

GEOGRAPHIES OF CHILDREN: QUO VADIS HEDUM?

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ABSTRACT

Studies of childhood geography reflect the significance of place and space of childhood. It is inseparable from the geography of the child, the main actor of childhood. The geographies of childhood are primarily focused on the way adult society shapes childhood, whereas the children's geography is more concerned with their experiences. In order to analyse and identify the framework and tendencies of contemporary geographies of children, the author formulates the following questions: 1) What research methods have been applied to research the geographies of children? 2) Which factors define the 'map' of geographies of contemporary children in the context of education?

To identify the spatial and time frame of geographies of contemporary children and to answer the stated questions, the following criteria were set for the scoping review: the Web of Science database was chosen and open access articles in English with the period 2019–2023 were selected using the keywords “geographies of children” in the category “Education; Educational Research”. A selection of 47 articles was made of which 19 were analysed as relevant to the focus of this scoping review.

Public and private narratives of geographies of contemporary children are intertwined, driving geographies of children from the micro to the macro level. The promoters of geographies of children in educational contexts identified in the review are largely socio-geographical, with human rights as an important feature of geographies of children, since a significant amount of research focuses on the geographies of children from marginalised groups.

Keywords: *children, childhood, geographies of children, geographies of childhood, education.*

Introduction

UNICEF estimates, based on the 2022 Revision of World Population Prospect, that the world is currently inhabited by approximately two billion three hundred and ninety-seven million four hundred and thirty-five thousand and five hundred and two people under the age of eighteen (United Nations, 2022). What are the paths of these children and how do they relate to education? According to UNESCO, by 2022, 244 million children and young people are unable to attend school and receive an age-appropriate education. The environment is more than just a background for the activities (Djohari et al., 2018), from an educational point of view, the geography “map” of

contemporary children is as diverse as the environments which they inhabit whether or not it is possible to attend educational institutions.

Before mapping the contemporary geography of children and childhood, it is important to define the origins – geography evokes certain associations. The first use of the word “geography”, or “writing about the world” as the ancient Greeks termed it, was by Eratosthenes of Cyrene. The key connection between Antiquity and the Renaissance, which marked a significant leap in the discoveries of the intellectual and spatial world, was when in 1533 Erasmus of Rotterdam edited Claudius Ptolemy’s “Geographia” (or “*Geographike Hyphegesis*”), written around 160 AD (Ormeling, 2015). Although geography is a discipline with a long heritage, it has the potential to evolve continuously with sub-disciplines, including cartography and GIScience, as well as human, material and environmental and social geography. Notwithstanding the constant discussion on the issue of whether geography should generate idiographic or nomothetic literacies, geography has, over the past decades, undergone a dynamic development of specialisation within its subfields (Sui & Turner, 2022). The difficulty in defining human geography is complicated – human geography is seen as a sub-discipline of geography because of the relatively recent formalisation of the human geography discipline (Gibson, 2009). The division between geography and human geography continued for most of the 20th century (Shaw et al., 2014). Albeit children and youth were often absent from the wider human geography epistemology, the understanding of the geographies of childhood and youth that has been acquired challenges, supplements or broadens the fundamental changes that other forms of socio-cultural diversity have generated in human geography (Horton et al. 2008).

The social perspective on childhood, though it had earlier foundations, thrived in the geography of children, young people and families from the early 1990s (Holloway, 2014). To pick a particular year or even day and declare that “the world really changed then” is quite satisfying and sometimes very understandable (Mitchell, 2018), and indeed the most comprehensive human rights treaty in history – the Convention on the Rights of the Child – marked a significant turning point for children around the world. The issue is whether the rights are a guarantee? According to the United Nations, one in six children experience extreme poverty on a daily basis (United Nations, n. d.); these data point to grave violations of children’s rights. The respect (and violation) of children’s rights affects the children’s geography from the micro to the macro level.

Theoretical background of childhood and children’s geography

The late 1960s mark perhaps the greatest geographical achievement – the Apollo 11 crew landed on the Moon, and for the first time in the history of human geography, man set foot on Earth’s natural satellite, stimulating not only the imagination, but also the demand for education. The educational context has conventionally been at the centre of histories of children and youth (Sköld & Vehkalahti, 2016). The history of education and childhood studies are research fields that have developed alongside each other.

The children's geography and the geography of childhood have indirectly accompanied this process of development, but as a field of research are relatively recent.

Children's geography emerged in the 1970s in the United States of America. A decade later neo-Marxists, feminists and critical theorists addressed children's geography through a relatively political prism, initiating important processes and promoting the right of children and young people to freedom of action (Aitken, 2018). Gill Valentine (2003) highlights research papers that pioneered the development of children's geographies – William Bunge's and Robert Bordessa a study (1975) on how children experience spatial oppression and James Morris Blaut and David Stea's research (1971) on children's early mapping skills. These papers launched research on children's life experiences, in particular their access to and use of spatial resources. Various practices of humans generate and exploit diverse spatial concepts (Harvey, 2009). Research on the historical-geographical geography of the concepts of time and space reveals that the construction of these concepts is grounded in the way they are produced and in the social relations that characterise them (Harvey, 1990), turning space into place. Unequal geographical patterns of everyday life and children's exposure to issues based on these patterns led to an increase in social projects for environmental activism (Gregory, 2011).

The geography of childhood often focuses on the ways in which adult society constructs childhood, whereas the children's geography is centred on the daily practices of children. Studies of childhood geography explore the dynamics of power among adults and youth (Disney, 2018) – a process that takes place throughout the history of childhood.

For more than 20 years, the geography of childhood has become a dynamic cross-disciplinary study of the everyday nature of children's lives. Childhood is a diverse and changing phenomenon, shaped by many factors (Gregory, 2011). Furthermore, children shape themselves by inhabiting and creating places.

The concept of children's geography includes the research of children and youth habitats, which are defined through experiences, ethical values, political, religious factors and cultural influences (Aitken, 2018), which in fact presents a particular challenge for geographers of childhood and children – researching, analysing and inferring makes a vast contrast between a researcher and a child/youth, for whom a certain experience might be unique. In essence, Aitken & Herman (1997) characterise it as a representational crisis.

Methodology

The research for this article is based on a scoping review. Initially, 47 articles were selected for abstract and keyword analysis. 19 articles were found to be relevant to answering the research questions.

Two following research questions were initially formulated:

- 1) What research methods have been used in studies of children's geographies?
- 2) What factors determine the 'map' of contemporary children's geography in educational contexts?

A keyword search was carried out in the Web of Science database. The selection criteria were the thematic framework of education and educational research, English language and open access. The time frame for the selection of articles was 2019–2023. The time frame chosen for the selection of the articles clarifies the current relevance of children’s geography and the situation in the field of research, revealing the impact of current factors on the issue under study. Based on the research question of this paper, the keywords “children’s geographies” were applied. The initial selection was made by reviewing the titles and abstracts of the selected scientific articles. The articles selected were focused on children’s geography rather than childhood geography. After reviewing abstracts of 47 articles, 34 papers were selected and analysed. 15 articles were excluded as not being relevant to the stated objective of the scoping review.

Inclusion criteria:

- Research on children’s geography is linked to access to education;
- Research on children’s geography is related to the quality of education;
- Grounded methodology.

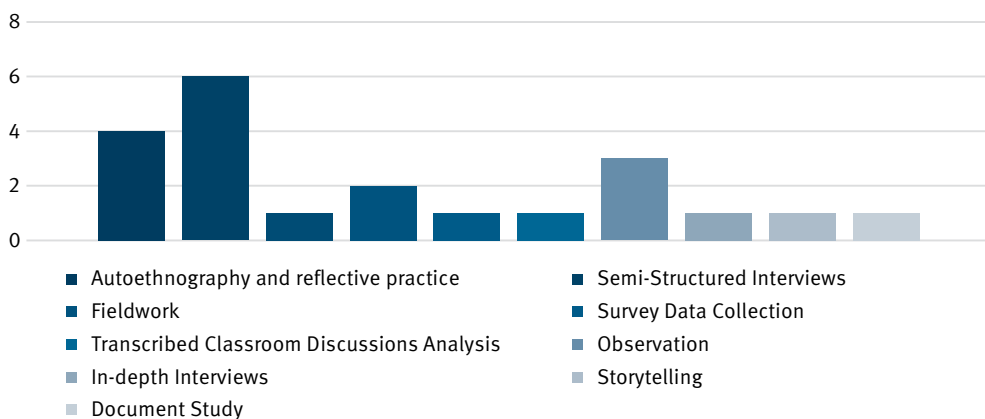
Exclusion criteria:

- The generalised articles refer to the geography of childhood;
- Case studies that are not appropriate to the general research;
- The article does not include a theoretical framework.

Findings

After a qualitative analysis of 34 papers with the keywords “children’s geography” and on the basis of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 19 papers were identified as relevant. The selected articles were searched for two defining aspects: 1) The methodology of research on children’s geography; 2) Factors affecting education, the quality of education or access to education in the context of children’s geography and vice versa. The studies reported in the articles selected were conducted worldwide and are relevant to the social sciences. Qualitative research design dominates the 16 articles reviewed. One of the selected articles represents a quantitative design research and one – mixed research design.

The tendency to attribute children’s geography research to the application of qualitative research design leads to concerns about the trustworthiness of the research. Credibility is a measure of the extent to which qualitative research is a true reflection of the phenomenon or process being studied (Mārtinsone et al., 2016). Although there are concerns about the reliability of the findings, the studies analysed come close to reflecting many of the realities faced by researchers or authors in the context of children’s geography. The use of qualitative research designs highlights the importance of: 1) The researcher’s understanding of the geography of children (including political, socio-economic, cultural spheres of influence); 2) The risk of ethical misconduct in research; 3) Children and/or child carers as comparably involved research participants.



Graph 1 Overview. Research methods

The methods most commonly used in the development of the selected articles are autoethnography and reflective practice, semi-structured interviews and observation. In-depth interviews, storytelling, documentary research, analysis of transcripts of classroom conversations, questionnaire data collection and statistical analysis are identified in smaller numbers.

Autoethnography and reflective practice – four, semi-structured interviews – six, observation – three, field research – two, other methods – one each (see Graph 1). The methods used in the selected studies mainly reflect the relatively intimate and exploratory nature of the research. The three most commonly used methods in the articles selected for this scoping review were also considered.

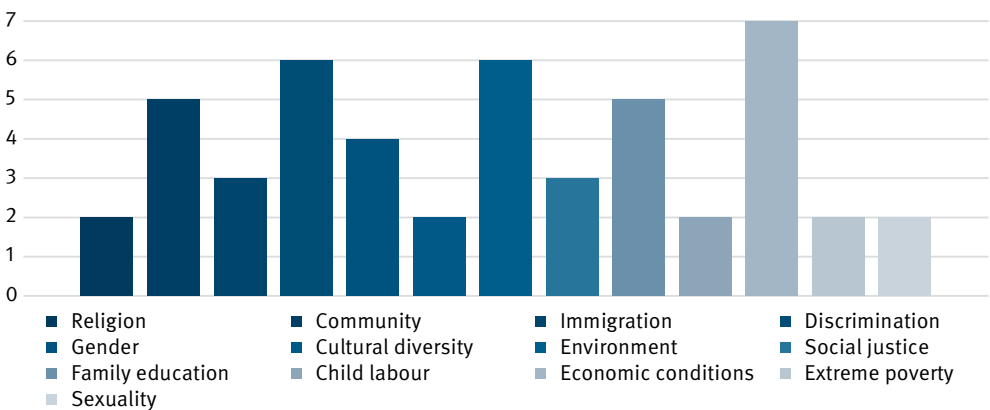
Autoethnography portrays the personal practices of the researcher analysing their personal experiences, it is a people-centric approach. Any paper that refers to autoethnography must contain one’s private experience and, by means of a considered discussion, show why this experience is meaningful and historically and/or culturally relevant (Sparkes, 2020). From this perspective, personal interests often overshadow the main objective of the research. However, this is not necessarily in conflict with the aim of scientific research per se, and the use of autoethnography in children’s geography research strengthens the ethical aspects of the research as it allows biases to be seen through personal narratives. Autobiographical practices, often complementary, whose methodology includes autoethnography, are used in children’s geography research (see Cahill, 2007; Woodyer, 2008). In children’s geography research, the use of autoethnography promotes the presence and participation of participants and the development of shared knowledge between participants and the researcher, establishing a relationship of trust.

Semi-structured interviews form an insight into the thoughts and feelings of the research participants. The interview is probably the most used methodological and research instrument in the social sciences; it is the core of qualitative research strategies (Edwards & Holland, 2020). The importance of taking into consideration the social context when using interviews as part of the information gathering practices in which

they are carried out should be stressed (Herod, 1993). Personal interviews are considered a benchmark because they provide a large amount of information (Edwards & Holland 2020), which can provide abundant dataset for children’s geography research and help map the geography of the modern child in the child’s own words, also interviews can be adaptive and flexible to reflect studies on sensitive topics. Interview as participatory research might involve the independent and autonomous expression of views by research participants, which is not always justified as children do not always need adult support to construct ideas and perspectives (Rautio, 2013). An ethical approach to research is essential in children’s geography, so the researcher has the opportunity to control the course of the interview by stimulating it or allowing it to be guided by the research participants.

Observations. In a social science context, research on the meaning of place focuses on how routines, experiences, identities and practices are shaped in the context of place, rather than independently of it (Djohari et al. 2018). It is a method of research in defined settings observing the research participants and phenomena in their natural environment, which is an important prerequisite for the study of children’s geography, as this area of research focuses on children’s construction and perception of place and space. Observation as a research method has many advantages for children’s geography research. However, one of the most relevant issues in the context of research ethics is power relations, not only during data collection but also in the interpretation of findings (Morrow, 2008) analysed from an adult perspective.

It should be noted that online and offline dimensions blend in the construction of the identity of the contemporary person – *Homo digitalis* (Rubene, 2024). Videos have rapidly grown in mainstream contemporary culture, from TV to on-line video streaming and private live feeds on social networks (Lau & Bratby, 2023) and it seems quite common that part of the qualitative data extraction methods are carried out on-line, that is *Homo Digitalis* familiar, natural environment where, in addition to the aspects that are specific to the digital realm, the same impact on children’s geographies mapping prevails as in the physical world.



Graph 2 Overview. Factors that define the ‘map’ of geographies of contemporary children in the context of education

Relatively high scores for discrimination, community and environmental influences, economic conditions, and family educational attainment – for example, whether one or both parents have any qualifications or education (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019). It is useful to analyse these factors in conjunction. Disruptive circumstances are socio-economic disadvantages, negative experiences in early childhood or other barriers that usually affect educational achievement (Dvorakova, 2024). An important factor indirectly influencing children's geography is attachment, which plays an important role and affects social competences. Positive attachment to an adult can ease circumstances (Sebre & Miltuze, 2022) and promote changes of habitual mobility “stopovers”, however, children's geographical routes do not always intersect with the person of attachment.

Discussion

Social and personal relations and ties in both space and time are formed around material things (Kestere & Strazdins, 2023) and it is often material things that determine life practices. Michel Foucault was among the first to question why history is dialectical and bold with multiple meanings, while space is viewed as constant (Whittingham, 2019) – time as linear ever-changing movement versus static background of space. Indeed, social science traditions favoured time and marginalised space (Gregory et al., 2011).

Place and space are different, but constructively connected (Whittingham, 2019). In the articles selected for this scoping review, these concepts are often complementary or substitutable. Place is a human-made construction. From a perspective of human geography, place location is often given a wider meaning and is defined as a human-made or pre-existing spatial transformation (Gregory et al., 2011). Place is constructed with cultural or subjective meanings and overlays, and is therefore in a continuous production state. The interactions between people, place and space are important not only for scholars working in the field of geography, but also for educational institutions (Hammond, 2023). Space, place and time are the dimensions of children's geography which are complemented by material objects.

Neither the world, nor perceptions, nor man-made images or other representations of the world are the same as geography (Lowenthal, 1961), which is constructed from an early age. It has to be noted that geographical imaginaries are fundamentally involved in the physical and sensuous creation of the physical world. Geographical imaginaries are more than representations of the world (Gregory et al., 2011). It is worth considering this question from two points of view: first to dwell on the idea expressed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1961) that the human hand cannot trace the illusion of place constructed and imagined by the eye and mind, and second on the personal, subjective nature of geographical imaginaries.

Innovations, both tactile and non-physical, transfer one from physical mobility to imaginary. Likewise as stained glass in a cathedral, picture books have the same spatial and educational abilities. As a provocative yet simple educational tool – picture books – provide a shared imaginative space for exploring ideas and experiences (Oberman, 2023)

that leads back into imaginary fields of geography. Contemporary education systems are undergoing changes that make education adaptable, and inclusive (Rozhi et al., 2023) – changes that are everlasting. Nearly any subject, including those that in the comparatively recent past would have been taught on-site, can be taught via online learning, complementing theoretical knowledge with tools for parallel or virtual reality. Imagination, combined with relatively realistic representations, such as in computer games, can not only expand children's (and adults') spatial horizons, but also support the learning of particular content (Tüzün et al., 2019). The digital environment is an area of significant importance for children's geography, as any nonphysical place involved in the processes of education. In summary, children's geography does not have to be obvious, but can be derivative, individually constructed and not revealed to others.

The early age illustrations and their non-verbal nature provide opportunities for children to interpret and create meaning (Oberman, 2023). These may be interpretations that are not notable to adults. Children's drawing studies are a tool for discovering features which are familiar to children and how they connect and navigate in their environment. Besides being a platform for children's self-expression, drawings also helps to articulate the internal models that children acquire about their living environment as they evolve and progress in their cognitive development (Sanchis et al., 2022). From a social science perspective, aspects of children's use of space can influence adults' understanding of their use of space (Berkhuizen, 2020). The researcher / adult should take into account not only the children's movement patterns, but also the semiotic construction and interpretative meaning, the choice and use of means of expression, and creative solutions.

Play and games (both physical and digital) inherently provide a lot of information about children's geography through creative world modelling and situation construction in a creative way. Observation and analysis of children's play often reveals unexpected areas, as such observation can take place without an academic or research purpose and often borders on ethics and child protection (Henderson, 2018). Play and creative self-expression is a highly valuable area of research in children's geography, particularly with relatively young research participants. Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that appropriate and equal leisure opportunities should be respected and promoted (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) which means that every child should have the freedom to enjoy playtime.

Children's rights are an important aspect that threads through the papers of this scoping review. Certain experiences are used to understand, recognise and explain the social world (Pinandita et al., 2020), so in some societies child labour and/or decision to work from an early age due to extreme poverty is normalised in order to pay school fees or support the family. The labour market for children varies depending on socio-economic conditions. Children often work outside school hours if their workplace is not located far from home (Ango et al., 2022). Child labour is just one of the inequalities that characterise the geography of children. Unequal access to the digital environment as another aspect affecting everyone's right to education (Rivera-Vargas et al., 2023). Accessibility to education can also be presented in the language used for education and at home

(Gunnlaugsson et al., 2021). Language barriers might lead to exclusion and isolation. Based on the diversity of transnational practices, the geography of children and young people is not only influenced by the resources available to them. Receptive literacy practices involve the literacy texts that people consume and access (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019). Parental education, comprehension and language proficiency play a significant part holding a child accountable for the practices and geography of their parents. Critical social research and the geography of children and youth have contributed to a transition from focusing on children in their domestic context (Punch, 2006), however it would be unfair to discuss the geography of children as a whole in isolation from that.

Until the early 19th century, in Western culture, human biography was seen as a continuous sequence of development, and childhood was considered the first stage prior to the real life (Jeffrey, 2009). The sense of belonging to a place or a particular social group is formed in childhood. Understanding one's sense of belonging is an essential part of identity formation and self-confidence. A sense of security with certain people and places has been recognised as a basic necessity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A diffuse explanation of belonging is common at different ages, and one of the studies reviewed indicates that younger participants tended to reflect on home in terms of significant social relations such as with their families, while the elder participants explored the idea of home in emotional aspects of attachment, focusing on the various associated emotional experiences (Maine et al., 2021). Children who move or are born to immigrant parents often face stereotypical attitudes not only towards themselves but also stereotypical judgements about different practices and places (Hammond, 2023), and while children's contemporary international perceptions are considerable, many misconceptions and stereotypes exist. Children's knowledge of international issues is incomplete and sometimes inaccurate (Compton-Lilly et al., 2019). On one side, this is due to the different characteristics of the ageing process, on the other to confusion about the overly broad information landscape.

Another important factor is the dilemma of belonging from an adult perspective. The aspects shown in Graph 2 have an impact on the household, i.e. adults. Socio-economic capabilities, both within and across generations, as well as over time and place, render the relationship between children and their families mutually dependent, as a consequence of limited schooling (Punch, 2015). Education is the key to reducing inequalities in society, as it is linked to income, employment and general wellbeing, but the flip side of the coin is that education also reinforces inequalities, as educational qualification level tends to be maintained from generation to generation (OECD, 2017) furthermore, UNICEF's Education Strategy 2019–2030 has as one of its three main objectives to eliminate unequal access to education for children and adolescents (UNICEF, 2019) which shows that equal access to education is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed.

Child care and access to educational facilities are assets for supporting families with children, as it both keeps parents in employment and offers an appropriate context for positive child development. Childcare friendly neighbourhoods are a welcome signal for new families and enterprises considering where to relocate (Sipple et al., 2020). Having

a convenient, affordable and efficient pre-school education in the neighbourhood, which also provides day care, reduces economic risks not only for the individual, but also for society. OECD member states are focusing more on parent training and education, devoting more resources to it, ensuring the education of children (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019).

Another issue is the religious considerations underlying the geography of children. Gender as a factor determining access to education for religious reasons is a fierce area of children's geography. According to UNESCO, there are countries (Iran, Afghanistan and Malawi) where girls are not educated about puberty (UNESCO, 2019), which is an important factor affecting girls' mobility and geography. Gender, sexuality and family norms, limiting people's agency, control individuals and collectives (Reimers, 2024). Religious prejudice creates unnecessary stereotypes in educational contexts. Models of religion and identity navigate multiple and at times contradictory social spaces in the construction and representation of their identities (Hammond, 2023), reinforcing stereotypical images not only of children, but also of their behaviour and pathways.

Stereotypical perceptions can be related to another issue that emerges in the articles analysed: how to talk about sexuality in the context of geography with children. How to teach the geography of children's sexuality (Hall, 2020) if there are so many bias and risk of marginalisation. A sensitive approach to the presentation of specific and potentially controversial visual content to children in the classroom, including prior screening of the appropriateness of such content and consideration of the necessary preview of content, with warnings about controversial content being given priority (Zebracki & Hall, 2020). A curriculum that is not needlessly graphically challenging encourages not only learning, but also thinking, breaking down prejudices and promoting inclusion.

The above considerations underline the use of mostly qualitative research design in "mapping" children's geography – these are sensitive or rather personal topics. Although often taking place in a public context, the mobility and the geography of the individual are private. The concept of mobility is embodied in the principle of motion. From a historic viewpoint, daily mobility are essentially about the separation between a space of residence and other locations (school, workplace etc.). In addition to socio-economic changes, mobility is also driven and challenged by innovation (Šūmane, 2010). Access to education and educational innovations differs between and within countries, for example due to differences in wealth, location, gender, nationality, language, religion, ethnicity and mobility (UNESCO, 2020). The articles analysed in this scoping review cover a broad array of national contexts, but there is a common feature that ties these studies with each other: their participants are at risk of being marginalised if they are not already.

Conclusion

Children's geography is associated with certain stereotypes and preconceptions about what it studies. It is a broad research field, where qualitative research methods currently dominate, but quantitative approaches are also inevitably used, both in terms of primary statistics and data synthesis.

Childhood geography is a field of social sciences that studies the social, cultural and environmental contexts that shape children's experiences and development. Children's geography is a branch of childhood geography that addresses children's life experiences, in particular how children perceive and interact with their environment. Childhood geography and children geography are research fields based on two pillars: human geography and childhood studies, which allow the field to be studied from different perspectives that are affected by social, economic, ethical, religious, political aspects. The geography of childhood explores how the geography of children is influenced by adults in the context of these issues, while the geography of children explores how place is constructed and navigated by children. Contemporary researchers of children geography emphasise social issues and challenges, with a particular focus on the geography of children from marginalised groups.

Equitable access to quality education for all young people should be ensured to support social inclusion and improve socio-economic outcomes. This will not only be an improvement for today's children, but also a cornerstone for the quality of life of future generations.

Authors note

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