

Teachers' Conceptions of and Lesson Plans for Teaching Controversial Issues: Limitations for Deploying Their Pedagogical Potential

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Abstract

Teaching “controversial issues” has a high pedagogical potential for students to understand the characteristics of social conflicts and to become critical citizens. Twenty Chilean secondary education Social Studies teachers were invited to participate in a group interview and workshop to establish their conceptions of controversial issues and to design lesson plans for teaching such issues. The data showed that although teachers recognise some of the key elements that define these issues and recognise their pedagogical potential, they do not link them with learning the characteristics of social conflict and do not seek to deepen students’ understanding of the actors and interests involved in such issues. The data reveal a tension between transmitting to students an interpretation of the traumatic issue in question and creating the conditions for students to analyse the different interpretations that may be in conflict. Therefore, to deploy the pedagogical potential of controversial issues, teachers need to refrain from expressing univocal truths and to question their position as owners and transmitters of knowledge.

Keywords: controversial issues; Social Studies; teachers; lesson plans

Introduction

In recent decades, different countries worldwide have been engaged in lively debates concerning Social Studies curricula, their objectives and content. Within this framework, the teaching of controversial issues has stimulated the interest of educational researchers in Europe (Brusa and Musci 2011; González-Monfort 2011; Legardez and Simonneaux 2006; López-Facal and Santidrián 2011; Tutiaux-Guillon



Education as Change

<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>

Volume 23 | 2019 | #3699 | 16 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/3699>

ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)

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2012), North America (Barton and McCully 2007; Cotton 2006; Hess 2009; Oulton et al. 2004), Asia (Al-Rabaani 2015; Ersoy 2010; Misco and Lee 2014; Misco and Tseng 2018; Pollak et al. 2018), Africa (Asimeng-Boahene 2007; Chikoko et al. 2011; Masooa and Twala 2014; Russell and Quaynor 2017), and Latin America (González 2008; Magendzo 2016; Toledo et al. 2015b).

In Chile, the last three versions of the national curriculum have incorporated controversial issues, with the objective that the students can develop knowledge, skills, and abilities that will enable them to understand their society and encourage them to act as critical and responsible citizens, committed to democracy, respect for and the enforcement of human rights (MINEDUC 1998; 2009; 2013). Such issues include the relationship between the Chilean state and indigenous peoples, human rights violations during the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990), and the relationship between economic growth, environmental sustainability and social equity.

Currently, hardly any information is available about the experiences of teachers and students in Chile and Latin America when controversial issues are taught. However, studies confirm that there are some problems (Ertola and Muñoz 2008; Funes 2006; González 2008; Toledo, Magendzo, and Gazmuri 2010b; Toledo et al. 2015a; 2015b). According to these investigations, Argentine and Chilean teachers note that teaching controversial issues elicits students' interest and has important pedagogical potential for the development of critical thinking and for their civic education (Ertola and Muñoz 2008; Funes 2006; Toledo et al. 2015b). However, many teachers and students report that this type of content is rarely taught in classrooms. The teachers cite various reasons for this, including lack of time due to overloaded curricula, limited availability of quality teaching materials, and the tension that teaching this type of content generates in schools, which can lead to conflicts with parents or the authorities (González 2008; Toledo and Magendzo 2010a; Toledo, Magendzo, and Gazmuri 2010b; Toledo et al. 2015b).

The studies described above note that the main obstacles to teaching such issues are contextual. Beyond these contextual difficulties, little is known about Social Studies teachers' conceptions regarding controversial issues in terms of curricular content and how they plan their teaching. This article investigates the conceptions of a group of Chilean secondary education Social Studies teachers regarding controversial issues as curricular content and the lesson plans they design for teaching this type of content. The lesson plans are interesting because they show the learning objectives defined for controversial issues, the teaching strategies developed in order to stimulate students, and the evaluation methods used. Understanding the teachers' perspectives regarding controversial issues and analysing their lesson plans will contribute to providing guidelines for teaching Social Studies lessons with the purpose of educating critical and emancipated citizens.

Frame of Reference

Several concepts have been used to refer to teaching curricular content related to social conflict. It is possible to distinguish a group of concepts that refer to teaching sensitive content in post-conflict societies, such as education for peace (Bretherton, Weston, and Zbar 2003), a reconciliation and humanising pedagogy (Keet, Zinn, and Porteus 2009), the work of memory and moral education (Weldon 2009), and difficult knowledge (Bryan 2016; Zembylas 2017). These concepts are related to the visualisation of injustice, the understanding of trauma (Garrett 2011), and human rights education (Bajaj, Canlas, and Argenal 2017; Lehrer, Milton, and Patterson 2011). A second group of concepts emphasises content related to lively debates in society, such as controversial issues (Barton and McCully 2007; Harwood and Hahn 1990; Hess 2009), socially controversial issues (López-Facal and Santidrián 2011), and socially relevant issues (Legardez and Simonneaux 2006; Tutiaux-Guillon 2012). This group of concepts refers to the teaching of conflict with the explicit purpose of teaching critical citizenship. In this case, the emphasis is on controversy. Consequently, it considers both past and present issues as well as traumatic issues and others that are not.

Within this framework, controversial issues can be understood as topics on which there is neither consensus (Advisory Group on Citizenship 1998), nor a single answer or solution (Simonneaux 2011), nor scientific agreement (Tutiaux-Guillon 2010). These issues generate debates (Legardez 2003) in the scientific sphere, in the media, within families, and in schools (Legardez and Simonneaux 2006). They produce differing interpretations, social engagement and conflict (López-Facal and Santidrián 2011). They divide society into groups that support different interpretations (Bailey 1975) and propose irreconcilable solutions (Advisory Group on Citizenship 1998; Oulton et al. 2004; Wales and Clarke 2005) based on differing values and interests (Tutiaux-Guillon 2012).

In recent decades, the literature on teaching Social Studies has provided significant guidance for teaching controversial issues in secondary education. This research has produced information regarding its curricular aims (González-Monfort 2011; López-Facal and Santidrián 2011; Oulton et al. 2004), teachers' roles (Barton and McCully 2007; Cotton 2006; Harwood and Hahn 1990; Levinson 2006; López-Facal and Santidrián 2011; Oulton et al. 2004), the type of activities to be performed (Asimeng-Boahene 2007; Dawson 2001; González-Monfort 2011; Hess 2009; Jacobs 2010), and the methodology for evaluation (Hess 2009; López-Facal and Santidrián 2011).

According to this literature, the aim of employing controversial issues as curricular content in Social Studies is for students to understand the conflicts' characteristics and develop the ability to engage in an ethical, sensible, and tolerant manner, to take a reasoned position and act accordingly. Students should understand that conflict is inherent in social interactions and should view it as a potential learning space. Students are expected to understand that arguments are constructed to influence people's

opinions (Oulton et al. 2004) because they reflect the interests and worldviews of those who make them. Moreover, students learn to argue and justify their opinions by using valid sources of information and logical reasoning, so they can make decisions with autonomy (López-Facal and Santidrián 2011). In terms of values, analysing controversial issues allows students to detect prejudice and manipulation in public discourse and question stereotypes; it also promotes empathy towards people who support differing arguments (González-Monfort 2011).

To address and develop a controversial issue in the classroom, the teacher should ideally know his/her students and their living environments in order to identify their interests and motivations (Asimeng-Boahene 2007). A safe classroom environment must be created, in which students feel empowered to express their views and to foster the acceptance of ideological diversity (Cotton 2006; Harwood and Hahn 1990). Ideally, the teacher should explain his/her position on the argument and expose its rationale (Oulton et al. 2004). Simultaneously, the teacher should present a variety of interpretations and provide arguments on which they are based (Barton and McCully 2007). Teachers should not only seize the emotionality triggered by controversial issues, in order to stimulate students' interests, but should also ensure a rational approach to conflict and provide students with adequate and rigorous sources of information (Barton and McCully 2007; López-Facal and Santidrián 2011).

When teaching a controversial issue, activities should be focused on socially significant topics that spark students' interests (Asimeng-Boahene 2007; Dawson 2001; Harwood and Hahn 1990). The teacher must also consider activities that stimulate collaborative work and inquiry, develop arguments, and consider arguments different from one's own (Dawson 2001; Jacobs 2010). Therefore, activities may focus on questions that explore the reasons behind a given controversy, the social agents and interests involved, and the evidence on which the agents base their arguments (Dawson 2001; González-Monfort 2011). Simultaneously, the activities must provide time for students to take a position, support it with valid information, and propose alternative solutions (Asimeng-Boahene 2007).

Regarding the assessment of learning, teaching controversial issues involves the use of instruments that are different from traditional ones in that the goal is not necessarily to evaluate the acquisition of specific knowledge (Hess 2009). Because the aim of teaching controversial issues is for students to develop a critical and participatory perspective, the evaluation should not expect the student to produce standard solutions or answers to the questions presented. Instead, it should focus on the quality of arguments, ensuring that they are based on valid and pertinent information and logical reasoning, the ability to understand the rationale of opposing arguments, and the ability to contextualise the discourses involved, taking into consideration both the agents who produce them and their values and interests (López-Facal and Santidrián 2011).

These orientations that the literature proposes for teaching controversial issues set high expectations regarding what teachers can achieve in their classes. They assume that teachers have clarity about their intentions in teaching issues that generate debate and conflict in their classrooms and that they are capable of articulating a teaching strategy that is consistent with these intentions. Furthermore, the type of activities proposed and the use of non-traditional evaluation instruments entail extended periods of time and curricular freedom. This comes into tension with schools' limited time and the existence of curricula overloaded with content. In addition to this, the fact that the teacher explains his/her opinion regarding the issue under debate causes the students' emotionality and ideological diversity to emerge, and can produce conflicts with parents and authorities in institutional cultures that have traditionally excluded conflict and emotions.

Methodology

To analyse teachers' conceptions of controversial issues and their lesson plans, a qualitative and group-based methodological design was implemented, with two sequential stages that occurred during a one-day workshop.

A total of 20 Social Studies teachers participated, 12 women and eight men, all between the ages of 24 and 46. All of them received their pedagogical training in Chilean universities, and seven of them have participated in Social Studies continuing training activities. From this group, 10 have been practising professionally for two to five years, five of them for six to 10 years, and five of them for 11 to 15 years. All of them work in educational establishments that receive state funding, 14 in private subsidised establishments and six in municipal establishments. These establishments enrol 91 per cent of the school-age population.¹

In a previous study, all of the teachers who participated in this study expressed their interest and commitment to teaching controversial issues present in Chile's curriculum. They did so despite their declaration that teaching controversial issues was not included in their initial training, nor was it included in their continuing training (Toledo and Magendzo 2014).

Stage One: The Concept of Controversial Issues

The objective of the workshop's first stage was to establish teachers' conceptions of controversial issues. A group interview was conducted to understand the participants'

¹ Neo-liberal reforms in education in the 1980s, during the Pinochet dictatorship, introduced the market into public education. The old public establishments that were funded and managed by the state disappeared. Two types of establishments were created in their place: municipal and private subsidised establishments. Municipal schools are state funded, but their property and management remain in the hands of municipalities or city councils (37.4% of the national school enrolment). Private subsidised establishments receive state funding, but their property and management are private (53.6% of the national school enrolment).

perspectives. The interview was designed to invite the group of teachers to talk about their ideas and experiences in relation to teaching (Taylor and Bogdan 1992). The aim of the interview was to offer access to common knowledge in relation to controversial issues, that is, “what is given to be known in the actions and communications of a group or collective” (Canales 2006, 266). The interviews were open and non-directed to allow the conversation to flow freely (Taylor and Bogdan 1992). The facilitator guided the conversation without dominating or subverting the participants (Goldman and Schwartz 1987).

The facilitator started the interview by indicating that the Chilean Social Studies curriculum includes topics called controversial issues. The interview was digitally recorded. The recordings were transcribed according to the protocol of Wood and Kroger (2000) following Spanish language norms with a low level of editing. The constant comparative method was used for the data analysis. This method involves comparing each of the incidents in the data to construct categories and establish their properties and dimensions (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Stage Two: Lesson Plans

The objective of this stage was for teachers to design a lesson plan to teach a unit on a controversial issue. For this task, the teachers were randomly divided into three groups. Each group had to prepare a lesson plan. The groups could choose between three issues in the Chilean Social Studies curriculum recognised as controversial issues by students and teachers in the previous quantitative study. The three topics were “State terrorism and human rights violations in Latin America,” “The crisis of the welfare state and the implementation of neoliberal policies,” and the “Spanish Conquest and the state’s relationship with indigenous peoples” (Toledo et al. 2015a; 2015b).

The lesson plan needed to consider learning goals in terms of lesson contents, student activities, and evaluation strategies. The groups worked for three hours. One teacher from each of the three groups presented their lesson plans to the entire group of participants. These presentations were digitally recorded, and the recordings were transcribed.

Findings

The following is an analytical description of the teachers’ conceptions of controversial issues and the lesson plans designed by them in the workshop.

Teachers’ Conceptions of Controversial Issues

The interviewed teachers were asked about the meaning they attribute to controversial issues and their impact on the school and the classroom. Although teachers noted that they do not know precisely how academic literature defines a controversial issue, they agreed that it concerns issues that generate social debate and irreconcilable positions.

According to the teachers, controversial issues refer to problems “that by the social events of the present ... become controversial” or “past events that are relevant again.” These polemical issues or controversies reach the school through the media and the students’ families because “the media highlight controversial issues” and families “discuss the problems presented in the media and express their opinions.”

According to the teachers, controversial issues are mainly contextual: “there are controversial issues for a group, which for other groups are not.” For an issue to be controversial in school and in the classroom, students should perceive it as close to them, as “controversy is closely related to the present and to events that are close.” There is agreement on proximity to the students’ lives as a characteristic element of a controversial issue: “that closeness is not only related to historical time, it is also related to geographical proximity and context.” Given this contextual nature, what adults or teachers perceive as controversial may not be perceived as controversial by students: “the controversy relates to the proximity of students to a subject.”

According to these teachers, this proximity between students and certain issues has an important emotional component; these are “issues that unleash emotions” because “if there is emotion, there is a controversial issue.” However, some teachers noted that it is not sufficient for a topic to generate emotions in order to make it controversial. Students must also empathise with the people involved because “it has a lot to do with empathy.” In this sense, its controversial nature depends on whether students “are able to empathise with a certain subject.” Viewing this idea in more detail, the teachers argued that issues are seen as controversial in the classroom when students identify common elements between controversial issues in society and their daily lives, or when they link conflicts from the past with those from the present.

Teachers noted that although there are potentially controversial issues in the curriculum, whether they are seen as controversial depends on how the teacher approaches the teaching of a topic. In that sense, “content can be controversial” depending on “how the teacher is able to generate some degree of empathy between the students and the content being studied.” In addition, all of the topics in Social Studies have the potential to be presented as controversial because “the issues of history and society are controversial.” When a topic is not controversial for students, the teacher should bring this topic closer to them and show why the topic is potentially controversial and what its consequences are for the present: “In order to bring students closer to a period in history, we professors must show the controversial process that took place at the time”; thus, “the teacher should seek to have students understand that they have inherited the outcome stemming from how the controversy was resolved.”

Finally, the teachers were asked about the pedagogical potential of controversial issues. The teachers agreed that controversial issues have a high pedagogical potential for educating citizens and teaching values. In that sense, “controversy is not a problem but rather a benefit for Social Studies teachers.” One of the participating teachers, who

thought over how controversial issues should be taught, noted that “if teachers understood controversial issues as an opportunity for teaching values, tolerance and respect for diversity, to reflect and ground opinions, [students] could be educated to be responsible students and future citizens. It would be another teaching perspective and the result would be different.”

Lesson Plans for Teaching Controversial Issues

From the issues suggested for lesson plan designs, the issue “State terrorism and human rights violations in Latin America” was chosen by two groups, and the “Spanish Conquest and the state’s relationship with indigenous peoples” was chosen by one group. The topics chosen for the design of the lesson plans are consistent with the teachers’ conceptions of controversial issues. The plans designed by the three groups effectively incorporated current public debates in Chilean society. State terrorism and human rights violations are associated with the experience of the Pinochet dictatorship, a traumatic period in Chile’s recent history. The political, economic, social, and legal consequences are constantly present in communication media and public debate. Similarly, the state’s relationship with indigenous peoples is linked with the Mapuche conflict, a current dispute between the Chilean state and indigenous communities in the country’s southern region who are demanding autonomy and constitutional recognition, the recovery of territories, and economic reparation. This conflict is constantly present in the media, due to the recurrence of violent political actions carried out by the various groups involved.

The two groups that developed plans to teach about the Pinochet dictatorship defined learning goals linked to the understanding of concepts, historical analysis and the development of democratic values. They presented a great deal of content and key concepts to use in the classes (between 10 and 14 concepts). These are essentially categories of history and social sciences, for example “human rights, state terrorism, dictatorship, repression, exile, torture, ideology, the disappeared detainees, propaganda, and totalitarianism.” They also proposed activities oriented towards the investigation, analysis and interpretation of information as well as activities that promote the formulation of opinions and the development of arguments. They included various pedagogical resources that may foster an emotional bond between the students and the people who participated in the events analysed, for example, “iconic films such as *La noche de los lápices*, Orwell’s *1984*, *Brazil*, *The Great Dictator*, *Machuca*, and *Los archivos del Cardenal* and of songs related to the subject; a visit to the *Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* [Museum of Memory and Human Rights] or to Villa Grimaldi,² and the design of audio material.” Consistent with the above, the proposed

² *La noche de los lápices* is an Argentinean film that portrays and narrates a high school student’s kidnapping, torture, and murder in 1976 during this country’s last dictatorship. *Machuca* is a Chilean film that portrays the 1973 coup d’état and the days leading up to it through the friendship of two children from different social classes. *Los Archivos del Cardenal* was a TV series that told the story

evaluations are aimed at obtaining information on the students' understanding of concepts and their capacities to analyse and argue.

Both lesson plans provide opportunity for the students to collect information, analyse it, take a stand on the conflict and give their arguments. Teachers expect students to approach processes and traumatic events, empathise with the subjects who experienced them, and make judgements about them. However, the learning goals, the large number of concepts, the activities, and the proposed evaluations are articulated to convey a relatively complete interpretation of the conflict analysed. They do not consider space for students to approach interpretations that differ from the teacher's and explore these interpretations' rationales.

The case of the teachers who designed a plan for teaching the Mapuche conflict is different. This plan also considers among its goals historical analysis and the development of democratic values. Similar to the plans above, it proposes activities and evaluations focused on the analysis of information, its interpretation, and the ability to formulate a personal and well-argued opinion. The teachers also proposed pedagogical resources that allow students to connect emotionally with the controversial subject under study. For example, they proposed reading news about the people killed in the different groups involved in the conflict, "one article on the murder of a young Mapuche by the police and another article on the attack on the Luchsinger family."³ However, along with this, they explicitly define the contrasting of positions and historiographical interpretations—considering the actors who hold them and their projections for the present—as a learning goal. The activities, pedagogical resources and evaluations emphasise the existence of different perspectives and consider the students' abilities to compare different interpretations. The teachers also proposed evaluations aimed at understanding the rationale of the different interpretations, considering different actors and the values and interests that mobilise them.

Although this plan is organised to analyse the conflict from different perspectives and to consider the existence of different interpretations, in the teachers' argument there is a caricature of the positions the teachers do not seem to share. These positions are associated with negative adjectives and categories. For example, they describe the Spanish conquistadors, as well as the Chilean state and private corporations, as greedy agents who seek to dominate and impose their interests and culture: "initially, it was the Spaniards who initiated the conquest; subsequently, the Chilean state became responsible for a new conquest, and finally, during the twentieth and twenty-first

of the human rights defense conducted by *Vicaría de la Solidaridad* (Solidarity Vestry), an institution of the Catholic Church that provided legal support to political prisoners and missing family members. *El Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos* and Villa Grimaldi are memorial sites dedicated to commemorating the victims of human rights violations.

³ The "attack on the Luchsinger family" refers to a fire at a farm, the property of a German immigrant family in a territory claimed by Mapuche organisations, in which two people were killed.

centuries, a new conquest is being led by the forestry companies.” Meanwhile, the positions they share are linked to positive adjectives and categories: indigenous people, “who defend their territory and their culture,” suffered the consequences of successive conquests, specifically, “discrimination, impoverishment, and injustice because their territory had been taken away from them.” This kind of treatment of different positions reduces the complexity of the conflict analysis, leaves no room for subtle interpretations, contradictions or singularities, and runs the risk of turning the conflict into a dichotomy between good versus evil.

Discussion

There is coherence between the teachers’ conceptions of controversial issues as curricular content and the related lesson plans. The lesson plans effectively address current conflicts in Chilean society that generate irreconcilable positions among different social groups. Furthermore, the lesson plans are explicitly designed to develop critical thinking and democratic values in students. Their plans consider activities and evaluations oriented towards the investigation, analysis and interpretation of information as well as the development of arguments and the formulation of opinions. In addition, the intention to bring controversies closer to the students’ context is evident in the lesson plans, given that they include pedagogical resources to foster the students’ emotional bonds, to elicit students’ interests and link the phenomena and processes under study with their lives.

However, both the teachers’ conceptions and lesson plans present limitations that make it difficult to deploy fully the pedagogical potential of controversial issues: neither the conceptions nor the lesson plans link the study of controversial issues with the understanding of social conflict. Nor do they go in depth regarding the rationales of the different positions in question or the values, agendas or interests of those who hold these positions. According to the literature, one of the main purposes of teaching controversial issues is to enable students to understand that conflict is an inherent part of life in society (González-Monfort 2011; Oulton et al. 2004). In addition, students should reflect upon the fact that the positions in dispute in a controversy are neither neutral nor innocent, but rather respond to different values, agendas and interests and that the actors who hold them are situated in different places in the social structure, with different degrees of power and influence (López-Facal and Santidrián 2011; Tutiaux-Guillon 2012).

The lesson plans for teaching Pinochet’s dictatorship present only one interpretation of the controversial issue selected, whereas the lesson plans for teaching the Mapuche conflict explain the contrast between different interpretations, with all of their components, and identify the groups and actors in dispute. Nonetheless, this lesson plan only validates the legitimacy of the position shared by the teachers. It does not recognise the legitimacy of the other position or arguments. By not considering the other’s position as legitimate, one’s own position is reinforced as the only valid one. Additionally, the possibility of gaining a deep understanding of the other positions’ rationales is

restricted, and the emergence of ideological diversity among students is limited, making it difficult for students to make arguments and take positions different from those the teachers value. Failing to consider different interpretations or not granting legitimacy to divergent interpretations limits the possibility of achieving some of the principal purposes of teaching controversial issues—one of which is that students understand that conflict is an inherent part of life in society.

Thus, a tension exists between transmitting a judgement about what happened and assuming a controversial perspective. Teaching conflict to denounce injustices, on the one hand, and teaching conflict to learn how to manage it in a democratic way, on the other hand, correspond to two different curricular objectives, which, in turn, involve different teaching strategies. Adopting a controversial perspective involves considering different interpretations of the events analysed with the aim of teaching students to understand the conflict, engage in dialogue, manage differences and act accordingly.

Final Thoughts

For teaching about controversial issues to effectively contribute to the formation of critical and emancipated citizens, it is necessary to enrich teachers' conceptions of these issues. For controversial issues to effectively contribute to the achievement of the objectives assigned to them by the theory, teaching needs to distance itself from univocal or irrefutable truths and incorporate the different perspectives in dispute (Magendzo 2016). Teachers also need to question their positions as holders and transmitters of knowledge. In order to teach controversial issues, teachers must create the conditions for students to assess the different perspectives that are in conflict, to know and evaluate their intentions and their rationales, and to take a position in a well-founded way.

Adopting this perspective means reintroducing the analysis of conflict into a space from which it has traditionally been expelled. As Michael Apple (1986) notes, the school is presented as a cooperative system where there is no place for social conflict, as a neutral institution that values consensus. The school “is often explicitly isolated from political processes and ideological argumentation” (Apple 1986, 113), thus validating hegemonies and favouring cultural reproduction (Apple 1986). In this sense, and according to the views of the teachers themselves, adopting a controversial perspective is ultimately a counter-cultural proposal.

Acknowledgments

This paper was written in the framework of the FONDECYT Project 1120742.

We would like to acknowledge Abraham Magendzo, Virna Gutierrez and Ricardo Iglesias for their participation in group interviews and Francisca Mena and Patricio Saavedra for organising the information.

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