

Looking in to Our Classrooms: Implementation of Active Learning Methods in Primary Schools

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Abstract:- This study was mainly designed to assess the understanding and implementation of active learning methods in the primary schools of south Wollo zone, Amhara Regional state, Ethiopia. Teachers, principals and supervisors were selected through availability & convenient sampling technique to give information. Data was collected through questionnaire, interview, observation & focus group discussion. A total of 305 primary school teachers who were taking summer course at Dessie College of Teachers' Education were participated in filling questionnaire. Moreover, 10 principals, 10 teachers & 4 supervisors took part in interview and focus group discussion.

The type of research employed for this study was descriptive survey research. The collected data were organized, analyzed and interpreted both quantitatively using percentages and qualitatively (using narrations and descriptions). Finally, the results revealed that active learning methods are not properly implemented in the primary schools. There were various hampering factors affecting the overall implementation of ALMs. Based on the findings concluded, recommendations had been drawn to different stake holders for the effectiveness of teachers in using ALMs.

Keywords:- Active Learning Methods, Primary School, Quality Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Both in developed and developing countries, quality of education has become a more critical issue. This is because education in general and quality education in particular is a means for economic, social, cultural and other developments. The provision of quality education in developing countries [like Ethiopia] is a serious issue where they strive to expand access together with maintaining quality. Leu (2005) states that educational quality in developing countries has become a topic of intense interest, primarily because of countries efforts to maintain quality/or reserve the decline/ in the context of quantitative expansion of educational provision.

In the challenging environment people face today, access is only the beginning. The education that people has access must be of good quality in order to provide skills needed to operate successfully in complex, democratic

societies with changing labor market (World Bank, 1999). If people are not gaining knowledge, skills and values they need, resources invested in teaching and learning are wasted. And of course it will cause a systemic collapse to the nations.

Much concern about the quality of education derives from the belief that poor quality will frustrate efforts to use education as an effective lever of economic growth and development in this age of accelerating globalization (Pigozzi, 2008). This is because, in today's world it is hard to believe that society can maintain its normal function without greater contribution of the education sector.

The term quality is perplexing to define. Accordingly, different scholars define quality differently. For example, Rao (2007) defines quality as that which best satisfies and exceeds customers' needs and wants. He also added that quality can be said to lie in the eyes of the beholder. Quality of education refers to inputs (number of teachers, amount of materials, number of text books), processes (extent of active learning, level of student participation) and output (test scores or achievements, graduation rates) (Adams (1992: cited in Chapman and Adams, 2002:2).

Much discussion of educational quality centered on system inputs, such as infrastructure and pupil-teacher ratios, and on curricular content. In recent years, however, more attention has been made to educational processes-how teachers and administrators use inputs to frame meaningful learning experiences for students their work represents a key factor in ensuring quality school process (UNESCO, 2002).

Nagel (2003) argues that definitions of quality given by UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank are narrowly focusing on some aspects like the input (books, school buildings, teacher training) and output (learning output). But what happens in between in the "black box" is not explained. It means it is the process that finally determines the out put. So the nature of classroom interaction is the most decisive factor in this regard.

Methods of teaching to advance student learning is changing as fast as the technology appears. You may not need to embrace new methods, but rather strive to consider all options to find your voice./Center for Excellence in Teaching.

In all the circumstances the role of the teacher is instrumental. In relation to this in any learning situation the teacher is the most important variable. His/her skills and personality are instrumental in creating conditions for learning that is his /her knowledge and experience in the methods and techniques of teaching(Merab,2009).

Chickering and Gamson(1987) suggests that students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most important, to be actively involved, students must engage in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Within this context, it is proposed that strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing.

The current education system which was introduced by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia(TGE, 1994) came in to being to address problems related to access, equity, relevance and quality of educational provision in Ethiopia. Furthermore, subsequent educational sector development strategies that follow the education and training policy echoed the emphasis given to the improvement of quality of education. Accordingly, Ministry of Education affirmed that throughout the education system, the increase in enrolment would be complemented by improvements in quality-from better trained and motivated teacher, more relevant curricula, more books, improved school environment, and improved internal efficiency, to examinations which provide feedback to schools to help improve *classroom teaching using active learning methods-my emphasis*(ESDP_I,1997).

In many countries, notions of professionalism have changed as national priorities have focused more closely upon teachers' accountabilities for student achievement as defined by national tests and examinations (Day and GU, 2009).Leu (2005) states that with the expansion and reform taking place at the same time, a sever burden falls on teachers to be flexible and reject traditional ways of performing their duties. Similarly Rosenhotlz (1989) asserts that in the context of school performance, the contributions of effort, loyalty, and involvement from teachers are the most vital resources required. Moreover, UNESCO(2004) cited in Leu (2005) pointed out that , *what goes on in the classroom*(my emphasis) and the impact of the teacher and teaching, has been identified in numerous studies as the crucial variable for improving learning outcomes. It is also indicated on the 32nd UNESCO ministerial conference, that participants found indispensable the role of teachers as purveyors of knowledge and values and as community leaders responsible for the future of the young.In improving students learning outcomes the role of teachers is decisive.

The Ministry of Education in its school improvement program /SIP/ document has put the decisive roles of teachers in improving quality of education(by improving students

learning outcomes) to increase of students result, teachers take the first position than any stakeholders working in education (MoE, 1999).

Here it should be noted that Active Learning Methods (hereafter called ALMs) is one major component of SIP.

Similarly, Yalew (2004) explained that in any setting of school system, teachers play a paramount role in student learning. No matter how good the curriculum may be and how well it is organized, and whether or not teaching materials are available, ultimately the quality of education rests mainly on *the methodology of instruction (our emphasis)* employed by the teachers.

Similarly, it was underlined that whether that education takes place under the shade of a tree or in a very expensive classroom, it is the processes of teaching and learning that are the key to quality education (Quality assurance- Ethiopia, 2005) cited in Seid (2009).

There is an agreement among scholars that teachers' understanding of the goals of the curriculum, competence in using new classroom methods, confidence in grasping their subject matter, positive attitude and ethical behavior, concern for students' welfare and a firm sense of professional identity and professionalism are important factors in improving teachers performance (Livingstone, Leu& Wood, 2002).

As discussed in the above consequent paragraphs from the onset of the 1994 Ethiopian Education and training policy the use of active learning methods was propagated as one major tool to improve the quality of education. The Education and training policy underscored that the philosophy behind it is that of constructivist approach. It also constituent one basic element of school improvement program (SIP).Following it, several trainings were given for teachers both in the pre-service and in-service programs and short term trainings at different levels. After fifteen years of rhetoric the views and news from the different education community hints that the use of ALMs is far beyond our reach. Active learning is, in short, anything that students do in a classroom other than merely passively listening to an instructor's lecture.

There are loud voices heard regarding the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of our classrooms in using active learning methods. In many encounters, supervisors and principals expressed their dissatisfaction on teacher's instructional practice. Teachers themselves do agree on the supervisors and principals concern.

The overwhelming dissatisfaction of major role players of the school system triggers the need to conduct an inquiry to the practice of active learning methods. Primary school principals and supervisors singled out "group discussion" as

the only active learning methods used by teachers. Moreover, it is not used appropriately.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap between the current professional demand and the government policy with the actual practice of ALMs in the primary schools. This particular research is based on the following guiding research questions:

1. Do teachers have adequate knowledge about active learning methods?
2. What are the most frequently used methods in the primary schools?
3. Do teachers appropriately use group discussion method?
4. What major problems do teachers face to use active learning methods?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Methods*

The study was conducted in 2015. The principal objective of this study was to assess and describe the use of active learning methods in general primary schools, a descriptive survey approach was used. According to Creswell (2003) a survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. From sample results, the researcher generalizes or makes claims about the population.

➤ *Study Population*

The target population of this research was 315 teachers, four supervisors and 14 principals from the primary schools of South Wollo zone, in Amhara Regional State in North Eastern Ethiopia.

➤ *Sample Size and Sampling Technique*

From the total population of teachers in 22 woredas of South Wollo zone, 315 teachers were taken as a sample using availability sampling techniques. In addition, four supervisors, six principals and 4 teachers were interviewed. Moreover, 10 teachers and 10 principals were taken for focus group discussion.

➤ *Instruments*

In this study, questionnaire, interview, focus group discussion and classroom observation were employed for collecting the data pertinent to the study. This is because using more than one data gathering instrument is advised to assure the reliability of the data (Yalew, 2006).

A self-prepared questionnaire was utilized to collect data from teachers. According to Best & Kahn (1999) questionnaire enables to secure factual information about opinions and views and also appropriate instrument to obtain a variety of opinions within a relatively short period of time. The questionnaire has three parts. The first part contains background information about the respondents. The second part containing 17 closed ended items was prepared to gather

information about teachers' knowledge and practice of ALMs in general and group work in particular. It consisted of five point scales with strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree with values of 5, 4,3,2,1 respectively. This is to give respondents a range of alternatives to show their level of responses.

The third section of the questionnaire consists of 3 open ended questions. This was aimed at giving the respondents the opportunity to list and reflect as much idea as possible regarding issues related to ALMs and group learning.

According to Best and Kahn (1999) the major way in which qualitative evaluator seeks to understand perception, feeling and knowledge of people in program is through interview. Moreover, interviews are found to be important instrument to understand people's awareness and attitudes using their words and gesture.

In this study the interviews were conducted with principals, supervisors and unit leaders. Accordingly, four principals, four supervisors and six unit leaders were interviewed. The interview items were unstructured and meant to gather data about teacher's use of ALMs in their classrooms.

Focus Group Discussions were held with principals and teachers. Four focus group discussions were held. This was aimed at gathering supplementary data about teachers' classroom practice of ALMs. According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992) cited in Lewis (2000) interviewing more than one person at a time sometimes proves very useful; some people need company to be emboldened to talk, and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people who know each other. One group consists of five members. Hence, a total of four focus group discussions were held.

The FGDs were conducted in such a way that ideas are either supported or opposed by participants so as to reach on an agreement. The final idea that was the stand of all participants was taken as the final point. This enabled the researcher to get inaccessible information that may not be obtained by other data gathering instruments.

The last instrument used was classroom observation was conducted by the researcher. The aim was to see what is happening in the classroom in relation to the instructional process.

➤ *Data Gathering Procedures*

The data gathering instruments were prepared by the researcher from different sources, works and by taking idea from review literature. Before the actual implementation the items were translated into Amharic to avoid language barrier and a pilot test was conducted. The question papers were distributed to fifteen teachers to fill them. Based on the pilot test results amendments were made for some items: the

number of items was reduced, items with similar message were merged and language clarity was reconsidered.

Finally, the questionnaire was administered with the support of trained collectors. Except 10, all the question papers were properly filled and collected.

➤ *Method of Data Analysis*

The quantitative data was tallied and categorized in groups to get the frequency distributions across the five scales. Then the percentage values were determined and used for analysis. For simplicity only three scales-agree (agree +strongly agree), undecided, disagree (disagree + strongly disagree)-were used in the analysis.

The qualitative data were organized into themes to make ready for analysis. The qualitative data which are related to

the quantitative data (positively or negatively) were analyzed by integrating with the quantitative data. Those qualitative data obtained through open ended items and related to the quantitative data were analyzed together others were analyzed separately as it consists of ideas which were not included in the quantitative data. When data were transcribed, pseudonyms were used to cover the identity of the respondents.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part deals with presentation and analysis of data. The data gathered through questionnaire, interview, observation and focus group discussion are analyzed as follows.

A. Teachers knowledge of ALMs

| No | Items | Agree | | undecided | | disagree | | Total | |
|----|--|-------|-------|-----------|------|----------|-------|-------|-----|
| | | F | % | F | % | F | % | | |
| 1 | I know the different teaching methods | 305 | 100 | - | - | - | - | 305 | 100 |
| 2 | Every method has unique importance | 288 | 94.42 | 5 | 1.64 | 12 | 3.93 | 305 | 100 |
| 3 | Most teaching methods can be applied | 40 | 13.12 | 7 | 2.3 | 258 | 84.58 | 305 | 100 |
| 4 | We can use more than one method in a single period | 35 | 11.48 | 10 | 3.29 | 260 | 85.25 | 305 | 100 |
| 5 | It is not as such difficult to use different ALMs | 20 | 6.56 | 5 | 1.64 | 280 | 91.8 | 305 | 100 |

Table 1:- Teachers’ Conception of ALMs

As indicated in Table 1 (item 1), all (100%) of the respondents say that they have knowledge of the different teaching methods. But the information obtained from interview and focus group discussion revealed that most teachers lack both the knowledge and skill of most active learning methods.

Regarding the unique importance of every method overwhelming majority (94.42%) of the respondents agree that every method has unique importance that implies that there is no single best method of teaching that fits all purposes. Still, there are teachers who believe that some methods are best to servethe purpose of teaching.

Teachers were also asked if they believe that most teaching methods can be applied or not. The overwhelming majority {258 (84.58%)} of the respondents (Table 1, item 3) responded that most of the teaching methods cannot be applied in their classrooms. Only a small portion of (13.12%) the respondents believe that most teaching methods can be applied in the teaching process. This shows that most teachers see the various teaching methods as non-applicable in their classrooms.

Regarding the use of more than one teaching methods in a single period, 35(11.48%) of the respondents rated in agreement. Whereas, 260(85.58%) of the respondents indicated that they don’t believe that multiple methods can be used in one period. This shows that most of the teachers believe that only one method should be used in one period. In relation to this, Pigozzi (2008)stated that a quality education has to consider the learner as an active participant and a central part of educational efforts learners bring to their learning, and to that of a group in which they participate, a large diversity of experiences characteristics skills.

Teachers were asked (Table 1 item 5) if they see any difficulty in using ALMs. While 280(91.8%) of the respondents agree that it is difficult to use ALMs; 20(6.56%) of the respondents see no difficulty in using ALMs. This shows that majority of the teachers consider the many ALMs as a complex concept to apply in their classrooms. This is also supported by the information gathered through interview and focus group discussion. This indicates the gap that exists on the part of teachers to accept at least in principle, the need to use variety and appropriate methods and tasks (activities) to display better classroom practice. In relation to this Elliot (1993) suggests that the performance of schools and teachers intrinsically manifests educational quality if the performance satisfies appropriate quality criteria (procedural principles).

B. Teacher’s use of Active Learning Methods

| No | Items | Agree | | undecided | | disagree | | Total |
|----|---|-------|-------|-----------|------|----------|------|-------|
| | | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| 1 | Most frequently, I use different ALMs | 258 | 84.59 | 3 | 0.98 | 44 | 14.4 | |
| 2 | Using ALMs made me effective | 48 | 15.74 | 12 | 3.93 | 245 | 80.3 | |
| 3 | My students enjoyed my use of ALMs | 150 | 49.18 | 30 | 9.84 | 125 | 40.9 | |
| 4 | In most cases I use very few ALMs | 256 | 83.93 | 4 | 1.31 | 45 | 14.7 | |
| 5 | In using ALMs I don’t faced that much problem | 25 | 8.19 | - | - | 280 | 91.8 | |

Table 2:- Teachers use of ALMs

Teachers were asked if they use ALMs in most of their classes (see Table 2 item 1) majority of the respondents 258 (84.59%) rated that they use ALMs most frequently. This contradicts with the data obtained through interview and focus group discussion. Respondents of the interview & FGDs confirmed that most teachers regularly use one or two teaching methods. Whereas, 44(14.43%) of the teachers are rated their disagreement.

Teachers were also asked (Table 2; item 2) whether they feel that they are effective in their use of ALMs. Only 48(15.74%) are satisfied in their use of ALMs. The remaining 12(3.93%) of the respondents are not sure if they are effective or not. As 80.3 % of the respondents do not feel of using ALMs make them effective, from this it is possible to conclude that most teachers are not effectively using ALMs.

Regarding students attitude towards learning using ALMs, a slight majority 150(49.18%) of the respondents believe that students enjoyed learning using ALMs. However, the data obtained from the open ended questions indicate that one challenge to use ALMs is students’ lack of interest in learning with ALMs. While 125(40.98%) of the respondents insisted that their students do not enjoyed learning using ALMs, the remaining 30(9.84%) of the respondents rated undecided. Supporting this Silberman described that the less accustomed they (students) are to active learning, the more an easy they will be initially. Here .there is misconception of teachers regarding students’ participation. We argue that should students be active first in order for teachers to apply active learning methods or should teachers start from where the students are?

Regarding the use of varieties of ALMs 256(83.93%) of the respondents feel that they use varieties of ALMs. But this was not supported by the data obtained through interview and focus group discussion. Participants of the focus group

discussion disclosed that most teachers use very limited ALMs in their instruction. The remaining 45(14.75%) and 4(1.31%) of the respondents rated disagree and undecided respectively. Although majority of the respondents say that they use variety of ALMs, the data from multiple sources indicated that most teachers use very limited ALMs. In relation to this Yalew (2004: 18) says “... whether or not teaching materials are available, ultimately the quality of education rests mainly on the methodology of instruction employed by the teachers.” Similarly it is said that whether the education takes place under the shade of a tree or in a very expensive classroom, it is the process of teaching and learning that are the key to quality education (Quality Assurance, 2005).

Teachers were asked if they face problems in using ALMs. The majority 280(91.81%) of the respondents responded that they face problems in using ALMs. Only 25(8.19%) of the respondents responded that they do not face that much problem in using ALMs. Teachers were also asked to list the major problems they face in using ALMs in the open ended items. They listed dictation by supervisors, students’ lack of interest and skill of learning with ALMs as a challenge. One interviewee described his experience as “እንግሊዝኛ ባስተምር ቃላት ምልልሱን ሁለት-ሁለት እያደረግኩኝ ባሰራቸው የተሻለ ይሆን ነበር። ነገርግን ይህን ሳይደግብ ያገዝተማሪ ተኮር ዘዴ እንዳልተጠቀምኮ ተደርጎ ጥቁር ነጥብ ይያዝብኛል”
Translated as “when I teach English conversation ,it will be netter if I made the students to do it in pairs. But if I was found doing this, it will be considered as if I don’t use ALM and registered on a black list.”

Similarly, Ross & Gray argue that teacher efficacy contributes to achievement because high efficacy teachers try harder, use management strategies that stimulate student autonomy, attend more closely to low ability student needs, and modify students’ ability perceptions.

C. Teachers' use of group learning methods

| No | Items | Agree | | undecided | | Disagree | | Total |
|----|--|-------|-------|-----------|------|----------|-------|-------|
| | | F | % | F | % | F | % | |
| 1 | Every student actively participate in the group tasks | 9 | 2.95 | - | - | 296 | 97.05 | 305 |
| 2 | I give individual responsibility to every group member | 50 | 16.39 | 5 | 2.95 | 250 | 81.97 | 305 |
| 3 | I periodically vary the group leaders | 15 | 4.92 | 3 | 0.98 | 287 | 94.1 | 305 |
| 4 | Teaching in group is better than other methods | 10 | 3.28 | 5 | 2.95 | 290 | 93.77 | 305 |
| 5 | I use different types of group formation | 35 | 11.48 | - | - | 270 | 88.52 | 305 |
| 6 | The most frequent method I used is group discussion | 296 | 97.05 | - | - | 9 | 2.95 | 305 |

Table 3:- Teachers use of group learning methods

As shown in Table 3(item 1) teachers were asked whether every student actively takes part in the group tasks they give 296(97.05%) of the respondents see that every students in a group does not actively engaged in the common tasks. Only 9(2.95%) of the respondents have positive reaction. This implies that there was no balance among students in carrying out common task. From this it is possible to conclude that students are not fairly taking part in group activities.

As indicated in Table 3 item 2, 250(81.97%) of the respondents rated that they do not give individual responsibility for group members. About 50(16.39%) &1.64%) of the respondents rated their agreement and unsure respectively. This indicated that teachers are not using group learning effectively in their classrooms.

Nkinyangi (2004) suggested that teachers must be at the fore front of educational reform since the quality and effectiveness of an educational system ultimately depends on the quality and nature of the interaction between teachers and students.

Regarding giving equal opportunity to students in a group task 287(94.1%) of the respondents indicated that they do not periodically vary the group leaders. Only 15 (4.92%) of the respondents agree that they change the group leaders periodically. This implies that only few students are favored to get the experience of leading a group.

Teachers were asked to compare group discussion with other ALMs. Majority 290(95.08%) of the respondents view group discussion/group work as one of the teaching methods and sees no superiority over the other teaching methods. However, as the information obtained through interview, focus group discussion and observation revealed that most teachers observed using group discussion/ group work exhaustively in their classes. Moreover, teachers were asked to list down the firstfive mostfrequently used methods in descending order. Nearly, 95.1 % of the respondents mentioned group discussion on the first place. Only 10 (3.28%) & 5(1.64%) rated agree and not sure respectively.

From this results, one can conclude that most teachers have the opinion that group discussion/work is superior to the rest ALMs. Silberman(1996) warns the danger of such feeling. In his view groups can be unproductive when there has been little team building in the beginning of the class and when group work is not carefully structured from the outset.

Regarding the use of different group formation techniques, 35(11.48%) of the respondents agreed that they use different group formation techniques. Whereas, 270(88.52%) of the respondents say that they do not use different group formation techniques. This was supported by the data obtained through interview and FGD. Accordingly, most teachers form their groups based on “ability grouping”/ mixed ability grouping- our understanding/ and on 1to 5(one clever student is assigned to lead 5 weak students). This further indicates the poor useof group discussion/work in most cases.

As indicated on table 3 item 6 teachers were asked to rate if they use group discussion all the time in their instruction. Interestingly, 296(97.05%) of the respondents responded that they use group discussion in most cases.A very small portion 9(2.95%) of the respondents insist that they do not use group discussion most.One interviewee made the remark as: “መምህራን በብዛት የሚጠቀሙት የቡድን ውይይት ነው። እናነተስ የምታስተምቶው በቡድን ውይይት አይደል?”

translated as teachers usually use group discussion. You-in the college- also taught them using group discussion.

Based on the analyzed data the study came up with the following major findings:

- Primary school teachers lack adequate knowledge of ALMs. The participants of the focus group discussion and the interviewees indicated that most teachers lacks adequate knowledge of most active learning methods.
- Teachers participated in the study identified group discussion, lecture, demonstration, question & answer and pair work as the most frequently practiced methods. However, group discussion is singled out as the most frequently used method.

- The data revealed that although teachers usually prefer to use group discussion/work in their classes, they do not use it effectively. It is indicated that students have not given individual responsibility; group formation techniques were used.
- Teachers face different problems to use ALMs. The problems emanates from students, supervisors and them selves. Lack of adequate knowledge, challenge from the students and tight control/dictation/ by supervisors were listed as hindering factors.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the major findings presented above the following conclusions were made. Teachers have immense roles to play in improving the quality of education. The main role is their choice of teaching methods. In the contemporary education community, the use of variety of ALMs does not have other alternative. Moreover, the need to adapt ALMs as the main instructional approach/strategy is underlined in the different components of the General Education Quality Improvement Program. Hence, the use of ALMs both from professional and policy point of view is not a choice rather it is both a necessity and a must.

Although teachers tend to use group discussion/ group work as the one and only ALM, they are not using it effectively. Silberman (1996) comments that some teachers over use groups. They do not give students enough chances to learn things individually, and they do not bring the entire class together enough for teaching and discussion.” Here one thing should be clear. As there is no one single method that fits all purpose, a variety of ALMs should be entertained. As the same time, group should also be better managed to yield better result.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the class room situation in using ALMs,the following actions need to be taken by the main stakeholders (teachers, educational leaders at various levels and Colleges of Teachers Education).

- Capacity building of teachers in relation to ALMs should be well managed. The short term trainings should focus on facts on the ground.
- Teachers’ method choice should not be dictated by somebody else but by the objectives & content of lessons and other related dynamics.
- School based trainings especially the CPD and toolkit programs should be the ideal place to fill the gap of knowledge & skill of using ALMs.
- The training offered at the college both in the pre-service and in-service need to be reassessed and adjusted in such way it can enable graduates to better equip both in knowledge and skill of ALMs.

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