RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Wim Lambrechts / James Hindson (editors)
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Evaluating Education for Sustainable Development Programmes consistently with Education for Sustainable Development values: A challenge for evaluators

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Abstract
Evaluation has been a major challenge for environmental education and for education for sustainable development (ESD). While national and international funding favours a kind of evaluation that could be defined as ‘positivistic’ concerned more with quantity than quality, ESD research asks for a paradigm and methodologies that are more consistent with its values. Complexity, systemic thinking, participation and collaboration are some of the many key constructs that accompany educational research on ESD and which need to be taken into consideration in strategies for evaluation.

From the beginning of its life, the ENSI network explored different research lines for an evaluation consistent with the research and innovation asked for by ESD: Drawing on European projects SEED, SUPPORT and CoDeS, this chapter discusses a research arena for experimenting with evaluation that takes into account not just products but also processes, not only facts and concrete outcomes but also the process of community building, together with the quality of the ‘internal learning’ of the networks themselves considered as ‘learning organisations’.

Keywords
Frontstage and Backstage, Learning Organisation, Project Evaluation, Quality Enhancement

‘It has often been said that scientific explanation lies in explaining what is complex and visible by referring to what is simple and invisible. But in this way, it would completely dissolve all that is complex and visible, while it is also the complex and visible with which we must deal’ (Morin, 1985).
THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATION

Evaluation has been a major challenge for environmental education (EE) and for education for sustainable development (ESD) from the beginning: both EE and ESD deal explicitly with values and cannot be approached with ‘positivistic’ approaches dealing only with outputs and outcomes and asking for ‘value-free’ and objective reports. The application of a positivistic paradigm to EE and to its evaluation has been strongly criticised in the past (e.g. Robottom and Hart, 1993; Flogaitis and Liriakou, 2000; Sterling, 2001; Mogensen and Mayer, 2005). Complexity, systemic thinking, participation and collaboration, situated knowledge, attention to ‘emergence’ and to ‘wicked problems’, future visioning, openness to change, these are some of the many key constructs that accompany educational research on ESD and ask for a different evaluation paradigm, less concerned with quantity, more interested in quality enhancement and innovative development, open to uncertainty and unexpected events.

Environment and School Initiatives (ENSI) was established in 1986 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as a Centre for Educational Research and Innovation project that places emphasis on school development in the field of ESD (OECD, 1991). The ENSI project became an international network influencing policy makers and researchers, proposing an action research approach to school-based national networks (OECD, 1995), combining international processes of quality development and improvement in order to propose guidelines and quality criteria (Breiting et al. 1995).

From the beginning, ENSI project explored different lines of research for forms of evaluation that were consistent with research and innovation in EE (OECD, 1994). In its second phase (1991-1995), ENSI incorporated evaluation within its action research methodology, complementing the self-evaluation country report with a series of national policy reviews and with an analysis of the national reports carried on by the ENSI Scientific Committee (OECD, 1995). The model of analysis and evaluation was strongly influenced by the methodology of the Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, UK (CARE) and aimed to respond to political demands for accountability and at the same time to be consistent with the values and the reflective stance of the ENSI project.

However, national and international funding agencies still ask for the kind of evaluation that could be defined as ‘positivistic’, concerned more with quantity than quality, which tries to reduce to ‘objective’ and ‘measurable’ items the data collected
and the results obtained. In this situation, the evaluation of a programme may conflict with the needs for formative development and quality enhancement that are consistent with the main aims of ESD.

ENSI’s vision and methodologies inspired the paradigm used for evaluating three projects in the European Union Comenius/Life-long Learning programmes: SEED (Tilbury et al. 2005), SUPPORT (Mayer, 2010) and CoDeS (Dillon, 2014). The paradigm that was explicitly accepted for the evaluation framework was ‘socio-critical’ (Robotom and Hart, 1993) in contrast not only with the positivistic paradigm but also with the relativistic/interpretative one inspired by post-modern criticism (Flogaitis and Liarakou, 2000). In ENSI’s vision, evaluation is a ‘transformative’ process, accompanying the ESD idea of ‘transformative learning’ and in order to bring about change it deals with processes and not only with results. In the socio-critical paradigm, evaluation is no longer reduced to an assessment process with ‘definite’ outcomes, but proposes instead a reflexive process which proceeds through negotiating values, searching for quality, taking care of unexpected issues and constructing new meaning. Such an evaluation tries to take account not only of facts but also of the values of the participants, their visions of ESD and the qualities they want to achieve within the project. The role of the evaluators has changed as well: they are no longer ‘objective’ observers, but social agents of change. They bring their own interests and values, which cannot be eliminated but rather must be made explicit. This strategy gives attention to emergence and to unexpected and unplanned events; the aim is to understand the actions and processes going on in order to participate in their development and to propose reflections and scenarios in line with the values involved. Such an evaluation is concerned with the processes of building communities within the partners’ networks and with the quality of the ‘internal learning’ of the network itself, considered as ‘a learning organisation’.

**QUALITY AND EVALUATION: THE QUALITY CRITERIA PROPOSAL**

These understandings of quality and evaluation run counter to the language and culture of the educational evaluations used by politicians and administrators in Europe. ‘Evaluation’ has been used as a tool mainly for educational control and not for school development towards ESD. For this reason it was, and still is, important to rethink the concept of educational quality in order to build a new meaning, useful for all members of a school community, and consistent with the importance of accepting uncertainty and complexity as a part of ESD.

In a culture of complexity, evaluation cannot reduce the quality of educational
processes to ‘sets of standardised procedures’, ‘outcomes’ or ‘performances’ so much favoured by management and control public bodies. Rather, it should take into account the educational values, the cultural characteristics of the local community, as well as the emotions and perceptions of members of that community. Quality and quantity are not contrasting concepts, but should be defined and harmonised within an evaluation design. Robert Pirsig, author of the famous novel Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, makes a distinction between ‘static quality’, the one which pushes a system to achieve defined benchmarks and standards, and ‘dynamic quality’, the quality that a system needs when something new happens, when it is necessary to proceed in uncertainty where standards do not exist. Both are relevant and necessary: „without dynamic quality an organism cannot develop, without static quality it cannot last“ (Pirsig 1992: 375).

One of the tools developed by ENSI was an ESD friendly version of a classical positivist tool: quality indicators. The term itself ‘quality indicators’ is an ambiguous one, trying to reconcile the two paradigms, and to reduce once more qualitative information and people’s feelings to numbers and quantities. The process may, however, be reversed and indicators – data both qualitative and quantitative – could be used as clues, as traces, embedded in a consistent value system, able to construct shared meanings through mediation and participation. In a socio-critical paradigm quality criteria should take the place of ‘performance indicators’. The notion of quality should build on values and principles that inspire engagement with sustainability issues and provide indications or general descriptions that help to turn values into educational actions, behaviours and choices. Moreover, quality criteria should be seen as an instrument for change and not as an instrument for assessment, focusing the attention not only on foreseen results but also on emergent and unexpected outcomes. The criteria thus bring theory and visions closer to practice and can be used as links for moving from ideal values to the realities one wishes to change.

Taking account of these considerations, a booklet, Quality Criteria for ESD Schools (Breiting, et al. 2005), was produced during the SEED European project as one of the ENSI contributions to the construction of instruments consistent with ESD needs for evaluation. The booklet tried to summarise an ESD educational philosophy and offer to teachers and practitioners a tool for internal/external evaluation.

**ESD PROGRAMME EVALUATION AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR SOCIAL LEARNING**

In the last ten years, ENSI has been strongly involved in the planning and implementation of European Union Comenius and Life-long Learning Projects related to ESD development and innovation (SEED, 2002-2005; SUPPORT, 2008-2010; CoDeS,
2011-2014). When confronted with the request for evaluation by the European Union, the ENSI vision has been further enriched as is illustrated in the most recent project, CoDeS.

CoDeS (Community-based School Development for Sustainability) is a multilateral network, a network of networks comprising twenty-eight partner organisations whose work focuses on collaboration between schools and communities to address education and issues of SD. Based on the partners’ wide range of experience, CoDeS aimed to identify exemplar cases of school-community collaborative partnerships, investigate the factors that made them successful, and develop models, indicators and tools to improve the quality of such collaborative efforts. The CoDeS network includes experts who have direct experience in the development of school-community collaboration in ESD and SD. They bring to the network a strong background based on their experiences in different sectors: teacher education, NGOs, research, policy making, educational administration, school teaching. This context is diverse in terms of stakeholders, cultural backgrounds, and countries and therefore demands methodologies that respect the diversity, acknowledge it, develops its theoretical base, and produce tools to facilitate practical applications.

![Figure 1. ENSI Quality Assurance System for European Projects](image)

In CoDeS, the widely shared idea of an external evaluator was transformed to a ‘system for quality assurance and for quality enhancement’, where different figures play different roles as shown in Figure 1. The monitoring function was performed by the project coordinator who was responsible for the appropriate use of time and resources; the internal evaluation function was performed by the internal
evaluator coordinating the collection of data through questionnaires, interviews, observations, and self-reflection activities; and the external evaluation function was performed by the external evaluator in the role of a ‘critical friend’, facilitating the constructive development of the partner network. This approach is consistent with the ENSI action research tradition.

The quality assurance framework constituted the three components working together, identifying the main quality areas to be monitored and evaluated as the project progressed. The methodology was participatory evaluation, promoting reflections among partners and proposing tools and workshops during the meetings in order to foster reflective thinking and improve the quality of partners’ work. The validity of data collected was assured by the systematic use of triangulation: every summary statement referring to the project was based on data collected from different partners or stakeholders, using a plurality of methods and tools (such as questionnaires, interviews, field notes, focus groups, observations), with a systematic comparison of different visions and opinions in order to overcome bias.

A new, important feature introduced in the CoDeS project was the involvement of ‘junior researchers in ESD’ in the evaluation of the three CoDeS conferences. The six junior researchers involved were all women (this may be an indication of how important the field and its issues are for women!), coming from different backgrounds and countries, contracted through the ‘junior researcher on ESD network’, led by ENSI. The junior researchers worked under the guidance of the internal evaluator. They brought new ideas, new evaluation tools, fresh enthusiasm and good quality reports to the evaluation.

The project coordinator and evaluators attended all partner meetings and project conferences. They participated as active members of the group, organising workshops and making presentations to gather information on how the aims of the project were being met, and to help focus the project and contribute cumulatively to its development. This style of evaluation - engaging with the whole process, attending meetings, mapping emergent ideas, following through actions, giving regular feedback, as well as using the standard methods of evaluation - also fits well with the ENSI tradition.

The ‘evaluation team’, internal and external evaluators and project coordinator, made extensive use of quality improvement tools in workshops with participants. The tools contributed to cumulative development through the project, helping
to clarify aims, develop a collective identity, refine processes and products, and agree strategies for implementation and dissemination (Figure 2). This approach, combining professional development and critical appraisal, has been refined by the external evaluator in his work with academics in Finland (Dillon et al. 2014).

Cumulative evaluation with quality improvement tools is also developmental in the sense that as the project progresses it ‘changes its shape’ through clarifying objectives and re-focussing. Its information base also gets ‘bigger’ because the progressive accumulation of new data. This leads to greater understanding of what the project can achieve and greater refinement of its working methods (Figure 3).

**CODES. A DEVELOPMENTAL JOURNEY THROUGH EVALUATION**

The connections between project coordination, participatory evaluation and cumulative development with quality improvement tools can be illustrated through the CoDeS project history. In the three years of the project there were three partner...
meetings to support coordination and continuity, and three conferences to provide participants with genuine experiences of multidisciplinary and multinational approaches to ESD. Partner meetings offered the possibility to foster the critical, reflexive approach to evaluation while the conferences gave the evaluators the possibility to observe the ‘network in action’ and to collect data concerning both external communication and internal development. Through the partner meetings CoDeS members explored in depth the type of community they wished to become, how they intended to collaborate and how they intended to disseminate their achievements. Similarly, through the conferences, CoDeS members explored the relationship between theory and practice, the roles of stakeholder and instigators, and processes of consolidation around CoDeS products.

CoDeS started its work with a first partner meeting in Friedrichsdorf, Germany. At this meeting the evaluators led workshops and discussions around the subject of community. ‘Community’ is central to the collaborative actions needed to address ESD and issues of sustainability and to run a project within the evaluative approach described above. Workshops were held around a set of lead questions: What makes a community? How do we characterise our community? What is the intellectual capital of the community? What community do we want to become?

In response to the last question, what community we want to become, the partners expressed a desire for clear goals, responsible roles and a ‘future orientation’ guided by motivation and team spirit. The community should be open minded to different worldviews, equitable, effective and friendly and supporting, sharing new knowledge with a critically reflective approach. CoDeS saw itself as a flexible, responsive, sustainable learning community: a leading community on collaboration for SD in Europe and beyond.

The characteristics of community listed above represent a collectively agreed statement of intent about how CoDeS expected to work both within the project and with its associated partners. Those qualities internal to the project, for example team spirit, responsible roles and friendly and supporting stances, guided the project at every stage of its operation. In terms of being ‘a leading community on collaboration for SD in Europe’ it should be noted that the members of the consortium are already leaders in the field in their home countries and thus have considerable influence on policy and practice. The coming together of these key figures in the project has created a momentum and produced outcomes that go beyond the sum of the contributing parts.
The first conference in Vienna brought together a wide diversity of stakeholders involved in school-community collaboration for sustainable development. The conference took stock of ‘where we are now’ with SD and ESD and explored some latest ideas about theory and how these might translate into practice.

The second partner meeting was held in Győr, Hungary and the evaluators’ work focused especially on workshops and discussions around the process of collaboration. ‘Collaboration’ is central to actions required to address ESD and issues of sustainability and the approach to evaluation outlined above.

Collaboration was seen as:

- Not so much doing the same work, but rather understanding the work of one another so that ideas and practices can be adapted and applied elsewhere.
- More than the sum of the individual participants’ contributions, there is an emergent, shared knowledge (joint work). It cannot be reduced to the separate knowledge of the individual participants.
- Not just planning, deciding and acting jointly but also thinking together.
- Its products reflect a blending of all participants’ contributions.
- Participants’ listen and discuss/read and analyse each other’s contributions, identify recurrent themes, make cross-site comparisons.
- Selection, highlighting and negotiation of meaning of what is being reported are through processes of mutual validation.

The most important conditions necessary for collaboration identified in the workshop were: complementarities of expertise, skills, effort and roles in trusting relationships. Following from this, there was a commitment to shared resources and power: no individual’s views should dominate; authority for decisions and actions resides with the group.

Amongst the potential barriers to collaboration were the following: language; cultural differences; conflicting objectives; between-group differences; tensions between participants; reluctant participants; competing obligations, loyalties and expectations; time demands and allocations; differences in worldviews; differences in working methods; difficulties in writing together.

There is no definitive definition of collaboration. Each group finds its own way of working in which the factors identified in our workshop have different levels of importance (see also John-Steiner and Weber, 1998). Collaboration takes different forms according to the objectives: e.g. in product-orientated collaborations roles
tend to be clearly delineated and producing the ‘outcome’ is the primary objective; in other types of collaboration, the emphasis might be on process and dialogue with more flexible roles. In terms of barriers to collaboration, the CoDeS partners recognised that there were no ‘set piece’ ways of dealing with them. Each group is unique; part of the process of collaboration is in identifying the barriers and finding ways of dealing with them. A characteristic of CoDeS was the proactive way in which it dealt with barriers to communication, especially of finding ways of engaging different constituencies of stakeholder, of getting groups talking and working together who would otherwise have no incentive to contact each other. The workshops proposed by the evaluators and discussions around collaboration held in Györ demonstrably influenced both the subsequent working of the CoDeS group and its products.

Following from observations above about ‘collaboration’, the theme of the second conference in Kerkrade was ‘Learning for the Future’ and the conference brought together about 105 participants including local administrators, staff from municipalities, politicians and political networkers, members of NGOs, local entrepreneurs, members of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE), and students and teachers working in school-community projects.

The Kerkrade Conference was somehow a critical turning point for CoDeS and the evaluators highlighted some of the difficulties in communication between different interest groups: CoDeS members, as part of their professional responsibilities, have spent much time analysing the issues and developing a deep understanding of SD and ESD – they know the ‘field’. Politicians, policy makers and people from the commercial sector typically do not have a deep understanding of SD. Nevertheless their policies and commercial processes shape the environment in which SD actions take place. This paradox means there is an inverse relationship between ‘understanding’ and ‘power’. This inverse relationship can cause frustration. It seldom happens that the different stakeholders work together in ways that lead to joint thinking and the production of shared knowledge. Conferences involving different stakeholders illustrate the point: politicians and delegates from the private sector typically give short ‘set-piece’ presentations and then leave. They talk at the audience rather than engaging in critical discussion with them.

CoDeS has been much preoccupied with finding ways of ‘bridging the gap’; of overcoming the separation between on the one hand ESD and on the other hand the policy framework of SD and the practices of private companies. A question about the impact of CoDeS in the longer term is the extent to which initiatives
instigated in schools can be shown to have had an impact on shaping policy and, more profoundly, on influencing the production processes of private companies. There is a need to develop strategies for engaging politicians, policy makers and representatives of private companies more actively in discussions with educational stakeholders.

The focus of the Third Partner Meeting in Larnaca, Cyprus was dissemination: the task was to collect the feedback on the finished products, plan the last steps of the project, and agree a framework for dissemination. But in order to disseminate the achievements, every member of the network had to understand and appreciate the products prepared, and be able to present them critically. What should be disseminated, only the products or also the processes? And what are the processes worth disseminating? What was the ‘collective cultural heritage’ of the CoDeS project and how should the partners transmit this to their own networks?

Various metaphors can be applied to the product-process issue. One such is Goffman’s (1956) notion of frontstage and backstage. In the theatre, the frontstage is what the audience is familiar with, whereas the backstage, accessed through the ‘stagedoor’, is restricted to those involved in the production. If one wanted to develop an understanding of the theatre the audience’s view of the frontstage is a good place to start, but it offers a far from complete picture. A backstage view is also required. The front of CoDeS is its website, products and formal documentation. The back, as in the theatre, is fragmental, intuitive and tentative, comprising conversations, strongly held opinions, points of view, things argued, ideas and practices taken away and developed or applied elsewhere. The formal business of the project focused on its frontstage, that is, the means through which the project met its objectives and was held accountable within the Comenius programme. But there was also considerable discussion about the interrelationships between the developed of products and the means by which their active use may be facilitated in new sites. These are very much backstage matters. They influence dissemination and evaluation strategies, but are seldom connected with them explicitly. Providing an insight into the backstage of CoDeS revealed some of the wider perspectives of the project team and the creative tensions that existed between them. Such matters typically do not find their way into evaluation reports, but are nevertheless important intellectual and professional outcomes with transformative potential.

The goal of the final conference, hosted by the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) in Barcelona was to provide an interactive space for partners and delegates to learn from each other and to foster collaboratively local SD facilitated by the CoDeS
products which were presented and shared. The conference show-cased CoDeS products and provided a forum for critical review of CoDeS school-community initiatives and ESD generally. The conference had over 100 delegates from across the world. Additionally, there was a post-conference seminar at which researchers and practitioners reported their research work.

The internal evaluation confirmed that the conference marked an appropriate end to a successful project, reflected in the number of delegates and the wide range of expertise they brought with them. There was a tangible sense that the project had reached a higher level of operation and influence. Three years of steady, cumulative development, growing international recognition, raised academic and practitioner profiles of CoDeS partners, well received products – these and other factors have contributed to the impact of the project across the sustainable development and educational communities. A seamless transition between practitioner matters in the main part of the conference and academic themes in the post-conference seminar was indicative of how CoDeS had achieved one of its major aims of bridging between different ESD communities and bringing a unified energy to the field.

CONCLUSIONS

Quality and evaluation are still central needs within ESD: in the recent Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, monitoring the quality of processes has been considered as important as the quality of products (or even more, form a learning community point of view), and a reflective approach to evaluation and monitoring is the only one consistent with the ‘learning changes’ the decade aimed at:

Efforts (...) only have value when used to improve the quality of processes and products. On the other hand, an imbedded reflexive approach helps to build in ways of continuously reviewing past actions and learning in order to enable better, more meaningful and transformative processes to achieve the same goal. (UNESCO 2012: 81–82)

During the three years of the project, CoDeS, through its extended network, involved many people in the forefront of developments in SD and ESD. Not surprisingly, the project revealed to the evaluators and to partners many issues and questions concerning current theory and practice. Some of the issues and questions have long histories, others are new. Some of them might be reformulated as ‘next generation’ questions for future projects. These are:
‘Legitimating differences’ while improving reciprocal understanding. We know in ESD that differences are crucial to building something new, but collaboration not-
withstanding, differences are always a great challenge. The purpose in ESD is not to overcome differences - in language, culture, visions – rather to manage them in the construction of trust and reciprocal understanding.

Internal and external to the partner networks has been the tension between ‘action’ and ‘thought’. While actions without responsible thought have driven our society to unsustainability, there are still pressures toward ‘fast’ and ‘effective’ actions; the practice of critical thinking helps the ‘activist’ accept also the moment of reflection. When different groups involved in ESD are asked to collaborate there is the problem of reconciling different priorities and different quality criteria. Often they remain implicit, in the backstage, and it is only during the actions that partners discover how different are their expectations and their judgments when confronted with practice.

Related to the points above, a strength of CoDeS underlined by the evaluation reports was in bringing together academics and practitioners in pursuit of common aims. But this is not without tensions. Higher education worldwide is predicated on a ‘growth’ model. Academics are under great pressure to publish. This may lead them to take on more of the collective workload, and push it towards academically recognised outcomes. This puts onus on very careful negotiation in the initial stages of a project when individual and institutional agendas should be put up front and their longer term implications discussed.

ESD is a topic which attracts people wanting to work for a better future. Such people are usually not strong in solving conflicts because of their ethical values. Solving conflicts is important in making SD a reality. Negotiation and conflict resolution are important matters emerging from our evaluation.

Power relations. Schools do not have the financial means to instigate projects and so typically have to ‘follow’ the economic/financial agendas, and ultimately the interests of those providing the funding (very often commercial organisations). CoDeS has shown that students of all ages are not only willing to engage in collaborative projects, they also have innovative and often unusual ideas about the content and direction of projects.

Related to the last point is intergenerational change. Ten years ago, few people would have predicted the impact that social media has had on modes of communication. We cannot assume that the future offers a linear transition from the present. Every fixed assumption about society alters, at least if one takes a long enough
perspective. Whatever forces prompt cultural change, not all the values of society respond simultaneously. This is immensely important to how issues of SD and ESD are perceived and acted upon in each generation.

Finally, the problem of terminology. It has been said that this is a ‘tired’ question. However, CoDeS has shown that it is a question that needs to be revisited. The notions of ‘sustainable’ and ‘development’ are at least in part contradictory. SD has been hijacked as a marketing slogan where it can be applied to anything, which reduces its meaning to nothing. The re-emergence of ‘environment’ (as in environmental and sustainability education) in the terminology is welcome, especially in its more mature meaning where it is taken to be the unity of the ‘human’ and ‘natural’ dimensions rather than seeing them in conflict. What CoDeS and the CoDeS evaluation highlighted is that terminology is in part dependent on national habits and contexts. For example, in Switzerland, ESD is closely tied with ‘Global Learning 21’, while in Finland there are strong links with ‘wellbeing’. The book Schooling for Sustainable Development (Jucker and Mathar, 2015), an additional CoDeS output, gives detailed accounts of some of the contexts that determine localised interpretations of SD and ESD across Europe.

There are logistical difficulties in a project of this kind: the EU-schedule is difficult to integrate with effective conduct of the research; the limited financial support for project partners means that publications, work in communities, translations, opportunities of exchange etc are always tightly restricted; there is a shortage of time for in-depth development; and the positivistic attitude toward evaluation which is prevalent in general is not compatible with the principles of SD and ESD.

What we have experienced in CoDeS is that to focus on the evaluation of processes is not in conflict with the evaluation of products. The quality of CoDeS products in fact was largely due to the quality of the process of collaboration: some of the products involved the majority of partners and none of the 32 partners was a ‘silent one’. The ‘intrinsic quality’ was surely enhanced by the internal debates and reflections, but also by the evaluators who were very much involved in the ‘quality enhancement’ of the project and not only in its quality control.

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