

## Free State educators' experiences and recognition of bullying at schools

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*In South Africa little research has been conducted into bullying and particularly into South African educators' experiences of school bullying. In an attempt to address this hiatus in the literature on bullying, I report on an investigation into Free State educators' experiences and recognition of school bullying. The research instrument was an adapted version of the Delaware Bullying Questionnaire, altered from a learner to an educator self-reporting questionnaire. The first important result from the research was that Free State educators had frequently witnessed learners being physically and verbally abused by fellow learners. Secondly, it was found that more than half of the respondents had been victims of direct verbal educator-targeted bullying. Thirdly, the results of the study indicated that verbal and physical bullying of learners by their educators was not an uncommon occurrence in some Free State schools. Finally, some recommendations regarding the protection of the rights of educators and learners to work and play in a bully-free milieu are given.*

### Introduction and statement of the problem

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem which can have negative consequences for the general school climate, and for the rights of learners and educators to learn and teach in a safe environment without fear. Bullying can also have negative lifelong social, emotional, psychological and educational consequences — both for the perpetrators and for their victims (Collins, McAleavy & Adamson, 2004:55; Banks, 1997:1). Despite this, bullying is one of the most underestimated problems in schools. According to Squelch (2000:51), it is something people prefer to ignore and simply pass off as nasty children picking on others.

Research on bullying in schools was conducted for the first time during the early 1970s by Olweus in Norway (1994:1). Over the past ten to twenty years, school bullying has become recognised as a problem that is present in most, if not all, schools and in a wide variety of countries (Collins *et al.*, 2004:55; Tremblay, 2001:107; Furniss, 2000:9; Limper, 1998:1; Olweus, 1994:14). However, there have been few studies of educators' experiences of, perceptions of, or attitudes towards, issues on bullying (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003:535-544; Menesini, Fonzi & Smith, 2002:394-403; Nicolaides, Toda & Smith, 2002:106-107; Hazler, Miller, Carney & Green, 2001:133-143; Bidwell, 1997:15-18; Siann & Callaghan, 1993:307-322).

Although, as is evident from the previous paragraph, numerous publications on bullying have appeared, little has been published on the subject in South Africa (Neser, Ovens, Van der Merwe, Morodi & Ladikos, 2003:1). From the literature research (see among others Booyens, 2003:353; Olivier, 2003:103-126; Smit, 2003:81-88; Bezuidenhout, 2002:28-35; Vorster, 2002:84-122), it is evident that interest in the subject has increased in South Africa since the start of the 21st century. These publications concentrate on learners' experiences of, and perspectives on, bullying in schools, as well as anti-bullying programmes. Little evidence (Nkosi, 2001:52-77) could be found of research highlighting South African educators' experiences of, perceptions of, attitudes towards, or recognition of, school bullying.

In an attempt to address the hiatus in the literature on bullying, I will aim to answer the

following research questions against the background of a literature review:

- What is, according to educators, the nature and extent of learner on learner bullying in Free State schools?
- What are Free State educators' experiences of educator-targeted bullying?
- To what extent are Free State educators involved in learner-targeted bullying?

### **What is bullying?**

Bullying can be defined as intentional, repeated, hurtful acts, words or other behaviour, such as name-calling, threatening, or shunning, committed by an individual or individuals against another individual or individuals. These negative acts are not necessarily provoked by the victim, and for such acts to be identified as bullying, an imbalance in real or perceived power must exist between the bully and the victim. It is not a question of a single attack directed at one individual here, and at another there, but that the victim is subjected to systematic harassment (Neser, Ovens, Van der Merwe, Morodi, Ladikos & Prinsloo, 2004:28). The combination of three primary characteristics — harm is done; the act is repeated; there is an unfair match of participants — differentiates bullying conflicts from other forms of play, such as teasing and fighting (Hazler *et al.*, 2001:134). Neser *et al.* (2004:28) have identified the following common examples of bullying:

- Physical bullying includes punching, poking, strangling, hair pulling, beating, biting, excessive tickling and direct vandalism.
- Verbal bullying includes such acts as hurtful name-calling, persistent teasing, gossiping and racist remarks.
- Relational bullying occurs when the victim is deliberately excluded from activities.
- Emotional bullying includes terrorising, extorting, defaming, humiliating, blackmailing, rating/ranking of personal characteristics such as race, disability, or ethnicity, manipulating friendships, ostracising, and peer pressure.
- Sexual bullying includes many of the above as well as exhibitionism, sexual positioning, sexual harassment, and abuse involving actual physical contact and sexual assault.

### **Educators' experiences and recognition of school bullying: a literature review**

#### **Educators' recognition of learner on learner bullying**

Although the majority of studies on bullying and victimisation of learners have relied mainly on self-reporting learner questionnaires (Holt & Keyes, 2004:122; Juvonen, 2003:1231), educator ratings of learner behaviour are considered to be valuable. Educators have ample opportunity to observe learners for relatively long periods of time in many school settings (Holt & Keyes, 2004:122; Juvonen, 2003:1231; Pakaslahti & Kelikangas-Järvinen, 2000:178). According to Pakaslahti and Kelikangas-Järvinen (2000:178) educators also have extensive experience with large numbers of adolescents that provide them with an implicit normative data base against which to judge behaviour. Educator rating of learner behaviour may, however, be biased. Educators also lack access to many contexts of peer interactions and therefore may sometimes be inaccurate in rating their learners' behaviour. This may explain why studies on bullying have found that learner on learner bullying is often viewed differently by learners and educators. These differences can also be attributed to the use of different measuring instruments and definitions. It is difficult to formulate a universal definition of bullying, because bullying differs from situation to situation and from child to child. For example, there is a very fine line

between teasing and verbal bullying (Smith, 2004:98; Trembl, 2001:107-108). In a comparative study by O'Moore and Hillery (1991:59-60), it was found that educators in Ireland identified only 24% of the total number of bullies identified by the learners. However, in a later study (O'Moore, Kirkham & Smith, 1997, as quoted by O'Moore, 2000:102), it was found that 21% of primary school principals and 24% of second-level principals thought that the level of bullying among their learners was higher than the levels reported by the learners. Studies carried out in Italy also indicate that there is a discrepancy between the perceptions of educators and learners on the levels of bullying in Italian schools (Menesini *et al.*, 2002:394). According to Holt and Keyes (2004:122) and Smith (2004:99), the majority of studies on the extent of bullying have found that educators reported lower prevalence rates of bullying than learners.

From the literature study the lack of research in South Africa on educators as witnesses, victims and perpetrators of bullying is apparent. However, findings from two learner self-report surveys illustrate that bullying is a pervasive problem among South African learners. Nesor *et al.* (2003:5) found that 60.9% of the 207 participants in a research project in Gauteng indicated that they were bullied during the 2002 school year. According to the First South African National Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (Department of Health, 2002:145), 49.3% of secondary school learners in the Free State reported that they had been bullied in the month preceding the survey.

Attention will now be given to a topic that receives scant attention by researchers, namely, the fact that some learners bully their educators.

### Educator-targeted bullying

According to Pervin and Turner (1998:4) it could be argued that educator-targeted bullying and disruptive learner behaviour is the same thing. Fontana (1995:354) defines disruptive behaviour as "behaviour that proves unacceptable to the teacher". Prinsloo (2005:455) and Fontana (1995:354) give the following examples of disruptive behaviour: a refusal to obey requests and commands, noisiness, showing off, teasing, irritating or disturbing other learners, learners leaving their seats without permission, talking out of turn, calling out when the educator is speaking, making improper noises, not paying attention, storming out of the class, as well as more serious offences such as verbal abuse, destructiveness, and physical violence. Educator-targeted bullying, on the other hand, can include the following:

- Persistent, intentional, vigorous abuse of the educator (e.g. threats of, as well as actual, physical assaults; sexual harassment)
- Swearing and/or mocking the educator
- Knowingly ignoring the educator
- Making personal comments about the educator
- Damaging the educator's property (Pervin & Turner, 1998:4)

Learners who indulge in educator-targeted bullying aim to undermine the educator's confidence. Pervin and Turner (1998:4) are of the opinion that disruptive behaviour can develop into educator-targeted bullying if one or two individuals have the confidence to challenge the educator. In a study on educator-targeted bullying in an Inner London school, Pervin and Turner (1998:5) found that 91% of the educators had at some stage in their teaching career suffered from educator-targeted bullying.

However, educators are not the only victims of bullying; some of them are the bullies.

### Educator-on-leamer bullying

Every child is entitled to a safe educational environment and a school has the responsibility to ensure that safety. The forms of behaviour which may threaten that safety are wide-ranging in their nature and seriousness. Varnham (2001:110) observes that while a serious view has generally always been taken of sexual misconduct perpetrated by those in a position of power, this is not always the case with many forms of physical and verbal bullying. This disregard of learner bullying as a form of educator misconduct is underlined by the fact that little evidence could be found in the literature of educators bullying learners. Yoon (2004:38), Smith (2004:98) as well as Parada, Marsh and Craven (2003:8) refer cryptically to the fact that educators can bully their learners. The fact that no evidence could be found of research in the South African context of educators bullying learners, does not mean that the South African educational authorities condone this form of educator misconduct. According to the South African Council of Educators' (SACE) (s.a.:2) Code of Conduct, educators should

- exercise authority with compassion;
- avoid any form of humiliation;
- refrain from any form of abuse — physical and psychological; and
- refrain from any form of sexual harassment (physical or otherwise) of learners.

If these provisions are compared with Nesor *et al.*'s (2004:28) examples of bullying, the similarities become obvious. It may be concluded that the SACE by implication prohibits the bullying of learners by educators.

From the literature review, the lack of research in the international, but especially South African, context on educators' experiences as witnesses, victims, as well as aggressors in bullying situations is noticeable. In the next section, attention will therefore be given to the aforesaid aspects of bullying in one of the nine South African provinces.

## Empirical investigation

### Research instrument

An investigation was conducted to determine the experiences of a group of Free State educators who were victims, aggressors, spectators, or listeners of incidents of bullying. The research instrument was an adapted version of the Delaware Bullying Questionnaire (State of Delaware, s.a.). The questionnaire was altered from a learner to an educator self-reporting questionnaire. Section A of the structured questionnaire provided biographical details of the respondents. In Section B questions were asked about the respondents as possible observers and/or listeners of bullying (Table 1), victims (Table 2), and bullies (Table 4). In Section C an attempt was made to obtain information on who the persons were and who, if applicable, bullied the respondents (Table 3).

The universum of the study consisted of educators at secondary schools in the Free State. A test sample of 60 schools was randomly drawn from an address list supplied by the Free State Department of Education. Six-hundred questionnaires (10 per school) were mailed and 326 (54.83%) returned questionnaires were suitable for processing. The average age of the respondents, of whom 100 (30.67%) were male and 226 (69.33%) female, was 39 years and 8 months. The respondents' average number of years of teaching experience was 14 years and 9 months.

The term bullying was standardised by introducing the following definition early in the questionnaire:

Bullying means that one person, or group of persons, targets another person with repeated

**Table 1** What the respondents have seen or heard with regard to bullying

Item	Rank order	Mean rating	Questions	1		2		3		4		5	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	1	2.267	How often have you seen learners bully others by laying hands on them (hitting, kicking, pushing or physically hurting) them at school or on the school bus/taxi?	131	40.18	65	19.94	63	19.33	46	14.21	21	6.44
2	2	2.387	How often have you heard learners bully others by saying mean things, teasing or calling other learners names in school or on the school bus/taxi?	107	32.82	85	26.07	61	18.71	47	14.42	26	7.98
3	3	3.018	How often have you heard learners spreading rumours about fellow learners to be mean at school or on the school bus/taxi?	48	14.72	71	21.78	91	27.91	59	18.10	57	17.49
5	4	3.070	How often have you heard or seen learners leaving their fellow learners out of activities to be mean?	44	13.50	70	21.47	85	26.08	73	22.39	54	16.54
4	5	3.420	How often have you heard learners bullying others by making sexual comments to be mean to other learners?	26	7.98	55	16.87	79	24.23	88	26.99	78	23.93
Av.		2.832											

1. Daily; 2. Once or twice a week; 3. Once or twice a month; 4. Once or twice a year; 5. Never

**Table 2** The extent of respondents' exposure to different types of bullying

Item	Rank order	Mean rating	Questions	1		2		3		4		5	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
2	1	4.135	How often do learners bully you by saying mean things to you (things that hurt your feelings)?	10	3.07	15	4.60	39	11.96	119	36.50	143	43.87
5	2	4.390	How often have you been bullied into giving up money, food, drinks or snacks?	9	2.76	21	6.44	26	7.98	48	14.72	222	68.10
1	3	4.488	How often do learners bully you by laying their hands on you (hit, kick or push or hurt your body)?	8	2.45	26	7.98	10	3.07	37	11.35	245	75.15
4	4	4.549	How often do students bully you by spreading mean rumours about you?	2	0.62	6	1.84	20	6.13	81	24.85	217	66.56
3	5	4.607	How often do learners bully you by making sexual comments that bother you? For instance, commenting on your body, calling you gay, talking to you about sex, etc.	2	0.62	6	1.84	12	3.68	39	11.96	267	81.90
Av.		4.434											

1. Daily; 2. Once or twice a week; 3. Once or twice a month; 4. Once or twice a year; 5. Never

direct or indirect negative actions over a period of time, which are harmful to the target either emotionally or physically. A negative action occurs when a person knowingly inflicts, or attempts to inflict, physical or emotional injury or discomfort upon another person (State of Delaware, s.a.:1).

### **Processing of data**

In Section B of the questionnaire, respondents had to use the following responses: 1 = daily, 2 = once or twice a week, 3 = once or twice a month, 4 = once or twice a year, 5 = never. The respondents' answers were then determined by mathematical calculation. Furthermore, the average gradation of each item was determined and the rank order established. The respondents' responses to questions on who bullied them, if applicable (Table 3), were also determined by means of mathematical calculation.

### **Results**

Table 1 summarises what the respondents had seen and/or heard with regard to various types of bullying, from the most common to the least common types of bullying.

It appears from Table 1 that the respondents were mostly witnesses of direct physical bullying. More than 40% of the educators indicated that they had witnessed incidents of physical bullying on a daily basis. Only 6.44% of the educators had never seen incidents of physical bullying. It is also evident from Table 1 that, according to the respondents, the majority of Free State learners were exposed to direct verbal bullying on a weekly basis. It was disconcerting to note that only 23.93% of the respondents had never witnessed incidents where learners were sexually harassed by their fellow learners.

Free State educators who took part in the research project were not only witnesses of learners being bullied, but were also the victims of educator-targeted bullying. Table 2 gives an overview of the respondents' experiences as victims of various types of bullying, from the most common to the least common types of bullying.

The most common form of bullying to which the respondents were exposed (Table 2, item 2), was the second most common type of learner-on-learner bullying that the respondents observed (Table 1, item 2). More than half of the respondents were verbally abused by their learners. Educators were also, although to a lesser extent, the victims of direct physical, indirect verbal, as well as sexual educator-targeted bullying.

Table 3 summarises the respondents' answers to questions concerning by whom they were bullied.

From Table 3 it is clear that educator victims of bullying were usually verbally abused by their colleagues ("adults who work for the school"). According to Table 3 learners of both sexes were guilty of verbally and physically bullying their educators. It should be noted that more girls than boys were guilty of educator-targeted physical bullying; on the other hand it seems that more boys than girls were responsible for verbally abusing their educators.

From Table 4 it becomes apparent that the respondents were not only witnesses and victims of bullying, but some of them were also bullies.

The most common form of bullying to which respondents were exposed, namely, direct verbal bullying (Table 2, item 2), was also the type of bullying used by the majority of respondents to victimise their learners (Table 4, item 2). It appears that physical bullying of learners by their educators is not an uncommon occurrence in some Free State schools: 29.45% of

**Table 4** How the respondents treat learners

Item	Rank order	Mean rating	Questions	1		2		3		4		5	
				N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
2	1	3.978	How often do you bully learners by saying mean things, teasing or calling them names at your school or other work related situation?	9	2.76	35	10.74	54	16.56	84	25.77	144	44.17
1	2	3.985	How often do you bully learners by laying your hands on them (hitting, kicking, pushing or otherwise hurting the bodies or other learners) at school or other work related situation?	20	6.13	31	9.51	45	13.81	68	20.86	162	49.69
5	3	4.503	How often do you leave learners out of your activities to be mean?	2	0.61	15	4.60	29	8.90	51	15.64	229	70.25
3	4	4.579	How often do you spread mean rumours about learners to be mean?	-	-	12	3.68	27	8.28	47	14.42	240	73.62
4	5	4.758	How often do you make sexual comments about learners whom you know are likely to be bothered by it?	5	1.53	9	2.76	6	1.84	20	6.13	286	87.74
Av.		4.361											

1. Daily; 2. Once or twice a week; 3. Once or twice a month; 4. Once or twice a year; 5. Never

**Table 3** Persons who bullied the respondents

Bullies	Verbal bullying *		Physical bullying **	
	N ***	% ****	N	%
Both boy(s) and girl(s)	34	10.43	20	6.14
Several boys	10	3.07	3	0.92
A boy	25	7.67	11	3.37
Several girls	9	2.76	11	3.37
A girl	15	4.60	8	2.45
An adult who works for the school	91	27.91	15	4.60
Nobody	152	46.63	258	79.14
Total	336		326	

\* Who has bullied you by saying mean things to you, teasing you, calling you names, spreading rumours about you or leaving you out to be mean at school or on the bus/taxi?

\*\* Who has bullied you by laying hands on you (hitting, kicking, pushing or hurting your body) at school or on the bus/taxi?

\*\*\* Some respondents indicated more than one category of bullies

\*\*\*\* Percentage of respondents

the respondents indicated that they bullied their learners physically at least once a month (Table 4, item 1). Twenty of the respondents (6.13%) indicated that they were guilty of this type of bullying at least once a day.

## Discussion and recommendations

Table 1 provides ample evidence that some of the respondents were witnessing physical bullying on a fairly regular basis at their respective schools. Although caution should be exercised when comparing these findings with those of the Department of Health (2002:145), it is obvious, from both studies, that bullying among learners is a serious problem in some, if not all, Free State schools (Table 5).

**Table 5** The respondents' views on whether or not bullying is a problem at their respective schools

	N	%
A huge problem	71	21.78
A big problem	121	37.11
Somewhat of a problem	118	36.20
No problem at all	16	4.91
Total	326	100

It should consequently be emphasised that educators are legally and morally obliged to maintain discipline and to protect the safety of their learners. According to the Code of

Conduct of the South African Council of Educators (SACE, s.a.:1) educators must take "... reasonable steps to ensure the safety of the learner". It is furthermore important that educators take note of Squelch's (2000:53) warning, namely, that schools cannot be complacent about bullying. According to her, the school has a legal duty

... to provide learners with a safe and secure environment, and to protect them from deviant behaviour that affects their well-being and infringes on their basic rights to security, human dignity, privacy and education.

Although only a few of the respondents were physically abused by their learners (24.85%) (Table 2, item 1), the victims of indirect verbal bullying (33.44%) (Table 2, item 4), or sexually harassed by their learners (18.1%) (Table 2, item 5), these bullying actions should be seen as infringements of educators' human rights (RSA 1996, art. 9-12), and in contravention of the Guidelines for the consideration of governing bodies in adopting of a code of conduct for learners (RSA, 1998: 11; 14). The aforementioned guidelines list the bullying of learners as one of the learner offences that may lead to either suspension or expulsion. Although these guidelines do not mention educator-targeted bullying, it could be argued that forbidding this, could *mutatis mutandis* be made applicable to educator-targeted bullying.

Pervin and Turner (1998:7) found that victims of educator-targeted bullying had lowered their expectations (in terms of behaviour, co-operation and academic output) of learners who bullied them. They warn that this lowered expectation may rub off on other learners who happen to be in the same class as the bullies. As a result of lowered educator expectations, classes containing learners who carry out educator-targeted bullying are less likely to be exposed to a variety of teaching methods, thereby reducing the scope for educators to carry out interesting lessons. According to Parada *et al.* (2003:8) educators are reluctant to tell their colleagues that they are the target of learner bullies. It is therefore important to take cognisance of Pervin and Turner's (1998:7) recommendation, namely, that educators who suffer from educator-targeted bullying should be supported by some kind of mentoring system by their colleagues and principals. There should be an awareness among all role players — educators, principals, parents, learners, and the Department of Education — that educator-targeted bullying does, in fact, take place. By raising awareness, it will be possible to improve morale in schools and reduce educator-targeted bullying. In their anti-bullying policies, schools should include a section on educator-targeted bullying, which may help to solve the problem.

According to Pakaslahti and Kelikangas-Järvinen (2000:178) the subjects are ultimately the best sources of information about their behaviour, because they know the intentions, goals and reasons for their behaviour. However, self-ratings, particularly concerning aggressiveness, are shown to be susceptible to numerous biases, such as a socially desirable response. It is therefore disconcerting to note that 55.83% and 50.31% of the respondents, respectively, indicated that they verbally and physically bullied their learners. The lack of research on the topic made it impossible to ascertain whether or not the extent to which the respondents were involved in the different types of learner-targeted bullying were a confirmation of previous research findings.

Some educators may not only be directly, but also indirectly, responsible for the bullying of learners. O'Moore (2000:104) observes in this regard that educators often see the sensitivity and negative attitudes that learner victims of bullying display as negative attributes. Educators who express intolerance of the victims' inability to sort out their own problems play an important role in the establishment of a culture of machismo in schools. Thus, rather than viewing

sensitivity and the ability to restrain oneself from violent counter attack as a virtue, it is seen instead as a crime. This perception among educators may, according to O'Moore (2000:104), contribute to the reluctance of learners to tell their educators that they are being bullied, as well as being a validation for the view that bullying is acceptable behaviour.

This study revealed the following hiatus and contradictions in the research on school bullying:

- A relatively high percentage (49.46%) of the 184 respondents, who indicated that they were victims of bullying, indicated that they were verbally abused by adults who worked at their respective schools (Table 3). For this reason, it is vital that research be done into workplace bullying in South African schools.
- It should be noted that data in Table 3, namely, that more girls than boys should be held responsible for educator-targeted bullying, are in contradiction with international findings with regard to physical learner-on-learner bullying. According to Glover, Gough, Johnson and Cartwright (2000:144), the overwhelming tendency is that boys are more often responsible than girls for physical bullying. It is therefore necessary to look into reasons why (Free State) girls are more violently inclined than their male counterparts when bullying their educators.
- This study should be seen as a preliminary investigation into educator-targeted bullying. The author and a colleague are currently working on a research project on educator-targeted bullying in Free State and Eastern Cape schools.

From the investigation, it was apparent that some of the educators who participated in the study witnessed learners being bullied by fellow learners, and/or suffered bullying at the hands of learners and/or colleagues. It should however not be forgotten that some of the respondents intentionally verbally, emotionally, physically and/or sexually bullied learners. It is therefore important that these educators and other role players should recognise that an anti-bullying policy is needed in their respective schools to reduce bullying. In the development of an anti-bullying policy, attention should be given to the following elements which are commonly included in anti-bullying policies:

- A statement of the school policy which is to promote positive interpersonal relations between members of the school community and specifically to prevent bullying and harassment at school, which is viewed as unacceptable. This policy should be seen as applicable not only to relationships between learners but involving school staff as well.
- A clear definition of bullying, with examples.
- A description of how the school proposes to deal with bully/victim problems.
- Encouragement for learners, educators and parents who are concerned about bullying to speak to school personnel about them (Rigby, 1995:2).

Educators should play a key role in preventing and intervening in bullying at school, yet they receive little or no help or training in how to effectively deal with such problems (Juvonen, 2003:1236; O'Moore, 2000:110). Therefore, it is essential to educate educators in ways in which schools can alter social norms towards bullying, to assist them to intervene effectively in incidents of bullying, and to work together with therapists and school psychologists to deal with the symptoms of bullying and victimisation.

### **Concluding remarks**

From this study, it has become evident that while some Free State educators are the witnesses

of incidences of bullying, others are the victims and/or perpetrators of direct and indirect verbal, as well as emotional, physical, and sexual bullying. In a twenty-first century climate of increasing concern for the rights of individuals and groups, be they due to race, sex, disability, religion, or sexual orientation, the right of the learner to be educated, but also the right of the educator to educate, without suffering from victimisation, is entrenched in the South African Bill of Rights. Every educator and learner in South Africa has the right to life, equal protection and benefit of the law, of dignity, as well as of freedom and security of the person (RSA, 1996: art. 9-12). These rights will only be realised in a bully-free school milieu.

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