

EVERY DAY STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS MATTER—REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING THE SCHOOL: EVIDENCE FROM ADVANCED LEVEL STUDENTS

M. N. F. Shakira & N. Kengatharan*

kenga@univ.jfn.ac.lk

Department of Human Resource Management
University of Jaffna

ABSTRACT

The reasons for students' absenteeism may vary across nations depending on country and cultural differences. Studies on students' absenteeism that have been investigated in the West are reflective of such cultural contexts and therefore, the findings cannot be directly applied to another cultural context. There is a dearth of such studies in Asian and other similar developing countries. Consequently, the present study aims to discover factors determining students' absenteeism in Sri Lanka. Strongly based on philosophical assumptions, the present study mainly employed a survey research strategy and data were primarily garnered from a self-administrated questionnaire. A total of 129 Advanced level students representing Arts and commerce streams were conveniently selected from five schools, namely KG/MW Baduriya Central College, KG/MW Zahira National School, KG/MW Mayurapada National School, KG/MW Nooraniya Muslim Vidhyalaya and KG/MW Mederigama Central College located Mawanella Zone in Sabaragamuwa province. The study revealed six factors determining students' absenteeism, named student-preference, teacher and subject, physical and mental capabilities, non-collegiate, classroom facility and personal factors. Needless to say, the current study made several theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: students' absenteeism, student-preference, physical and mental capabilities, non-collegiate, classroom facility, teacher and subject

1. Introduction

There was a piece of shocking news that 59 million children of primary school were out of school; 52 per cent of them were girls (Zahrah, 2016). About one-third of the world's out-of-school children live in West and Central Africa; about one fifth is in

Eastern and Southern Africa. In South Asian region, Pakistan confronts the huge challenge in terms of both the proportion (28 per cent) and number (5.5 million) of children out-of-school. Nonetheless, the number of out-of-school children of primary school has scaled down globally from 99 million to 59 million between 2000 and 2013, progress has stalled since 2007. Moreover, students' attendance is less than 80 per cent in 25 countries concentrated mainly in the West and Central Africa and in South Asia. In many countries, children from the poorest 20 per cent of the population are less likely to attend school than those who are better off, with each successive quintile having a higher average attendance. The total number of out-of-school children and youth has declined by a little more than 1 million per year since 2012. Some 63 million, or 24% of the total, are children of primary school age (about 6 to 11 years old); 61 million, or 23% of the total, are adolescents of lower secondary school age (about 12 to 14 years old); and 139 million, or 53% of the total, are youth of upper secondary school age (about 15 to 17 years old). Students' irregularity has been noticed in many countries (see Wadesango et al., 2011) and studies have investigated to identify reasons for students' absenteeism across several countries, for instance, Belita, Mbindyo, and English (2013); Burke (2010); Dashputra, Kulkarni, Chari, and Date (2015); and Wadesango et al. (2011). To the best of our knowledge, no systematic studies have attempted to identify the reasons for students' absenteeism in Sri Lanka to date.

Previous studies that have been investigated in the West identified many reasons for students' absenteeism, nonetheless, the findings are not directly applicable to another cultural context. The students' absenteeism is country-specific macro-environmental factors such as poverty, educational policies, culture etc. Succinctly, the reasons for students' absenteeism in developed countries might be different in case of developing countries. Therefore, there is a compelling need for finding out the reasons for students' absenteeism in Sri Lanka and other similar developing countries. Consequently, the present study aims to identify factors determining students' absenteeism among advanced level students in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

Student absenteeism is a period of time when a student does not attend school (Teasley, 2004). Remarkably, continuous absenteeism among students has caused serious problems in many countries. Therefore, there is a need for identifying factors determining student-absenteeism prior to making any policy decisions and strategies. Earlier studies conducted in many countries have reported a range of factors

contributing to students' absenteeism such as: family health, low income, part-time working, poor school climate, sick, drug and alcohol use, lack of school fees, student delinquency and truancy, time out on games and sports, parents' education levels, harassment, bullying, snow, rain, lack of transport and community attitudes towards education (Dashputra et al., 2015; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Henry, 2007; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Roby, 2003; Teasley, 2004). Interestingly, Lin (2010) found that boring or uninteresting, unimpressive style of teaching kills the interest of the students' attendance at school. Similarly, Kube and Ratigan (1992) found that good weather, vacations and peer group pressure affects students' attendance. Schumulian and Coetzee's (2011) study reveals traffic and oversleeping are the causes of students' absenteeism. What was the overriding importance is that the reasons for students' absenteeism are different from country to country, family to family and even at individual student-level. For instance, cultural values such as early and forced marriage, attitudes of family and community towards girls' education, lack of female teachers could affect students' attendance (McElroy, 2013). Though, from a large pool of empirical studies, the reasons for students' absenteeism can be subsumed under three categories: Student-related factor, teacher-related factor and environmental-related factor.

Student-Related Factors

Many studies that have been undertaken in the sphere of students' regularity to the schools have reported a list of student - related factors determining Students' absenteeism such as sickness, family health, low income, peer group pressure, drug and alcohol use, tired/sleepy, poor language, peer pressure, student's socioeconomic status, parents' education levels, homesick, family-related problem/breakup, not interested subjects, groupism, extracurricular work, not allowing late arrivals of the student, and exam preparation (Dashputra et al., 2015; Henry, 2007; Kube & Ratigan, 1992; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Teasley, 2004). Notably, Rao, Valleswary, Nayak, and Rao's study (2016) disclosed that laziness, taking part in extracurricular activities (cultural activities, sports), food and water-related problems and preparing for internal assessment examinations are the causes of students' absenteeism and their findings are similar to that of BinSaeed, Al-Otaibi, Al-Ziyadi, Babsail, and Shaik's study (2009) that mostly attributed the students' absence to the preparation of the exam. Another study undertaken by Teasley (2004) found that family health, low income, poor school climate, drug and alcohol use, transportation problems, and community attitudes towards education cause the students' absenteeism. Intriguingly,

Williams (2001) suggests that the involvement of fun activities and socialising with their peers outside of school develop students' absenteeism. Civil strife and natural disasters (Dashputra et al., 2015), and illness and oversleeping (Schumulian & Coetzee, 2011) are also other causes of students' absenteeism. The seminal study of Paisey and Paisey (2004) reported that students' absenteeism is because of part-time work, illness and other personal reasons. Succinctly, as discussed above, student-related factors of absenteeism are subjected to county-culture specific nature.

Teacher-Related Factors

Based on the empirical evidence, a large number of factors determining students' absenteeism are related to teacher-specific. More interestingly, Dashputra et al.'s (2015) study claimed that teachers fail to motivate the students and consequently, those students felt studying at home is better rather attending the school. The factors related to teacher-specific include teacher attitude, teaching methodology, teacher approach to the subject, teaching quality, teaching contents, lengthy classes, lack of clarity about the topic among teachers, teacher attendance, boring or uninteresting and unimpressive style of teaching and poor feedback (Bati et al., 2013; Dashputra et al., 2015; Devadoss & Foltz, 1996; Fernandes, Maley, & Cruickshank, 2008; Gump, 2006; Lin, 2010; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Ruiz, Mintzer, & Leipzig, 2006). For instance, Rao et al. (2016) suggest that small classes, active learning methods and timely feedback alleviate students' absenteeism at school and the findings are in line with the earlier study of Burke (2015) who confirmed that the improving teaching styles and methods weaken students' irregularity in schools. The study of Rodriguez et al. (2003) revealed that the proximity of exams results in poor attendance of the students. Based on the collection of empirical studies, we have identified many factors are prone to Students' absenteeism.

Environment-Related Factors

The third form of the factors determining students' absenteeism is named "environmental-related factors". By and large, environmental-related factors include poor ventilation, overcrowding, sitting arrangement, insufferably hot, noise, spatial elements, classroom equipments (e.g. desks, chairs, rugs, chalkboards, tack boards, easels, counters and computer equipment), classroom acoustics and poor infrastructure (Dasputra et al., 2015; Fisher & Larkin, 2008; Haertel, Walberg, & Haertel, 1981; McElroy, 2003; Rao et al., 2016; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1996). For instance, Haertel et al. (1981) disclosed that the students' perception of the

classroom environment is an important factor promoting students' attendance and some others observed that the students are not attending the school owing to poorly ventilated classrooms and uncomfortable sitting arrangement (Dasputra et al., 2015). Remarkably, many research scholars support the notion that well-structured classrooms enhance students' academic and behavioural outcomes (McElroy, 2003; Savage, 1999; Stewart, Evans, & Kaczynski, 1997; Walker et al., 1996) and thus, the structure of the classroom is described as "silent curriculum" (Taylor & Vlastos, 2009).

In summary, all the factors determining students' absenteeism have been predominantly identified based on Western studies. Nonetheless, studies on students' absenteeism are scant in developing countries. Since students' absenteeism is country-specific nature, the present study attempts to answer an unanswered question left by earlier studies that why students are not regularly attending to the school in Sri Lanka.

3. Methods

Based on the ontological and epistemological assumptions, the present study adopts a survey strategy with a deductive approach in a cross-sectional time horizon. The first author has actively engaged with the data collection. A total of 129 Advanced level students representing Arts and commerce stream were conveniently selected from five schools, namely KG/MW Baduriya Central College (n=31), KG/MW Zahira National School (n=33), KG/MW Mayurapada National School (n=22), KG/MW Nooraniya Muslim Vidhyalaya (n=23) and KG/MW Mederigama Central College (n=20) located Mawanella Zone in Sabaragamuwa province. The majority of the students were males 51.2% (n=66) and the remaining 48.8% were females (n=63). 60 students represent the commerce stream and the remaining students from the Arts stream. Interestingly, the highest number of students (41.1%) walks to the school indicating the closeness of students' residence to the schools.

Instrument

From the empirical studies and interviews with students, the most appropriate 27 items' scale was employed to identify the factors contributing to Students' absenteeism (see Dashputra et al., 2015). Some sample items include 'I stay at home to study for term exams', 'I don't attend school when I have tuition classes on weekdays', 'I don't like to attend school when I'm not interested in the topic', 'my teacher is boring and I can't understand what he/ she is speaking', 'I don't like to attend school when the

subject is boring’, ‘I prefer to attend tuition classes rather than attending school’, ‘studying at home is better rather than attending school’, ‘teacher is targeting me in class so I do not attend school’, and ‘I don't like to attend school when I don't like the tone of teacher’. The items were measured with a five-point Likert scale where students were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on each statement provided.

4. Results

Since the items measuring student’s absenteeism were emerged from culturally different contexts, factor analysis was warranted to identify underlying factor structure of the latent constructs (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) is the test which tells about the appropriateness of factor analysis and sampling adequacy. The KMO value lies between zero and one, and the value closer to one indicates that the data set is appropriate for factor analysis. It is also assumed that all the variables are somewhat correlated to each other and this assumption can be checked by Bartlett’s sphericity test.

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.739
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	694.26
	df	210
	Sig.	.000

As can be seen in Table 1, the KMO value is 0.739 indicating that the factor analysis is relevant with this data set, Kaiser recommends values between 0.7 and 0.8 are good. In addition, the significance of Bartlett’s sphericity test is 000 which also confirms the suitability of the data set for the factor analysis. Now, one of the key concerns of factor analysis is to determine the number of factors to be extracted and thus principal component analysis (PCA) was employed to identify the number of factors for the causes of absenteeism.

Table 2 below summarizes the results of the extraction of the factors and the percentage of variance explained by each of these factors. The factors were extracted if eigenvalue is greater than one (Kaiser’s criterion), and as can be seen in the same Table, the first six factors were extracted explaining 58.45% variance. The variance in order of first to sixth factors are as follows: 19.91%, 13.44%, 7.92%, 6.62%, 5.34% and 5.21%.

Table 2: Factor extraction - Kaiser's criterion

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	4.182	19.914	19.914	4.182	19.914	19.914	2.673
2	2.823	13.444	33.359	2.823	13.444	33.359	2.803
3	1.664	7.924	41.282	1.664	7.924	41.282	2.493
4	1.390	6.620	47.903	1.390	6.620	47.903	1.500
5	1.120	5.335	53.237	1.120	5.335	53.237	2.482
6	1.094	5.208	58.446	1.094	5.208	58.446	1.948
7	.994	4.735	63.181				
.....				
21	.293	1.394	100.000				

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

Cattell's Scree test (1966) is another extraction technique, derived by plotting Eigenvalues (on Y- axis) against the number of factors (on X- axis).The graph is known as a scree plot. Cattell recommends that the cut off point for extracting factors should be at the point of inflexion. The point of inflexion is where the curve becomes horizontal and meets the vertical and horizontal lines. Only factors to the left of the point of inflexion can be retained. As shown in figure 1, the point of inflexion is at the seventh component confirming that only six components can be retained in line with the results of the application of Kaiser's criterion.

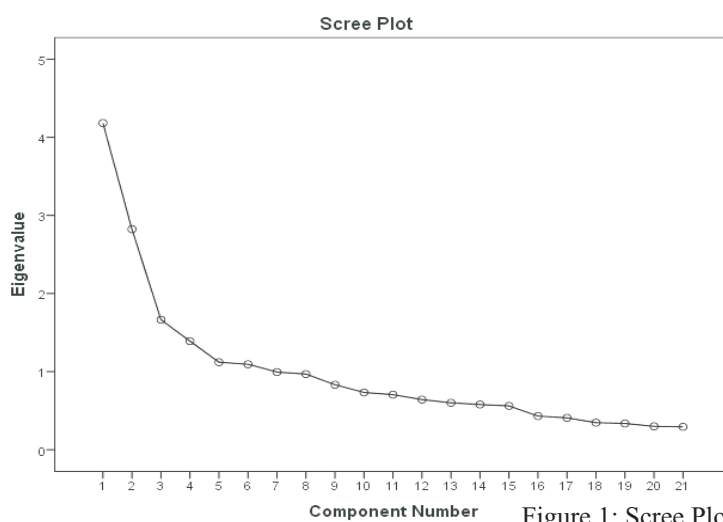


Figure 1: Scree Plot

The below set of tables present the pattern matrix derived from direct oblmin with the Kaiser Normalization rotation (KNR). The Table clearly shows the items loaded onto each factor.

Factor 1

Table 3 shows the first factors consist of three items, loadings range from .487 to .764. Since the items describe students' interest and choice, the factor is named as "Student-Preference".

Table 3: Factor 1

Variables (Items)	Loading	Factor name
I stay at home to study for term exams	.764	Student - Preference
I don't attend school when I have tuition classes on week days	.749	
I don't like to attend school when I'm not interested in the topic	.487	

Factor 2

Factor 2, as shown in Table 4 consists of six items and the loadings range from .424 to .708. Since the items describe teacher and subject-related matters, the factor is named as "teacher and subject".

Table 4: Factor 2

Variables (Items)	Loading	Factor name
My teacher is boring and I can't understand whathe/she is speaking	.708	Teacher and subject
I don't like to attend school when the subject is boring	.670	
I prefer to attend tuition classes rather than attending school	.602	
Studying at home is better rather than attending school	.594	
Teacher is targeting me in class so I do not attend school	.486	
I don't like to attend school when I don't like the tone of teacher	.424	

Factor 3

Since the factor 3 concerns with physical and mental related matters, the factor is named as “Physical and mental capabilities”. The factor 3 consists of 5 items and the loadings range from .406 to .704.

Table 5: Factor 3

Variables (Items)	Loading	Factor name
I can't concentrate in class because of feeling sleepy or tired	.704	
I can't wake up early due to late night sleep	.626	
I stay at home when I have family problems or breakup	.593	Physical and mental capabilities
I don't attend school when my friends do not	.468	
I don't like to attend school because of the constant noise	.406	

Factor 4

The factor 4 consists of only one item with the loading of .779 and the factor is related to the extracurricular activities of students, it is named as “Non-collegiate”.

Table 6: Factor 4

Variables (Items)	Loading	Factor name
I'm unable to attend school when I have to participate in extracurricular activities	.779	Non-collegiate

Factor 5

As can be seen in Table 7, factor 5 has 4 items describing classroom facilities such as ventilation, sitting arrangement and illumination. The item loadings are ranging from .490 to .594. Based on the nature of the items, the factor 5 is named as “classroom facility”.

Table 7: Factor 5

Variables (Items)	Loading	Factor name
I don't like to attend school because of the uncomfortable sitting arrangement in the classroom	.594	Classroom facility
I don't attend school because of the poor ventilation in the classroom	.585	
I can't see blackboard properly because of the poor illumination. So I don't like to attend school	.556	
I don't like to attend school due to overcrowding in the class	.490	

Factor 6

As can be seen in Table 8, factor 6 consists of 2 items describing personal reasons for not attending the school. The items' loadings range from .642 to .769. The factor 6 is named as "Personal".

Table 8: Factor 6

Variables (Items)	Loading	Factor name
I don't like to attend school because of the stream I select	.769	Personal
Most probably I don't attend school when I'm sick	.642	

In summary, our analysis produces a six-factor solution for the students' absenteeism. Moreover, an additional analysis of "independent sample t-test" was performed to see gender makes a difference in the reasons for the students' absenteeism. Table 9 shows the mean values for the six factors in terms of male and female.

Table 9: Group Statistics of absenteeism factors

	Gender	Group Statistics			
		<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. Error Mean</i>
Student preferences (SP)	Male	66	3.823	.571	.070
	Female	63	4.143	.647	.082
Teacher and subject (TS)	Male	66	3.859	.545	.067
	Female	63	4.071	.531	.067
Physical and mental capabilities (PM)	Male	66	3.827	.580	.071
	Female	63	3.987	.447	.056
Non-collegiate (NC)	Male	66	4.030	.841	.103
	Female	63	4.175	.853	.107
Classroom facility (CF)	Male	66	3.712	.684	.084
	Female	63	3.726	.546	.069
Personal (P)	Male	66	3.871	.658	.081
	Female	63	4.040	.709	.089

Table 9: Group Statistics of a As can be seen in Table 9, surprisingly the mean values are greater for females on all six factors than males. Whether the mean differences between male and females are significant or not are presented in Table 10. absenteeism factors.

Table 10: Independent Sample t- Test

		Independent Samples Test						
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variance:		t-test for Equality of Means				
		<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
SP	Equal variance assumed	.619	.433	-2.980	127	.003	-.320	.107
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.971	123.38	.004	-.320	.108
TS	Equal variance assumed	1.680	.197	-2.246	127	.026	-.213	.095
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.247	126.94	.026	-.213	.095
PM	Equal variance assumed	6.831	.010	-1.750	127	.082	-.160	.091
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.761	121.71	.081	-.160	.091

NC	Equal assumed	varian	.136	.712	-.968	127	.335	-.144	.149
	Equal assumed	variances			-.967	126.53	.335	-.144	.149
CF	Equal assumed	varian	3.925	.050	-.129	127	.898	-.014	.109
	Equal assumed	variances			-.129	123.18	.897	-.014	.109
P	Equal assumed	varian	.033	.856	-1.400	127	.164	-.168	.120
	Equal assumed	variances n			-1.397	125.17	.165	-.168	.121

As can be shown in Table 10, the factor “student-preference” is different in terms of gender. It implies that males are slightly lower the reasoning “student-preference” ($M=3.82, SD=0.57$) than females ($M=4.14, SD=0.65$) and the difference is statically significant $t(127) = -2.98, p < 0.05$. Similarly, factor 2 “teacher and subject” is also different between males and females. The females largely reasoned “teacher and subject” as a cause of their absence ($M=4.07, SD=0.53$) than males ($M=3.86, SD=0.54$) and the difference is significant $t(127) = -2.25, p < 0.05$. All other factors are not different in term of gender: physical and mental capabilities- $t(121.7) = -1.761, p > 0.05$; non-collegiate- $t(127) = -0.968, p > 0.05$; classroom facility- $t(123.18) = -0.129, p > 0.05$; and personal $t(127) = -1.40, p > 0.05$.

5. Discussion

The present study aims to identify the reasons for students’ absenteeism. Based on the data that were garnered from 129 Advanced level students, the results revealed a six-factor that causes students’ absenteeism at school. The first factor is student-preference. The factor is predominantly focusing on students’ choice of not attending the school. For instance, students prefer not to go to school for preparing their term exams. The second factor is the teacher and the subject. The factor clearly shows that students are not attending the school because of teacher and subject related matters. For example, students will not attend school if teachers and subjects are boring. Another interesting example is that the student is not attending the school because the teacher is targeting him/her. The third reason for the Students’ absenteeism is physical and mental capabilities. For instance, following two occasions students are not attending the school: ‘I can’t concentrate in class because of feeling sleepy or tired’ and ‘I can’t wake up early due to late night sleep’. Non-Collegiate is the fourth reason for not attending the school. The factor implies that students fail to attend the school owing to their greater involvement in extracurricular activities such as sports. The

fifth factor, called classroom facility, explains that students are not attending the school because of insufficient facilities at school. Some examples are ‘students don’t like to attend school because of the uncomfortable sitting arrangement overcrowding, poor ventilation and poor illumination in the classroom. The last reason for the students’ absenteeism is a personal factor. The factor includes students’ sickness and their mismatch in the subject selection. The mean scores of the six factors clearly show students’ agreeableness on each factor: Non-collegiate (M=4.10), student-preference (M=3.97), teacher and subject (M=3.96), personal (M=3.95), physical and mental capabilities (M=3.90), and classroom facility (M=3.71). In overall, the present study found six reasons for the students’ absenteeism and the findings are in line with some previous seminal studies (BinSaeed et al., 2009; Dashputra et al., 2015; Haertel et al., 1981; Rao et al., 2016). The present study made many theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The current study made a theoretical contribution by identifying the six novel factors contributing to students’ absenteeism. The field of education has suffered from a dearth of the studies in the area of students’ absenteeism and thus the present has expanded earlier studies (see Bin Saeed et al., 2009; Dashputra et al., 2015; Rao et al., 2016). As we have discussed earlier, the students’ absenteeism is country-culture specific nature, the novel contribution that the study made by examining the reasons for the students’ absenteeism in a neglected country, Sri Lanka. Therefore, country-specific inputs advance the extant literature in the field of education. Besides, theoretical contributions, the study has many practical implications. The principals, zonal directors, teachers and the government should pay attention to reduce the students’ absenteeism. Most importantly, the factors contributing to students’ absenteeism have been related to students’ academic performance. For instance, the lack of attendance is a major reason for students’ poor performance (Park & Kerr, 1990), physical environment of the classroom and classroom facilities are linked to lower performance, and low ventilation rates in classrooms significantly reduces the pupils’ attention and vigilance, and negatively affect memory and concentration (Taylor & Vlastos, 2009). Therefore, school administration should pay much care in designing and implementing strategies for alleviating the students’ poor attendance. For example, punishment for absenteeism further aggravates the situation and sometimes students stay away from school altogether to avoid the sanctions associated with late arrival and absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). There is a possibility that the

teacher could specifically increase student attendance by utilizing active learning methods and providing timely feedback to students on their course performance. We have identified several possible reasons for this absence. These reasons vary from the more 'valid' reasons, such as illness to less 'valid' reasons, such as sleeping. Therefore, the best mechanism for controlling students' absenteeism is timely required to uplift the standard of education.

Small sample size and common method variance are the major limitations of the present study. Therefore, future studies should focus on a large pool of participants with a longitudinal time horizon. Moreover, scholars should also replicate the studies in similar Asian countries across varying nature of schools. The present study warrants further in-depth qualitative studies in the area of students' absenteeism. On balance, the present study is vital from the theoretical and practical perspectives.

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