

A New Relationship with Schools: inspection and self-evaluation

This edition of INform draws on two recent studies of the relationship between inspection and self-evaluation – for the National College of School Leadership (*Self-evaluation: background principles and key learning, and Self-evaluation: models, tools and examples of practice*), and *Inspection and Self-evaluation: a new relationship?* for the National Union of Teachers (MacBeath and Oduro, 2005).

The origins of an idea

The ‘New Relationship’ was first signalled by David Miliband at the North of England Education Conference in January 2004. The aim was to improve schools’ relationships with local and central government and with Ofsted. Among the various elements of the new relationship was the proposal to slim down inspection, move self-evaluation to centre stage and streamline planning and data collection. The speech heralded three key reforms.

There are three key aspects to a new relationship with schools. An accountability framework, which puts a premium on ensuring effective and ongoing self-evaluation in every school combined with more focussed external inspection, linked closely to the improvement cycle of the school. A simplified school improvement process, where every school uses robust self evaluation to drive improvement, informed by a single annual conversation with a school improvement partner to debate and advise on targets, priorities and support. And improved information and data management between schools, government bodies and parents with information ‘collected once, used many times’. (DfES, 2004a)

Following this speech the DfES confirmed that self-evaluation would be put at ‘the heart of the inspection’, and would provide ‘the most crucial piece of evidence available to the inspection team’ (DfES, 2004b, p24). This initial document was followed by the joint DfES/Ofsted publication ‘A New Relationship with Schools: Next Steps’ (DfES/Ofsted, 2005) and by ‘A New Relationship with Schools: Improving Performance through School Self-Evaluation’ (Ofsted, 2005) which contained the following statement:

The underlying process which the school employs to identify its strengths and weaknesses is not prescribed. Schools are free to follow any model which gives them the best insights into their improvement priorities.

The best schools have simple processes which enable their leaders to measure progress in a practical way through their day-to-day work. (paragraph 11)

Here is an implicit recognition of self-evaluation as having a vitality, a separate identity and life of its own from the uniform approach suggested by the self-evaluation form (SEF) and its predecessor the S4.

So what was wrong with the old? A brief history

The need for a new relationship is a tacit acknowledgement that there was something wrong with what had gone before. In fact there was enough cumulative evidence over a decade and more to convince Government that what had existed previously was deeply flawed.

1992 is the landmark date for what was to signal a new relationship between schools and government. Then Secretary of State John Patten, impatient with the slow progress of local authorities, argued for a tougher role of HMI, envisioning a new regime of ‘big cats prowling the educational landscape’¹. A year later Chris Woodhead was appointed as HMCI to turn that vision into a reality.

Although the publication of HMI reports had been in place for ten years, new Ofsted arrangements in 1993 introduced what came to be known as the ‘naming and shaming’ of schools, those graded as ‘failing’ or with ‘serious weaknesses’. This was to prove a highly controversial policy as its effects were most acute in areas of disadvantage. As Levacic reported in 1995, within a national school ‘failure’ rate of 2–3 per cent, two thirds of those schools were in areas of urban disadvantage.

The original cycle of inspection, once every four years with up to a year’s prior notice, was described by one commentator (Rosenthal, 2001) as ‘an extensive time-consuming process of preparation and paperwork’. One of the first steps taken under New Labour was for the cycle of Ofsted visits to be extended, requiring inspection only once every six years from the 1997/98 school year. While providing more breathing space between inspections it left in place the essential ingredients of the process, primarily what was seen as its narrow focus on accountability (Jeffery and

¹ Quoted in Learmonth, J. (2001) *Inspection: what’s in it for schools?* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Woods, 1996). The extent to which Ofsted's top-down approach to inspection was helping schools to improve was widely questioned. For example, Cullingford and Daniels' 1999 study of the effects of inspections on school quality and standards reported an adverse effect on exam performance for a sample of schools, although the study was dismissed by the then Chief Inspector of Schools (Woodhead, 1999) as 'deeply flawed, ineptly executed and poorly argued' (p.5). Rosenthal's study however, also found significant negative effects of Ofsted visits on school exam performance.

Ofsted visits seem to have adverse effects on the standards of exam performance achieved by schools in the year of the Ofsted inspection. Perhaps the efforts required by teaching staff in responding to the demands of the school inspection system are great enough to divert resources from teaching so as to affect pupil achievement in the year of the visit. (p.16)

This performance drop may be explained in part by the diversion of a school's energy into preparing for inspection. A report by the University of Brunel in 1999 referred to 'anticipatory dread' which impaired normal school development work and the effectiveness of teaching. In Hertfordshire a group of secondary students conducted their own study of Ofsted (Dannawy, 2002) and reported a tenuous relationship with their teachers, special lessons being rehearsed beforehand, and having to be constantly 'on show' ever ready for the inspector's visit. 'Trouble students' were sent away to an outdoor pursuits centre to partake in a week long alternative education programme. Students also wrote 'Teachers are too busy being stressed'; 'Some of them have no time to teach, they are so busy getting ready'; 'Everyone is telling us what to say and how to act. What is this dictatorship? Are we expecting Stalin or Hitler next week?'

In another study students counselled the research team to be wary of using impressions of visitors as a source of evidence. With the school's experience of inspection they said they had become very well trained on how to show the school off to its best for outsiders and inspectors. One student described the school as 'a Jekyll and Hyde school' with two faces. 'It has one face for visitors and one for us.' (MacBeath, 1999, p1).

The Parliamentary sub-committee which reported in 1999 acknowledged the stress on teachers and recommended a briefer notice of inspection suggesting it be reduced to four weeks. While broadly supportive of a continuing role for Ofsted it also recommended that the Chief Inspector 'should be concerned to improve morale and promote confidence in the teaching profession' and that inspectors should 'take account of self-evaluation procedures used by the school'.

Ouston and Davies' study in 1998 found that schools that were most positive about the inspection experience were those that did not allow the process to intimidate them, had a high level of professional self-confidence, enough to challenge the Ofsted team's findings and were able to make their own professional judgements as to what was right for their school. In other words there was already in these schools an incipient, or well developed, self-evaluation culture.

From 1997 on developments were aimed at finding a model which would try to reconcile schools' own approaches to evaluating quality with external inspection and to try and resolve the tensions between accountability and improvement – a new relationship which would meet the needs of teachers and satisfy agencies of government.

Three determining factors

The move to a new relationship may be put down to three determining factors.

Repairing the ruins

There was a perceived need among policy makers to repair the ruins created by the 'big cats' and to begin a rebuilding of the trust of teachers, restoring their professional status and discretion. Self-evaluation would be one of the key planks of policy designed to give back to teachers the right to decide.

System maturity

It may also be argued that the system was maturing, marked by a growing understanding of how change works and the part that evidence-based practice has to play in a grown-up school. There was a growing acknowledgement that ill-conceived policies can undermine and disable schools and that as school systems mature they become less dependent on external policing, become more autonomous and more able to speak for themselves.

Capacity and capital

Two words which have entered the educational vocabulary in the last half decade or so are 'capacity' and 'capital'. They refer to the essential purpose of schools which is not simply to push up test and exam scores but to become intelligent places, where learning and growth refer not simply to children but to adults, to teachers, school leaders and to the nature of the organisation itself. An increasingly persuasive body of work points to the measure of school success as less by reference to pupil attainment scores and more about sustainability across generations, meeting the challenges of change. As self-evaluation matures it identifies where the hidden capital in a school may lie and focuses its attention on capacity-building.

A more immediate and political impetus, however, was the recognition that inspection had simply become too expensive without commensurate evidence of return on investment. Slimming down inspection while giving to schools the responsibility to self inspect commended itself to the Treasury.

The new relationship: A closer look

As noted earlier, David Miliband described the new relationship with schools as having three key aspects: an accountability framework, a simplified school improvement process, and enhanced information and data management. There are in reality seven strands to the new

relationship. These are represented graphically by DfES as seven interlocking pieces of a jig saw surrounded on four sides by the key words – Networking, Support, Challenge, Trust. Each of the seven strands begs a question as do the four framing values.

1. School self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is premised on intelligent accountability which means a school being able to tell its stakeholders how well it is doing based on a regular collection of data, and embedding of self-evaluation in the day-to-day work of the school. Six ‘acid tests’ of self-evaluation are suggested.

1. Asks important questions about learning, achievement and development
2. Has a basis in telling evidence
3. Benchmarks against the best
4. Involves staff, pupils, parents and governors
5. Is integral to assessment and management
6. Leads to action

Questions:

- What for you are the ‘important questions’? What are they for Ofsted? And is there a difference?
- What for you counts as ‘telling evidence’? What does that mean for Ofsted?
- What evidence is used for benchmarking, and on what basis are ‘the best’ to be recognised?

2. A new Ofsted inspection framework, linked closely to self-evaluation

The new framework has been well publicised and few schools can now be in the dark about its key constituent elements. These do represent a significant shift from what went before. They are:

1. shorter, sharper inspections that take no more than two days in a school and concentrate on closer interaction with senior managers in the school
2. shorter notice of inspections to avoid unnecessary pre-inspection preparation and to reduce the levels of stress
3. smaller inspection teams with a greater number of inspections led by one of HMI who will publish and be responsible for all reports
4. more frequent inspections, with the maximum period between inspections reduced from the six to three years, although more frequently for schools causing concern
5. more emphasis on the school’s own self-evaluation evidence as the starting point for inspection and for schools’ internal planning as well as allowing regular feedback from pupils, parents and community

6. simplifying the categorisation of schools causing concern, retaining ‘special measures’ and removing the categorisation of ‘serious weakness’ and ‘inadequate sixth form’, replacing them with a new single category of ‘Improvement Notice’.

Questions:

- What are the implications of ‘sharper’ inspections and what might be lost as well as gained?
- Who are the key stakeholders and what form might regular feedback from key stakeholders take?

3. A simplified school improvement process

The 2004 A New Relationship with Schools document describes ‘a simpler streamlined school improvement process based around a school’s own annual cycle of planning, development, reflection and evaluation’ (p.3) with targets set in line with national priorities. In this view improvement is seen as a managed cyclical process, fed into by review and self-evaluation data across all aspects of the school’s work including teacher performance review, information from parents, governor reports, and analysis of pupil performance and value-added data. It suggests a series of events rather than a more embedded and ongoing process.

Question:

- How might you portray an alternative version of school improvement which captures the complexity, unpredictability and spontaneity of school and classroom life?

4. A single conversation between the headteacher and a school improvement partner

The single conversation is envisaged as taking place between the headteacher and a school improvement partner (SIP) who is a credible, experienced practitioner. It is intended that this single conversation (in reality, a series of conversations) should replace many lines of accountability and promote a critical friend relationship. The agenda for the conversation in the advice to SIPs comes with a clear and specific focus, what may be described as a singular conversation rather than negotiated with a school-chosen critical friend. After ‘brisk training’ and accreditation the SIP is appointed and has a clear line of accountability to Government. The school may reject only once the choice of school improvement partner. Although described as respecting school autonomy and confidentiality the SIP may also ‘intervene’ if he or she believes the school is not meeting required standards.

Questions:

- In what sense can the SIP meet the criteria of ‘critical friend’? (see INform no. 3, Swaffield, 2003)
- Can a SIP act as a trusted critical friend as well as being accountable to government?

5. An annual school profile to report school performance to parents and the community

The proposal is that in future information to parents and the community will be produced in a more acceptable and telling form than school performance tables. The new form proposed is a school profile which presents a 'broad and balanced view' comprised of standardised performance data together with other 'depiction of the school's work'. Recognising the problems created by performance tables for schools which have a large number of children with special educational needs the Government is committed to developing indicators to more accurately reflect the work of those schools.

Questions:

- If self-evaluation is owned by schools themselves what is the case for government developing indicators rather than schools themselves?
- What should a more fine grained profile of a school include and can national performance tables now be discontinued?

6. Improved information and data management

The Government promise that data provided for school will be 'simpler, timelier and easier to use'. While the terms 'information' and 'data' refer to a wide range of sources, the upfront emphasis is on pupil performance data as derived from PANDA reports and the Pupil Achievement Tracker (PAT).

These data provide the basis for benchmarking against schools locally and nationally. 'Information', as distinguished from 'data' includes the views of stakeholders and less easy-to-measure aspects such as personal, social and spiritual development. The advice on the new relationship concludes 'It is much harder to quantify learner's personal development but this must not be shirked' (paragraph 16).

Questions:

- What is the distinction between data and information?
- Is it important to quantify aspects such as personal development or are there other ways of telling the story?

7. Improved communication with government

In recognition of the paperwork burden on schools the Government promise a 'spring clean' to tidy up channels of communication. In future there will be a single portal on the web for communication with schools, putting schools 'in charge of the information they receive' and allowing them to both download and upload information using their own user name and password.

Question:

- To what extent does simplification imply standardisation and what leeway exists in reality for schools to follow their own priorities?

The four value frames

Easily overlooked in the NRWS are the four key words that frame the jig saw. These words are *challenge* and *support*, *networking* and *trust*. The implication is that a new relationship is founded on these and cannot work unless these are in place. But what do they mean?

The key word on which the others depend is trust. This may be interpreted in a number of ways, for example that teachers trust the goodwill of the government's intentions, teachers trust that Ofsted will be fair in its assessments, that the Government trusts the professionalism and integrity of teachers, or that Ofsted trusts the integrity and honesty of the school's own self-evaluation.

With a measure of trust it is possible for there to be support, implying a relationship in which people feel a genuine intention to help without a hidden agenda, without a sense that support comes with caveats and some form of payback. At an individual level we experience support from friends and colleagues as an expression of genuine concern given unconditionally without charge. The same principle applies at organisational level yet it is hard to conceive, in an accountability relationship, where support is not inevitably conditional.

Support does not come free. Implicit in the new relationship is that it is accompanied by challenge. These are uneasy bedfellows because they can only co-exist where the quality of support allows challenge to be heard and accepted. The combination of these is implicit in the role of a critical friend – friend first and critic second, once a relationship has been established. Schools' experience of Ofsted has in the past typically been one of challenge – often fruitful and appreciated but rarely accompanied by a sense of support, critical but not always friendly.

It is through the fourth of these framing words – networking – that support and challenge are most likely to bear fruit. Networking is a collegial relationship, founded on voluntarism and initiative. It is built on reciprocity and a measure of trust. The ties that bind are conditional not on authority but on mutual gain, give and take, learning and helping others learn.

The case for self-evaluation

The DfES document starts with the question 'Why should schools engage in self-evaluation?' and answers it with this statement:

Schools want to be able to demonstrate that they are accountable to their stakeholders: to do this they must be in a position to provide convincing evidence of their success and a clear plan of action which maps out how improvement will be made. (paragraph 1)

Question:

- Does this reflect for you the driving motive for engaging in self-evaluation? What other rationale might be suggested?

In a recent study (MacBeath, 2005) examining how teachers and headteachers saw the purposes of self-evaluation, they consistently put pupil learning, and an environment for learning, as the primary rationale.

Student learning is vital. It's not just a question of students performing well in key stage tests..... If we can understand and evaluate learning it will enable schools to respond to the needs of children better. (primary headteacher)

The purpose of looking at the school from the lens of self-evaluation is to make the school a better place for learning. (primary teacher)

This is not to deny the importance of accountability but to conceive of it as a secondary purpose, flowing naturally from a concern for learning, pupil, professional and organisational learning.

A starting point for accountability is with the day-to-day nature of teachers' work. Teachers have always been in the business of self-evaluation. They make a thousand evaluative decisions every day. These are often intuitive and unconscious and rest on tacit rather than explicit knowledge. As such they are not always visible to their students, to their colleagues or to senior leaders. Decisions about learning and teaching are deeply embedded in teachers' and students' priorities and in the immediate pressures of classroom life and curriculum 'coverage'. The nature of decisions made and their underlying rationale are, as a consequence, rarely explicit and are inhibited by the lack of a technical language in which to express the deeper processes of learning.

As governments move towards self-evaluation systems it is crucial for teachers and school leaders to retain control of their professional work. Schools must speak for themselves and find a compelling voice in which to tell their own story. This depends on a clarity of thinking about what self-evaluation is, and is not, and what the differences are

between self-evaluation owned and driven by teachers, and self-evaluation which works to a common formula, devised and imposed from without by policy-makers. We only need to look around the world to see many models of self-evaluation formats which do not touch what is of real concern to teachers, students and parents, and which in their obsession with the simplicity of numbers lose sight of what is of deepest value and significance in the life of schools and classrooms. It was Albert Einstein who famously said that "Not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted, counts."

Self-evaluation is now on the agenda of schools and policy makers around the world. It is part of a global movement in which power is being pushed down to school level while at the same time accountability, or rendering an account, assumes a high priority. While in many countries school inspection has traditionally been the path to quality assurance it is now seen as more economical and growth promoting to put evaluation in the hands of schools themselves. With off-the shelf inspection models it a small step for schools to adopt a ready made self inspection approach as opposed to a more organic self-evaluation.

Ofsted training in the past and the S4 self-evaluation form had features more closely paralleling the left hand than the right hand box in the above diagram. The New Relationship, however, suggests something closer to the right hand side. By way of endorsing this self-evaluation principle Ofsted offers this promise:

The underlying process which the school employs to identify its strengths and weaknesses is not prescribed. Schools are free to follow any model which gives them the best insights into their improvement priorities.

The best schools have simple processes which enable their leaders to measure progress in practical ways through their day-to-day work

Figure 1
Self inspection and self evaluation

Self inspection	Self evaluation
Top down Is a one-off event	Bottom up Is continuous and embedded in the nature of teachers' and headteacher's work
Provides a snapshot Is time-consuming Is more about accountability than improvement	Is a moving picture Is time saving Is more about improvement than accountability
Applies a rigid framework Uses a set of predetermined criteria Creates resistance	Is flexible and spontaneous Uses, adapts and creates relevant criteria Engages and involves people
Can detract from learning and teaching Encourages playing safe Demands consensus	Improves learning and teaching Takes risks Celebrates difference

Over time and with new leadership Ofsted has responded to some of the criticisms made against it. The revised framework for the inspection of schools, published in 1999 reduced the period of notice to 6–10 weeks and opened the way for differential inspections, shorter for schools deemed to be performing well (20–25% of schools) and longer inspections for the rest. It included guidance on using the handbook for self-evaluation, with strong encouragement to use the Ofsted framework for the school's own internal evaluation. This signalled a move from a parallel to a sequential model so that self-evaluation would thereafter be complementary to inspection.

Following what was described as successful piloting of the New Relationship in March 2005 'A New Relationship with Schools: Next Steps' set out the practical changes planned, implications for local authorities, schools, governors, parents and pupils together with a timetable for change and the actions that schools and local authorities could begin to take.

The Children Act of 2004 proved the legislative spine for reforms which would support:

- Partnership: Local Authorities working with local partners to agree local priorities for improving outcomes and commissioning services for children, young people and parents
- Accountability: Local Authorities appointing by 2008 at the latest Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members to provide vision and impetus for local change
- A sharper focus: a sharper focus on safeguarding children: statutory Local Safeguarding Children's Boards will replace the current Area Child Protection Committees
- Inspection: new Joint Area Reviews of children's services will assess how successfully services are working together to improve outcomes

Every Child Matters set out the guidelines for schools and for inspection, broadening the role of school education to a more child-centred view of provision, underpinned by a multi-agency approach to the five key outcomes of a new approach (Be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, achieve economic well-being). Under each of the five outcomes the document provides six more specific criteria that a school might use to evaluate its provision. These five key concerns traverse the boundaries of school learning to include health and welfare and imply a role for self-evaluation which includes the effectiveness and impact of inter-agency collaboration. These are in turn linked to priority national targets. New inspection arrangements will include these five broad areas such of well-being, a new emphasis that 'would be reflected in school's self-evaluation' (*Every Child Matters*, p. 2). How inspectorates will render their judgements is contained in *Outcomes Framework* published in December 2004 (DfES).

Within each of the five broad 'outcomes' of *Every Child Matters* are six specific areas of focus. Each of these may be taken as an indicator or criterion for self-evaluation. So, for example, under the heading *Make a positive contribution* the six criteria are:

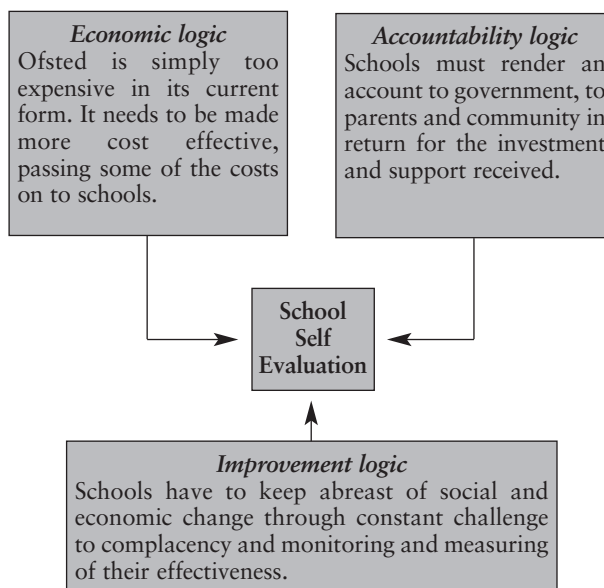
- Engage in decision-making and support the community and environment
- Engage in law-abiding behaviour in and out of school
- Develop positive relationships and choose not to bully or discriminate
- Develop self-confidence and successfully deal with significant life changes and challenges
- Develop enterprising behaviour
- Parents, carers and families promote positive behaviour

The description of these as 'outcomes' is presumably to give them a harder edge in parity with attainment outcomes, but these are clearly ongoing developmental processes. Nor are these susceptible to easy measurement but if they are to be at the heart of self-evaluation then it opens the door to more qualitative and subjective forms of evidence, given the very personal and interpersonal qualities these imply.

The Global context

The embrace of self-evaluation has to be understood within an international policy context. As inter-country communication becomes easier and swifter, so policy-borrowing and cherry picking increases. With greater access to country data and governments' interest in school performance international agencies such as the OCED and UNESCO compare national performance of pupils, watched closely by politicians who equate school results with economic performance, despite any evidence to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship (see for example Alison Wolf's 2002 study *Does Education Matter?*). None the less this brings on its coattails national target setting, raised expectations on school outcomes and processes and closer scrutiny of individual school performance. Self-evaluation in every country where it is promoted is being driven by three competing 'logics'.

Figure 2
The three 'logics' of self-evaluation



The economic logic derives from a recognition that external quality assurance, whether through inspection or other means, does not offer value for money, especially in a policy climate where finance and financial management is devolved to schools. School self-evaluation is a virtually cost-free alternative to school inspection.

Accountability is a necessary complement to a value-for-money view. Where management of finance is entrusted to schools and where parents 'invest' in their children's education there is a requirement for schools to render their account like any business or publicly financed organisation. The logical extension of the concept is accounting for the school's main purposes – the achievement and welfare of students, implying systematic, valid and reliable forms of evidence.

The improvement logic sees it as axiomatic that self-evaluation drives improvement and contends that improvement is a misnomer without the means of knowing where we are, where we are going and how we will know when we have arrived.

There are clearly tensions among these three driving logics and it may be difficult to see how a new relationship can reconcile these. When driven by purely economic motives self-evaluation is resented by school staff. When accountability is to the fore self-evaluation becomes ritualised. When improvement is the driving force through that avenue, teachers come to recognise the benefits of keeping a systematic account and telling their story to a wider audience. With heightened self awareness the economy of provision may also begin to make more sense. Reconciliation among the three logics is, therefore possible, but reliant on visionary leadership, political nous and the self-confidence to be different.

Questions:

Does improvement follow on the heels of accountability?
OR

Does accountability arise out of improvement?

A case study from Hong Kong

There is something to be learned from the newly developed Hong Kong model, one that lies close to the ‘new relationship’ in England.

In 2004 the Education and Manpower Bureau began a pilot project to test a system to be known by its abbreviation SSE/ESR – school self-evaluation and external review. 100 schools participated with an external evaluation conducted by a Cambridge team. The following are a few of the conclusions:

- The purpose of external evaluation has to be clearly understood and reflected in practice
- Self-evaluation should be driven by a widely shared commitment to improvement and not as preparation for inspection
- The move from inspection to review of self-evaluation requires a different set of skills on the part of the review/inspection team with implications for the professional development of inspectors
- The principle of reciprocity implies that inspection teams listen and learn and are as open to criticism as they expect school staff to be
- Inspection teams need to be open to creative surprise and alternative approaches used by schools themselves

An effective interchange between schools and inspection teams implies an openness, honesty and willingness to learn, not simply on the teachers’ side but on the inspectors’ part too. That is, surely, the hallmark of a ‘new’ relationship.

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