



PEACE IV Programme - Shared Education Impact Evaluation

Sharing from the Start (SFTS)

Case Study Report 2022: Preschool Partnership

Tru Beginnings Community Playgroup (Co. Monaghan), Woodland Adventure Playgroup and Clogher Valley Playgroup (Co. Tyrone)



Approach

As part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education¹, a number of partnerships were invited to host a case study visit in 2020 and most recently in 2022. Case studies were identified by Sharing from the Start (SFTS) Project Partners (i.e. Early Years – the organisation for young children; the National Childhood Network; and the Fermanagh Trust).

The case-study outlines examples of activity where the coming together of pre-schools from different backgrounds as part of curricular-based shared classes has helped to normalise contact between children, early years practitioners, and across the pre-school community. Embedding Shared Education into the pre-schools' curriculum should be seen as a key marker of the projects' success, as sustained contact has led to bonds and friendships being developed, which will contribute to reconciliation benefits in the longer-term.

The specific objectives of the case studies are:

- To provide examples of good practice i.e. projects which have shown improved educational and shared outcomes for children; enhanced early years practitioner training and partnership working; and projects which demonstrated engagement with parents and the wider community.
- To document how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the delivery of the initiative and how schools/other settings adapted their delivery in response.

- To enrich the Impact Evaluation of Shared Education by capturing real-life stories of funded projects.
- To contribute to the wider dissemination efforts to showcase the work funded under the PEACE IV Programme.

The study included the following research activities:

- An in-depth interview with the managers of each partnership setting.
- Review of existing partnership documentation including monitoring information and Shared Education activity plans.

The case study report is structured as follows:

- Background to the partnership;
- Previous experiences of Shared Education and motivations for getting involved;
- Model of sharing;
- Benefits: for the child, setting, parents and wider community;
- What has worked well and why;
- Challenges and barriers;
- Looking forward: sustainability and future plans; and
- Final reflections.

¹ The evaluation is being undertaken by SJC consultancy, in partnership with the National

Background to the partnership

The enrolment of three settings in this partnership are detailed below:

Playgroup name	Enrolment	
	2020/21	2021/22
Clogher Valley Playgroup	27	40
Woodland Adventure Playgroup	13	14
Tru Beginnings Community Playgroup	20	17

Clogher Valley Playgroup operates in a purpose-built mobile building on the outskirts of the village of Clogher in rural Tyrone. It had an enrolment of 40 children in 2021/22 and most of these children come from the village and the surrounding area. Clogher is a village in the border area of south County Tyrone. It lies on the River Blackwater c. 6 miles from the border crossing to County Monaghan. The 2011 Census² recorded a population of 2,223 in the ward of Clogher with 63% belonging to, or were brought up in the Catholic religion, and 35% belonging to/brought up in a 'Protestant and Other Christian (including Christian related)' religion.

Woodland Adventure Community Playgroup had an enrolment of 14 children in 2021/22 and is situated in purpose-built accommodation set in a rural location opposite the local primary school in Augher. There are year-on-year fluctuations in the enrolments in the playgroup with numbers in some years below 10. Augher,

where the playgroup is located, is a small village in south County Tyrone just 6 miles to the County Monaghan border. Augher ward had a population of in excess of 2,000 according to the 2011 Census, with 59% belonging to, or being brought up in, the Catholic religion and 40% belonging to, or being brought up in a 'Protestant and Other Christian (including Christian related)' religion.

Tru Beginnings Community Playgroup had a total enrolment of 17 children in 2021/22 and is located 2kms from Emyvale, in rural County Monaghan, and about 8kms from the Border with County Tyrone. Emyvale town and surrounding area has a population of just c.1,220. Approximately one-fifth of the population are nationals who have settled in Emyvale from other countries; for example, 12% of the population were originally from Lithuania.

Both Clogher Valley Playgroup and Woodland Adventure Playgroup are located 3 miles apart; Tru Beginnings Community Playgroup is located just over 13 miles from the other two settings.



² Census 2021 figures are not available until Autumn 2022.

Previous experiences of Shared Education and motivations for getting involved

None of the settings had ever collaborated prior to becoming involved in Shared Education; this is despite two of the settings being in close proximity to each other. One of the managers noted how they live near each other and are close neighbours but that they never had an opportunity to visit each other's setting. Shared Education provided them with their first opportunity to make contact.

“She and I are neighbours. It was so strange as the two of us live on the same road but we never got to visit each other's play group and it was only through the Sharing From The Start that we made contact and have been very friendly since. (Manager)

A significant reason for why the managers of each setting did not meet up according to one of the managers interviewed was the fact that the two settings located in Co. Tyrone deliver a different curriculum – staff in one setting deliver the HighScope Curriculum, whereas staff in the other setting deliver the Northern Ireland pre-school curriculum.

HighScope was developed by HighScope Educational Research Foundation based in Michigan in the United States. Its central belief is that children construct their own learning by doing and being actively involved in working with materials, people and ideas.

Early Years leads the HighScope Ireland Institute in Ireland, which is one of several HighScope Institutes throughout the world.

In addition to the above, the third setting within the partnership delivers the Aistear curriculum. The fact, therefore, that each of the settings deliver a different curriculum has meant that staff had attended different cluster meetings and training events and none of the managers had a ready-made opportunity to meet up and develop links.

“[They deliver] the HighScope curriculum and we deliver the preschool curriculum. Even though we're about 10 minutes apart, we were never at the same cluster training and we would never have had an opportunity to come in touch. (Manager)

Sharing From The Start (SFTS) therefore provided staff within each setting their first opportunity to collaborate together and for their children to meet their peers in other settings.

“Until we had Shared Education, and started working with the other settings we would never really have experienced this. (Manager)

In terms of the underlying motivations for taking part in SFTS, intrigue drew staff's attention to Shared Education initially. Staff within the partnership believed that it would be helpful for children within their settings to help them develop their social skills and expand their friendship network.

“I think the motivation was intrigue at the start to be honest. I went to an information session and thought it would be good for the children and we thought we would have it. It's great for the children to help them socialize and interact with other children because they do all see each other in the local parks but (before the programme) they wouldn't know each other. (Manager)

Another motivating factor identified related to the opportunities that collaborative activities would bring in terms of developing staff teaching practices and providing opportunities for staff across the partnership to learn from the variety of practices in each of the settings.

“Even for staff ourselves, we thought it would have been beneficial to see other practices. We are all getting them ready for school but everybody does things in different ways. Our staff have learned things from the other partners. (Manager)

Lastly, SFTS provided opportunities for staff to understand how different settings organised their learning spaces and their displays, and to see what resources were being used. They also had an opportunity to see there were surplus resources that could be shared within the partnership.

“We got to go into the different settings to see the layout of the rooms there and what they display on their walls and on their boards and what shared resources they have. When we went to one of the settings, there were things that maybe they needed and they didn't have that we could help with. (Manager)

It is important to note that the settings, like others, experienced significant disruption as a result of the pandemic including setting closures. From March 2020 onwards all three settings gradually adapted their delivery and moved many of their shared activities online using platforms such as Zoom. This meant that activities primarily took place within each of the respective settings.



Model of sharing

The table below sets out the number and percentage of children from each of the settings taking part alongside the activities delivered. In 2020/21 and 2021/22, all of the children from both settings were involved in Shared Education. In 2021/22, 71 children took part in SFTS across all three settings and 11 hours of activities, varying in duration of between 1 and 4 hours, were delivered largely within their own settings given the continuing Covid-19 situation. Videos and photos of activities undertaken were shared with the other settings in the partnership.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Year groups involved	All year groups	All year groups	All year groups	All year groups	All year groups
Total enrolment	55	54	87	60	71
Total no. of children taking part	52	52	87	60	71
% of children taking part	95%	96%	100%	100%	100%
Model of sharing	20 hours delivered in 5 sessions	30 hours delivered in 7 sessions	10 hours (2 sessions x 5 hours)	11 hours delivered in sessions lasting up to 5.5 hours	11 hours delivered in sessions between 1 and 4 hours

Prior to Covid-19, a key focus of shared activities between the settings involved in the partnership was on meeting up for face-to-face sessions. Many of these were delivered by staff from the settings, however a number of activities, such as visits to the forest, were organised and delivered by outside facilitators.

“Pre-Covid, it was really good and the majority of the sessions were run by ourselves. Sometimes we used an outside facilitator because our numbers were so big and none of our settings could hold all of the children. We went to the forest, for example, for one of the sessions and upon reflection we felt that when we run them ourselves, they ran much better. Our focus really at the very onset every year was on the personal, social, emotional development of kids and them having fun. (Manager)

Another focus in the earlier years of SFTS was around music and dance and tying this into specific events such as St Patrick's day celebrations.

“We had an Irish dancing in round on St Patrick's day. We had them dancing and we showed them how to do tap dance and things like that. (Manager)

In 2021/22, three SFTS sessions had been delivered prior to the case study virtual visit being undertaken and a variety of activities were delivered as part of the SFTS. Due to Covid-19, the sessions were delivered within the individual settings rather than as joint activities across the partnership. The first session took place in November 2021 and was used to support initial connection with partners. Each of the schools sent flower bulbs to their partner schools and the focus of the session was to enable children to explore and think about what plants needed to help them grow over time.

The session educational outcomes were to promote the social and emotional development of children and to deliver elements of the World Around Us (WAU) curriculum in NI, and for children in the partner school in the Republic of Ireland to meet the Exploring and Thinking Aim of the Aistear curriculum. The session was also used as a way of developing children's self-awareness and awareness of their community and also as an opportunity to explore differences and similarities.

The Little Red Hen book was used to learn about planting and the importance of helping each other and teamwork.

The second session took place in December 2021 and provided an opportunity for children to continue to get to know their peers in other settings through creating Christmas cards and sending them to children in their partner settings. The session also incorporated Circle Time as an opportunity to discuss each of the logos of the settings in the SFTS partnership to create a sense of awareness of others. Videos were created by staff to share with children and staff in the partnership settings. This enabled children to discuss the different uniforms across the settings and talk about any similarities and differences. GoNoodle³ was also used to get children moving with short interactive activities.

The third session took place in February 2022 and focused on religious and cultural events such as St Brigid's Day, Valentine's Day and St Patrick's Day in March. Children in each of the settings created crosses and cards and posted them to their peers in other settings. This also gave children the opportunity to learn about different cultural festivals and celebrations, particularly important given the number of newcomer families for whom these traditions would be new.



³ GoNoodle helps teachers and parents get kids moving with short interactive activities. Desk-side

movement helps kids achieve more by keeping them engaged and motivated throughout the day.



Photo: A St Brigid's cross, which the children made to share with their partner school.

Benefits for the children

All of the activities had a significant social element to them as well as being educational. Children had plenty of opportunities to develop their writing skills by writing letters and Christmas cards to their peers in other partnership settings. Given that many of the children might never have met their peers face-to-face in their partner's settings, this provided an opportunity for the children to be creative whilst also developing their writing and communication skills.

“The children are sending these cards to other children we have never met. They have to think about what they could write to them and they have to be creative. They're essentially strangers because we never actually met them. (Manager)

Children and staff were also given an opportunity to experience different curricular content and approaches across all of the settings. One manager noted how they thought the curriculum being taught in the setting in Ireland appeared to be easier to teach and children appeared more engaged.

“It was so nice to cross the border to see what they do. They have a different curriculum and some aspects of their curriculum are so much easier and engaging for the kids than ours. (Manager)

As indicated above, schools tied their SFTS activities into specific cultural and religious days. For example, for St Brigid's day, children in one of the schools made St Brigid's crosses and this activity was recorded on a video, which the other two settings could review once they had received the crosses in the post. This activity worked well in terms of helping children to develop skills and in sharing their ideas with peers in other schools. It also helped children to better understand and engage with different cultural celebrations.

“We shared our crosses with [the other settings] and they opened them up when they received them in the post. It's a great way of exchanging ideas that worked well. The video worked well for children. (Manager)

Social: One of the significant benefits of SFTS prior to Covid-19 was the ability for children to go on bus trips and meet their peers for specific activities.

Many of the face-to-face activities prior to the pandemic provided rich opportunities for peer-to-peer socialising. Travelling on a bus was viewed as a particular highlight in its own right as well as enabling children to play games with their peers and have snacks together.

“It was kind of like a preschool session. They had their time to play there, had snack together and then they would sing songs and tell stories. (Manager)

These joint trips were critical in terms of helping the children to make new friends and then recognising each other within their communities.

“The children enjoyed it because they got to experience different schools and different backgrounds. It was great for them as well because they were speaking to the children in shops that they have met through the Sharing from the Start. They made new friends which was very beneficial. (Manager)

The SFTS partnership utilised outside facilitators for some of the activities at the beginning. One of these joint activities was a visit to a forest. The facilitator led and delivered the full set of activities. Children were engaged in a number of activities including ‘Elf on the Shelf’ and a bauble hunt to decorate a Christmas tree.

“They (the facilitator) had like, an overriding theme, like, one of them was the Elf on the Shelf. And then we walked around the forest trying to find baubles to decorate the tree. (Manager)

On reflection, whilst the children enjoyed the activities, the managers felt that certain aspects of the activities could have been more inclusive. For example, instead of having two baubles for a group of children, they would have preferred that there was one for every child in the group.

“We thought about what we would have done different. For the bauble hunting, maybe two out of the group of 20 children got to find a bauble, whereas I would have had a bauble for every single child. (Manager)

Another aspect of utilising outside facilitators that did not work as well as anticipated was in terms of the highly structured set of activities, that gave children little time to relax and explore their surroundings or engage with their peers.

“The day was too rushed. We would have been talking with the kids about the leaves on the ground and how they crunch and asking kids about what we can see. But then we had to rush to go to the next place. (Manager)

“It was too advanced. It was too structured and children don't like that. Children like to be able to just play but the enjoyment went out the window, you know, the children were just put into a group and they had to sit down. (Manager)

With the onset of Covid-19, the partnership had to adapt their delivery to being largely one where activities were delivered within their own settings with videos used to share learning experiences across the partnership. The use of remote sessions with partner schools meant that it was difficult for children to engage fully with their peers and remember their names and the development of friendships was much more challenging. Setting managers believed that remote sessions provide few of the benefits that sustained face-to-face engagement in play activities provides.

“Our children need to play with other children to remember anything. They remember the names of the other schools and they know the colour of their uniforms but that’s about it.

Notwithstanding the impact of the pandemic, in the round children’s self-esteem and confidence has improved as a result of their involvement in SFTS. Staff particularly noted that engaging with a larger group during a shared session gave some children more confidence to engage when they returned to their own smaller setting.

“In the beginning they just weren't very confident within their own setting. And as they got more and more children in [as Shared Education progressed] , they did adapt and that really helped with her confidence within our own group then. (Manager)

Understanding difference: The Senior Early Years Specialist for this partnership reported that both settings skilfully and effectively implemented the Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) - Respecting Difference Programme, and have used this to support understanding of difference, and recognition of similarities.

Practitioners interviewed believed that the children largely take other children ‘at face value’. A number of the sessions have focused on understanding difference in terms of each of the settings’ logos and the children’s uniforms. However, beyond this the children do not generally identify differences or personal characteristics of other children that might be different to their own.

“In terms of embracing difference, I find at this age children just take everybody at face value. Children at this age don't point out each other's differences in terms of hair colour or eye colour. I would find children don't even mention children of a different skin colour unless you draw attention to it. (Manager)

Nonetheless, involvement in Shared Education has prompted a desire and wish amongst the children to learn about, and embrace, different cultures. Staff in each of the settings have used sessions to discuss cultural events like Chinese New Year, St. Patricks Day, and St. Brigid’s Day and delivered them in a fun and engaging way. One of the managers noted that children only really begin to take notice of difference from around the age of eight upwards.

“We only have them for that one year and we talk to them about Chinese New Year and other cultural events anyway. They just want to learn and embrace different cultures, and they do it because they want to learn about it. But its only when they are 8, 9 or 10 that they’re starting to really notice that. (Manager)

Benefits for the setting

Staff had significant amounts of training prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and engaged in joint planning, delivery and evaluation of sessions over subsequent terms. One of the key benefits, particularly, in the earlier years of the partnership, was the quality of the relationships that developed between staff. As one manager pointed out, even though they had spent time building that relationship, it did not feel over-burdening.

“We built a strong relationship at the beginning. It didn't feel like it was time consuming. (Manager)

Another key benefit of the partnership, particularly prior to Covid-19, was the ability of staff to use joint planning days to bounce ideas off each other and exchange ideas of what might work that could be tried by different settings.

“We could share ideas with each other and were bouncing things off each other about what might work. We would then just see how that goes. (Manager)



Benefits for parents and the wider community

Prior to Covid-19, the involvement of parents was much more prominent than it is currently. Settings in the partnerships issued invitations to parents to come along to specific SFTS activities such as a dance routine that children were involved in. This was a particularly positive experience for grandparents, parents and children because of the nature of the activity and the level of interaction between them.

“They were invited to come in. The time that we did the dance routine, they were invited to stay on for the last half an hour. Most of the grandparents and parents were invited to that session. That one was more popular because it was dancing and the children enjoyed having the grandparents and parents dancing with them and getting involved in that way. (Manager)

Parents and grandparents were also invited in to school to help deliver a number of activities and several volunteered to help with specific activities such as planting bulbs or driving a bus between the different settings.

“We used to have grandparents come in. One grandparent came in for the planting and it was more about them wanting to see what was going on. Two grandparents actually came in - the other one came in to deliver an activity to one of the classes. (Manager)

“One time we had our parent who drove the bus - that was fun and a talking point for the children. (Manager)

Overall, the involvement of parents in SFTS, especially before Covid-19, was viewed positively in terms of helping parents to get to know more about places they might not have ever been to before. It also helped bring parents from different backgrounds together.

“It was an education for the parents as well as the children. I think maybe more so their parents as it brought all the parents together that they may never been in the same place before, you know, so it was all good. There's a lot of positives. (Manager)

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, those interviewed felt that there was less of a buzz for parents as their child(ren) were not able to go on trips to each other's settings.

“There's not as much of a connection with the parents. [Before Covid] when we were going on a trip, the parents were so aware that Shared Education was taking place and that we're going on a bus and they would ask them questions at home such as what did you do with your new friends? (Manager)

What has worked well and why?

The relationships that developed between the staff was one of the most important aspects that worked well. These friendships improved and deepened over time.

“Yeah, definitely our friendships. The friendships definitely have improved over the years. (Manager)

These friendships were critical because as one manager noted, there was so much to absorb at the beginning (Year 1 of Sharing from the Start) that people felt slightly overwhelmed at the prospect of commencing a new initiative, as it represented a steep learning curve. The strong friendships meant staff could support each other and share ideas, which led to building shared learning into everyday practice.

“It was good to know that we were here for each other because there was so much being thrown at us with little guidance at the beginning. Those relationships are a great help within Sharing From The Start because it feeds into your everyday practice. Without this it would feel like deer in headlights - so it was nice. (Manager)

Having time for joint planning was also viewed positively. Whilst considered time consuming, it was critical in helping to ensure the sessions were delivered to a high standard. Joint evaluation of sessions (pre-Covid) was also much easier and more effective when carried out face-to-face at

the end of each session as it enabled a collective evaluation of the session rather than having several individual evaluations of the same session.

“*Preparing for sessions appears on the face of it that there was more time needed for planning. But we were able to plan two or three together and come back again in a few months to plan more. I found really helpful. (Manager)*

“*The evaluation was much better when we did it together because our evaluation since Covid is your own evaluation of your own activity. (Manager)*

Challenges and barriers

Many of the challenges experienced by the settings were largely Covid-19 related. Like other settings, the pandemic presented significant logistical challenges for staff. The reliability of the internet connection to facilitate the sessions was an ongoing challenge and it meant that any poor internet connections resulted in some groups moving ahead whilst others fell behind.

“*Reliability of the internet connection and moving at different paces was a particular challenge. (Manager)*

“*Sometimes the Internet wasn't great and you couldn't hear no matter what. There was a kind of half delay which meant that one group was ahead and one group was behind. (Manager)*

Getting children engaged in the session took significant amounts of time, and a number of children were camera shy and struggled to engage with online sessions. Several children preferred to engage in direct play activities (which sometimes were not possible due to the pandemic).

“*It was difficult getting the children engaged in what we were doing and it took time to get them to settle down. I have a lot of children that go camera shy and said no, they didn't want to do that. Trying to get them to sit was the biggest thing because children don't want to sit; they want to be playing. (Manager)*

This same view was also shared with another interviewee.

“*They do not want to sit down and get engaged in this. No, this is not what they want. We wouldn't have had these challenges if we were doing normal play. Children were a little agitated and some were frightened that they have to do this. (Manager)*

The amount of time taken to plan an activity was also longer, and in addition extra time was needed to evaluate the sessions. Prior to Covid-19, activities were jointly evaluated at the end of the session and done collaboratively between the staff delivering them. Given that activities were delivered separately by each setting and that they took place over a longer period of time, staff found themselves setting aside time on different days to complete the evaluation on their own, something which many of the staff found more challenging.

“I would be doing short videos today for one of the other [settings] and then they would be doing their activity. There was so much more extra time needed to write up an evaluation – we had to write many evaluations instead of one bigger evaluation. (Manager)

“The evaluation, I found it much more time consuming. You could have typed it up previously maybe in a half an hour together, whereas now you maybe do that for 10 minutes one day, 15 minutes another day, and you could maybe spend 20 minutes to figure out which group is which or which relates to which thing. (Manager)

However, the support provided by the Senior Early Years Specialist was critical to helping the schools navigate through the challenges presented by Covid-19.

“We, as a group, would like to thank [our SEYS] for the support provided over the years and especially the encouragement she gave us to continue with our planning and delivering of [Shared Education] during Covid when it was much more difficult to plan and deliver activities through Zoom and videos.

Not all of the challenges experienced by partnership were related to Covid-19. A number of challenges were experienced in running the joint activities. One significant challenge was in relation to getting a venue that had the necessary capacity to take the entire group. This was a particular ‘hindrance’ for the partnership at varying time points.

“This location... there's only so many venues that have the number of rooms we need... no matter if you cleared the furniture. We were constantly checking whether we went over our square feet per child and that was a real big hindrance. (Manager)

Linked to the above was the time it took to plan and organise activities to make sure they run smoothly.

“It takes a lot of time to plan out activities when you are going from one place to the other. You're nearly asking venues if we can have access to the session from the night before to get things set up.

Looking forward: sustainability and future plans

The settings have worked hard to maintain SFTS throughout the pandemic, however those interviewed expressed a desire to get back to face-to-face delivery which they viewed as being more effective.

Not only did the face-to-face delivery create a buzz amongst the children and their family members, it also provided an opportunity for children to make friends with the peers in other settings. In addition, behavioural problems were not as noticeable when they came together to participate in shared activities.

“The children looked forward so much to these days out and all – it was pretty cool for them. Going on the bus brought so much enjoyment to the children and their behaviour was really good too. (Manager)

Without the funding, it is unlikely that the settings themselves will be able to sustain these face-to-face activities given the costs associated with transport and venue hire. This is a particular issue for those settings which have fluctuating and unpredictable enrolments, but is also an issue for all settings, where budgets are always a challenge.

Final reflections

On balance, all of the groups – parents/grandparents, children and staff – benefited enormously from Shared Education. The face-to-face activities, delivered prior to Covid-19, generated a real sense of excitement for the children and their families, and levels of parental/family engagement were high – both in terms of parents and grandparents volunteering to undertake certain tasks, and attending and participating in specific activities.

Children had a chance to meet others, see a different uniform, and become familiar with their local community. While staff feel children are too young to notice cultural differences, they took the opportunity to discuss cultural events, such as the Chinese New Year. This is an early and important step towards normalising difference.

Teachers themselves also benefited in terms of developing deep and meaningful relationships across the three settings. They were presented with opportunities to collaborate in planning, delivering and jointly evaluating sessions. These relationships will continue, and may therefore bring further opportunities for cross-community collaboration and reconciliation benefits.

Undoubtedly, Covid-19 has disrupted the delivery model, and specific benefits that were apparent prior to this are not as evident particularly in terms of friendship development. However, the mentoring and guidance provided by Project Partners and Senior Early Years Specialists enabled Shared Education to be continued within this and other early years settings. Without this support and associated resources, settings might have struggled to continue delivering as much Shared Education as they did. Now that the pandemic is having less impact, there is a real willingness to get back to face-to-face delivery. Whether activities are sustained beyond the period of funding is dependent on what funding opportunities might arise to sustain face-to-face activities.



This report was produced by SJC consultancy and National Children's Bureau, as part of the wider Impact Evaluation of Shared Education (PEACE IV Programme, Specific Objective 1, Action 1)

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