

Children's ways-of-knowing. Learning through Intent Participation in the early years.

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Context of the study

In England, as in many countries worldwide, there continues to be a strong focus on early childhood education (ECE) as an ameliorating factor for children growing up in poverty (Parliamentary Select Committee, 2019; Bakken, Brown and Downing, 2017; DFE, 2015; Pascal and Bertram, 2013). In England, this ongoing focus is embedded in the recent Department for Education report *Unlocking Talent. Fulfilling Potential* (DFE, 2017) which sets out a series of key-life-stage ambitions, starting with the early years, to “improve social mobility through education” (6).

A significant aspect of government policy to ameliorate the impact of poverty is a focus on early language and literacy. This includes an often-stated commitment to phonics teaching, and a strong focus on children’s spoken language (OFSTED, 2017; DFE, 2017; NCTL, 2013). Indeed, the report cited above (DFE, 2017) has as its “first key life-stage ambition” (8) an explicit aim to “close the word gap in the early years” (8). It aims to support this by ensuring that disadvantaged children have a rich early language environment and attend high-quality early years provision. Raising the quality of provision in disadvantaged areas, it argues, will be achieved by spreading best practice and creating partnerships for change with children parents and families, the local authority, health and early years professionals, and expert organisations such as the “EEF [Education Endowment Foundation] and the EIF [Early Intervention Foundation]” (15). The role of the expert organisations is one of finding out “what works” (9) in supporting parents’ and practitioners’ knowledge and skills in this area. Good levels of funding are available for research and implementation of these initiatives. For example, the EEF (2019) currently has three large-scale early years interventions to test what works in developing parents’ and early years practitioners’ interaction skills to support children’s language acquisition and development. The EIF has

developed a self-assessment tool to support a system-wide approach to improving outcomes for children in the early years, with a focus on speech, language and communication skills: the *EIF Maturity Matrix* (2018). This consists of a peer review system in up-to thirty Local Authorities with the aim of exploring the effectiveness of local services and providing recommendations for organisational system change to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, with a focus on early language. This is coupled with a £6.5 million Early Outcomes fund to progress system change and assess existing approaches which are considered to be effective and can be shared.

A focus on language acquisition and development in the early years, particularly for children growing up in areas of disadvantage, is not disputed. As Law et al. (2013) and Law et al. (2017, 3) conclude, evidence shows that the development of oral language is “mediated by, and in turn impacts upon, developments in other cognitive domains” and that “oral language precedes and underpins pre-literacy skills, as well as later reading (especially reading comprehension) and writing.” Similarly, a focus on enhancing early years practitioners’ knowledge and expertise as part of the provision of high-quality early years education is not contentious (Nutbrown, 2012; Siraj-Blatchford, 2002).

However, whilst there may be consensus about the importance of a policy focus on early years, including early language and practitioners’ knowledge and skills, how this is manifest and enacted in practice is more controversial. There are particular concerns about the rationale for action which Moss (2013; 2007) describes as instrumental, in that childhood institutions are seen as “places first and foremost, for technical practice: places where society can apply powerful human technologies to children to produce predetermined outcomes” (2007, 7). This, it is argued, has flowed from the strong positioning of early education as a preparation

for later schooling (Whitebread and Bingham, 2014; Moss, 2013; Moyles, 2012; House, 2011; OECD, 2006), and, in England, this policy-driven shift in discourse has resulted in a pedagogical shift (Neaum, 2016). This can be characterised as a move away from a Competence-based pedagogical approach towards a Performance-based approach (Bernstein, 2000).

Historically, distinct early years pedagogical practice has been framed within a Competence-based approach (Neaum, 2016; Bernstein, 2000). This approach is predicated on a child as an individual whose learning takes place within a specific context and specific relationships. Therefore, there is an expectation that learning may take different pathways and occur within different time frames, so age-related or pre-defined criteria can only act as a framework for reference. Pedagogically this requires fluidity and responsiveness in the selection, sequence, timing and pace of individual children's learning and professional autonomy to facilitate this. However, the current dominant policy-driven discourse has resulted in an enforced shift towards a Performance-based approach (Neaum, 2016; Bernstein, 2000). This approach positions early years as a preparation for school, and thus knowledge and skills are defined by the next stage of education. This requires pre-determined outcomes to ensure that children acquire appropriate skills and knowledge by a pre-determined point in time. These outcomes become the basis of assessment, mapped to age related norms and assessed against explicit criteria, to manage and monitor readiness for school. Pedagogically therefore, significant control of children's learning is required to ensure that it is aligned with later schooling. This control extends to professional practice, as, in a Performance based pedagogy, practitioner autonomy is subordinate to external curricula and regulation of the selection, sequence, pace and criteria for teaching and learning (Neaum, 2016).

The shift towards a Performance based pedagogy in early years, has, by definition, resulted in a strong focus on practitioners and parents: what they do to manage the sequence, timing and pace of young children's early learning towards pre-determined outcomes in readiness for school. This is reflected in the DFE's (2017) commitment to finding out what works to close the word-gap in the early years, coupled with the development of strategic local authority plans to disseminate what works and ensure that staff and parents have the necessary skills to achieve this aim.

Data from this study led the research team to ponder the ways in which this shifting discourse shapes early years pedagogical practice. This was informed by evidence from the field of psychology on how strongly directed attention enables focus on the task-at-hand but can also powerfully limit what is seen and attended to (Simons and Chabris, 1999). It led to consideration of what practitioners, who are encouraged and incentivised to direct attention to their own practice and focus on language and language-mediated learning, may be missing. We were led to consider what other modalities may support young children's learning, particularly children growing up in disadvantaged families and communities who are the focus of policy efforts, and, the implications of this for early years practitioners' pedagogical understanding and practice.

Research methods

The study

This paper reports a finding from a wider study into children's engagement with literacy provision in free play (Neaum, 2018). The findings from the initial study were stark, so an extended study was undertaken in 2018. In the analysis of the initial study, a finding was generated (Braun and Clark, 2018) around the children's ways of coming-to-know, and this

was therefore included in the analysis of the extended study. This paper reports on this finding, using data from both the initial and extended studies.

The schools

All the schools in the study are in the north east of England. They are situated in some of the most deprived wards in the country (MHCLG [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government], 2019) and have a well-above average to high proportion of pupils eligible for pupil premium funding (additional funding for publicly funded schools in England to support raising attainment of disadvantaged pupils of all abilities). As such, these schools, and many of the pupils in the schools, are the focus of policy to enhance learning in the early years.

Participants

42 children across four settings were involved in the initial and extended studies. The children were all in their final year of nursery school, English speaking, monolingual children who did not have identified special educational needs. They were identified from setting staff's ongoing assessments against the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) criteria as not meeting age-related expectations in communication and language and in literacy. The EYFS is a national, statutory profile (DFE, 2018) of ongoing, formative, observational assessment against age-related criteria, and, summative assessment against stated Early Learning Goals which are outlined in the EYFS (Early Education, 2012). Nursery staff, because they know the parents well, explained the study to the parents and sought consent for each child to be involved. Outcomes from the study were fed back to staff in each setting by the member of the research team who had completed the observations in the setting, and parents were informed in ways that staff deemed appropriate, via established channels of home-school communication.

Data collection

Thirty-two hours of unstructured, narrative observation of 42 children's child-initiated play activity across four settings were completed in the initial and extended studies.

The researchers are all experienced teachers of young children who are now working in academia. This form of naturalistic observation is a recognised qualitative research tool (Cohen et al., 2007) that enables strong ecological validity, and, is also standard practice in formative and summative assessment in ECE (Palaiologou, 2012; Papatheodorou et al., 2011). This means that it is familiar to the children and an aspect of the researchers' professional expertise and experience; both of which are important to the study's ecological validity.

In accordance with the initial study, the observations focused on activities and interactions initiated by the child in the free-play environment, indoors and outside. To ensure consistency in approach to data collection, and prior to the completion of the fieldwork, the lead researcher and team scrutinised examples of the notes from the initial study as a model for the extended study fieldwork. Written, verbatim recordings were made in 15-20 minute time-frames, depending on the flow of the nursery day. Observation notes included but were not limited to: verbatim spoken language (including some aspects of prosody when deemed significant to the nature of the interaction, for example, a command to "Give it me"); other vocalisations; facial expressions; non-verbal interactions; and actions. Researcher interpretations of children's expressions and actions were made in-situ in the context of the observation and noted as contextualised interpretation.

The data were gathered over four weeks in the spring term prior to the children starting statutory schooling the following academic year (September of the same year). During these observations it was anticipated that, at times, adults would join the children's play, or a child would approach an adult. In these instances, the observation would continue but with a distinction made in the notes and later in the analysis, between child-initiated play and interaction, and adult-initiated play and interaction. Methodologically, this distinction was not problematic.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken within a constructivist paradigm. This recognises that researchers are subjectively and interactively in relationship with what can be known (Annels, 1996). Thus, as Annels (1996) notes, knowledge is created through interpretation that aims for informed and sophisticated consensus-constructions to provide a reconstructive understanding of a phenomenon.

Transcripts were analysed by the team over three dedicated days using the taxonomies and codes developed in the initial study (Neaum, 2018). We began, through discussion and examples from the initial study, by developing a shared understanding of the taxonomies and codes. Each member of the team then read through their transcripts to familiarise themselves with their data, then, using the taxonomies and codes from the initial study they annotated and coded their transcripts. The research team were also able to identify and code for aspects of the data not already coded. As they worked on the transcripts, the lead researcher discussed data interpretations with individuals, aiming for consistency across the team. Data were then scrutinised for veracity by each research team member talking the team through their data for each taxonomy/code. The team then worked together to collate data from the annotations and coding, and a content analysis of this was undertaken to identify outcomes of

the study. Outcomes were then charted by the lead researcher, Sally Neaum, and returned to the team for checking prior to a dedicated day for discussion and interpretation of the outcomes. This discussion was informed by Gorard (2013) and White's (2017) work on warranting claims by getting into the habit of thinking about rival explanations of data as a way towards identifying research claims with high veracity and the lowest level of assumption.

Findings

The data showed that 25 of the 42 children, across the four settings, engaged in observable instances of silent, intensive, wholly focused, watching of other children and adults working at activities. When engaged in this way, the children stood in close proximity to the activity without attempting to be physically involved, but their participation was wholly active through watching and listening, in an engaged, alert and fulsome way.

Snack bar. Target child (TC) and two children there (C1) (C2). Teacher comes over briefly.

Start: 14.47

TC: Stands at edge of table. Watches.

C1: Touches TC sticker. Takes a breadstick.

TC: Watches C1. Intense, head cocked. Focus on the crunching breadstick. Gaze intense, unmoving.

Teacher: Gives directions to C2 and comments on crunchy apple. TC strong focus on teachers face.

TC: Shifts gaze to C2 crunching apple. Upright, still, gaze intense.

TC: Watches. Holds gaze on C2; holds as C1 bumps him.

TC: Watches, watches, watches, strong focus on C2 biting apple. Attention captured.

End: 14.50

Threading activity at table in nursery. Teacher and group of children at table; target child (TC) stands leaning on table.

Start: 13.48

Teacher: Recalls story, asks who was in the story.

TC: Watches, listens.

Teacher: Explains task of making a necklace for grandma. Holds up beads, "What colour is this?"

Children: Call out, "Blue, red..." TC: No response, watches.

TC: Stands, watches, intensive, still, silent.

C1: Threads pattern, blue, red, blue, red.

TC: Moves closer. Watches C1, focused. Stare like.
Teacher to C1: "Let's count them, 1-2-3..."
TC: Watches, intense, still, silent.
Teacher: Points at beads, says, "Red, blue, red, blue... what's next?"
C1: "Yellow, green..."
TC: Watches, listens, alert, involved, silent, still.
Teacher: "...blue, red, blue, red..." C1 joins in with teacher.
TC: Listens, watches, alert, still.
End: 13.51

Contextualising annotations/interpretations completed in the field, and discursive interpretative analysis of the data, supported the observations made. Words and phrases used in the annotations/interpretations of what was observed reflected the intensity of the children's watching and listening, for example: completely still; gaze focused and intense; unmoving; strong focus; staring; stasis; focus remained when bumped into; very close to the table/teacher; head cocked, gaze intense; captured attention; close to activity; silent; intense watching; like a stare that needed to be broken; no-response to what's around; fulsome; straight-backed, statue like; edged in closer then still; alert stance – silent. In contrast, fieldnotes, contextualising annotations and discursive interpretation of other, less intense, instances of watching (n=5 occurrences), noted: arms swinging; scanning eye gaze; hand on dough, squeezing; fiddling with...; turns and twist – responds; varied gaze; turned to noise.

The quality of what was observed is not easy to convey in language, although clear when seen, but words such as intense, intensive, active, alert, focused, and fulsome, give a sense of the magnitude of the children's watching and listening.

Discussion

Positive outcomes from learning modalities of imitation, silence, observation and non-verbal interaction are documented across a range of areas (Colliver and Arguel, 2018; Gampe, Brauer, and Daum, 2016; Kultti, 2015; Chen, Masur and Mcnamee, 2011; Jones 2009; Lindahl and Pramling Samuelsson, 2002; Didow and Eckerman, 2001; Hanna and Meltzoff).

For example, Didow and Eckerman, (2001) conclude that non-verbal imitative games facilitate young children's skill in verbal discourse, namely, responding verbally to adult's speech in connected topics, and maintaining topically connected responses during successive turns. Gampe, Brauer, and Daum (2016) similarly investigated whether action imitation is beneficial for first language acquisition. They demonstrated that 36-month-old children were able to learn the labels of different actions through observing the experimenter producing the action, and conclude that this suggests that action imitation is beneficial for verb learning. Colliver and Arguel (2018) focused on whether imitation could affect children's choice of activity, and thus be a way in which adults can influence the play choices of young children. Their results indicated that more numeracy concepts were evident in the play of children who had been exposed to adult demonstrations of numeracy activity. Marcus et al.'s (2016) study concludes similarly, that young children observe and notice maths content in their own and other children's play. More broadly, Hanna and Meltzoff (1993) showed that, in comparison to a control group, infants demonstrated imitative social learning from peers that was retained across time and change of context, and, Lindahl and Pramling Samuelsson (2002) cite a range of studies that demonstrate how imitation is interwoven in the strategies that young children use for learning. Theoretically, Tomasello's (1997, 45) work on children's learning concludes that "imitation leads to the accumulation of knowledge" and the work of Piaget (1896-1980) and Bandura (1925-) support learning through observation. Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of situated learning also emphasises the role of observation and imitation, in the process of participants moving from legitimate peripheral participation into full participation in a given community.

However, what was observed was a very particular version of this learning modality. As observed, it was an epistemic attitude that flowed from the child, one of non-verbal, wonderment or perplexity (Stokhof et al., 2017), focused and intense; the child in *flow*

(Csikszentmihalyi, [1992] 2002). This resonated most strongly with Rogoff's concept of *Intent Participation* (Rogoff et al., 2003). *Intent Participation* (also referred to as Learning by *Observation and Pitching In* [LOPI] (Rogoff, Mejía-Arauz and Correa-Chávez, 2015)) refers to a modality of learning that involves "keen observation and listening-in" (Rogoff et al., 2003, 177) as an "act of participation....in anticipation of, or in the process of, engaging in an endeavour" (178). It is an active and engaged process that involves attentiveness and intentionality. This concept most clearly characterises the ways in which the children were observed participating in the learning environment: silent, keen, intense observation, and attentive, fulsome, focused, listening-in. What is particularly resonant in articulating what was observed as *Intent Participation* is that keen observation and listening-in are, in Rogoff et al.'s (2003, 1993) work, regarded as a modality of participation, not just a prelude to more conventional learning modalities. Their work does trace the development of this into other modalities of participation, but, importantly, also articulates it as participation alongside other modalities.

Rogoff et al.'s work flows from ethnographic studies of ways of learning in families and communities in western and non-western traditions. The ethnographic observations (Rogoff et al., 2003) were also explored through empirical studies that examined key cultural differences in how toddlers and caregivers in different cultural communities collaborated in shared activities (Rogoff et al., 1993). The work concludes that it is important that we understand not only how children learn through instruction that is managed by adults, but also that they learn through keen observation and listening-in. Shirley Brice-Heath (1993, 176), in her commentary on the empirical work, highlights what we need to consider pedagogically in this modality. She argues that the strong findings should serve as a constant reminder of the bias towards verbal communication, and greater attention needs to be given

to “distal arrangements of activity and non-verbal signals of attention to visual and kinaesthetic cues from the environment to the learner”. Rogoff et al. (2003) also argue that *Intent Participation* is often overlooked or taken for granted in schooling and research, because we are so familiar with, and focused on, other learning modalities.

Clearly, this study can only warrant claims to have observed children engaged in keen observation and listening-in, as this study didn't allow for further observation or analysis of what happened next. However, it has been shown that this high level of focus and engagement engenders a forward momentum in children's learning, indeed, Rogoff et al.'s (2003, 1993) ethnographic and empirical work traced the learning trajectory, demonstrating how keen observation and listening-in leads to learning. There is other evidence for this assumption. The Leuven Involvement Scales (Laevers, 1994, 1994a) make an explicit link between involvement and learning. Studies of very young children's learning, and the resulting observation-based tool for early years practitioners, describe involvement that leads to learning as a narrowing of attention, strong motivation, fascination and an exploratory drive; an openness to stimuli and an intensity in perceptual and cognitive functioning lacking in other types of activity. This description of involvement aligns with what was observed in this study, and with the notion of *Intent Participation*. Laevers (2015) argues, that it is the intense mental activity involved that is favourable to development and learning as it naturally occurs in the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). Supporting evidence also comes from sociocultural study of interest as a learning phenomenon. Interest is foundational to *Intent Participation* in that it begins with the child being drawn by their interest to watching and listening-in. Birbili (2018), in her empirical work critiquing the taken-for-granted early years pedagogical rhetoric of interest, cites Dewey (1913), noting his claim that interest leads to attentiveness and involvement in learning without external pressure. This is

supported by Hedges (2018) who concludes that personal interest has both a psychological quality and motivational attributes and can provide a source of curiosity, motivation and engagement in learning. A recent empirical study by Colliver and Aruguel, (2018), adds weight to this supposition. Using Rogoff's work as the basis of their study Colliver and Arugel (2018) tested the effects of children's observation of literacy and numeracy practices demonstrated by adults at home and in settings. They found that children's observation of the demonstrations provoked interest and then engagement in the activity, which, in turn, had measurable impacts on the children's literacy and numeracy. Thus, we can conclude that learning was highly likely to be taking place as the children engaged in *Intent Participation*; watching and listening-in to peers and adults at activities.

Another aspect of this finding that was significant is that observation as a modality of learning is often linked to very young children (Kultti, 2015; Williamson and Brand, 2014; Jones, 2009; Lindahl and Pramling Samuelsson, 2002; Meltzoff, 1993). This includes Rogoff et al's (1993) empirical work, which was with children aged 12-24 months. Our work was with children who were assessed as not meeting age-related-expectations, thus, developmentally at an earlier stage than their chronological age. *Intent Participation*, it can thus be argued, is an appropriate and developmentally useful learning modality for these children, both in relation to their developmental maturation, and the context in which they are growing up. Chen, Masur and McNamee (2010) note this in their work, commenting that both maturation and contextual variables play a role in the development of learning approaches. This is significant in the wider context of concerns about a lack of equality in access to learning in early years pedagogical spaces. Simpson et. al (2017, 10) in their work examining practitioners' ways of working with children growing up in poverty, conclude that there is a "discernible poverty blindness with limited focus on equality as pedagogical

space”. Similarly, Wood (2014) and Kalliali (2014) argue that, not all children have easy access to the provision in ECE, that issues of competency, agency, interests and self-interest, relate to access within expectations of the learner and learning in ECE. Moss (2000) and Bradbury (2013) conclude similarly, that restrictive notions of a ‘good learner’ can work systematically to exclude some children from success. This school knowledge, they argue, is more visible and inclusive to middle-class children who, in turn, are most likely to benefit from a restrictive pedagogy, one that emphasises control of the selection, sequence pace and criteria of teaching and learning (Neaum, 2016). In the context of these conclusions, the observed learning modality of *Intent participation* is thus significant. For these children, growing up in poverty, and assessed as developmentally younger than their chronological age, engagement in *Intent Participation* can be interpreted as an opening up of the pedagogical space through a learning modality that enabled them to engage and learn.

One other thought, at perhaps a more esoteric level, is the effect on the child’s meaning-making when adults consistently mediate experiences through language. As with previous arguments, it poses the question of whether in our desire to support children’s language learning, and meaning-making through language, we limit the scope of the child’s in-the-moment-experience. In a series of lectures, Adyashanti (2011) talks about the potential of a child’s ‘seeing’, arguing that when you mediate experiences with language the child will no longer ‘see’, for example, a bird in nature; they will forget what it is to look up and see an extraordinary, wondrous, winged-being taking flight. This, he argues, is because once we learn to name things, we think that we know what it is, so we look and no longer see a winged life-form soaring through the sky, we see a ‘bird’, and we almost discount it. We cannot know what the child is perceiving as they watch and listen-in, so, whilst mediation of experience through language is clearly necessary to learning and understanding, this learning

modality suggests a pedagogy that includes an in-the-moment pedagogical judgement about when to hold the space and allow emergent sensory enquiry that includes stillness and silence.

Thus, it can be argued that developmentally young children growing up in poverty would particularly benefit from practitioners having an awareness of, and pedagogical response to, *Intent Participation* as a learning modality.

This study, therefore, raises questions about the current policy-led foci in ECE, particularly for children who are the focus of policy to ameliorate the impact of poverty.

- How does this learning modality sit within the current strong foci on adult-led pedagogy practices and language and language-mediated learning?
- Does a lack of awareness of child-led modes of participation and coming-to-know make children's learning vulnerable to an expectation of "busyness" (a pedagogy of participation through doing and an emphasis on adult-focused sequencing, timing and pace of language-based and language-mediated learning) which may cut across this mode of participation?
- Does a combination of a lack of awareness of different learning modalities and the emphasis on pedagogical practices of adult-led language-based busy engagement, potentially compound disadvantage in further limiting some children's access to learning opportunities in ECE (Simpson et al., 2017; Wood, 2014; Kalliala, 2014; Bradbury, 2013; Moss, 2000)?

These questions remain, and whilst this study argues for *Intent Participation* to be considered as a learning modality in ECE, there is clearly more to understand about the role of watching and listening-in in setting-based learning This includes a better understanding of the

intersection of modalities, for example, the ways in which language contributes positively to *Intent Participation*, and what this means pedagogically. Brice-Heath (1993, 178) touches on this, commenting that, in terms of adult interaction, when what is being attended to by the learner is nonverbal, adults may need to “move from presentative deictics to those that are expressive or directive, or the like, to channel perception towards adult-preferred foci of learning”.

Conclusion and implications for practice.

Empirical work focused primarily on young children’s learning approaches has been limited. Of the five core dimensions of early development and learning approaches to learning are the least understood and the least researched.

Chen, Masur and McNamee (2011, 1137)

This study explores young children’s learning approaches, questioning whether, in the context of supporting children who are growing up in poverty, a strong focus on adult pedagogy and language means that we are missing a pedagogical opportunity of young children coming-to-know in a way that they bring to the pedagogical space. This, it is argued, may be particularly important for children whose developmental level and early experiences are not aligned with curriculum expectations. Engaging in *Intent Participation*, it is argued, could enable these children to participate in learning in a way that they can; a way that has the potential to open up their access to learning. Clearly, the conclusions drawn are not an argument against a focus on what adults do, language learning, and language-mediated learning, as these have been shown to be important. Rather, it is an argument for pedagogical practices that focus on a range of learning modalities: an expansive concept and enactment of pedagogy in the early years.

This argument for an expansive approach to early years pedagogy, aligns with the distinct early years pedagogical practice framed within a Competence-based approach (Neaum, 2016). It recognises children as individual, with individual interests and ways of engaging in learning. It acknowledges that children's learning may take different pathways and occur within different time frames and it allows for shared control of the selection, sequence, timing and pace of individual children's learning. Thus, there is a coherence between the ways in which these children engaged in learning and long-established pedagogical practices in early years; practices which have been challenged as early years has increasingly become the site for school readiness with discourses of intervention and preparation, and an emphasis on normativity and performativity (Chesworth, 2018; Moss, 2013; Miller and Hevey, 2012; Moyles, 2012; House, 2011). So, in opening up this pedagogical question for consideration, this study continues the debate framed in Chesworth's (2018) critical question - what counts as valid knowledge and legitimate modes of becoming knowledgeable in early years education?

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