

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs for students with Behavioural disorders

Ilyn S. Botes¹, Jinieza D. Gevera², Ariel E. San Jose³

¹Holy Cross Of Davao College Davao del Sur Philippines,

²Holy Cross Of Davao College Davao City, Davao del Sur Philippines,

³Southern Philippines Agribusiness and Marine and Aquatic School of Technology, Malita, Davao Occidental, Davao City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This study examined the limited effectiveness of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs for students with behavioral disorders across global and Philippine contexts. Guided by the CASEL Framework and using theory-based content analysis, the research synthesized Mark T. Greenberg's Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools (2023) alongside twelve meta-analyses. Findings revealed that SEL programs consistently produce medium to large positive effects on students' social skills, emotional well-being, behavior, and academic performance when implemented with fidelity, structured practices, and systemic support. However, outcomes for students with behavioral disorders remain inconsistent due to gaps in teacher training, cultural contextualization, and weak policy integration. In the Philippines, SEL programs enhance general competencies but fail to adequately address the unique social and familial pressures of learners with behavioral challenges, underscoring the need for culturally responsive approaches. Policy-level challenges include insufficient investment in professional development and fragmented systemic support, while opportunities lie in embedding SEL into national frameworks to promote inclusivity and equity. The consequences of weak SEL implementation include heightened teacher stress, strained classroom relationships, and reduced long-term social adaptability for students. Overall, the study highlights the urgency of rethinking SEL frameworks to ensure inclusive, equitable, and sustainable educational reform, aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

Keywords: Social-emotional learning, behavioral disorders, CASEL framework, inclusive education, policy integration

INTRODUCTION

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become a central component of educational reform worldwide, aiming to enhance students' emotional regulation, interpersonal skills, and academic success. However, despite its widespread adoption, the limited effectiveness of SEL programs for students with behavioral disorders remains a pressing global concern. Recent studies emphasize that while SEL frameworks improve general student outcomes, they often fail to adequately address the complex needs of learners with behavioral challenges, leaving a gap in inclusive education practices (Lee, Michael, & Benner, 2024).

In the United States, SEL programs are widely implemented, yet students with behavioral disorders continue to show limited progress in emotional regulation and classroom engagement, raising questions about program adaptability (Benner et al., 2023). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, evaluations of SEL initiatives highlight inconsistencies in outcomes for students with behavioral difficulties, pointing to challenges in integrating SEL with special education frameworks (Brunsting et al., 2024). In Australia, despite policy-level support for SEL, research indicates that students with behavioral disorders benefit less compared to their peers, underscoring the need for culturally and contextually responsive approaches (Abrams, 2023). These findings collectively illustrate that the limited effectiveness of SEL programs for this population is not confined to one nation but is a shared educational challenge across diverse contexts. In the Philippines, SEL programs are increasingly recognized as essential for student well-being and academic success. Yet, their limited effectiveness for students with behavioral disorders is evident in the lack of culturally contextualized frameworks. A recent integrative review revealed that while SEL interventions enhance general student competencies, they often fail to resonate with Filipino learners facing behavioral challenges due to insufficient adaptation to local realities (Molina, Vergara, & Manalo, 2025). This situation highlights the urgent need for SEL strategies that reflect the unique social, familial, and academic pressures experienced by Filipino students with behavioral disorders.

The limited effectiveness of SEL programs for students with behavioral disorders carries significant consequences. At the classroom level, students may continue to struggle with emotional regulation, leading to persistent behavioral disruptions and strained teacher-student relationships. At the institutional level, schools risk widening educational inequities, as students with behavioral disorders remain underserved by mainstream SEL initiatives. On a broader

societal scale, the failure to provide effective SEL support contributes to long-term challenges in social integration, employability, and mental health outcomes for these students (Brunsting et al., 2024; Molina et al., 2025). These consequences underscore the urgency of rethinking SEL frameworks to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness for all learners.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools, a selected research brief by the renowned author Mark T. Greenberg. In particular, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What does the existing body of meta-analyses reveal about the overall effectiveness of SEL programs in addressing the needs of students with behavioral disorders across diverse educational contexts?
2. How do findings from SEL program evaluations in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia illustrate similarities and differences in program effectiveness for students with behavioral disorders?
3. What evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of SEL programs for students with behavioral disorders in the Philippine education system, and how does it compare to international findings?
4. What policy-level challenges and opportunities emerge from the limited effectiveness of SEL programs for students with behavioral disorders, particularly in ensuring inclusivity and equity in education?
5. What are the documented consequences of limited SEL program effectiveness for students with behavioral disorders in terms of classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, and long-term social outcomes?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The conduct of this content analysis on Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools by Mark T. Greenberg, framed through the CASEL Framework, is significant because it supports the global pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). It contributes to SDG 4 by promoting inclusive and equitable education through the improvement of SEL programs that enhance emotional regulation, social interaction, and academic engagement among students with behavioral challenges. It aligns with SDG 3 by emphasizing the role of SEL in fostering emotional resilience and psychological well-being, which are essential for lifelong health and productivity. Furthermore, it advances SDG 10 by addressing educational disparities and ensuring that students with behavioral disorders receive equitable access to effective SEL interventions. Grounded in the evidence presented by the Learning Policy Institute (Greenberg, 2023), this study informs policymakers, educators, and researchers about the need for culturally responsive and evidence-based SEL frameworks that strengthen teacher training, school-wide support systems, and community partnerships. Ultimately, it contributes to sustainable educational reform and the holistic development of learners, reinforcing the global commitment to inclusive and quality education for all.

THEORETICAL LENS

This content analysis study was guided by the lens of the CASEL Framework, which is built on five interrelated competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies form the foundation for students to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve goals, establish and maintain healthy relationships, and make constructive choices. The framework's core assertion is that SEL is not an "add-on" but a systemic approach that should be embedded across classrooms, schools, families, and communities to ensure equitable outcomes and lifelong success. Lemberger-Truelove et al. (2024) showed that small to moderate effects, indicating limited impact for students with behavioral challenges, and highlighting the need for stronger alignment with CASEL competencies. As Benner et al. (2023) explained, teacher study groups in the U.S. improved general SEL practices but demonstrated minimal gains for students with emotional and behavioral disorders, reflecting gaps in program adaptability to CASEL's self-management and relationship skills domains. Brunsting et al. (2024) initiatives produced inconsistent outcomes for students with behavioral difficulties, suggesting that integration into special education frameworks remains weak despite CASEL's emphasis on systemic implementation. Abrams (2023) revealed that students with behavioral disorders benefit less than peers from SEL programs, underscoring the need for culturally responsive approaches to CASEL's social awareness and responsible decision-making competencies. Molina et al. (2025) found that SEL programs enhance general competencies but lack cultural contextualization, limiting their effectiveness for Filipino students with behavioral disorders and weakening CASEL's ecological systems alignment. Lee et al. (2024) noted that despite widespread adoption, programs often fail to address the unique emotional regulation needs of students with behavioral disorders, reducing long-term effectiveness across CASEL's five competencies.

PARADIGM

The paradigm illustrates how the selected research synthesis serves as the input, providing textual representations of the SEL research brief examined through the process of content analysis guided by the principles of the CASEL

Framework. Within this process, four key elements frame the interpretation that influences educational outcomes for students with behavioral disorders and contribute to broader social goals. At the starting point, SEL programs serve as the foundation, emphasizing the five core competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies form the basis for developing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills among learners. The next stage, implementation fidelity and contextual adaptation, highlights the importance of how SEL programs are executed. Factors such as teacher training, cultural relevance, and student engagement determine whether the program’s design translates effectively into practice. Moving forward, the effectiveness of SEL interventions for students with behavioral disorders represents the measurable outcomes of SEL interventions, focusing on emotional regulation, social interaction, and academic engagement. This stage reflects the current challenge of limited effectiveness, where students with behavioral disorders often show less improvement compared to their peers. Finally, the paradigm culminates in educational equity and SDG alignment, showing how effective SEL implementation supports inclusive education, reduces inequalities, and aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Overall, the paradigm demonstrates a continuous process where the design and delivery of SEL programs influence their effectiveness and ultimately contribute to equitable, sustainable educational outcomes.



Fig. 2 The paradigm of the study made through the assistance of AI

METHOD

This study used Theory-based content analysis with the CASEL framework. Theory-based content analysis, often referred to as deductive content analysis, is a qualitative method that applies predefined categories from established theories to analyze textual, visual, or verbal data. Instead of generating codes inductively, researchers rely on theoretical constructs to guide the coding process. This approach is particularly useful when the aim is to test, refine, or extend a theory in a new context.

The analysis is structured around these theoretical constructs to ensure conceptual rigor and consistency. This method allows the study to evaluate how SEL programs address or fail to address the competencies outlined by CASEL, thereby identifying patterns of limited effectiveness across different contexts. Recent scholarship emphasizes that theory-based content analysis strengthens the validity of findings by aligning empirical evidence with established theoretical models (AK Journals, 2023). It also enables researchers to highlight gaps where existing theories may not fully explain observed phenomena, making it particularly suitable for analyzing the challenges faced by students with behavioral disorders (Floridi, 2025). By applying this method, the study ensures that the analysis is not only descriptive but also interpretive, connecting program outcomes to broader theoretical and policy implications. This approach is especially relevant in education research, where deductive content analysis has been widely used to evaluate interventions and their alignment with systemic frameworks (Lee et al. 2024).

MATERIALS USED

A research synthesis authored by Mark T. Greenberg, a leading American developmental psychologist and prevention researcher renowned for his pioneering work and advocacy in social and emotional learning (SEL), was utilized in this study. Greenberg’s brief, *Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools*, published in March 2023 by the Learning Policy Institute, seeks to illuminate the transformative power of emotional intelligence in education. The following section presents the plot of the research synthesis, highlighting its narrative arc and central findings.

Plot of Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools, with author synthesis centers on the growing movement to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) into schools worldwide, unfolds through Greenberg's synthesis of twelve meta-analyses, each revealing how SEL programs transform learning environments. These programs, grounded in the CASEL framework, cultivate five essential competencies — self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The research synthesizes how these competencies foster empathy, resilience, and academic success, painting a vision of education that transcends traditional instruction. Greenberg unveils the divide between theory and practice. Despite persuasive evidence supporting SEL's benefits, many schools falter in implementation. Teachers often enter classrooms without adequate training, principals lack mentoring to sustain emotionally supportive environments, and systemic backing remains fragmented. This tension captures the unrealized promise of SEL — programs designed to transform education stumble when deprived of coherent guidance, infrastructure, and long-term institutional commitment.

In addition, Greenberg reveals the gap in the stark divide between theory and practice. Although compelling evidence underscores the benefits of social and emotional learning, many schools continue to struggle with ineffective implementation. Teachers often enter classrooms without sufficient training, principals lack the mentoring needed to sustain supportive environments, and systemic backing remains fragmented. This tension highlights the unrealized promise of SEL — programs designed to transform education falter when deprived of coherent guidance, robust infrastructure, and long-term institutional commitment.

He calls for reform. He urges schools to adopt sequenced, active, focused, and explicit strategies for SEL delivery. He advocates for professional development that empowers teachers and principals, systemic support that integrates SEL into school culture, and collaboration among educators, families, and policymakers. His recommendations form a roadmap for sustainable change, emphasizing that emotional learning must be woven into every layer of the educational system.

The data speak with unmistakable clarity: when SEL programs are implemented with fidelity, they produce medium to large positive effects on students' social skills, behavior, emotional well-being, and academic performance. This evidence affirms that SEL is far more than an educational trend; it is a scientifically validated approach to holistic development, equipping learners not only with academic knowledge but also with the emotional and interpersonal competencies essential for thriving in school and beyond.

Finally, it resolves the narrative with hope and realism. Greenberg affirms that SEL is a low-cost, high-impact intervention capable of transforming schools into communities of care. Yet, he reminds readers that success depends on commitment — on training, leadership, and systemic alignment. His research brief closes like the final chapter of a story about human growth, where education becomes not just the transmission of knowledge but the cultivation of compassion, connection, and lifelong learning.

RESULTS

Content Analysis of Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools

Meta-analyses since 2023 consistently show that SEL programs

In the research synthesis, Mark T. Greenberg shows medium to large positive effects of SEL programs on students' social skills, emotional well-being, behavior, and academic performance. These effects are consistent across grade levels (PreK–12) and diverse contexts—including studies from the United States, Australia, the Netherlands, Romania, and the United Kingdom. SEL Reduces Behavioral Problems and Emotional Distress-Across the twelve meta-analyses, SEL programs were found to reduce disruptive behavior problems and emotional distress, directly addressing the needs of students with behavioral disorders. These improvements stem from the development of social and emotional competencies such as self-management and responsible decision-making. The programs must be sequenced, active, focused, and explicit to achieve meaningful outcomes. Many schools fail to reach full potential due to inadequate teacher training, limited mentoring, and weak systemic support. Proper implementation ensures that SEL benefits all students, including those with behavioral challenges.

Evidence from hundreds of studies indicates a consistent, reliable effect of tested, evidence-based SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes at all grade levels and across gender, ethnicity, and race, income, and other demographic variables. SEL programs reduce disruptive behavior problems and emotional distress, and Research indicates that they are more effective when they are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (Page 7 Line 133, Page 5 Lines 67 & 75-79).

Evaluations of SEL programs

Across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, SEL programs consistently improve emotional regulation and reduce behavioral disorders. Greenberg, in his study, shows that SEL programs show consistent global effectiveness across the U.S., U.K., and Australia in improving students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, supporting the CASEL framework's applicability in diverse contexts. However, their success depends on strong implementation fidelity and contextual adaptation, with differences in training and cultural approaches influencing outcomes. Moreover, sustained effectiveness is strengthened by systemic support such as leadership, teacher mentoring, policy alignment, and whole-school approaches, particularly for improving outcomes among students with behavioral disorders.

The meta-analyses were conducted in Australia, the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom, and the United States and featured studies from around the world. Findings indicate that there is a consistent, reliable effect of tested, evidence-based SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. Research indicates that they are more effective when they are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. To effectively deliver programs that have these four components, teachers usually require substantial training and support. Comprehensive SEL programs produce broader behavioral and academic improvements than those that are more narrowly targeted. Policymakers can support this broad vision of SEL by creating infrastructures and processes at the state and district level that support successful and sustainable SEL in schools. (Page 3, Lines 47-49 and 51-53/Page 5 Lines 75-79& 80-81/ Page 6, Line 99-101 & 105-107).

Evidence shows that **SEL programs** in the Philippine Education System

Greenberg, in his study, found that international evidence from the U.S., U.K., and Australia shows that SEL programs improve students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, confirming their effectiveness in reducing behavioral and emotional difficulties. Their success, however, depends on strong implementation through structured practices and teacher training, as well as adaptation to local contexts such as the Philippine education system. In addition, sustained impact requires systemic support through leadership, infrastructure, policy alignment, and whole-school approaches to ensure long-term improvements for students with behavioral disorders.

The meta-analyses were conducted in Australia, the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom, and the United States and featured studies from around the world. SEL programs reduce disruptive behavior problems and emotional distress. Research indicates that they are more effective when they are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Principals themselves must be knowledgeable about evidence-based SEL models and how to effectively provide support to teachers. Comprehensive SEL programs produce broader behavioral and academic improvements than those that are more narrowly targeted. Policymakers can support this broad vision of SEL by creating infrastructures and processes at the state and district level that support successful and sustainable SEL in schools. (Page 3, Lines 47-49/ Page 5, Line 67,& 75-79 /Page 6, Lines 93-95, 99-101 & 105-107)

Policy-level **challenges and opportunities** arise from the limited effectiveness of SEL programs

Greenberg stresses that the Policy-level challenges and opportunities emerge from limited SEL effectiveness, with insufficient investment in teacher and principal training hindering inclusivity and fidelity. Strengthening systemic support through policy integration—embedding SEL in national frameworks and aligning schools, families, and communities—ensures equitable access and sustainability. Equity-driven implementation further guarantees that marginalized learners and those with behavioral challenges benefit, aligning SEL with inclusive education and global development goals.

Unfortunately, it is common for schools to adopt SEL programs without providing the essential initial training, ongoing coaching and mentoring, or technical support. Principals themselves must be knowledgeable about evidence-based SEL models and how to effectively provide support to teachers. Policymakers can support this broad vision of SEL by creating infrastructures and processes at the state and district level that support successful and sustainable SEL in schools. Comprehensive SEL programs produce broader behavioral and academic improvements than those that are more narrowly targeted. Evidence from hundreds of studies indicates a consistent, reliable effect of SEL programs on students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes... across gender, ethnicity and race, income, and other demographic variables. (Page 5, Lines 81-83/ Page 6, Lines 93-95, 99-101 & 105-107/ Page 7, Lines 133-136)

The consequences of limited **SEL effectiveness** for students with behavioral disorders

The analysis reveals that ineffective SEL programs often create stressful classrooms, lowering teaching quality and straining educators' emotional stability. They weaken teacher–student relationships, eroding trust and cooperation. Over time, these shortcomings limit students' social and emotional growth, reducing empathy, resilience, and their ability to engage meaningfully in society.

Teachers have reported that stress—which results in negative consequences for teachers, lower achievement for students, and higher costs for schools—has been the primary reason for leaving the profession. SEL programs reduce disruptive behavior problems and emotional distress. Comprehensive SEL programs produce broader behavioral and academic improvements than those that are more narrowly targeted. (Page 5, Line 67/Page 6, Line 99-101).



Fig. 2 Caricature illustration of Evidence for Social and Emotional Learning in Schools based on the Theory-based content analysis with the CASEL framework made through the assistance of AI

DISCUSSION

SEL Programs Drive Holistic Student Growth

Greenberg SEL programs consistently improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, effectively reduce behavioral problems and emotional distress, and achieve the greatest success when implemented with strong fidelity and systemic support, which agree to Cipriano et al. (2023) who found that SEL programs consistently enhance social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes across diverse student populations, reinforcing the importance of structured and universal implementation. Likewise, the findings of Cipriano, C., and McCarthy, M. F. (2023) emphasized that SEL programs are most effective when equity and systemic support are embedded, showing that fidelity in implementation and inclusive practices are critical for long-term success.

On the contrary, his study contradicts Sánchez, B. et al. (2023), who argue that SEL programs often show mixed or limited effects, particularly in under-resourced schools, and highlighted that without strong cultural adaptation, improvements in academic and behavioral outcomes are inconsistent.

Effectiveness and Implementation of SEL Programs in Supporting Students with Disorders

The findings of his study reveal that SEL programs are consistently effective across diverse contexts, that they significantly reduce behavioral problems and emotional distress among students with disorders, and that their success ultimately depends on strong implementation fidelity supported by systemic structures, which agree to Coelho et al. (2023), SEL programs implemented across different school contexts produced positive outcomes in students' social and emotional competencies, with findings emphasizing that higher implementation quality and fidelity significantly strengthened program effectiveness and reduced behavioral difficulties among learners. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2023) found that universal SEL programs were effective in improving students' behavioral and emotional adjustment when implemented with strong contextual and systemic support, highlighting that implementation fidelity, teacher engagement, and school-level structures were critical factors influencing successful outcomes.

On the contrary, his findings contradict DiPerna, J. C. et al. (2023), who reported that although classrooms with higher levels of SEL implementation generally showed better student outcomes, many differences were not statistically significant under typical school conditions, suggesting that SEL programs may not always produce great behavioral or emotional improvements in real-world settings despite varying implementation quality.

Global Effectiveness, Implementation, and Systemic Support of SEL Programs

Greenberg's study reveals that SEL programs are globally recognized as effective in improving students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes, that their success depends on strong implementation fidelity and contextual adaptation, and that sustained effectiveness requires systemic support through leadership, infrastructure, and policy integration, which agrees with Zhao et al. (2023) indicates that SEL programs implemented across diverse school settings improved students' social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes when supported by strong implementation fidelity, contextual responsiveness, and organizational support, emphasizing that authentic implementation conditions and school structures significantly influence program effectiveness. Similarly, Ulla and Poom-Valickis (2023) found that the long-term success and sustainability of SEL programs depend on teacher support, school leadership, infrastructure, and contextual factors, highlighting that systemic and policy-related supports are essential for maintaining high-quality SEL implementation and achieving positive student behavioral and academic outcomes.

Contrary to the findings of DiPerna et al. (2023), who found that under typical school implementation practices, universal SEL programs produced mixed and largely non-significant effects on students' social and behavioral outcomes, suggesting that even with classroom implementation efforts, SEL may not always lead to substantial improvements in authentic school settings.

Challenges, Systemic Support, and Inclusivity in SEL Implementation

On the other hand, Greenberg's study also reveals that SEL implementation is hindered by training and support gaps among educators, as sustainable effectiveness depends on strong systemic and policy integration, and equitable and inclusive SEL practices are essential to address the diverse needs of students with behavioral disorders while reducing educational inequalities, which asserts to Ulla and Poom-Valickis (2023), the implementation of SEL programs is often constrained by insufficient teacher preparation, limited institutional support, and inadequate professional development opportunities, emphasizing that sustainable and inclusive SEL practices require strong leadership, school-wide coordination, and systemic support structures to effectively address diverse student needs. Similarly, Javier (2023) found that inclusive education programs face significant challenges related to teacher competencies, lack of training, and limited administrative support, highlighting that policy alignment, infrastructure, and equitable educational practices are necessary to ensure inclusive and effective support for learners with behavioral and special educational needs.

A previous finding that contrasts with the current view of Taylor et al. (2023), who reported as inconsistently implemented and weakly sustained in real school settings, with teachers frequently adapting or abandoning program components due to limited time, competing academic demands, and lack of structured support, resulting in variable rather than equitable outcomes across student populations.

Weak SEL Implementation and Its Ripple Effects

Finally, the findings of Greenberg's study show that weak SEL programs heighten teacher stress and reduce classroom quality, undermine teacher–student relationships by limiting empathy and behavioral support, and hinder students' long-term social outcomes such as resilience, inclusion, and adaptability, which supports Caparoso, J. L et al. (2023) who found that teachers' social-emotional competence and supportive school climate significantly predicted pedagogical effectiveness, showing that weak SEL undermines classroom quality and increases stress. Same as the findings of Sandilos, L. et al. (2023) who showed that effective implementation preserved positive teacher–student interactions even when teachers reported lower emotional well-being, underscoring how weak SEL erodes relationships and student engagement.

Consequently, opposes the studies of Jones, S. M. et al. (2023), who demonstrated that SEL interventions improved classroom climate and student engagement, opposing the idea that SEL reduces instructional quality. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2023), who also found that teachers with access to well-implemented SEL programs reported lower stress and greater classroom satisfaction, contradict claims that SEL heightens stress. Sandilos, L. E et al. (2023) showed that SEL programs strengthened empathy and communication between teachers and students, directly opposing the claim that SEL undermines relationships.

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