pedagogy represents "that program of emancipation for the self-directed learning processes inside and outside the education system acting for the transformation of society" (p. 93).

Therefore, through its actions of local and community intervention, social pedagogy has the force to act systematically on individuals, morals and, ultimately, on social culture, thus contributing to social change.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

The evolutionary process of the social pedagogy paradigm is axiomatically based on the fact that education has become a permanent dimension of social life. The history of pedagogy reveals a gallery of well-known philosophers and educators (Plato, Aristotle, Comenius, Pestalozzi, Diesterweg, Fröbel, Mager, Willmann, Natorp, Barth, Kerschensteiner, Durkheim, Dewey, Nohl et al.) who expressed their belief that education has always been social in nature. These representatives of social pedagogy gave priority to the social factor in education and emphasized the role of society in the development of the human being in relation to educational purposes: preparing the individual for his/her social integration and for an active life within society. The need for social education carried out outside the two institutions dedicated to education (school and family) was also pointed out and the role of social values as higher educational values was further emphasized.

Today, the paradigm of social pedagogy is exploited in the community of educational practices around the world under the most diverse activities: from socio-educational support to young people or adults (assisted at home or in care centres) to activities with delinquents (young offenders/adults), from the activities of play and occupational therapists to the activities of community development (Neacșu, 2011).

Hämäläinen (2003) argues that there are two ways in the development of social pedagogy: on the one hand, the tradition of theoretical discussions and, on the other hand,

the tradition of practical activities that are based on creative work styles, community orientation and experience orientation. Eriksson and Markström (2003) describe social pedagogy as being supported by three pillars: raising and educating children to become citizens, animating in the sense of social mobilization through community activity and emancipation of groups, the process of analysing and solving social case studies following the American tradition of social work. We deduce from here that social pedagogy is supported by the family, the school and the community in its program of social-civic literacy, of investigation and settlement of certain problems specific to different groups and communities, of responsible participation in the community decision-making and, finally, of training/development of the social-civic competences of young people. Kiriaco (2009) identifies 5 dimensions of social pedagogy in school as a program that offers an integrated approach to the needs of the child in terms of care and well-being, inclusion, socialization, support in learning and social education. Social pedagogy is both a field of practice and a field of inquiry that crosses disciplines such as social work, education, community development and psychology.

In Romania as well there is a tradition of establishing the paradigm of social pedagogy through the socio-pedagogical contributions of Constantin Dimitrescu-Iași, Spiru Haret, C. Rădulescu Motru, Dimitrie Gusti, Petre Andrei, I.C. Petrescu, S. Stoian et.al.

According to some contemporary Romanian educators (Neacșu, 2010), social pedagogy is a discipline with a pronounced practical-applicative character that has the "vocation of proven interdisciplinarity" and which builds its methodological arsenal by exploring "the substance of the fertile fields, deriving from the concepts, the logic of the problems and the mechanisms of some disciplines, such as: education sciences, psychology, social psychology, neurobiology, neuroscience, communication pedagogy, group therapies, volunteer group methodology, medical pedagogy." (p. 14).

Ilica (2009) distinguishes between social pedagogy, considered as "field of education sciences, dealing with adult education, lifelong education and the education carried out by society in its favour" (p. 199), and social education, which is to be defined as "influence of the society on each member" (p. 202). According to Bocoș (2016), social education represents "that type of education

that aims mainly to ensure the function of socialization, by transferring values, cultural models, civilization elements, norms and rules from society to the individual, within a constructive process, which builds skills, attitudes and competences necessary for social integration" (p. 69). Ștefan (2006) describes social education as "orientation of the current pedagogical action, which aims to instill in children the spirit of cooperation, of respect and mutual aid, social solidarity. It is a democratic orientation, with emphasis on the decisions taken through group discussion, on responsibility in fulfilling social tasks, on involvement in community actions" (pp. 114-115). Moreover, Albu (2009) calls for reflection, under the form of social pedagogy essays, on the pressing problems of education in the "hypermodern society: school and its new dilemmas, education and television, suburb culture, education and hyperconsumer society, the teacher and the hypermodern society".

A series of manifestations of public and/ or private institutions and bodies in our country, as well as of individuals can be integrated into the concept of social education, in the sense that these direct/indirect, conscious/ unconscious actions at some point cause changes in the behaviours of individuals in a society (Neacșu, 2011). Examples of good practices come mainly from the sphere of private non-governmental initiatives: the projects of the Pestalozzi Romania Foundation for the assertion of the profession of social educationist in our country, the intercultural and civic education projects of the Timisoara Intercultural Institute, the activities of training young people in a democratic spirit performed by the Prahova Social Education Association and the Association of Social Educators in Cheia, Târgu-Mureș.

On the educational level, there are more initiatives to promote social education in the school. On the one hand, the introduction in the compulsory secondary school curriculum, starting with the 2017-2018 school year, of the *Social Education* subject which encompasses the following: in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade – *Critical Thinking and Children' Rights*, in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade – *Intercultural Education*, in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade – *Education for Democratic Citizenship*, in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade – *Economic-Financial Education*. On the other hand, a continuity in the teaching of *Civic Education* in primary school (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades) and of *Civic Culture* in secondary school (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades) doubled by curricular modernization through the introduction of digital textbooks to study these school

subjects in the knowledge-based society. At the same time, the curricular offer that is decided upon by the school includes new optional subjects related to the curricular area *Man and Society*, for example: *Prepared for life. Education for Life and Community, Character Comes First, Legal Education, Education for Society, European Education*.

Social education proves its effectiveness if it is supported by a school environment in which students are given the opportunity to experience the values and principles of the democratic process in action. This is also supported by current educational policy documents that underline the fact that "successful school experiences provide students with the opportunity to reach their potential and prepare them to play a key role as active and responsible citizens." (Action Plan for Education, 2019-2030, p. 16)

### 3. Research methodology

The matter of social education and the analysis of the concrete ways of achieving it in school directed our investigative approach towards a confirmatory study realized between February and March 2019 in order to probe the perceptions of some pre-university teachers from Argeș on the knowledge of school-life realities, of manifestations of risk behaviours in and outside school, of socio-educational strategies and actions that can cause positive behavioural, attitudinal and/or action changes, contributing to the formation and development of desirable individual and group behaviours through educational, formal and/or non-formal, means.

The objectives of the study were aimed at:

- ✓ knowing the importance given by the teachers questioned to the factors of social education;
- ✓ identifying those socio-educational strategies necessary in the application of the current social education curriculum that facilitates the daily practice/respect of social-human values and the creative transfer of these values in other life situations;
- ✓ identifying strategies for preventing/ reducing/ modifying aggressive behaviours in schools.

The study was built on a questionnaire-based survey, the questionnaire being applied to 60 teachers from the Argeș county who teach *Civic Education* in the primary cycle (30) and *Social Education/ Civic Culture* in the

secondary cycle (30). Descriptive statistical analysis and cross-table analysis were used as statistical tools. The participants in the study were predominantly female teachers (86.5%), while the male gender representatives had a weight of only 13.5%. Most of the teachers (75%) surveyed have the Teacher certification – level 1, 11.5% have the Teacher certification – level 2, 9.6% have the permanent teacher certification and only 3.8% are beginners in the profession. Regarding their seniority in the school institution, 48.3% have served over 19 years, 13.3% have served between 9 and 13 years, 11.7% have served between 14 and 19 years, 11.7% have served between 3 and 8 years, and only 1.9% have a short seniority, under 2 years.

#### 4. Results

At Question Q1., *"In general, to what extent do you face problems such as those indicated below at the level of the class or school you are working in?"*, the teachers questioned mentioned that they face the following problems to a high degree at the classroom or school level:

- a. poor children at the level of the family of origin/standards below the socially accepted limit (*the problem of poverty*);
- b. undisciplined children in relation to the rules of the school regulation, of the student status (*the problem of lack of school discipline*);
- c. violent children in the classroom, outside the classroom, on the street, in other environments (*the problem of violence*);
- d. children neglected by their parents and children who drop out of school without a written motivation from their parents (*the problem of child neglect and school dropout*).

The multitude of problems that teachers face as a result of poverty, lack of discipline, increased acts of violence in school, the proliferation of addictive behaviours and

the increase of school dropout cases are reasons why teachers need help in the efficient management of complex problems related to the youth personality shaping and development. The most important factors for the social education of young people which were mentioned by the participants in the study are, in order: family factors (45.0%), community-related/reference group-related factors (35.1%), environmental factors (28.3%), factors related to their own personality/immaturity, weak will, strong demotivation (18.6%), and school factors/excessive authority, very high standards (18.3%). Poverty and lack of access to education and social protection services that children and their families face are known to negatively impact the former's school attendance.

The teachers participating in the study were asked to what extent the current school curriculum of Civic Education and/or Social Education reflects the fundamental human values and the respondents mentioned that the following general-human values are addressed the most in the current school curriculum: justice, solidarity, the good, education/training, culture and civilization, the beautiful, recognition of the right to play, work, education and creation, truth/knowledge, compliance with the truth, tolerance and flexibility, faith, freedom of expression, freedom of communication and individual, social, and group security. Those that are reflected to a lesser extent than those mentioned above are: the self-achievement of the personal project, the existence and quality of the satisfaction of the primary needs, health, protection, social assistance, family/group life and individual dignity.

At the question *"To what extent do the strategies below facilitate the correct knowledge and understanding of human values?"*, the participants in the study considered that the following strategies (figure no. 1) greatly facilitate the correct knowledge and understanding of human values.

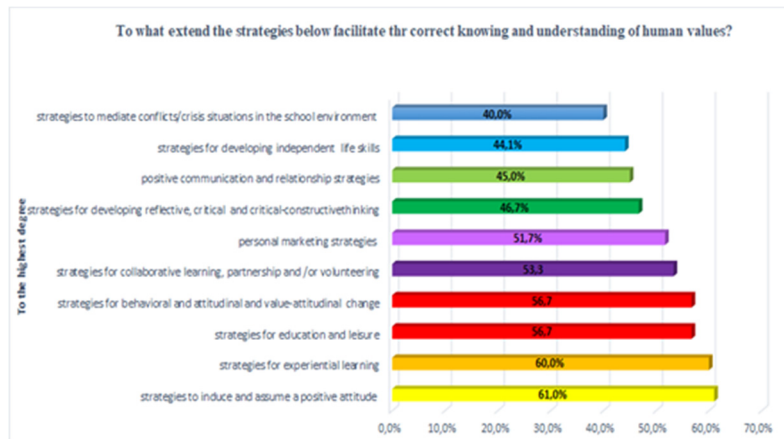


Figure no. 1. Hierarchy of the strategies that facilitate to the highest degree the correct understanding of human values

For female teachers, the most important strategies are: and assuming responsible attitude and strategies for experiential learning strategies, strategies for inducing behavioural and attitudinal-value change.

Table no. 1. Hierarchy of the strategies that most facilitate the correct understanding of human values function of gender

Strategies that facilitate to the highest degree the correct knowledge and understanding of human values	Male	Female
1. strategies of inducing and assuming responsible attitude	71,4%	65,9%
2. strategies of experiential learning	57,1%	68,9%
3. strategies of behavioral and attitudinal-value change	57,1%	62,2%

The didactic degree or seniority in the school institution does not significantly influence the ranking of strategies that facilitate the correct knowledge and understanding of human values.

At the question "To what extent do the strategies below facilitate the daily practice of and compliance with

the social-human values?", according to the respondents, all the strategies mentioned facilitate to a high degree the daily practice and respect of human values, but they can also be classified according to the importance given (figure no. 2).

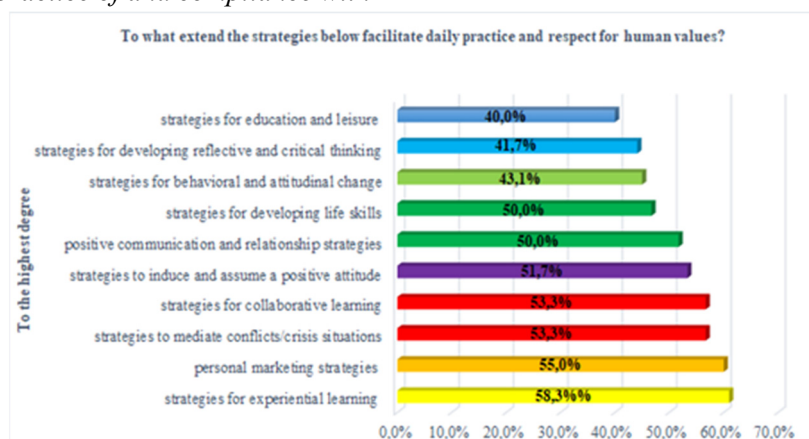


Figure no. 2. Hierarchy of the strategies that facilitate to the highest degree the daily practice of and compliance with the social-human values

While male teachers consider that the most important are the strategies that mediate conflicts/crisis situations in the school space, followed by experiential learning strategies and collaborative learning strategies, female teachers focus on experiential learning strategies and, just like the male teachers, on strategies for collaborative

learning, followed by strategies for mediating conflicts/crisis situations in the school space. The didactic degree or the seniority in the school institution does not put a significant imprint on the ranking of the strategies that facilitate the daily practice of and compliance with socio-human values.

**Table no. 2.** Hierarchy of the strategies that facilitate to the highest degree the daily practice of and compliance with the social-human values function of gender

Hierarchy of the strategies that facilitate to the highest degree the daily practice of and compliance with the social-human values	Male	Female
1. strategies that mediate conflicts/crisis situations in the school space	71,4%	60%
2. experiential learning strategies	57,1%	66,7%
3. collaborative learning strategies	57,1%	62,2%

Moreover, the teachers participating in the study were questioned about the need to implement strategies to prevent/reduce/modify the aggressive behaviours in schools and the respondents consider that it is first necessary to implement the techniques of individual and group educational counselling (81.4%) followed by:

- involvement of children/young people in extracurricular projects (78%);
- focus groups with parents (71.2%);
- techniques for individual and group psychological counselling (69.5%);
- workshops for personal development of children/young people (69.5%);
- techniques for behavioral control and conflict mediation (67.8%);
- workshops for the emotional education of children/young people (66.7%);
- joint workshops for children-teachers-parents (65%);
- anti-violence campaigns (63.8%);
- involvement of children/young people in volunteering activities (59.3%);
- strategies for behavioural modification (50.8%);
- reconstructive techniques (43.1%).

## 5. Discussions

Many researchers and practitioners in the field of social pedagogy believe it is wrong to consider social pedagogy only a collection of strategies for socio-educational intervention, but rather it should be seen as a

complex program at the meeting point between care and education. Naturally, we ask ourselves the following questions: *How should such a socio-educational program look like? Are our teachers ready to implement in schools such coherent programs of social pedagogy that respond to the pressing needs and problems of our schools today? What would the training of teachers entail in this regard? Is the existence of a social educationist in school that coordinates such socio-educational programs justified, or do the efforts of teachers combined with those of the parents, community representatives and members of the multidisciplinary team (school psychologist, school counsellor, school assistant, school doctor, medical nurse) suffice, if such staff exists in schools?*

The pressing problems faced by teachers today, to a large extent at the classroom and school level, are mainly related to poverty, lack of discipline, violence, neglect and school dropout. Specialized studies (Muntean, 2011, Neacșu, 2010) mention the multidimensional character of poverty which "affects the material state (food, housing, heat), the workplace, the mental well-being (induces annoyance, sadness, insecurity, shame, humility, hunger), creates inability to participate and represent at political level, as well as specific cultural and social norms. While the subculture theory links poverty to the initiation of violent and antisocial behaviours in certain social groups, newer research highlights an important aspect present in the groups exposed to poverty: human solidarity" (p. 130). Therefore, for the poor families there is a complex register of needs that have to be met in order to facilitate their children's access to education. However, there are certain

socio-economic barriers that reduce the chances of poor families sending their children to school.

School indiscipline, under its various manifestations, from the lack of respect for teachers and/or classmates, disobedience to the rules of the class or family, to inappropriate behaviour during school hours or threats and forms of violence (screams, fights, physical assault of colleagues or even of teachers) most often puts teachers in difficulty in efficiently managing the situations of indiscipline encountered in school practice. Therefore, teachers express the need to know and apply those methods and strategies suitable for reducing acts of indiscipline and the level of aggressive behaviour at school. Several studies and research on combating the phenomenon of violence in school show that bullying, harassment and verbal aggression against children are present at a worrying level in schools. In a statement issued by the Romanian Police in October 2018, it is shown that the average rate of offenses reported in schools at county level is 0.59, most of the violence is in fact represented by consequences of spontaneous conflicts arising from trivial quarrels between children, and the crime rate committed in school is almost twice as high in urban areas as in rural areas. Hitting and other types of violence represent 54.9% of the offenses reported in the last year of school. Therefore, it can be concluded that the tendency of children to respond violently is increasing, against the background of violence to which children are exposed in the family, in society, in the media or on the Internet.

Regarding child neglect, it is known that this negatively affects both the physical and psychological development of the child. The immediate psychological effects of neglecting the child are fear, isolation and inability to trust someone. Other psychological difficulties associated with neglect include depression, withdrawal, panic disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anger, reactive attachment disorder, cognitive abilities, language development, educational acquisitions, and lower performance. Neglected children are more prone to antisocial behaviours, personality disorders and violent behaviour. Sometimes, neglect leads to taking on too many responsibilities: the responsibility of caring for younger siblings prevents the child from participating in activities appropriate to his or her age, like playing or having friends, and it may even reach the level of not

going to school. The long-term psychological problems associated with neglect are also known: personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders and even psychoses.

Early school leaving is a problematic issue at national level. The number of people leaving early the education system remains one of the highest in the EU, the rate of early school leaving being 16.4% in 2018 according to Eurostat. Children and adolescents from the most disadvantaged families, members of the Roma communities, those living in rural areas and children with disabilities have the least chance of graduating from compulsory education and continuing their education at a higher level. A research of the Institute of Education Sciences carried out in 2012 together with UNICEF Romania presents a hierarchy of family factors with negative impact on the school dropout of students: "income at the subsistence limit, low level of parents' education, family disorganized by divorce/death, single-parent family, reorganized family, temporary/permanent child in the care of grandparents/other relatives, unemployment situation for one or both parents, negative attitude of family members regarding the children's education/school, abandonment situations in the case of older siblings, the provision of lucrative activities in the household/outside it, the lack of minimum conditions for home study" (p. 62). It is also emphasized that the risk of school dropout "is most often associated with factors that are related either to the characteristics of the student (health status, level of intelligence, level of previous knowledge, specific attitudes and behaviours etc.) or to the socio-economic and cultural environment of the family of origin" (p. 65).

## 6. Conclusions

The study conducted led us to the following conclusions:

- The fundamental human values addressed and reflected to a great extent in the current Romanian school curriculum at primary and secondary level are: justice, solidarity, the good, education/training, culture and civilization, the beautiful, recognition of the right to play, work, education and creation, truth/knowledge, compliance with truth; tolerance and flexibility; faith; freedom of expression, freedom



of communication and individual, social and group security. To a lesser extent than those mentioned above are: self-achievement of the personal project; the existence and quality of the satisfaction of the primary needs; health, protection, social assistance; family/group life and individual dignity.

- Among the strategies that facilitate to a great extent the correct knowledge and understanding of human values are: experiential learning strategies, positive communication and relation strategies, behavioural and attitudinal-value change strategies, responsible attitude induction strategies, strategies for developing independent living skills, strategies for collaborative learning, partnership and/or volunteering, and strategies for education and leisure. The following strategies are very important, but to a lesser extent than those mentioned above: strategies for developing reflective and critical-constructive thinking, personal marketing strategies and strategies for mediating conflicts/crisis situations in the school space.
- Regarding the desirable social attitudes and behaviours, young people learn mainly from the hidden curriculum of the school, whose values shape and influence each aspect of the student's experience, as they participate daily in social processes in the classroom and school life, they learn from the nature of the social relations established at the level of the school organization, from the teacher-student interactions, from the way in which the colleagues and teachers relate, from observing or violating some internal norms of the class/school, from overcoming prejudices and stereotypes or not, from constraints and/or manifestations of authority/power, from the spirit of cooperation and existing aids, etc.
- Through the continuous training of teachers in the field of social pedagogy, specific competences can be developed, which will allow them to intervene from an educational and socio-emotional point of view in the prevention, correction and healthy modelling of the youth from the behavioural and behavioral-attitudinal point of view and, last but not least, to act in the spirit of social pedagogy as active agents of social change by initiating and implementing in the educational practice some operational programs of social pedagogy that respond to the socio-educational

problems identified at a given time in the school space and outside it.

#### Authors note:

The authors have equal contributions to this article.

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