

The sand is home: Playing the ways of Kiribati

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Children draw on their familiarity with the everyday practices of their families in play. In this article, we explore family interpretations of one child's (Mee) play from a larger qualitative study of the everyday experiences of newly settled families in an Aotearoa New Zealand playgroup. Mee's encounters with sand and flowers in the playgroup connected to her early experiences in Kiribati, where she lived with her grandparents during her first year. Mee's mother, a participant-researcher in the study and co-author of this paper, and Mee's grandmother, Tane, informed the research process with their intimate knowledge of Mee's lived experiences, the Kiribati language and their family's everyday practices. We share two key moments in our research collaboration, one during data collection and another during data analysis, that illustrate the power of family expertise to better understand the meanings children negotiate in play.

Introduction

Children have unique connections to places, people, and artefacts from their families and communities that contribute to how they see the world and how they negotiate meaning in their lives. Early childhood educators have the first opportunity to value these connections within educational institutions, building on the play experiences of young children to nurture a sense of belonging. Yet, valuing the family knowledge/s and experiences children bring with them into early childhood settings requires recognition of what children know and their connections to the wider world. Recognition is more difficult when there is cultural distance between educators and the children they serve (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Valdés, 1996).

In superdiverse cities (Vertovec, 2007), such as Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, where nearly 40% of the residents were born overseas (Spoonley, 2015), cultural distance may exist between children and teachers. This distance can lead to misrecognition and deficit thinking about children and families. Institutional deficit discourses position cultural and linguistic diversity as barriers to overcome in early childhood rather than as resources and strengths children carry with them from their families and communities (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus, 2017). Shifting from this deficit lens to valuing the cultural resources and worldviews of children and families requires that teachers, researchers, and policy makers privilege what children and families already know (Si'ilata, 2014; Tuafuti, Pua, & van Schaijik, 2011).

When children and families are positioned as knowing, much more can be discovered about family knowledge/s that affirm the cultural practices of children as valued institutional knowledge in early childhood settings. Recognising family knowledge/s in the play experiences of young children, centres what is meaningful to the child, connected to their lived histories and relationships with their social and material worlds. In this manuscript, we draw on selected data from a yearlong qualitative study of the everyday practices of newly settled families in an intercultural playgroup in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand's largest city. We privilege the interpretations of one child's play by her mother and grandmother to better understand how the meanings children negotiate in play are connected to their family's everyday practices and lived-experiences.

Theoretical lens and literature

Aotearoa New Zealand's bicultural early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki: He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Whāriki)* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) values the diverse linguistic and cultural knowledge of children and recognises that “family and community are integral to learning and development, with every child situated within a set of nested contexts that includes not only the early childhood education (ECE) setting but also the home, whānau, community and beyond” (p. 60). The curriculum, *Te Whāriki* recognises the bicultural commitment to *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* in ECE, positioning te reo Māori (language) and tikanga Māori (culture) alongside the English language and western paradigms, challenging educational monocultural discourses that undervalue linguistic and cultural diversity. It states:

New Zealand is increasingly multicultural. Te Tiriti the Treaty is seen to be inclusive of all immigrants to New Zealand whose welcome comes in the context of this partnership. Those working in early childhood education respond to the changing demographic landscape by valuing and supporting the different cultures represented in their settings (MoE, 2017, p. 3).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Chan and Ritchie (2019) argued that ECE teachers have a role to disrupt the privileged status of English and dominant cultural practices and beliefs in order to support immigrant children and their families. Recognition of Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land) and deepening connections to Māori language and culture in ECE settings for all children and families is necessary to take up this critical role. The bicultural imperative of Te Tiriti enables space for diverse family knowledge/s and worldviews when genuine engagement with te reo Māori and tikanga Māori disrupts the educational monocultural dominance that has led to inequitable educational outcomes for children and families (Chan & Ritchie, 2019).

The revised *Te Whāriki* (MoE, 2017) has been critiqued for shallow links to Pasifika approaches, philosophies, and concepts (Leauepepe, Matapo, & Ravlich, 2017) and for early childhood discourses that seem to privilege learning outcomes over play and experience (Farquhar & Sansom, 2017). Despite these critically important arguments, two strands in particular may be useful to consider how children's play experiences in ECE are situated within the cultural, social, historical, and material contexts of children's lives. The Belonging/Mana whenua strand states “connecting links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended” (MoE, 2017, p. 24) and the Exploration/Mana aotūroa strand states: “Children experience an environment where their play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognized” (MoE, 2017, p. 25). Play experiences of young children understood as meaningful learning that occurs in relationship to people, places, and material objects, validate the ways of knowing and being important to children and families.

Children tell stories, enact identities, and draw on their familiarity with the unique everyday practices of their families to negotiate meanings in play (Wohlwend, 2008). Paradise and Rogoff (2009) referred to the process by which children participate in the everyday activities of their families and communities by observing closely as “intent community participation” or “learning by observing and pitching in” (p. 104). When play is viewed as a socially situated and culturally constructed activity, relationships between people and the activities and cultural tools associated with these relationships are significant to what happens in play for children (Fleer, 2009).

Rautio and Winston (2015) argued that when play is trivialised as something in which children engage simply as a means to develop skills or as an end to become more psychologically or socially mature, the meaning of children's play is left to the interpretations and assumptions of observing adults. Rautio and Winston (2015) propose the notion of play as intra-action:

...a mode of being and knowing in itself, the emphasis in studying play as intra-active shifts from seeking a definition of what play is (for) towards the ways in which playing (re)generates those playing, all in complex relations to each other. Intra-active playing is thus never 'free' but always interdependent, never 'guided' but always generative and becoming. Intra-active play is about being 'in it' together: becoming human beings in relation to one another and to the world (p. 17).

From this perspective, what matters to the child in play is not necessarily consistent with the worldview/s of the adults who are observing and, as a result, what they see. When the notion of play encompasses both being and knowing, or both the ends and the means, the focus turns to what is in the moment, meaningful to the child. What is meaningful to the child is influenced by the discursive and material conditions in which play occurs. An intra-active perspective of play considers the entanglement of discourse and matter in encounters of meaning-making. The child does not just interact with the people and things in their environment through language, but the environment and the material possibilities within it also influence what the child says and does in each play encounter between human and non-human organisms and matter (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). The following studies illustrate how family cultural knowledge/s can inform the material conditions and possibilities of early childhood spaces in ways that affirm what is significant to children in the everyday.

In a case-study approach, Rameka, Glasgow, Howarth, Rikihana, Wills, Mansell, Burgess, Fiti, Kauraka and Iosefo, (2017) demonstrated how pūrākau (stories) gathered from the communities of six early learning services could reclaim Māori and Pasifika cultural knowledge to inform contemporary infant and toddler practice. One finding indicated that pareu (sarongs/lavalava), an important cultural artefact, could be used in multiple ways to affirm Cook Islands Māori cultural identity and practices related to caregiving, comforting children, and play activities. Another finding demonstrated that the place and use of wai (water) was significant in the pūrākau of the community of one early learning service. The pūrākau informed how the children's encounters with wai in the early learning service could be enhanced so children could understand their spiritual connectedness to wai, the Waikato awa (river), and the ua (rain). This required teachers to develop understandings of a Māori worldview and connections to the physical and spiritual worlds for whānau (families) and tamariki (children). Collaboration with whānau contributed to the growing understanding of the spiritual power of wai and pedagogical approaches to value its importance in the early learning service.

Drawing on a larger qualitative study, Cooper and Hedges (2014) reported findings related to a child called Hunter, whose interest in drumming led to a collaborative response between his teachers and his parents. During a home visit, Hunter's parents also shared with the teachers their expertise of his drumming at home and in church, and his father's history as a drummer. Hunter's parents' enthusiasm for the teachers' recognition of his interest in drumming showed they valued play experiences that deepened Hunter's connection to their family's Cook Island Māori and Samoan cultural heritage/s, strengthening the connection between the early childhood setting and the family.

When teachers have the opportunity to learn from families, new discoveries can be made about children's relationships with the world beyond the ECE setting that sustain what is most meaningful to children and their families. Artefacts that connect to everyday experiences (Cooper, & Hedges, 2014; Rameka et al., 2017) and family cultural tools such as home languages (Guo, & Dalli, 2016) can contribute to a sense of belonging in early childhood settings when teachers are familiar with and value their significance for children and families.

Context

Playgroups are ideal settings for learning from families as family members attend with their children. The multilingual intercultural playgroup where the study took place, is run by a larger organisation with an appointed playgroup leader. Matavaha, the playgroup leader, and 15 families participated in the larger study, many of whom had recently moved from overseas. Families attended the playgroup two to three days per week for approximately two to three hours a day. The playgroup was structured in such a way that parents, grandparents and other adult family members were encouraged to follow their children's interests rather than a set schedule of activities. Matavaha explicitly encouraged families to talk to their children in the languages of their homes and share cultural knowledge/s in the playgroup. As a Tongan-born mother and grandmother who raised her own children in Aotearoa New Zealand, Matavaha understood first-hand the challenges of sustaining family linguistic and cultural practices in a new country.

Our research partnership and method

We are mothers, co-researchers, and co-authors from two different places, both now living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mati's name comes from Matikoora, a combination of the names of her two aunties and uncle who helped look after her when she was two years old. She is from Kiribati, a small Pacific island nation, just two metres above sea level. Her ancestry is rooted in Kiribati. Mati is bilingual, and can move flexibly between the languages of Kiribati and English. She was a medical doctor in Kiribati and now, in Auckland, she is a professional interpreter. On the other hand my name Meg comes from Mary Margaret. I am named after my great grandmother and grandmother, who were both teachers. I am from the land-locked midwestern United States and am a monolingual speaker of English with European ancestry. I was a primary school teacher and a lecturer in education in the United States. Both Mati and I are from big families. We understand how important it is to sustain connections to the places we left and the people we love who are there, especially for our children. We also recognise that sustaining the ways of Kiribati will be much more difficult for Mati's family in Aotearoa New Zealand, where English and Eurocentric institutions are dominant.

We met during a year-long qualitative study of the everyday experiences of newly settled families in Aotearoa New Zealand who participated in an intercultural community playgroup in Auckland (Jacobs, under review). I was the lead investigator and Mati was a participant-researcher. Mati's mother-in-law, Tane, and Mati's 15-month old daughter, Mee, began attending the playgroup shortly after returning from Kiribati, where Mee lived with her grandparents from seven to 14 months of age. All participant names in this article are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Mati and I collected data in two semi-structured interview conversations, one photo elicitation interview conversation, and observational fieldnotes. Mati led all three family interview conversations in the Kiribati language and I was an attentive listener. Interpretation was used sparingly during the conversations to avoid centring English. In the photo elicitation interview conversation, Tane and Mati chose photos that represented what was most important to them. Predetermined questions were not used for this interview, rather the conversation centred on the photos. I carried out fieldnote observations in the playgroup, supported by Tane's linguistic flexibility between Kiribati and English and her close relationship with Mee. Mati transcribed the audio-recorded interview conversations in Kiribati and translated the Kiribati text to English. We engaged in data analysis together through focused coding and discussion of interpretations. During the processes of data collection and analysis, Tane's interpretations in the playgroup and Mati's interpretation of the data were critically important. The intimate relationships of a mother and grandmother were invaluable to interpreting Mee's intra-actions in the playgroup.

Our collaboration is important to share with early childhood teachers who are continually striving to deepen their understanding of the children and families they serve who may be culturally distant from them. Without Mati's

research partnership and Tane's presence at the playgroup throughout the research process, my worldview would have led to misrepresentation. Rogoff, Coppens, Alcalá, Aceves-Azuara, Ruvalcaba, López and Dayton (2017) wrote:

Although mainstream research has begun to include people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, it has seldom adjusted its procedures and interpretation of data to be appropriate to the cultural experience of the participants. Instead, data are often gathered and interpreted from the perspective of the cultural values and practices of the researchers. This is a serious problem—it undermines understanding and negates strengths of individuals and of cultural communities, by judging others' practices by the assumptions and value system of the dominant community (p. 877).

Mati and Tane's interpretations critically informed the research process as they drew on family history, language, and everyday practices in Kiribati to understand what Mee might be making sense of in play. For the purpose of this manuscript, we share two key moments during data collection and data analysis that demonstrate the importance of positioning family members as experts to better understand the meanings children negotiate in play. We now move to a portrait composed by Mati to introduce Mee and Tane to readers.

Mee and Tane

Mee is a 'miracle child'. Fourteen years after our son, she came into our lives. We always thought that there will always only be three of us, and then when she came, we felt very blessed and complete. She is very special in her own ways. One thing I am always grateful for is the fact that since she came back from Kiribati at the age of 14 months she has never failed to say 'Aba' to anyone who does something good to her. 'Aba' is her own little word for 'Ko rabwa' which means 'thank you' in Kiribati. She is very independent and likes to do things her own way. She loves to look after her baby dolls as if they are real people. Her paternal grandmother Tane came to New Zealand a day before her birth. Mee's dad has only four brothers and no sister. They each have sons without any daughters. Mee is the first girl in the family. Mee's paternal grandparents made it a point to be here at her birth, welcoming her personally. Mee brought so much joy to all of us and especially to her grandparents and families back in the Islands. Mee was taken back to the Islands at her grandfather's wish. He wanted to spend as much time as possible with her. He passed away three months after they left for the Islands. The last few days, he had always told us via video call that Mee brought so much joy and was privileged to have been able to see her and spend the last three months of his life with her. As for Tane, we are forever grateful to have such a wonderful mother who never fails to love our children and the quality of care she gave them both is priceless. I always tell people that for the two children that I have, I felt that Tane is the one having the baby and not me! She would wake up every two hours to pass the baby for feeding. She would not only do that but would serve breakfast in bed every morning till six months after giving birth. I am forever grateful to have such a loving mother-in-law as Tane.

Two key moments

The following sections describe two key moments in our research collaboration “gathering flowers” and “the sand is home”, that demonstrate the importance of family expertise to understand how children make sense of their everyday lives in play.

Gathering flowers

From her first weeks at the playgroup, Mee was engaged in the activities of her family's household in play. She worked with blankets near the crib, singing to the dolls to make sure they would sleep, the same song her grandmother sang to her in Kiribati. She would work and work and work, flipping the blanket over and back again. Tane explained, “in the Islands she was always helping with the folding and the housework. She is always with us and

she wants to do *what we do*" (Tane, personal communication, September 12, 2018). Tane often noticed the cultural significance of Mee's choices in play. Here we zoom in on one such moment:

One sunny autumn day in the courtyard of the playgroup, Mee was preoccupied with the sand pit, returning to it again and again to dive down under the top layer with her arms, and even at times, scooping up a handful to cover her head. Tane often pleaded with her to stop because she knew Mee would fall asleep in the buggy on the walk home. On this day, Tane gently grabbed Mee's attention to a planter of pink flowers in full bloom and plucked the petal of one for Mee to hold. Mee examined the flower closely and moved it around in her hand, looking up at Tane. She then turned to the planter and quickly plucked several more flowers from the plant. Tane turned to gently stop Mee. Tane's eyes grew wide and she smiled as she explained to me that Mee helped to gather the flowers to make the garland in Kiribati and motioned around the crown of her head. "In the Islands, she always played in the sand and she always wore flowers on her head. Now she is always putting the artificial leis on when she sees them (laughs)" (Tane, personal communication, October 24, 2018).

Tane connected Mee's interest in the flowers to the cultural significance of the garland she helped to make in Kiribati. Mee's experiences in Kiribati, engaging in the activities of her family and community alongside her grandmother, were reflected in her intra-actions with the flowers. Tane made visible what Mee had learned during her time there. I saw Mee plucking the flowers simply as curiosity to touch and explore the flowers. Without Tane's expertise of the cultural practices Mee engaged in, I would have diluted the meaning embedded in her play. The knowledge Tane shared of Mee's everyday experiences in Kiribati, also shifted me to consider how the flowers beckoned to be picked by Mee. Here Mati reflects on how this moment represents cultural significance in Mee's everyday experiences in the playgroup that reflect her own childhood in Kiribati:

My daughter grew up with the grandparents in the Islands. She attended many functions with them where she got to meet so many people. Functions usually involved people wearing garlands of flowers on their heads. Most times, my daughter would help or see family members collect the flowers to make the garlands. When it happens it usually marks a sign of the beginning of 'a gathering' or socialising. When I was young, I used to collect flowers to make a garland for a social function. All the girls my age in my village in North Tarawa would make it like a 'coffee' time here in New Zealand. We would pick a time and a place to meet and then we would be all gathering flowers together. That is our 'coffee' time. We would usually tell stories as we picked the flowers or sing a song together. Those were the most memorable days. When Mee goes to playgroup, she picks flowers. Playgroup is her social function so maybe she thinks, it is time to pick flowers for the occasion.

The sand is home

Mee could often be found in the sandpit in the playgroup courtyard. Tane would plead for her to play inside on the colder autumn and winter days, but Mee would usually make her way for the door before too long. Tane said they weren't used to being inside in Kiribati and Mee always wanted to go out. Mee's love for the sandpit came up in interview conversations and in fieldnote observations. I attributed Mee's interest in the sand to her love of being outdoors and wanting to engage in outdoor play. Here we zoom in on a moment during data analysis in which Mati made visible what I could not see in Mee's intra-actions with the sand:

We sat together, coding quietly on our separate transcripts, to see how our interpretations might differ. After a couple of pages of coding, we stopped to share our interpretations and to address places in the transcript that the existing codes did not represent. When we reached a section about Mee being happy in the sandpit at the playgroup, Mati assigned the codes 'cultural significance in everyday experiences' and 'home' and I chose the code 'access to the natural environment'. This was a powerful moment between us. It dawned on me more than ever before how important it was to work alongside Mati a cultural insider to understand the everyday in families, but more

importantly, to learn from the insights of a mother. Who knows more about Mee than her mother? Not only did Mati know the history of Mee's lived experiences, she also knew Mee's everyday in Kiribati connected to her own experiences as a child.

For Mati, this moment brought back many fond memories of Kiribati and memories of her childhood with loved ones who are all in Kiribati. The simple peaceful life she once lived back in the Islands. Sand is where she socialised, where she spent most of her childhood playing with other children in the village and where her siblings and cousins spent most of their Christmas holiday evenings playing. For her daughter to be able to experience a bit of the sand was tearful as it is what she wished for both of her children to be able to experience. "The sand is home. The sand is like home to her. She goes into it and wants to cover herself, put it on her head. She is happy there" (Mati, personal communication, December 4, 2018).

If I had conducted the data analysis alone, the multilingual design of the study, and the Kiribati language, would have been diluted by English translation and western interpretation, simplified to outdoor play. In short, the deep connections and richness of what Mati brought to data analysis and interpretation could not have been achieved without her contribution. How easily we moved from an outsider's perspective to something deeply meaningful to the family; an understanding that could only be achieved *with* the family. Moving beyond data analysis to co-authoring was also key to understanding what was important to Mati's family in the everyday. Here Mati reflects on her relationship to the beach, further emphasising the meaning embedded in Mee's play in the sandpit and her sense of "the sand is home":

Kiribati is a low lying atoll and the beach is everywhere. To most, the beach is a place for socialising. Most times, children will be seen playing on the beach and when the tide comes in, all will continue to play in the sea. The children will stay on the beach for as long as they can until it is almost dark. Usually teenagers will take over the beach just before the sun sets and stay there playing games in the moonlight until the moon sets. Where I grew up, during school days, we would play on the beach straight after dinner from around 6pm until 9pm, when we were expected to return home for bed. The older single people would stay longer, as long as they would like. During nights without moonlight, there was hardly anyone on the beach. My home in Kiribati is right next to a beach so a beach always reminds me of home. Weekends were usually my favourite as this was when we stayed up really late playing on the beach. If we were not playing at the beach, we were just sitting there waiting for the fishermen to come home so we could help them carry their catch. It was great that Mee could spend some time back in the Islands with her grandparents and relatives. She got to see 'a lot of the beach' when she was back in Kiribati. She could experience the white beach every day and she not only enjoys playing in the sandpit here in New Zealand, but she also just loved it when we took her to Maraetai beach during school holidays. We would just sit on the beach and watch the sun set. It is a place that always makes me feel like I am back 'home'.

Discussion

Without Mati's and Tane's intimate knowledge of their family's experiences and of Kiribati, I would not have considered possible deeper meanings of Mee's encounters with the sand and the flowers. From these key moments we derived two lessons from our collaboration that may support the work of early childhood teachers:

Parents, grandparents, and other family members have intimate knowledge of their children's everyday lived experiences and histories that may inform deeper meanings of what they are negotiating in play.

Engaging families to understand what children know can reveal strengths, interests, and connections hidden from view. For each child, the everyday experiences of their families and communities shape how they negotiate meaning in the worlds they inhabit. Essentialising people from one place or one cultural group diminishes the everyday ways

of knowing and being shaped by children's unique lived experiences and histories within their families and the communities they belong to (Rameka, 2018). For example, we are not suggesting all children from Kiribati have a deep connection to the sand, but the intra-action between Mee and the sand at the playgroup connected to culturally significant everyday experiences in Kiribati with her grandparents. The open air and the white sand coming up to the entrance of their home were part of some of Mee's first experiences and connected to people dear to her in Kiribati. Home is more than one place for Mee and validating her unique lived experiences and connections to Kiribati in early childhood, just as her grandmother did in the playgroup, nurtures her emerging multiliterate practices and identities in Aotearoa New Zealand (Compton-Lilly, Papoi, Venegas, Hamman, & Schwabenbauer, 2017). Mee's ways of being and knowing were not trivialised because Tane and Mati shared their interpretations of Mee's intra-actions with the sand and the flowers as intertwined with culturally significant everyday experiences. The worldview/s of her mother and grandmother suggest that, for Mee, the sandpit is much more than a place to engage in outdoor messy play and an encounter with flowers means much more than bright and beautiful petals that are too difficult to resist.

Recognising and valuing the relationships children have to people, places, and things in their environment is necessary to nurture a sense of belonging in early childhood settings.

Tane and Mati's interpretations demonstrate that the lived experiences of Mee's time in Kiribati are visible in her intra-actions in the playgroup. Artefacts carry stories that reveal relationships between Mee and the worlds she has experienced (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010). Collecting the flowers, connecting with the sand, folding blankets, and singing to babies were just some of the ways of knowing and being from her experiences in Kiribati that Mee carried with her into the playgroup. Unfortunately, these ways of knowing and being are less visible or diminished when people do not understand the significance of how children negotiate meaning by drawing on the experiences and knowledge/s of their families and communities. Paradise and Rogoff (2009) wrote:

Informal learning through observation and participation is common when there is a spontaneous recognition of the social, cultural, and economic importance of the activities being learned, as well as a desire to belong to the community that engages in those activities (p. 126).

Mee's choices in the playgroup were an expression of the pedagogy of her family and community in Kiribati (Hedges, Cooper, & Weisz-Koves, 2019), a context in which she fully participated alongside adults and other children. Inviting families into early childhood settings to learn about their everyday practices and the people, places and things families treasure, can shape deeper interpretations of the meanings children negotiate in play. Mati's and Tane's interpretations shifted the analytical lens to consider how the sand, and the flowers, beckoned to Mee's deep sense of connection to Kiribati within the playgroup setting. Lenz Taguchi (2010) argued that an intra-active approach to pedagogy does not look at what the child says and does separate from the material conditions and possibilities in the early childhood setting. The connections ECE settings make with families can create space for understanding what material conditions and encounters contribute to a sense of belonging for children. Connecting with families opens up space for understanding connections to the wider world that affirm children's cultural ways of knowing and identities in early childhood settings.

Conclusion

Recognising the ways of being and knowing children carry with them into ECE settings, stems from acknowledging relationships with the important people, places, and things in children's lives. How can we consider the ECE setting from children's unique lived experiences and worldview/s, in partnership with their families? With Tane and Mati's expertise, I was invited to see Mee's play as windows into the time she spent in Kiribati. Family expertise transformed the sand and the flowers in ways that affirmed relationships to place, family, and home. Mee's ways of knowing and

being in the playgroup were inseparable from what was and continues to be culturally significant to her family in the everyday.

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