

COACHING AS A TOOL FOR UNLOCKING LEARNING POTENTIAL

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Abstract. In contemporary European educational contexts, equal access to education and learning opportunities have become one of the main issues. Socio-economic factors and the surrounding environment are widely recognised as the main barriers to changing an individual's social position in society, while the disparity between educational opportunities and learning outcomes is seen to be growing. This paper aims to address the ongoing challenges and opportunities to break down barriers to upward mobility and promote equal opportunities for all by looking at different intervention approaches, such as coaching and positive role models. International research involving participants from 6 European countries - Lithuania, Italy, Norway, Greece, Romania and the United Kingdom - was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the coaching method and its impact on unlocking learning potential in the educational setting. The research findings suggest that coaching effectively promotes learning and behavioural change in disadvantaged learners.

Keywords: social mobility, educational achievements, intervention strategies, coaching.

Introduction

The lack of social mobility is a key issue for Europe. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack positive role models or family support. They are not always aware of their options or potential, so they may be subject to negative influence in their communities. Various sources (for instance, Brookings et al. 2017; Battle and Lewis 2002; Rimfield et al. 2018) highlight that socio-economic factors and family backgrounds are the main barriers to social mobility and that gaps between both access to educational opportunities and achievement continue to rise.

To address this issue, 6 European educational institutions joined together and focused on developing and testing a range of intervention strategies, including using youngsters as role models and coaching practice, which are believed to raise aspiration and improve educational opportunities.

The current paper aims to discuss the findings of the empirical test of coaching effectiveness in the educational setting from three perspectives: the coaches (young 'role models' with proper coaching experience), coachees (disadvantaged learners from each participating country), and external observers (school authorities and managers). To achieve the aim, the following objectives were set: 1) to introduce the theoretical framework for contemporary challenges of the educational environment and possible interventional strategies; 2) to collect quantitative and qualitative data from the target groups in terms of their involvement in coaching experience; 3) to analyse the relationship between the main factors of coaching method and

different types of results that can be achieved. The online survey involving three target groups was carried out after the training programme of young coaches had been completed and the coaching sessions for disadvantaged learners had been organised, thus enabling the participants to reflect on their more extended experience of coaching practice.

The results of the quantitative and qualitative research suggest empirical evidence of the validity of the coaching method for generating satisfaction and improving learning achievements among disadvantaged learners.

Theoretical framework

The relationship between socio-economic factors and educational achievements has been widely discussed over recent years. A number of scholars have revealed it to be an indicator of many life outcomes, such as job status, happiness, health, and even life expectancy (Battle and Lewis 2002; Rimfield et al. 2018). At the European level, the Commission has pointed out (*E&T Monitor* 2017) that students' educational attainment largely depends on their socio-economic backgrounds, and that educational attainment is important in determining social outcomes. It is also argued that people having only basic education are almost three times more likely to suffer deprivation or social strain than those with tertiary education. Apparently, unequal educational opportunities are a major challenge requiring a multi-faceted approach. An adequate learning environment and conditions can serve as a driver of upward mobility and a gateway to a better future. Therefore, certain intervention measures have to be applied in a wide

range of educational settings to break the cycles of the disadvantaged, raise aspirations, and improve motivation to facilitate educational opportunities.

Coaching has gained great popularity in recent years. The last two decades have seen a rise in the field of coaching as the profession has recognised the need for rigour and validity in the discipline. In the broadest sense, coaching is understood as a learning process wherein individuals take guidance and support from an experienced person (called a coach) and seek to maximise their potential (Blackbyrn 2022). Several scientific studies have investigated the effectiveness of coaching in various educational contexts, such as teacher coaching, academic coaching, and student coaching. For instance, a study by Knight et al. (2016) found that instructional coaching for teachers led to improvements in teaching practice and learning outcomes.

Similarly, the research by Van der Kleij et al. (2015) revealed that coaching interventions for students resulted in improvements in academic performance and self-regulated learning. Other studies highlight the transformative potential of coaching, both for individuals and organisations. Grant and Cavanagh (2021) emphasise the power of coaching to unlock human potential and maximise performance, while Bachkirova (2019) brings out the role of coaching in helping individuals become the best version of themselves. Thus, the main purpose of coaching is to help a person make progress in a certain area of their life and achieve their goals through a series of training sessions. As a facilitative intervention tailored to an individual and their unique skillset and circumstances (Waters, 2022), coaching enables a person to learn from the experts in the field in a structured and efficient manner. In this sense, the aspects of coaching can be integrated into educational settings and expand the repertoire of educators by providing a non-directive approach to facilitating others to learn for themselves.

Research methodology

To test the effectiveness of coaching as the intervention strategy applied to disadvantaged learners, the participants from 6 countries (Italy, Lithuania, Norway, the UK, Greece and Romania) initiated Erasmus+ KA2 strategic partnership project (hereinafter referred to as the Project). The main activities of the Project focused on developing a tool for identifying disadvantaged learners who would benefit from support and interventions; creating and introducing a coaching training guide; joint training for all selected young coaches; coaching sessions with disadvantaged learners in

each partner country; and an online survey providing evaluations of the coaching experience. Each partner trained up to 10 young coaches and matched them with targeted learners from local educational institutions. Overall, the Project reached approximately 100 disadvantaged pupils, tracking their progress and impacting their future career paths.

Research method. The current research is based on a survey, a common research method used to gather data from a sample of individuals about their experiences, opinions, and attitudes. The survey is considered to be one of the most versatile and widely used of all social research methods, offering a high degree of precision, flexibility, and generalizability (Creswell 2014; Babbie and Mouton 2015). According to the type of data used, the research questions are based on both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The research comprises the main variables affecting the result of the coaching experience, which are the performance of the coach, the readiness of the coachee, their mutual relationship (also known as the working alliance), and the nature of the coaching process. The valuation of the coach, coachee, their relationship, and the coaching process reflects their impact on certain aspects as coachee satisfaction, as well as on the favourable results of the intervention.

Research instrument. To collect the data through the survey, three sets of questionnaires were compiled involving three target groups: young coaches, coaches, and external observers. The questions were designed to gather relevant information and included a combination of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions provided a structured set of response options that can be easily quantified and analysed statistically. Additionally, the standardised responses across participants make it easier to compare and analyse data, as there is less variability in the data collection process (Creswell 2014). The obtained responses were interpreted into graphs, charts and percentages, giving a visual insight into respondents' experience of the coaching sessions. Most of the questions were based on the *Likert scale* (sometimes referred to as a satisfaction scale) – five (or more) point scale which was used to allow the participants to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement or measure their attitudes towards a certain coaching experience related item. To get an in-depth understanding of the coaching issues under the research, it was also decided to include open-ended questions, which allowed participants to provide rich, detailed responses that can be analysed for themes and patterns (Creswell 2014; Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2014). These questions were

mainly used to specify the reasons for respondents' choice of one or another item and provide examples of their associations with the coaching experience. Some open-ended questions were compulsory, while some of them were optional.

Sampling. There was a slight variation in the number of respondents across different countries. In total, 46 young coaches, 97 disadvantaged learners and 19 external observers provided their responses. According to a *Raosoft* sample size calculator (2023), the total sample size aligns with the recommended sample size.

Data collection. Three sets of questionnaires were compiled using the *Google Forms* platform and administered online in May-August 2022 to all 3 target groups. Each participating country was responsible for the timely provision of questionnaires for each target group. Upon the need, the questionnaires were translated into national languages for some of the target groups (e.g., coachees) by each participating country.

Data analysis. All responses were entered into a *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheet and analysed using descriptive statistics.

Research findings: Coaches' point of view

The first group of the survey respondents involved young people who were trained to become coaches and 'role models' to disadvantaged learners. The self-evaluation questionnaire for this target group was created to mirror their coaching competencies and experience. These questions were categorised by the indicators associated with their prior experience and knowledge of coaching, their participation in the training process and their practical coaching experience with disadvantaged learners.

The first set of questions was related to the prior experience of this target group (young coaches) regarding coaching competence. The data revealed that most of the respondents (80 per cent) were absolutely new to this method and had no prior experience. The rest of the respondents (14.3 per cent) stated that they were beginners with some very basic knowledge of coaching. As seen in Figure 1, none of the young coaches had any extensive level of coaching experience before the beginning of their training.

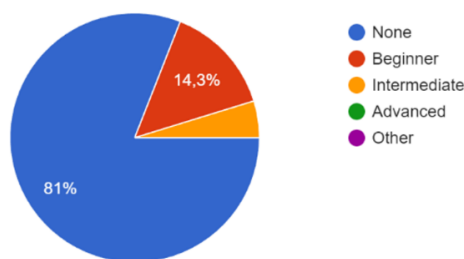


Fig. 1. Prior experience of coaching (before the participation in the training) (per cent)

To measure the progress of the coaching competence development, the respondents were asked to reveal their level of subject knowledge after the training. Based on the data provided (Fig. 2), the trainees considerably improved their knowledge, and most of them rated it from 7 to 9. Some respondents feel that the level of their knowledge is about 5 or 6, and one respondent rated the acquired level of proficiency with the highest score.

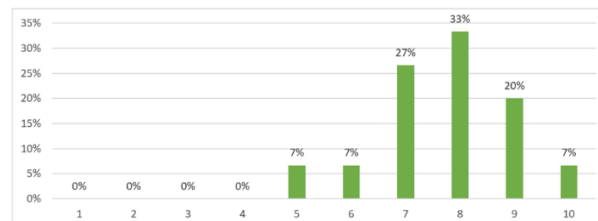


Fig. 2. Level of trainee's subject knowledge on coaching after the training (per cent)

The results show significant positive development of the awareness of the coaching method, as most young trainees, having no prior experience and background in the subject matter, reported to have broadened their knowledge and competence in coaching. When asked to specify the reason for their satisfaction with the training, the young coaches mentioned that they liked the content, the quality was great, the sessions were incredibly interesting, and they enjoyed the process. One respondent emphasised that: *"It has made a massive impact on the way I speak to young people. I used to spend my time trying to find the answers/solutions... now I let them find the solutions, and it is much more likely to work because it was their idea!"*.

The second set of questions was used to assess the practical coaching experience with disadvantaged learners. A coach should possess certain skills that will contribute to the good outcome of the process, positively impacting the coachee's perception of the effectiveness of coaching. While commenting on the new strengths developed from the coaching experience, most respondents stated that they became more *self-confident, learned how to choose and ask the right questions and avoided providing solutions themselves*. Most of the answers also highlighted active listening and better communication skills, which is consistent with the ideas of certain scholars (e.g., De Haan et al. 2011; Rekalde et al. 2015), according to whom the coaches who contribute to a satisfactory coaching experience are competent at communicating with the coachee (including verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, assertiveness, etc.).

Self-reflection (or self-assessment) is a process that helps turn experience into knowledge. Many people find that, during self-reflection, they are able to scrutinise their own actions and behaviour around others and then take steps to address any potential conflicts (Protheroe 2021). To reflect on their coaching experience, the trainees were asked: “If you could go back and do it again, is there anything you would have done differently”. Only a few respondents replied that they would do everything exactly the same, whereas the others wished they had been *more relaxed* and *not so afraid of the new learning experience*, *had created detailed manuals for themselves or kept journals*, *had been more open-minded* and *practised more*. One of the respondents gave a detailed account of the things she/he would have done differently: “I would have tried to have been more receptive to the process at the beginning. As I felt uncomfortable being vulnerable, I did not get the best out of coaching conversations, but now I can see how beneficial that is and enjoy them”.

Overall, the results obtained through the coaches’ survey reveal their actual growth and development in the field of coaching, their satisfaction with the coaching training and their own coaching experience.

Research findings: Coachee’s point of view

One of the cornerstones of any coaching process is feedback. The second part of the research targeted disadvantaged groups, who are those most likely to either underperform in school or leave education early. The newly trained coaches had to carry out several coaching sessions for disadvantaged learners from their country to inspire them to continue in education or training and encourage them to aim high in terms of achievement.

At first, the respondents were asked to rate their coaching sessions, considering their expectations. As it is seen from Figure 3, almost half of the coachees (48.4 per cent) indicated that their expectations were met much more than expected, about 20 per cent responded that the expectations of the coaching sessions were somewhat more than expected, and about one-third (32.3 per cent) found them as much as expected. The overall response to this question was very positive.

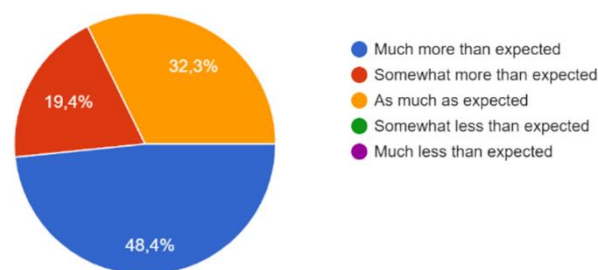


Fig. 3. Degree of expectations met during coaching sessions (per cent)

The coachees’ sense of achievement is believed to increase their perception of the effectiveness of the coaching method, likely inducing a greater degree of self-satisfaction. Regarding this statement, the respondents were asked to indicate whether the coaching helped them reach their goals. The data in Figure 4 show that the respondents found the coaching sessions very beneficial for reaching their goals. More than a third of the participants (38.7 per cent) said that they quite reached their goals, 22.6 per cent indicated that they completely reached them, while the others were quite positive as well, claiming that they reached a little or somewhat reached their goals (16.1 per cent and 19.4 per cent respectively).

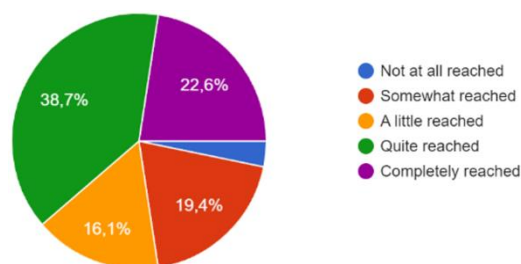


Fig. 4. Degree of reaching goals with the help of coaching (per cent)

Some authors (e.g., Lambert and Barley 2002) suggest that coachee willingness is the most important factor for bringing about change. When the participants were asked about the changes related to the coaching experience, the majority commented that they had become *more motivated* and *more self-confident*. The other popular answers involved becoming *more aware of their strengths and the impact of their behaviour on others*, *being more positive, open to changes and willing to learn and develop new skills*. Some respondents also felt that they are *more efficient* now and have *better relationships with their friends*, while others considered that they are just *more relaxed* and have *better time management skills*. Coaching experience has also impacted better learning results for some of the coachees.

In response to the question: “*What did you enjoy most about the coaching experience?*”, a range of responses was elicited. Some respondents pointed out that they liked the coach. For example, one interviewee said: “*I liked my coach; she allowed me to take my time in our sessions, and I was made aware of my goals*”. This view was echoed by some other informants who shared their impressions: “*I have found a person who does not judge me for what I say or for what I am*” or “*I enjoyed being able to speak to someone about my life goals. I did not know how to realise my goals before, but I have loved being able to speak to a young adult and have them challenge me to think of other options or methods to reach my goal*”. A number of the respondents also stated that coaching experience helped them better understand themselves: “*Every time I could discover something about myself*”, “*being able to find a solution*”, “*I think I enjoyed the fact that we helped each other so much to reach our goals*”. Some respondents just mentioned some single benefits, for instance: ‘*efficiency*’, ‘*developed my confidence*’, ‘*the determination it gave me*’, ‘*being part of the team*’, etc.

When asked whether there was anything they would have done differently if they went back and did it again, most respondents reported ‘*no*’ or ‘*not really*’. However, some coachees stated that they would change the way they started speaking about themselves and their problems, be *less shy* and *more open and(or) self-confident, appreciate every single coaching session, and enjoy them more*. One interviewee wrote: “*I would try to be less shy at the beginning and not put pressure on myself to think of an immediate answer to every question. But my coach did put me at ease and did say that I did not need to pressure myself into any answers and that we had time to think*”. Some respondents indicated they wanted more sessions with more open questions.

In response to the question about participation in further coaching sessions (Fig. 5), almost half of those surveyed (48.4 per cent) indicated that they would definitely like to take part in coaching sessions again, which was closely followed by other positive answers like probably (25.8 per cent) and maybe (19.4 per cent). However, a few participants reported that they would not like to repeat this experience.

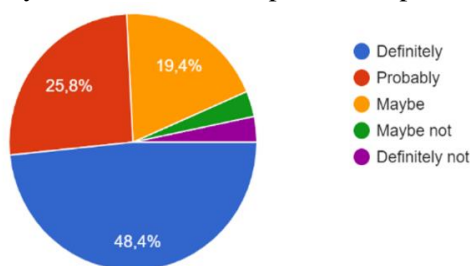


Fig. 5. Willingness to take part in coaching sessions again (per cent)

The response to the question about recommending coaching sessions to others was very positive. The respondents indicated they are extremely likely to recommend them to others. All of the responses provided imply positive experiences from the coaching sessions and might mean a change for disadvantaged learners for the better.

Research findings: External observers’ point of view

The last category of obtained data involves the comments and ratings of schools’ authorities or responsible persons who were interviewed as a part of the research strand. This part of the research aimed to gain insight into the views and opinions of the mentors and advisors amongst the educational stakeholders because, as the external observers, they had the best understanding of their professional development from a management or supervisory point of view.

The data comes from the informants from various countries who are familiar with young coaches and disadvantaged learners they have been matched to. Some questions were the same as for the first two target groups – coaches and coachees. However, some additional questions were included to reveal the impact of coaching on the well-being and improvement of their institution.

The first question focused on the awareness of the coaching method and its practical application at their educational establishments. As seen from the data provided in Figure 6, coaching sessions have not been common in their institutions as the majority of the respondents chose the answer – very few (26.7 per cent), few (13.3 per cent), a few (13.3 per cent), none (26.7 per cent).

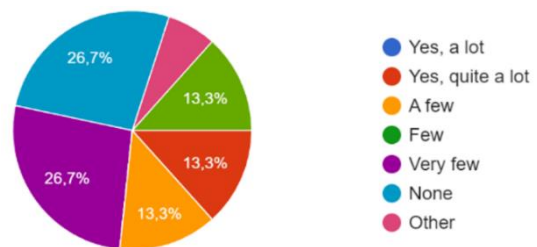


Fig. 6. Experience of prior coaching sessions at the institutions involved (per cent)

Yet, some respondents (13.3 per cent) indicated that they have already had quite a lot of prior coaching practices at their institution.

When asked about the level of their satisfaction with the coaching process that took place at their institution (Fig. 7), most of the respondents (53.8 per cent) confirmed that they were very satisfied, almost one-third (26.7 per cent) found coaching

sessions with disadvantaged learners as fairly satisfying. One-fifth of external observers (20 per cent) were completely satisfied with coaching sessions organised at their institutions. These responses imply the potential to improve the school's performance in terms of attendance, academic performance and continuation rates.

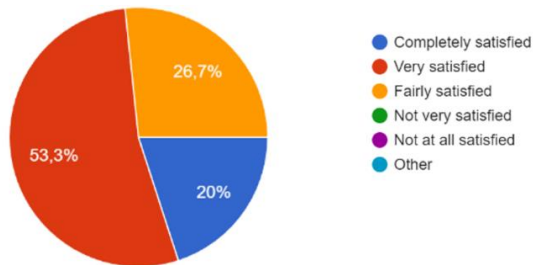


Fig. 7. Satisfaction with the coaching process which took place at the institutions involved (per cent)

When the external observers were asked to provide more specific comments on the degree of satisfaction, some most common positive responses were related to the well-being of the disadvantaged learners. These are some of the quotes provided in the questionnaire: “*students were happy to be coached by young people*”, “*for the impact it had on students*”, “*development of self-confidence and improvement in their social relationships*”, “*it gives the students a chance to get different perspectives*”.

The average ratings observed in all indicators of the item asking about the areas of improvement during/after coaching sessions at the involved institutions are very high (Fig. 8).

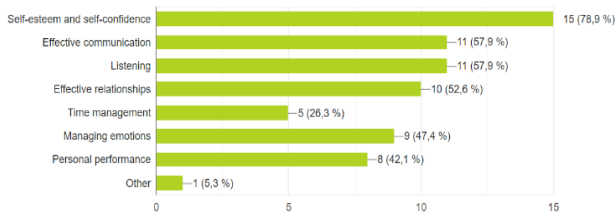


Fig. 8. Areas of improvement during/after coaching sessions at the institutions involved (per cent)

The biggest part of the respondents (84.6 per cent) indicated *self-esteem* and *self-confidence* represent the greatest development. These findings are consistent with many studies revealing that low self-esteem or low self-confidence can cause a self-perpetuating cycle of negative thinking and negative expectations, which might lead to disappointing outcomes.

Other indicators of high levels of improved areas, including items such as *effective communication*, *listening*, *effective relationship*, *personal performance* and *managing emotions*,

were indicated by the respondents as the improved ones.

Most of the respondents agreed with the statement that “*the coaching sessions organised at their institutions have enabled them to improve as a mentor/leader/school manager*”. The most popular comments provided by the respondents involve the improvement of such skills as active listening, self-confidence, self-esteem, and mindfulness. Some external observers pointed out that it is now easier to get a better rapport with learners, working with them towards a common goal.

As seen from the provided data and examples, the school community representatives approve coaching as a positive intervention method and associate it with great support for learning and development for students, school leaders and their educational establishments.

The participants' responses of the three target groups from all project partner countries were very much alike and revealed similar tendencies. The individual differences constituted an insignificant proportion of all submitted answers and could not be grouped or classified to reveal generalising findings. Thus, the analysis of the collected data according to separate countries has not been performed.

Conclusions

1. Over the past few years, there has been extensive discussion about the correlation between socio-economic factors and educational accomplishments. Various studies reveal that a suitable learning environment and favourable conditions can act as a catalyst for upward mobility and provide a pathway to learner's development.
2. A number of intervention methods, such as coaching, can be implemented to overcome obstacles to social mobility and advance equal educational opportunities for everyone.
3. Six European educational institutions initiated joint collaboration and carried out the research to test the effectiveness of coaching from the perspective of coaches, coachees, and external observers.
4. The research findings indicate that newly trained coaches have shown progress and improvement in the field of coaching and are satisfied with their coaching training and personal experience. Coaching practices enable them to improve their skills such as active listening, self-confidence, self-esteem, and mindfulness, which helps them establish a better rapport with learners and work with them towards common goals.

5. The feedback received from disadvantaged learners indicates that coaching positively impacts them, leading to increased motivation, self-confidence and goal achievement.
6. The responses from school community representatives suggest that coaching is a beneficial intervention method and is perceived to be supportive in unlocking the learning potential and development of students, as well as the school leaders and educational institutions.
7. The conducted research and its overall findings provide empirical evidence that coaching is an effective instrument for promoting learning and behavioural changes among disadvantaged learners. It can also have positive effects on the entire educational community.
8. Given the positive outcomes of coaching, it should be considered in the management and development processes of both curricular and extracurricular activities.

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UGDOMASIS VADOVAVIMAS KAIP MOKYMOŠI GALIMYBIŲ SKATINIMO PRIEMONĖ

Santrauka

Dabartiniame Europos švietimo kontekste viena iš pagrindinių problemų yra lygios galimybės gauti išsilavinimą ir mokytis. Pagrindinės kliūtys, kurios trukdo keisti asmens socialinę padėtį visuomenėje, yra socialiniai ir ekonominiai veiksniai bei supanti aplinka. To pasekmėje skirtumas tarp švietimo galimybių ir mokymosi rezultatų vis didėja. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama atkreipti dėmesį į nuolatinius iššūkius ir galimybes pašalinti minėtas kliūtis ir skatinti lygias galimybes visiems pasitelkiant įvairius intervencijos metodus, pavyzdžiui, ugdomąjį vadovavimą ir teigiamus pavyzdžius. Siekiant įvertinti šio ugdymo metodo veiksmingumą ir jo poveikį švietime, buvo atliktas tarptautinis tyrimas, kuriame dalyvavo 6 Europos sąjungos šalys: Lietuva, Italija, Norvegija, Graikija, Rumunija ir Jungtinė Karalystė. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad ugdomasis vadovavimas yra veiksminga priemonė, skatinanti nepalankioje padėtyje esančių mokinių mokymąsi ir teigiamus elgsenos pokyčius.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: socialinis mobilumas, mokymosi pasiekimai, intervencijos strategijos, ugdomasis vadovavimas.

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