

Listen to us, grown-ups! A Research on Children's Diaries during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ascoltateci, grandi! Una ricerca sui diari dei bambini durante la pandemia da COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The article presents the preliminary analysis of Italian children's diaries during the COVID-19 lockdown. The outbreak of the disease has posed great challenges to people's daily lives and often children's perspectives have been overlooked. We conducted a diary study with 28 pre-adolescents in the North-East of Italy to grasp their first-person perspective on this extraordinary event. We considered a number of relevant examples that are representative of their ideas, opinions and thoughts on the pandemic phases, family life, and education. Diaries are used as ecocultural qualitative methods able to illustrate the dynamics of children's experiences and their sense-making, and to provide useful insights for educators.

L'articolo presenta un'analisi preliminare dei diari di alcuni bambini italiani durante il lockdown da Covid-19. Lo scoppio della pandemia ha posto grandi sfide alla vita quotidiana delle persone, e spesso le prospettive dei bambini sono state trascurate. Abbiamo condotto uno "studio di diario" su 28 pre-adolescenti del Nord-Est d'Italia per cogliere la loro prospettiva su questo straordinario evento. Sono stati considerati una serie di esempi rilevanti rappresentativi delle loro idee, opinioni e pensieri sulle diverse fasi della pandemia, la vita familiare e l'istruzione. I diari sono stati utilizzati perché metodi qualitativi eco-culturali in grado di illustrare la dinamica delle esperienze dei bambini e i loro modi di dar senso a quanto accade. Inoltre vogliono essere spunti di riflessione per gli educatori.

KEYWORDS

Childrens' First-Person Perspective; Schooling; Covid-19, Diary Study; Imagination.

Prospettiva dei Bambini; Scuola; Covid-19; Diari; Immaginazione.

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Introduction

Children and adolescents have seldom been the topic of public debate during the first emergency phase of the SARS-COV2 (COVID-19) pandemic that resulted in total lockdowns in countries like China and Italy. In the wake of fighting against this new disease, it seemed that the most vulnerable population was represented by elders. Thus, young people were considered mainly in relation to the risk that they could infect their grandparents. The focus shifted on young people when countries started to discuss the end of the lockdown and the progressive resuming of everyday activities, including the health and logistic issues of reopening schools (Vermund & Pitzer, 2020).

During the lockdown, children and adolescents were exposed to a flow of discourses and media messages about the pandemic as well as a dramatic change in their daily routines (Dalton, Rapa & Stein, 2020). Reasonably, a great deal of the initial studies on the effect of pandemic and social isolation on children and adolescents focused on the risk factors that such an emergency condition could produce on the youth's psychological well-being (Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore & Fasolo, 2020; Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang & Jiang, 2020). Nevertheless, since the beginning it was emerging the need to focus not only on the risk factors but also on children's and adolescents' capabilities to cope with the new situation (Ellis, Dumas & Forbes, 2020). As it usually happens, research was done *on* children and adolescents rather than *with* them (Crivello, Camfield & Woodhead, 2009).

Very little is known about the first-person experience of millions of children and adolescents during the lockdown and how the pandemic has affected their meaning-making, their lives and their development. Contemporary Western societies have loosened the sense of community and consider the individual only from the perspective of the productive subject. Consequently, children are seen either as the exclusive responsibility of the parents or as non-legitimated epistemic subjects, having no saying in the matter (Havi & Györfy, 2014). This also applies to educational practice, in which children are by definition in a position of epistemic inferiority, based on the system of values that guides the organization of the school institution (Tateo, 2019). On the contrary, children are people with full right to be heard and to be taken care of by the community and by formal, informal and non-formal professionals in education who work with them (Borroughs & Tollefson, 2016). If one is interested in knowing how children have experienced the lockdown and the social isolation from everyday school life, the right thing to do is ask them directly.

In particular, we were interested in understanding how pre-adolescents made sense of the lockdown experience and the new organization of school activities. We were also interested in observing the developmental aspect of children's reflection as it unfolded over time. Thus, the methodology of qualitative diary study seemed the most suitable to analyse the first-person experiences of pre-adolescent pupils from Venetian schools, one of the hardest hit Italian regions in social, emotional and economic terms. We have asked the children to keep diaries which describe their daily routines and rhythms of their life, fears, hopes, friendships and loneliness. The objective of this exploratory study was *to understand how pre-adolescents make meaning of the lockdown experience and the changes in schooling routines from their own first-person perspective, in order to gain valuable insights for the teachers to deal with children affected by such an unusual event*. The collection ended in the summer and the data are currently being analysed. In this article, we present the results of a preliminary analysis that allowed

us to define some relevant emerging themes, which will guide the rest of the data analysis process.

1. The use of diaries as method of investigation

The term “diary study” covers a large range of methods in qualitative and mixed-method research (Alaszewski, 2006; Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003; Janssens, Bos, Rosmalen, Wichers & Riese, 2018). Since the early times of qualitative social research it has been used as a powerful methodological tool to link the personal experience to the oral collective history (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958). Diaries also allow the participant to link the levels of narrativity and reflexivity (Janesick, 1999), providing a richer insight into the first-person perspective. Diaries can take different forms: from a simple one limited to recording activities or events without comments on the part of the authors to more complex forms that contain the author’s personal ideas, reflections and explorations of one’s feelings (Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003). Besides, diaries are also externalized tools of self-reflection, self-surveillance and self-regulation. Janssens, Bos, Rosmalen, Wichers & Riese (2018) provide an overview of the use of diary-based tools to study regularities in people’s everyday conduct, showing how they can also serve quantitative research designs that need to guarantee participants’ regularity in expected behaviours. The diary as a tool in self-reflection and personal identity is also used in therapy. According to Faccio, Turco and Iudici (2019), writing a diary corresponds to self-writing where the writer becomes at the same time the film director and the protagonist of her own story. This is a privileged condition for suffering people who are unable to change their own narration: the patient’s diary could be seen as a self-portrait written under the psychotherapist’s gaze (Fioretti & Smorti, 2015). Diaries are widely used as a method in stress studies, both as a tool for data collection and for stress regulation (Alford, Malouff & Osland, 2005). Recently, diary studies have once again become popular also thanks to the affordability of technological devices and the diffusion of smartphones (Broderick, 2008; Buchwald, Schantz-Laursen & Delmar, 2009; Rönkä, Sevón, Rääkkönen *et al.* 2017).

Considering the flexibility of the diary methodology and its capability to capture everyday experience, we decided to use it with pre-adolescents during the lockdown. Diary methods are useful when dealing with phenomena that are not accessible to observation (e.g. internal processes such as feelings), when observations in the person’s natural setting may be limited for reasons beyond our control or because the phenomena are infrequent and/or unpredictable (Hormuth 1986). Diary methods also help analyse events, which cannot be reliably remembered retrospectively. Besides, the demands on memory becomes less of an issue because a diary moves closer to real-time data collection as the period of time being assessed is reduced. With less demand on memory, recall biases associated with the frequency, saliency and recency of an event may be less common and may lead to more accurate reports (McAuliffe, Di Francesco, & Reed, 2007). Since diary methods are designed to assess relatively recent events, respondents are also often able to provide greater details about their behaviour.

Diary studies concern naturally occurring phenomena: “life as it is lived”, as claimed by Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli (2003). Diary studies can examine phenomena that are difficult or impossible to study in the laboratory. For example, it would seem to be difficult to study the development of close relationships, particularly intimate relationships, in a fixed, controlled laboratory setting. Their main benefits

are: ecological validity, the analysis of influence of the context, the examination of changes over time periods, and the study of interpersonal differences (Rausch, 2013; 2014).

As described in other qualitative studies (Gabb, 2009; Jensen, 2008; Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton & Ciske, 2005; Hewitt, Bamundo, Day & Harvey, 2007), diaries are generally used in combination with questionnaires and participatory action researches and they can shed light into participants' knowledge, behaviours and feelings (Harvey, 2011).

In our case, the particular conditions of living in one of the first areas affected by the total lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic required a methodology able to access children's lived experience. We looked for a "child-focused and participatory research methodology" (Crivello, Camfield & Woodhead, 2009, p. 51) that allowed pre-adolescent voices to become visible and to foster reflections in educators and caregivers.

2. Participants and context

The North-East of Italy was one of the first European regions affected by the pandemic, officially since February 2020. At the beginning of March 2020, the Veneto region was declared a "red zone" by the Italian Government. Schools, public offices, sports, shops and all open air activities were forbidden. The police were stopping everybody outside without a specific permission. There was a general atmosphere of fear and anxiety and the media obsessively reported about the pandemic and the number of victims. Such a climate relegated at the margins the situation of schools that had to rapidly set up distance learning solutions. Moreover, children were taken into account only as the total lockdown forced parents to work from home while taking care of their kids or helping them with online lessons¹. The situation also brought forward the structural social inequalities related to distance learning: not every family had the possibility of having more than one computer and a broadband connection at home (Bonacini & Murat, 2020). Low income and numerous families had to face serious problems to have parents working from home and children attending online classrooms at the same time.

As we wanted to make visible the children's first-person point of view on such a complex situation, we selected a group of pre-adolescents in the school where one of the authors is teaching. The school was located in a middle-size town in the red zone. We selected 28 participants on a voluntary base, aged between 10-11 years (8 M; 20 F).

3. Data collection

As we were interested in collecting narrative accounts on covid-19, including students' thoughts, personal perceptions of the phenomenon, everyday routines and peer relationships, as participants experienced them, we did not schedule a fixed

1 According to Istat (2020) data for 2018-2019, 14.3% of families with at least one minor do not have a computer or tablet available at home. Furthermore, only in 22.2% of families, each member has an individual PC or tablet available. Except for the latter group, in light of the increase in smart working activities of parents, the absence of a personal device represents an additional barrier to participation (Dario et al., 2020).

frequency or a beep signal (Janssens, Bos, Rosmalen, Wichers & Riese, 2018). Students were informed about the scope of the study and parental consent was obtained. Participants were given the following instructions:

Create a diary, a diary page in which you tell us how you are living the moment, what is the experience of a boy / girl of your age. You can write about your thoughts, your actions, your feelings and other meaningful elements in your life. If you want, you can use a video and insert images in your work.

Diaries were collected from March (the official beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown was March 8th, 2020) to September (the end of the total lockdown and the progressive resuming of everyday activities began in July). Participants had the complete freedom to choose the medium: paper-and-pencil, text files, slides, videos. We did not want to limit children's creativity and freedom of expression and we wanted to also allow children with linguistic barriers or special needs to participate. Of course, most of the diaries entries refer to the first phase of the pandemic during the total lockdown. Each participant wrote at least one page of a diary.

4. Data Analysis

Textual diaries have been transcribed to have a homogeneous base of data, while video diaries and slides will be analysed as visual data. We present a preliminary analysis of the data through a thematic content analysis. After a careful reading of the diary entries, the authors have adopted an inductive data-driven approach (without prior assumptions) in order to identify potential key themes (Hammersley, 2013). We report a first overview of children's thoughts, emotions, perceptions that emerged during the pandemic and how they changed over time. Participants' diaries were cited by coding them without using their names in accordance with privacy policy. In this regard, individuals were numbered and coded P. Any reference that could identify participants, such as the name of the town, has been replaced with [...].

4.1 *First phase: The emergency and the lockdown*

In the wake of the total lockdown, in early March 2020, children's diary entries report fears and anxieties, while some others seem to deny the existence of the situation. The tendency to minimize and deny, exhibited by some children, is a typical human response in emergencies as described by Proulx (1993): unclear situations lead to a sense of confusion because one cannot make sense of what is happening.

P. 1: The Corona virus is a virus of Chinese origin that appeared in Italy in late February. It shows flu-like symptoms ... I try not to get scared.

P. 3: I wanted to write on Coronavirus. Because of this virus, we kids had to stay home for about a month. It is springtime and it is getting a bit warm. In the past, we could meet in the park but unfortunately because of this virus we have to remain locked up in the house.

P4: Since the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, I have always lived in anxiety, hoping that it will not affect me, my family or my relatives.

Another relevant dimension is the role of media in the elaboration of children's experience. Adults sometimes think that young people should be protected and shielded from media messages. On the contrary, diary entries show that children take an interest in social, local and national political issues:

P. 5: I should have gone to grandma's on Thursday, but since Prime Minister Conte² decided that we must stay at home, I stayed home “;

P. 6: It seems that many people are going crazy: when you enter the supermarket there are people with carts full of food and water, as if we were facing the third world war. In addition, stores have run out of disinfectants. Masks and gloves are nowhere to be found.

P. 14 (08/03/2020): Dear diary, I am in the Red Zone. This means that Treviso County, the entire region of Lombardy and 14 other counties are closed off... Prime Minister Conte together with the Italian government has decided to limit inbound and outbound traffic to prevent infections. My mother had to call the hospital, where she works, to find out if she needed a special certificate to reach the Friuli Venezia Giulia region (where the woman works).

Reading their writings, it is unrealistic to think that children do not have access to news in a *hypermedialized* world. More important is the role of mediation that adults can play (Wang, Zhang, Zhao, Zhang & Jiang, 2020) or the factor of risk represented by the unconscious distress that adults can transmit to their children (Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore & Fasolo, 2020).

It is understandable that the first concern of research has been to assess the consequences of the lockdown on children's mental health, focusing on the dimension of trauma. However, reading children's diaries, one becomes aware of the more “existential” dimension of their life during the pandemic.

P. 12: This whole situation has been very difficult to deal with because it is not good for an eleven-year-old girl to stay indoors all day. On the positive side, we had the opportunity to spend more time with the family, that is true, on the negative side, after a while the situation became difficult and I began to feel the need for a change of scenery and just opening the window won't do it).

P. 4: Since the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, I have always lived in anxiety, hoping that it will not affect me, my family or my relatives. When I go out to play with my friends, I always stay close to home. I would like to go for a walk with my friends around town but they (parents) don't let me. And in the evening when I watch the news and I see that there are more and more infections and the entire country is a red zone, I become even more frightened. I would like to go places where there are lots of people: to go shopping, get a croissant at the café or go to the newsstand to get a pencil or some stickers. [...] Hopefully, if we stay at home helping each other, this epidemic will disappear.

In the lockdown phase of the emergency, the children evoked a different perception of time and space.

P. 3: We kids had to stay home for about a month. It is springtime and it is getting a bit warm. In the past, we could meet in the park but unfortunately because of this virus we have to remain locked up in the house.

2 Italian Prime Minister during the pandemic.

P. 10: I had to change my routine. I can't go to school but still try to do the assigned homework. I can no longer go to the gym for training or to games on Sundays. I can't even go to catechism! Even though it is across the street from my house!

The social distancing represented by the mask and the distance of at least one meter is far from the world of these pre-adolescents who are used to live relationally, share, recognize and satisfy their immediate needs, so much so that children feel the need to escape from that unpleasant situation by using their imagination and fantasy.

P. 4: This is a difficult period for my family and me. I can't go out anymore, I can't go for walks with my sisters, my mom and my dog, I can't meet my friends, I can't go to school ... The only place I can go to is my fantasy. I think I'm traveling the world, or I imagine I'm Alice in Wonderland, because I feel just like that. I imagine places that don't exist in the real world but exist in my world where I am the boss and I also think that the coronavirus does not exist. Sometimes I sit by the window and look at things from another perspective, like I raise my eyes and see that the sky is gray but I imagine the sunset all colorful and so beautiful that I can't take my eyes off it. I see that the streets are deserted, lifeless, but in my mind they are full of everything and more. But then I open my eyes again and I see that it is not so, but it would be nice! In fact, it is because dreams can come true, so everything will return as before, at least I hope so. But if I believe it, the whole world can believe it, for the moment it is just my mind that is traveling in the stream of thoughts. But I hope that everything we are experiencing today ends soon, and so we can go back to the life we knew before.

Mind wandering and imagination create spaces for meaning-making through narratives, to explore and expand alternative dimensions of reality, but also to cultivate hope and resilience.

P. 9 (14/03/2020): I wanted to talk to you [the diary] about two things that have helped me a lot these days: imagination and fantasy! For example, every now and then, I imagine funny situations like those found in puzzles! (she refers to the comics in these specific magazines). Or that my house is a beautiful green garden with: trees, flowers, herbs ... Instead when there is a program on TV with episodes that I have already seen a thousand times, I start to imagine being with them (she refers to the characters) but I introduce new characters. I have to admit that I have a lot of imagination!!

4.2 *School life and the pandemics: children's ideas*

One of the biggest challenges for children and their families during the pandemic was the new setting of schooling. All teaching went online and the Italian educational system was definitely not prepared for it. A long set up period was required. During the pandemic children attended school differently. At home, they often shared the learning spaces and time with parents and siblings (e.g. attending online classes in the same room and sharing the same e-learning platforms). The participants seldom utilized digital technologies for learning. They used them for fun and socializing. Thus, it is very important to grasp their take on how technology becomes a place of learning that plays an important role in their socialization and supports the return to normality.

P. 8: The days are quite beautiful and I am outdoors in the garden playing, I can see my classmates and teachers in the virtual classroom and at least here I burst out laughing!!!!!!

P. 7: Sometimes I miss my days at school but above all I miss my classmates.

In the beginning, children experience the opposition between face-to-face and distant interactions. One can expect that they miss the daily encounter with the peers and the teachers. However, they seem to rapidly develop personal resources that turn the unfamiliar context of distance learning into an opportunity to maintain their relationships.

P. 13: One of the few things I like to do is visit the homework site and talk to Viola and Matilde, and all my other classmates.

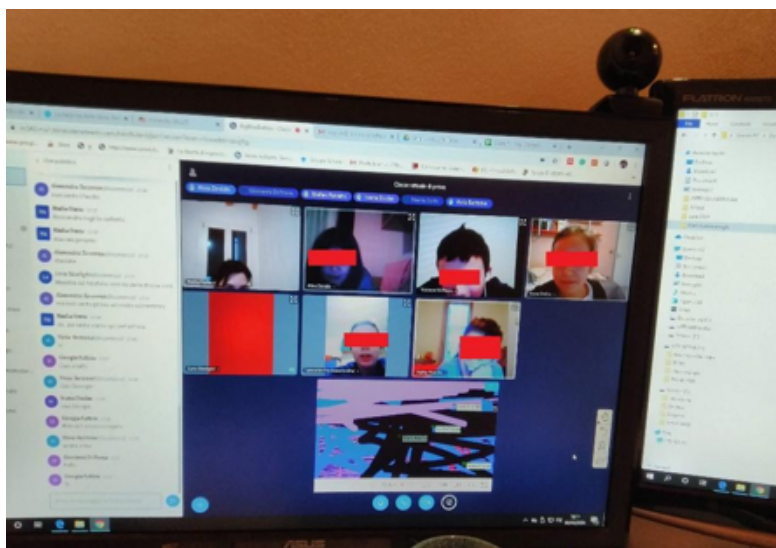


Figure 1. the photo shows an online lesson attended by children: they are drawing on the screen and laughing

There has been an active debate worldwide about the pros and cons of online learning versus face-to-face. Some apocalyptic perspectives have been stressing the great impact that few months of home schooling could have on children's development. Some have defended the benefits of online learning beyond the emergency situation (Dawhan, 2020). Again, one can find in the children's perspective a more balanced position.

P. 14: (14/04/2020) Dear diary, today the Easter holidays are over and my live lessons with the teachers and my classmates resume.

They have been able to adapt to the new learning situation and to cope with the difficulties. At the end, they are of course happy to meet their friends again.

4.3 *Third phase: the long way back to a new normality*

By May 2020, the figures of the pandemic began to seem under control and the Italian national and local governments began the progressive reopening. A new atmosphere, with mixed feelings of hope, anxiety and expectations, is mirrored in children's diaries and elaborated in their personal perspective. From the extraordinary nature of the event, children describe the return to a new normality.

P. 14 (01/05/2020). Dear Diary, today is May 1st, Labor Day, and we are all celebrating together. We all ate together, we are lucky because we have a very large garden and there are many of us in the family, and therefore we can all be together outside without getting bored.

P. 14 (03/05/2020). Dear Diary, today is grandma's birthday, she turns 75, we surprised by giving her some beautiful gifts. At lunch we made her believe that the gift was just a plant. Since my mom was working, we had the party in the evening, outside in the gazebo. She (the grandmother) was amazed seeing the other two gifts she did not expect, SURPRISE!!!!!!

P. 11 (07/19/2020) I went on vacation to Austria because my sister went camping in Falcade (a town near the border between Italy and Austria). So my parents and I continued on to Austria. Once we arrived at our friends' house, we had dinner with them (and continued to do so every day); then we unpacked.

The joy of returning to social life is very clear in the words of the participants. Besides, one can see how their understanding of "family" is not restricted to the nuclear group. However, the diaries' entries during the whole study reveal not only the fears and sadness of lockdown, but also great personal force and compassion in pre-adolescents.

Conclusions

We have used pre-adolescents' diaries during the pandemic to have an idea of their first-person perspective and to understand how they made meaning of this extraordinary experience. So far, we have presented only a preliminary analysis of the data and we are aware of the limitations on this account. First, we have considered only a local context, although it was one of the most seriously affected by the pandemic. Secondly, we have performed only an interpretative analysis and a more systematic thematization of the data is under development. However, it is already possible to elaborate some initial reflections.

When children write about their experience during the pandemic, they do not just mention fears, trauma or anxiety. Of course, they show awareness of the situation and of adults' concerns. They also report preoccupation and sadness. However, they seem resourceful and able to reflect upon both the positive and negative aspects of the situation. Our preliminary reading has identified some leading themes for further analysis.

The first theme is the temporal development of the experience. Developmental and educational psychology often forgets that the object of study is the growing person, thus we need to use methodologies able to grasp the developmental process in its unfolding (Valsiner, 2007). The diary method made visible the meaning-making process during the different phases of the pandemic.

The second theme is the management of anxiety and fear typical of emergency situations (Cinceri, 2001; Pietrantoni & Prati, 2009) and the sense of de-realization:

a different perception of time and space. This feeling is described well by Heidegger when he speaks of “being thrown”. (see for instance P.05 “*These are very difficult times for me and my family. I can’t go out anymore, I can’t go for walks with my sisters, my mom and my dog, I can’t meet my friends, I can’t go to school ... The only place I can find refuge in is my fantasy*”). The repetitive children’s narratives concerning covid-19 health and governmental policies as reported by the media and in the news, has made it more necessary than ever to provide correct information and learning that does not throw minors into a panic.

The third theme is how participants build their meaningful resources to cope with the new situation. For instance, children describe socialization, at least online, as necessary to maintain their well-being during the pandemic. The important implication of educators is the necessity to build virtual spaces in which the participants feel in communion with others (Dario, Emili, Standler, 2020). Children mentioned relationship as a key element of their life and development but they don’t question the means used to create it but its use. In this sense, they seem more critical than many adults.

The fourth theme is the needed dialogical confrontation and relationship with “otherness” (Tarda, 2015) that children stress as fundamental to become resilient and to just hang in there. In this sense, the pandemic has significantly increased attention toward the collective welfare and the educational community (Veggetti, 2020). The personalistic perspective is avoided in favour of a collective, proactive and generative dimension involving everyone: children, teachers, parents and others.

The fifth theme concerns how the pandemic has further evidenced the educational iniquities towards weaker subjects and students with Special needs (SEN). They are often absent during rollcalls and thus become invisible. No one even mentions them in the diaries! Those who up to the day before were regular classmates, suddenly disappear from their narrations.

They have become invisible for at least two basic reasons: the lack of technological means that many families with SEN children complained about; the absence of adults able to accompany them through this difficult moment. The support teachers and parents were not sufficiently prepared because, in Italy, a solid training of teachers and adults on how to deal with emergency situations with children with disabilities is still lacking.

In conclusion, this research permits us to consider children as observers and participants of reality at the same time. They perceive the pandemic crisis in its semantic sense: a separation, a turning point between a reality that precedes that moment and the more marked one that follows it (Diamond, 2019).

Furthermore, in addition to children’s acute and proactive (if pedagogically understood) statements, we would like to give voice to invisible children, those with Special Educational Needs. Their absence in classmates’ diaries reaffirms the need for modalities, didactic, organizational and operational forms that guarantee the full realization of the principle of inclusion and take into account their “life project” inside and outside the school walls.

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