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Implementing Multicultural Education to Strengthen Elementary School Students' Character Value of Tolerance

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of tolerance character education at SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen faces challenges, ranging from educators' limited understanding of the multicultural approach to the suboptimal integration of diversity values in daily learning. This study aims to describe the process of implementing multicultural education to strengthen elementary school students' tolerance and to identify strategies, practices, and obstacles encountered in schools with heterogeneous socio-cultural backgrounds. The research used a descriptive qualitative case study with participatory observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and field notes, involving teachers, students, and parents as primary informants. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model through reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results show that tolerance values are instilled through thematic learning, habitual mutual respect, and open communication among teachers, students, and parents, helping to create an inclusive learning atmosphere and supporting early internalization of tolerance. However, limited multicultural resources and minimal teacher training remain challenges. This research contributes to the discourse on multicultural education by providing empirical evidence for developing value-based education models adaptive to diversity and local needs, emphasizing the critical role of teachers, schools, and families in shaping tolerant students.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is known as an archipelagic country with a highly complex diversity of ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions. This diversity makes Indonesia one of the world's largest multicultural countries (Purnama, 2021; Nugraha et al., 2020). With more than 17,000 islands and hundreds of ethnic groups, Indonesia faces a major challenge in maintaining national unity and integrity. Multiculturalism is a condition in which people from diverse backgrounds live together harmoniously (Pertiwi & Hasanah, 2020; Fridiyanto et al., 2022). However, this diversity also creates social tensions that may arise when differences are not properly managed within the educational sphere. Recent national data show that intolerance remains a pressing issue in schools. According to the Setara Institute (2023), there were 177 cases of intolerance in Indonesia, many occurring in schools, indicating that intolerance remains an educational challenge.

A preliminary study at SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen confirmed this situation. Based on interviews, observations, and document analysis, it was found that multicultural education in this school has not been optimal. Students tend to form groups by ethnicity, and teachers have difficulty applying multicultural concepts in daily practice. Lesson plans rarely integrate tolerance values, and no regular school programs strengthen awareness of diversity. These findings show that multicultural education

is still conceptual and needs systematic integration into classroom activities. Therefore, strategies to strengthen tolerance through multicultural-based education are urgently required. Multicultural education is an important instrument for building awareness of diversity, fostering tolerance, and cultivating respect for differences.

It aims to create students who understand and appreciate cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity (Ananda, 2021; Suroyo et al., 2024). Schools must develop consistent learning habits that shape attitudes and mindsets that strengthen national identity (Ramadhani et al., 2021; Sielvyana et al., 2021). The principles emphasize that no group is sacrificed for unity, students must think broadly about diversity, and individual uniqueness is valued (Hermanto et al., 2021). Therefore, multicultural education needs to be instilled early and incorporated into the educational process (Fauzi et al., 2022; Ubadah, 2022). Structured education management is essential to accommodate multicultural values. With systematic management, education can produce modern yet cultured citizens (Fitriyani et al., 2023).

Multicultural education increases children's awareness of cultural diversity (Winata, 2020) and lays the foundation for tolerance based on justice, equality, freedom, and democracy (Mubarak & Rahman, 2025; Yunita et al., 2025). Elementary school is the most strategic phase for nurturing tolerance as it marks the beginning of formal education (Nurhidayat et al., 2024; Lubis & Salminawati, 2023). The value of tolerance must be instilled from an early age to ensure the nation's future (Magdalena et al., 2023; Rusmiati, 2023). Respecting diversity is the basis of social harmony, so tolerance and respect for differences must be cultivated at the elementary level (Mariska et al., 2025; Sarif et al., 2023; Yulianti & Dewi, 2021). Nevertheless, the rise of social groups with rigid and puritanical views that promote intolerance makes tolerance education even more urgent (Nurmansyah & Muttaqin, 2024; Rosyad et al., 2021).

Through multicultural education, a peaceful society that upholds human values as mandated by the 1945 Constitution can be realized (Romadon et al., 2021). Multicultural values such as tolerance, cooperation, and respect must be taught from an early age. Elementary school is crucial because students are in a key phase of character development. Furthermore, instilling multicultural values aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the Pancasila Student Profile (Putri & Budiman, 2022; Raihan et al., 2023). Teachers play a central role as the leading figures influencing students' attitudes and social skills. Their guidance fosters mutual respect and strengthens character building. Multicultural education enables students to understand their own values while respecting those of others, thereby promoting social solidarity (Romadhona & Zulfairah, 2023). Tolerance in schools fosters respect and positive acceptance of diversity (Dewi & Mardiana, 2023). Students are assessed on their perspectives and social attitudes regarding tolerance (Winata, 2020; Hasan, 2019).

Despite its importance, implementing multicultural education continues to encounter obstacles. Teachers often struggle to translate concepts into practice, and limited training or resources make it challenging to manage classroom diversity (Pramuji, 2025; Amka, 2025). Therefore, teacher development and positive attitudes toward multiculturalism are crucial. Lessons that eliminate prejudice can help students develop positive attitudes toward different ethnic and cultural groups (Huda et al., 2023; Alfulaila & Nashrullah, 2022). However, many schools still rely on homogeneous, text-based learning that limits cultural exploration and meaningful experience. Contextual and experiential approaches that encourage empathy and collaboration are not yet fully utilized, even though such methods foster cooperation and real-world problem-solving (Sujud & Utomo, 2023; Purnomo et al., 2022). These conditions hinder the optimal realization of multicultural education initiatives (Nurmansyah & Muttaqin, 2024; Malik, 2021).

At SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen, where students are ethnically and socially diverse, these challenges are even more pronounced. The urgency of this research lies in developing learning strategies that

integrate multicultural values into basic education. Banks and Banks (2015) emphasize that multicultural education is not only about teaching diversity but also about promoting inclusive social transformation. Thus, an approach that combines theory with authentic learning experiences is needed. The school reflects East Kutai's social diversity, underscoring the need to understand how multicultural education systematically fosters tolerance. This aligns with Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which emphasizes respect for humanity and cultural diversity.

Previous studies show that multicultural education plays an important role in fostering student tolerance. Santosa et al. (2025) found that integrating tolerance values into history lessons encourages students to apply them in social contexts. Sasa et al. (2025) found that multicultural education through the curriculum, habitual activities, and Project-Based Learning promotes tolerance. Activities such as Culture Week help students appreciate differences. Zamroni et al. (2024) also showed that collaborative learning and inclusive curricula enhance tolerance, with teachers' roles being decisive. These studies highlight the need for integrated approaches that combine curriculum, learning methods, and teacher involvement.

However, research on schools with specific characteristics remains limited. Most studies focus on urban or private schools, whereas SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen, with an ethnic mix of migrant plantation workers, presents distinct challenges that require a different strategy. Furthermore, previous studies tend to be theoretical and rarely examine teachers' daily practices in fostering tolerance. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by exploring actual practices in heterogeneous rural schools. Specifically, it aims to describe how multicultural education is implemented to foster tolerance among elementary students, to identify the strategies, activities, challenges, and solutions experienced by teachers, and to provide practical recommendations for strengthening the role of basic education in developing a tolerant, inclusive, and harmonious generation within Indonesia's diversity.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the implementation of multicultural education in fostering tolerance among elementary school students. This approach was chosen because it allows in-depth understanding of learning dynamics, teacher strategies, and student responses (Marfuah & Mulyoto, 2021). The research was conducted at SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen, Telen District, East Kutai, East Kalimantan, which was purposively selected for its diverse student population in terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture. The study period was from June to August 2025. The descriptive qualitative method enabled detailed observations of daily classroom interactions and school activities, providing a comprehensive understanding of how tolerance values are integrated into learning.

The study aims to describe the process of implementing multicultural-based education and to identify strategies, practices, and obstacles that arise in a heterogeneous socio-cultural school context. Research subjects included one sixth-grade teacher, 19 students, and 19 parents. The teacher was selected for direct involvement in the learning process, students as recipients of tolerance value implementation, and parents for their role in supporting value habits at home and in the community. This selection ensured that perspectives from all stakeholders were captured. The combination of teachers, students, and parents provided triangulation, strengthening the study's validity and depth of insights.

Data collection involved 39 semi-structured interviews of 30-45 minutes and eight classroom-based participatory observations (each lasting 70-105 minutes), complemented by documentation and field notes using instruments designed to explore participants' understanding of tolerance values. Interview sheets explored teachers', students', and parents' understanding of tolerance values. Observation sheets recorded student interactions, tolerance behaviors, and teaching strategies.

Documentation included lesson plans, school activities, and other relevant materials. Field notes were used to record important findings during data collection. Instruments were developed based on three operationalized aspects of tolerance: cognitive (understanding diversity), affective (empathy and respect), and behavioral (working collaboratively without discrimination).

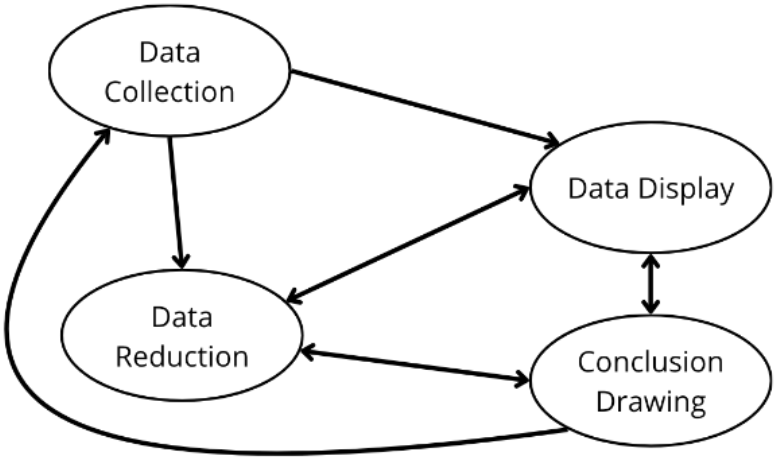


Figure 1. Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model

Data validation was strengthened through source and method triangulation by comparing interview, observation, and documentation data across teachers, students, and parents. Member checking was conducted by confirming findings with participants to ensure interpretation accuracy, while an audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions and data processing steps. Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model as shown in Figure 1, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Relevant information was sorted, coded, and grouped into themes to facilitate interpretation. Thematic analysis further categorized tolerance-related values into cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, and a relationship matrix was developed to link teacher strategies, student responses, and contextual challenges, enabling deeper conceptual understanding beyond descriptive narration. This analysis enabled the identification of appropriate approaches and obstacles, forming a solid basis for recommendations in multicultural-based character education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals several key findings that provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation of multicultural education in strengthening tolerance among students at SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen. These findings are organized around key themes derived from data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model. The research results are categorized into four main themes: 1) teacher strategies for integrating tolerance values; 2) school activities supporting multicultural education; 3) student responses to multicultural education, and; 4) challenges in implementing multicultural education.

Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators in implementing multicultural values into daily learning activities. Teachers need to realize that teaching multiculturalism is not limited to introducing students to various cultures, but also involves shaping attitudes and behaviors that respect diversity. To illustrate how teachers integrate tolerance values into learning, the following table presents the strategies participants observed and described.

Table 1. Strategies for Integrating Tolerance Values

Strategy	Interview/Observation Quotes	Important Notes
Integration in learning	"I always emphasize to students that each friend has a different background and that it must be appreciated." (Teacher Interview, August 2, 2025)	Teachers explicitly teach tolerance.
The use of multicultural	Observation: teachers use folk tales from various ethnic groups. (July 31, 2025)	Stories are used to foster empathy.
Habitualizing attitudes	Documentation of joint prayer activities and cross-ethnic group work. (July 31, 2025)	Values are instilled through daily habits.

In addition to conveying subject matter, teachers also act as facilitators who build students' understanding and positive attitudes toward cultural differences. Teachers are required to integrate multicultural values into the curriculum and learning process, using teaching materials that reflect cultural diversity and learning methods that encourage active student participation in dialogue (Pramuji, 2025). In line with this statement, a classroom teacher said in an interview, "I usually include folk tales from various regions so that children learn to appreciate cultural diversity" (Interview, August 2, 2025). Observations also showed that teachers reprimanded students persuasively when stereotypical jokes were made.

At SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen, teachers not only deliver the curriculum textually but also consistently strive to incorporate diversity into each subject. The strategies implemented include integrating tolerance values through thematic discussions, using folk tales from various regions, applying cross-cultural cooperative learning methods, and incorporating social issues relevant to local diversity. The school recognizes the importance of creating an inclusive environment where all students are treated fairly regardless of their backgrounds (Karmila & Chanifudin, 2023). Furthermore, active teachers demonstrate exemplary attitudes through direct interaction with students. Teachers play a crucial role in transforming students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors to develop multicultural values (Khaerunnisa et al., 2023). They display attitudes of mutual respect, respect for differences of opinion, and encourage students to express their views openly but politely. The classroom is shaped into an inclusive, psychologically safe space where every student feels recognized and valued for their presence. This aligns with Vygotsky's theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in shaping values and behavior (Ardania et al., 2024).

Teachers play a strategic role in shaping education, not only as educators, but also as facilitators, agents of change, and role models for students (Ningtyas, 2024). Therefore, the role of teachers is not limited to cognitive aspects but also includes being agents of character building and social ethics. In learning, teachers develop a multicultural-oriented climate, promoting social and cultural justice for students, thereby requiring them to transform into multicultural individuals with multicultural-based learning designs (Hermanto et al., 2021). Competent multicultural teachers actively introduce cultural diversity and respond to it in the classroom with learning models that involve all students from various backgrounds and experiences (Ramadhani et al., 2021).

These findings align with Zamroni et al. (2024), who emphasize the role of teachers as facilitators of a culture of tolerance in elementary schools. The results of this study also reinforce the findings of Santosa et al. (2025), which show that community-based school activities can foster inclusive attitudes in children, and Sasa et al. (2025), which highlight the benefits of project-based and collaborative learning in cultivating tolerance. However, this study offers a different perspective, showing that daily social interactions and persuasive teacher communication play a more meaningful role than formal or structured programs in internalizing tolerance values. The novelty of this study

lies in its focus on the real implementation of multicultural education in a rural industrial school context with heterogeneous ethnic composition, a context rarely explored in previous studies. While earlier research, such as Santosa et al. (2025), Sasa et al. (2025), and Zamroni et al. (2024), emphasized curriculum design, community-based activities, or inclusive classroom models, this study highlights informal interaction patterns and lived experiences as central mechanisms for building tolerance. This finding provides a new empirical insight: multicultural education can be strengthened through social interaction and experiential learning within diverse elementary school environments.

The implications and scientific contributions of this study lie in two key aspects. Theoretically, it enriches the discourse on multicultural education by integrating Vygotsky's social interaction perspective into the framework of character education, emphasizing that tolerance values are best developed through authentic social engagement rather than abstract instruction. Practically, this study provides a contextual model for implementing multicultural education in rural industrial areas, demonstrating how teacher attitudes, communication styles, and class dynamics can transform diversity into a learning resource. These insights offer a foundation for future research and policy development related to inclusive education and the strengthening of tolerance character among elementary school students in multicultural settings. In addition to teacher strategies, school activities also play an important role in realizing multicultural education. Schools provide institutional support for multicultural education through various programs and activities that reflect the values of diversity. The school's main multicultural programs, identified through interviews, observations, and documentation, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. School Activities Supporting Multicultural Education

Activities	Data Source	Important Notes
Celebration of major holidays across religions	Documentation: Eid al-Fitr, Christmas, Waisak	Building interfaith respect across religions
Local culture competition	"The school held a regional dance competition to introduce the culture of friends." (Interview with student guardian, August 1-2, 2025)	An event for cross-ethnic interaction.
School cooperation	Observation: Students clean the yard together.	Strengthening solidarity without discrimination.

Multicultural education practices in school life are carried out in an integrated manner, both through intracurricular and extracurricular activities tailored to students' interests and talents, so that learning is not monotonous and students remain enthusiastic (Sujud & Utomo, 2023). Routine activities such as flag ceremonies and interfaith commemorations serve as a vehicle for internalizing the value of tolerance, not just as a formality, because they condition students to live together in a pluralistic environment. These findings align with the school's program documentation, which indicates that a Culture Week occurs every semester. These activities involve students from various ethnic groups to showcase their arts and culture. Observations show that students work together without discriminating against each other's backgrounds. The main objective is for students to apply the multicultural values they have learned in class and interact harmoniously, thereby building tolerance and appreciation for diversity (Nurmansyah & Muttaqin, 2024).

In addition to formal learning activities, schools regularly host programs that foster a culture of tolerance among students (Wati et al., 2024). Art performances provide a space for students from various ethnic groups to express their respective cultures, which ultimately fosters mutual understanding and respect. In this case, schools strive to create a comfortable environment for

students despite their different backgrounds. The school uses these differences as a source of strength to develop its students' potential (Putri & Budiman, 2022). The school's literacy program also integrates folk tales and thematic books featuring characters from various cultural backgrounds to broaden students' understanding of social plurality.

The principal's policy is a key factor in supporting a multicultural educational atmosphere. This commitment is manifested through regulations that prohibit discriminatory behavior, the establishment of cross-class forums to discuss diversity issues, and regular teacher training on character education and multiculturalism. These findings confirm Banks's (2014) view that successful multicultural education requires a systemic and institutional approach, not just individual initiatives. Schools must become miniature versions of a pluralistic society that reflect tolerance in daily practice. Multicultural education can improve reading, writing, and math skills, as well as intellectual-process skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and conflict management, through approaches and materials that are relevant to the lives and mindsets of ethnically diverse students (Mubarak & Rahman, 2025). Observations and interviews indicate that most students respond positively to the practice of tolerance implemented in schools. A summary of students' responses and behavioral evidence is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Student Responses to Multicultural Education

Responses	Quotes/Observations	Important Notes
Positive	"I am happy to have friends of different religions; we can learn a lot." (Student Interview Student, July 31, 2025)	The student shows an open attitude.
Positive	Observation: students work together without conflict despite their different backgrounds.	Evidence of genuine acceptance.
Negative	Some students still tend to group themselves according to ethnicity	Challenges in achieving comprehensive tolerance.

One example of a positive response can be seen in an interview with a student who stated, "I am happy to be able to play soccer with my friends, even though we have different religions. It does not matter; the important thing is that we are close." (Interview, July 31, 2025). They are accustomed to working together in heterogeneous groups and show enthusiasm when discussing cultural differences. In fact, some students can express their opinions with empathy towards friends of different religions, ethnicities, and languages.

However, this positive response has not been entirely uniform. There are still some indications of microaggressions, such as stereotypical jokes, suggesting that understanding of tolerance remains superficial and has not been deeply ingrained in all students. This indicates that the process of internalizing tolerance requires time, consistency, and a repeated approach in the context of meaningful learning. Referring to Lickona's stages of character formation, students at SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen are currently in the knowing and feeling stages, but they need to be encouraged to reach the acting stage, which involves the consistent manifestation of tolerance in real actions.

In addition to the roles of teachers and schools, support from families or guardians is also very important in strengthening children's tolerance. Based on interviews with several guardians, they stated that the values of tolerance taught at school are also emphasized at home. Despite these positive efforts, several obstacles remain, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Challenges in Implementing Multicultural Education

Challenges	Quote	Important Notes
Social bias	"There are still parents who disagree with their children participating in interfaith activities." (Teacher Interview, August 2, 2025)	Barriers from the family.
Limitations Facilities	Documentation: limited multicultural learning materials, limited multiculturalism	Facilities need to be improved.
Student consistency	Observation: Some students still joke about differences.	Tolerance is not yet fully established.

This statement was reinforced by one of the guardians who said, "At home, we always remind our children not to look down on friends who are different, because everyone must be respected." (Interview, August 1-2, 2025). Parents strive to teach their children to respect differences and avoid prejudice towards others, so that what is learned at school can be reinforced in real life. Several guardians also said that communication between teachers and parents helps them understand multicultural learning materials and supports their application in the family environment. This aligns with the family's role as the primary agent of socialization, shaping children's attitudes and character from an early age. However, challenges such as differences in parents' cultural backgrounds and limited understanding of multiculturalism still need to be addressed to ensure stronger collaboration between schools and families.

SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen consistently integrates multicultural values into thematic learning. This is important considering that the school is located in a palm oil industrial area with a high level of ethnic diversity. For example, in one class, there are students from Dayak, Bugis, Javanese, and East Nusa Tenggara backgrounds, most of whose parents work in the plantation sector. This condition requires inclusive learning strategies, such as cross-ethnic group discussions and joint project activities, to minimize potential misunderstandings and foster solidarity. Implementing multicultural education faces various challenges that hinder its optimization. One of the main obstacles is the limited teaching materials and learning media that specifically address multicultural values in the local context. In addition to the limited teaching materials, interviews with teachers also revealed that stereotypical jokes often arise among students. To overcome this, teachers increase reflective discussions in class and use a persuasive approach, thereby gradually reducing discriminatory behavior. Most of the learning materials are still general in nature and do not address the social realities of students living in diverse environments.

Another major challenge is the lack of professional training for teachers on multicultural pedagogical approaches. In fact, a deep understanding of multiculturalism theory, inclusive strategies, and intercultural psychosocial dynamics is essential to creating learning that is responsive to diversity. Educators are not only required to master subject matter professionally but must also instill the core values of multicultural education, such as democracy, humanity, social relations, and pluralism. Educators must instill inclusive values of diversity in students so that school graduates are not only academically competent but also able to apply these values and respect the existence of other religions and beliefs (Badu, 2023).

Externally, a relatively homogeneous community environment also influences students' perceptions of diversity. The lack of interaction between ethnic and religious groups outside of school means that students have little real-life experience of living together in a pluralistic society. Therefore, schools play a crucial role as transformative spaces that provide structured, real-life learning experiences about diversity. Therefore, strong collaboration among schools, parents, local communities, and local governments is needed to build an educational ecosystem that supports

tolerance in a comprehensive, systemic, and sustainable manner. Policy initiatives that are responsive to diversity need to be continuously encouraged, including strengthening the curriculum, developing contextual learning resources, and providing multicultural-based teacher training.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the implementation of multicultural education at SD Eka Tjipta 01 Telen has begun to strengthen students' tolerance. Key results show that teachers integrate tolerance through inclusive learning strategies, collaborative methods, and exemplary behavior, while students demonstrate positive responses such as mutual respect and openness to differences. Despite challenges like limited contextual learning resources, minimal teacher training in multicultural pedagogy, and a relatively homogeneous social environment, the study highlights meaningful practices that foster tolerance from an early age. The practical contributions of applying these results are noteworthy, as they provide guidance for designing multicultural-based character education models adaptable to diverse and local contexts, particularly in plantation or industrial areas with high social diversity. Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of collaboration between teachers, schools, families, communities, and government in creating an inclusive, harmonious, and adaptive educational environment. Overall, this research contributes both theoretically and practically to the development of contextually relevant tolerance strategies and enriches scientific studies on multicultural character education in Indonesia. However, this study has certain limitations, particularly its focus on a single school with specific socio-cultural characteristics, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The short observation period and the qualitative nature of the study also mean that the results provide in-depth contextual insights rather than broad general conclusions. Future studies could expand to multiple schools or combine qualitative and quantitative approaches to strengthen comparative analysis and broader applicability.

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