

THE CHILD AT THE CENTRE OF RESEARCH

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in research on children's 'voice' and its influence on social processes. It is only in the last two decades that significant economic, institutional and academic developments have led to the participation of children as agents who act independently and to their recognition as 'experts regarding their own lives'. In 1989, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledged that the very young children are entitled to experience a sense of belonging and to feel that they have the freedom to express their own intentions, thus influencing various aspects of their life. Active listening is not only an expression of children's rights, but also an ethical and democratic practice. The aim of our study is to explore appropriate practices to highlight the "voice" of younger children aged 3-5 years in a Greek learning environment and to employ it in research data. Using appropriate tools and approaches, children of this age can express thoughts, feelings and attitudes on issues that concern them, whether they relate to their interaction with 'significant others' in their lives or their preferred play. Using a qualitative research methodology, our preliminary results argue for the confirmation that children living in a democratically responsive learning environment, whether in a family or educational context, can understand their place in life and act as active citizens as they grow up.

Keywords: children's voice, early childhood education, child-centered approach, democratic learning environments, Greek early education

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a fundamental microsystem for preschool-aged children, consisting of the people and the environment that allow children to understand themselves and others' perspectives, values, histories as well as the world around them (Doucet & Adair 2013). The creation of democratic responsive learning environments, where children can express their views, participate and communicate is the key to the development of active citizenship. All children deserve high quality early care and education (ECE) experiences that affirm who they are, help them thrive, and lay a foundation for positive life trajectories (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] 2019). Children's developing self-perceptions and views of others shape their ideas about the workings of the world and their engagement with it (Boutte 2008) and are associated with their future school engagement (Erwin et al. 2022) and academic success.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in research for the young children's own "voice" and their 'participation' in social processes (Sofou 2022). Traditionally, children do not take part in research regarding issues that affect their life. However, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the economic developments of the 1980s that recognise the child as a consumer and user of products, and Pedagogical developments in the study of childhood (Sofou 2022; Harcourt & Hägglund 2013) led to the active participation of children as agents who act independently and to their recognition as 'experts regarding their own life' (Flewitt & Ang 2020) and as autonomous persons with emerging abilities (Broström 2012).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Children's Rights

A defining feature of the previous century was the progressive expansion of rights to "people once ignored or excluded" by the law. A major milestone, in that process, was also the recognition in both

international human rights (IHR) law and various national constitutions, of the rights of children. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognise children as competent individuals, having their own experiences, knowledge and attitudes, in addition to having the right to have a "voice" in a range of contexts (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide 2013) and recognizes their right to participate in all matters concerning them. Article 12 and 13 of the Convention are significant, as they delineate the children's right to express their views on whatever affects them and that their views should be taken into account by adults around them. The recognition of such rights can also imply a corresponding duty on the part of the society to provide extensive forms of affirmative protection for individuals.

2.2 The view of Child and Childhood

The advent of the 21st century has been a crucial period in the gradual shaping of a landscape for children and childhood. Intense social, economic, political and cultural upheavals and developments led to a change in the way society viewed the child and childhood, which was instrumental in the formation of a new research field, the "New Sociology of Childhood" (Lyndon 2021). The shift of researchers' interest in this new field implies the analysis of childhood on a social level and in the deeper understanding of society as a whole. The child as part of society is now understood as an acting subject who is shaped by society but shapes it in part as well.

On the other hand, childhood is now considered a protected space and the child a vulnerable being in need of protection (James & Prout 2015). This vulnerability encourages a protectionist view in the Western world that hinders the perspective of the development of the child's rights, as the implementation of their right to express and participate depends on the development of their understanding (James & Prout 2015).

2.3 Voice and Active Listening

Considering children as knowledgeable and capable actors with their own unique experiences, ideas and choices underlines the importance of listening to children and young people. The "voice" is considered a social and multidimensional construct that evolves over time (Flynn, Shevlin & Lodge 2012; Komulainen, Korhonen & Rätty 2013) and is shaped by our ideology, cultural beliefs and worldview (Sommer et al., 2013). Listening to children was described by Stephen (2011) and Bath (2013) as a democratic care practice intertwined with paying attention - to children's feelings, thoughts, wishes, desires, attitudes, preferences – all aspects that are considered valuable in decision making (Murray 2019; Brooks & Murray 2018).

Listening to children's ideas contributes to the establishment of respectful relationships which enhance adults' understanding of children's priorities, interests, feelings, and concerns. This understanding leads to changing assumptions and raising new expectations for both children and adults about children's capabilities (Pascal & Bertram 2009). Research highlights the potential benefits of children's free expression and participation in their development, self-esteem, self-efficacy, friendships, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, practical thinking and decision-making skills; skills that develop their future capacity for meaningful agency (Nussbaum 2000; Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin, & Sinclair 2003; Sinclair 2004). The formation of democratic citizens therefore starts from a very early age through social interaction in the family environment, where children learn to value the right to free expression as a skill for their later development as active citizens. An understanding of participation, of the responsibility of their own words can be acquired gradually, through everyday practice, and this cannot be taught in an abstract or fragmented way (Hart 1992). It is unrealistic to expect children to suddenly become responsible, active citizens as adults without prior exposure to relevant skills and responsibilities.

The implementation of the children's right to freedom of expression and participation is a challenge for the researcher. The idea that the child is not a voiceless, passive and powerless being, but instead a citizen with rights, changes the existing power balance of child-researcher relations and points to the direction of a relationship between equal parts. In this light, the researcher is called upon to formulate an appropriate listening and developmental environment, respecting the specificities and multiple languages of each child. Indeed, Lundy (2007) argued that for young children to be heard effectively,

the 'voice' is not enough; young children must be given appropriate opportunities (space) and time to express themselves.

The fact is that although researchers advocate for the inclusion of young children's voices in research (Jindal-Snape 2016), they apply research designs and data collection methods that are highly structured, raising concerns about the extent to which we actually listen to the views and voices of young children (Wong 2015; White 2015). Furthermore, there is a risk that the voice of the child may be treated as yet another tool leading to children being treated as an unvarying group rather than as individuals with unique voices (Bragg 2007). Therefore, it seems necessary for researchers to shift towards meaningful democratic child-centred research practices that can support culturally and ethically sensitive methods while always respecting the rights of the child (Lincoln & Denzin 2005).

2.4 Code of Ethics and Conduct

The rapid developments in scientific research, focusing on the child as a research subject, have led to the drafting of a guiding framework of eight ethical principles and specific guidelines for research practice for all those involved in the research process to ensure children well-being, the Code of Ethics and Conduct (Bertram et al. 2015). This code is not only limited to the research process, but also the publication and dissemination of data, demonstrating the complexity of conducting research in the field of Early Childhood.

According to the Code of Ethics, research participants, from pre-birth throughout their lifespan, are considered subjects, not objects, and have the right to participate in the research process, either indirectly or directly, actively or passively. The Code ensures that all participants are treated fairly, with dignity and without prejudice, with respect regarding their age, religion, disability, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, socio-economic status or marital, family or parental status (the diversity of each child). The research process must take place in a context that actively promotes democratic values and contributes to social justice and equity within communities and societies (ECERA 2015).

Researchers should act in the spirit of Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, giving people of all ages the opportunity to freely express their views on issues that affect them and to participate actively in all decisions and actions that concern them. Children's views, which may differ from those of adults, should be taken into account and 'listened to' with respect. The researcher should approach the participants in such a way in order to reduce the power or authority difference between them, creating a child-centred, democratic context.

However, the above ethical framework sparks some controversy, as it links the possibility of free expression and participation of children in the research process to their age and maturity, thus implicitly introducing adult consent, who may easily deny it. The child in the Code of Ethics and Conduct is considered a socially vulnerable group in need of protection, therefore their rights are automatically limited, and their implementation always depends on their significant others, thus perpetuating sterile traditional notions that approach the child as an ignored entity (Pechtelidis 2015; Sofou 2022).

Adult consent is a prerequisite for the child's voice to be heard and the adult acts as a gatekeeper in terms of access to the research process. While these precautions are considered necessary, it must be acknowledged that they perpetuate the view of the vulnerable child and do little to ensure that children are actually heard within the research context (Lyndon 2023). Finally, according to Lyndon (2023), the Code of Ethics and Conduct is in need of revision due to the complexity of the field and the changing background of research, focusing on the impact of technology and artificial intelligence on the research process and the UN (2015) sustainability goals, part of which is to treat all members of a society equally.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Taking into account Children's Rights and Lundy's (2007) Voice Model, in this study we attempt to explore the appropriate practices for the emergence of the 'voice' of younger children aged 3-5 years in a Greek learning environment. Specifically, the research questions are:

- Can children "talk" about issues that concern them, whether it is their favourite toy or their relationship with their family?
- What technique or combination of techniques can children use to express themselves?

3.1. *Methods*

The research employs a qualitative approach, which offers a variety of research methods that enable the researchers to choose the one that best suits their research questions in conjunction with the limitations they may face. In this particular case, a case study was chosen. According to Creswell (2017), a case study is a qualitative research approach where the researcher seeks to understand in detail a real, life-limited system called a case.

A case study is a holistic and in-depth examination of a situation, event, policy or institution, which uses various methods to unravel the complexity and specificity of that event, person or situation (Tight 2017). A case study is the exploration of an individual or set of individuals, an event or situation within its natural environment, unique and dynamic in each case, employing a variety of data collection techniques (Yin 2014). For case studies, environments are unique and dynamic, so a case study investigates and captures the complex, dynamic and extensive interactions of events, human relationships and other parameters in a unique situation (Cohen et al. 2008).

In order to give the children a voice and explore the perspectives regarding issues that concern them, the research adopts a critical child-centred approach which seeks to 'put children first' (Bhana 2016, p. 14), with the aim to engage with the children as active agents and encourage them to feel comfortable in the presence of the researcher and talk openly about the issue.

This research follows a multi-modal research framework for listening (Clark & Moss 2011), using verbal and non-verbal ways. These methods - through pictures, drawings, and photographs - of symbolic communication trigger communication and discussion with young children. The researcher acknowledges the uniqueness of each child's lived experience and encourages them to participate in the interpretation of the data (Lyndon 2019a). In addition, the above methods were not chosen at random as they have been found to allow more control to be handed over to children (Martin & Buckley 2020; Streelasky 2020).

3.2. *Materials*

3.2.1. *Drawings*

Through drawing, children project on paper their view of their world, and of themselves, elements of their personality, their thoughts, their emotional state at the moment they are asked to draw and their feelings for the significant others in their life (Bekhit et al 2005; Crotti & Magni 2003; Panagopoulou 2004). In the present research, children's drawing was used as a projection technique, that is, children's drawings are used as projective means and are analysed on the basis of symbols and the use of colours. In this context, drawing gives rise to storytelling (Kress 1997; Pahl 1999), to intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogues (Brooks 2005).

3.2.2. *Photography*

The use of cameras, a highly attractive medium to children, is proposed as a technique for actively engaging them in activities that entail listening (Clark & Moss 2001/2010; Einarsdottir 2005a) and empowering their role within a democratic and participatory practice, as this case study (Loizou 2011). It works, Burke (2008) mentions, as a "visual voice", rendering the way they understand the world around them "visible" (Kind 2013).

3.2.3. Board game

Artisanal board games can also help to collect diverse and rich data that can successfully complement traditional techniques (Neag 2018). Creating a safe environment through play enables the voice of children, even those from vulnerable groups, to be 'heard'.

3.3. Research participants

The research sample was 39 children between the ages of 3 and 5 from public ECEC settings in the Municipality of Athens.

3.4. Ethical Approval

The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of West Attica (Prot. No.26303/13-03-2023). Ethical issues had to be carefully considered in the research process: at the planning stage, in the research design, during data collection and analysis and in the storing and sharing of data (Creswell 2014). All the parents of the children who took part gave written consent allowing them to participate in the research group, after being informed of the objectives and scope of the research. In our attempt to highlight the "voice" of younger children and the right to participate and choose, even though we had written consent from the parents, we orally informed the children about the project and the research process. Children were able to articulate their willingness to participate in the study and activities (Burke et al. 2023). We also informed the children that they have the option to withdraw from the group at any time or not to participate at all. Both choices comply with the ethics of the study. The digital records collected from the researchers did not contain personal names or the preschool setting's identification to protect children's anonymity (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2012). Pseudonyms are also used to protect participant identity. All copies of data are kept in a secure format and location.

4. CASE STUDY 1: CHILDREN'S PREFERENCES REGARDING PLAY

Before the research process began, the researcher met with the staff of the Children's Centre to prepare the children's smooth transition into the research process. Priority was given to building relationships with the children, so the researcher followed the daily classroom schedule for a week (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell 2015). To this purpose, she made contact with the children, got to know them, and became familiar with their routines, practices and habits. On many occasions she participated in the children's free play, if they wished so, in order for them to feel comfortable and safe with her being there.

On the first day of the research process, the researcher with the help of a mediator/glove doll discussed with the children and tried to inform them about the process of their cooperation using terms that were accessible and understandable to them. So the glove doll took the place of the researcher in an attempt to break down the usual adult-child relationship of power (Bhana 2016).

R: Hi, I'm Maria....I don't know anyone here and I would like to meet you and make new friends....Would you like to help me?

C: Yes.... (they all shouted out together)

R: Do you want to play some games so we can get to know each other? If so, raise the tab with the smiley face. Whoever doesn't want to, will raise the negative face and whoever is thinking about it, will raise this face. Okay? You can stop anytime you want. I want us all to be happy.

The researcher employed three tabs with faces depicting emotions - happy face, thinking face and negative face – and asked the children if they wanted to participate in the process and if they thought it was interesting. The various game-based activities were presented to the children as voluntary and easily adaptable to their wishes. It was pointed out to them that they had the option of not participating in the process, even though their parents had agreed to it, or that they could withdraw at any time during the research. After discussing with the classroom teacher, it was decided that children who did not want to participate even though their parents had consented, could remain in the classroom and do

whatever they liked. There were also children who wanted to participate, but could not because their parents had not agreed to. In this case they were given the opportunity to participate in the drawing and photography activity, but their data was not used. Only one child used a negative face and withdrew from the study from the beginning. The researcher with the glove doll and the teacher approached the child and they discussed his/her reasons for not wanting to participate.

The children were told that the aim of the survey is to get in touch with their favourite toys and tell us about them. The procedure was carried out in consultation with the researcher, always with the help of the teacher. The data collection process began with the discussion (Adhabi & Anozie 2017). The children were asked questions individually or in pairs related to their favourite toy. Then they were asked to take a picture of their favourite toy at the ECEC setting, using a camera (Figure 1 &2). The use of this particular research instrument can empower the role of children in the context of democratic and participatory practice in research and educational practice (Clark & Moss 2001/2010; Loizou 2011). All the children participated in this activity. They found it interesting and fun; they wanted to take photographs of more than one toy, which they did. Next, they were asked to choose only two of the photos they took. The interview-discussion and the photos are the actual research data.



Fig. 1. Photo of a boy 3 years old



Fig. 2. Photo of a girl 3 years old

Throughout the research process, the researcher asked for the children's consent in order to proceed to the next stage. The next activity was a board game created for the needs of the research by the researcher.

The game consists of a board, cards of 4 different colours, 4 toy cars and a dice. The children roll the dice and move their pawn on the board. Depending on the square they reach, they pick up the corresponding card based on colour. The game is non-competitive; everyone wins as long as they reach the "End" square.

C1: I'd get him a different, boyish doll.

R: Can you explain?

C1: A SpiderMan doll, he would love it because he dressed up as Spider Man in the Carnival.

C2: I'd get him a book with monsters because boys like them.

R: So your friend Dimitra wouldn't like it?

C2: But girls are afraid of monsters.

C3: Girls want girlish....and boys want boyish.

R: Would you buy your friend (a girl) a toy car?

C4: Yes, but pink, Barbie's little car. Pink is for girls. Sometimes I paint in pink to make my drawing a little prettier....and for girls to like it.

Fewer children participated in this activity (32/40) and they chose their own teammate. A group of three (two children and the researcher) was formed each time; they sat in a circle on the room mat, (16 dyads). The researcher deliberately chose to sit next to the children so that the children would feel that they were a team. Using the glove doll, the researcher gave clarifications and read out each card. The children followed the game procedure, waited for their turn, rolled the dice and moved the pawn each time. Three children struggled during the game and withdrew from it, expressing a desire to play something else. For the four children who found it difficult to play, the board game was modified the game based on their needs and it was turned it into a card game (such as Uno). In addition, two children decided to use the pawns from another board game. Two groups of children wanted to modify the rules of the game, and answer to all the cards.

The last stage of the research required children drawing (Figure 3 & 4). They were asked to draw their favourite toy. Using markers, coloured pencils and wax crayons, the children drew anything related to their favourite toy; an object, a place where they play with it, an activity, people they play it with, or even emotions. No direction was given to the children. In this activity, only 4 children refused to draw and two of them chose to draw something else. While the children were drawing, the researcher with the help of the glove doll talked with the children about their drawings.



Fig. 3. Drawing of a girl aged 3 year old



Fig. 4. Drawing of a boy aged 3 year old

The activities presented so far, indicate that children can choose, participate and express their opinion on issues that concern them. What was interesting throughout the procedure is the fact that the children seem willing to express their opinion, their feelings and to even confront with the researcher or their teammate, strongly supporting their opinion within the properly organised context of the ECEC.

Although in this article we do not focus on the analysis of children's data regarding their preferred toy, but rather on the methodology of the research process, the multiple methods approach proved to be effective, as children told us that they prefer mass culture and commercial toys, which trigger story creation (Nicholson et al. 2014). Furthermore, the gender factor overwhelmingly influences children's preferences. Therefore, symbolic play seems to dominate this age group (Taggart et al. 2020) and it is deeply influenced by mass media and gender (Sidiropoulou & Tsaoula 2008).

CASE STUDY 2: CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS OF FAMILY

For the collection of the research data, a sample of 29 preschool children was asked to draw their family. In order to ensure the research process started smoothly, the researcher contacted the staff of the two Childcare Centers where the research was implemented in order informed them about the topic and the content of the research process. The researcher participated in the morning routines, i.e. the time when the children sit on the classroom carpet in a circle and with the help of the teacher fill in the

class diary, observe and tell the weather and sing the welcome song. The teacher introduced the researcher by informed the children that later they would do an activity together. She used the word "surprise" to keep their interest. Breakfast and music-kinetic games followed. Then the researcher with the teacher's help explained to the children what they were going to do.

In particular, she asked them to draw their family. The researcher asked "what do we mean when we say family" and the teacher invited the children to raise their hands to answer, choosing by name which children would answer. The researcher and the teacher handed out paper, markers, coloured pencils and crayons. It should be noted at this point that there were children whose parents refused to participate in the research process, but the children themselves wanted to do the drawing. They did so, but the researcher did not collect data from them. Also, if these children did not wish at that moment to draw, then they could do any other activity of their choice, with their teacher. It is important to stress that the educator was present in the classroom throughout the research process. Our aim is to respect the choices of the children and those of their parents/guardians and to avoid creating negative feelings to the children.

The researcher and the educator walked around the children who were seated at the tables in groups of 4 or 5 to offer their help if asked and to make sure that all the children had access to the materials. The children completed the drawings in different times. They went up to the researcher, willing to explain their drawing. Most of them started introducing their family members before the researcher could ask the introductory question (would you like to tell me about your drawing?). The researcher then directed the children's narrative based on the level of analysis she had planned on, i.e. what colours they used for each family member, in what order they placed the family members, what size the faces they drew are, where the drawing is placed, what they are doing with their family and where their own place in the drawing is.

It should be noted that we focused on some cases of children's drawings based on the following criteria: a. the structural elements of the drawing, i.e., the existence of only one colour, the size of the faces, the spatial positioning and b. the children's narrative about how they experience their relationship with their family at the given moment. We will present 2 drawings out of a total of 29. More specifically, one drawing (Figure 5) came from a 3.5 year old boy, called Child 1 to ensure subject anonymity, who drew his house in only one colour (orange), placing his mother in the kitchen cooking fish soup, his favourite food, his sister upstairs in her room, himself having a bath in the bathroom, and finally making his dad unnaturally larger than the rest of his family members, on the far edge of the paper, away from the rest of them.

About his dad he said: *"He's angry and he's leaving."* The researcher asked why the child's dad was angry and Child 1 replied, *"Because I want him to be!"* Then the child took the marker and started to scribble on his drawing as if he wanted to hide its content. The educator and the researcher looked at each other, with the educator asking the child if he had finished his drawing. He stopped and walked over to the researcher to give it to her. The teacher revealed to the researcher his dad had died the previous month.

This example highlights that the child feels safe to express his feelings by capturing them in his drawing, communicating them verbally, and by using the marker again to "vent his anger". The researcher refrained from pressuring or directing the child to give further information by respecting his *"that's how I want it!"* response and also gave him time to scribble over a large part of his drawing.

Next, there is a drawing (Figure 6), by a 4-year-old girl, Child 2. The girl chose to depict a family moment at the beach. She used a variety of colours, drew details such as hearts and birds in the air, coloured waves like a rainbow, the family members in a row, the parents are in the centre, and the four members have their arms open and holding hands. They are smiling. The girl also drew her little dog which she is holding. The girl gave a lot of information about her drawing, such as the names of her sister and her dog, the accident her mom had so she has her ankle bandaged, as well as her feelings, such as how much she loves her family. She was smiling and happy while she was narrating.

In this example we also observe a naturalness of the child's expression to communicate both verbally (her narration) and non-verbally (her smile) through the drawing, which confirms that the child's voice is heard and the initiative comes from the child.



Fig. 5. Drawing of a boy 3.5 years old



Fig. 6. Drawing of a girl 4 years old

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, the researcher in both the case studies sought opportunities to listen to children's voices in child-initiated ways, providing multiple methods of data collection based on play pedagogy from which they could choose one or more or all of them and have their voices heard. The data highlight that all children participated in at least one research activity, with the majority of children participating in all of them, confirming the theory that children can act as research subjects.

The majority of the data collection techniques used in both study cases were child-led, such as taking pictures and drawing, which allowed children to manage the activities (Alvarez 2018; Martin & Buckley 2020; Streelasky 2020). Even the board game, although created by the researcher, was guided by the children regarding the formation of groups as they were free to take part in it.

In this research, Lundy's (2007) voice model was followed. Specifically, the opportunity (space) was given to listen to the children's voice, the necessary time was given, an appropriate context was created to facilitate children's participation, and the children's voice was "listened to" by adapting and modifying the research process based on their wishes (Lundy 2007). Regarding Lundy's (2007) model, we could mention that the last parameter is not taken into consideration in this research, as we do not know if the teachers act within the teaching context according to the children's voices.

Taking into consideration children's naturally occurring multimodal communication (Gray & Winterm 2011), different data collection methods were used and we successfully implicated all children in at least one activity and the majority of the children participated in all of them. The fact that children's voice is multi-dimensional and children can communicate in many different languages was affirmed (Groundwater-Smith et al. 2015).

6. CONCLUSION

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that if children are provided with the appropriate safe and inclusive space to express themselves freely without direct or indirect external pressure, and also the time to express their views without rushing, the realisation of authentic choices not directed by adults is achieved. This contributes to the development of active citizenship, as the children grow up. The shaping of a democratic citizen therefore starts from a very early age through social interaction in the ECEC settings and in the family environment, where children learn to value the right to free expression as a skill for their later development as active citizens. An understanding of participation,

of the responsibility of their own words can be acquired gradually, through everyday practice, and this cannot be taught in an abstract or fragmented way (Hart 1992). It is unrealistic to expect children to suddenly become responsible, active citizens as adults without prior exposure to relevant skills and responsibilities.

The claim that children's ability to act depends on their developmental stage or age, is not confirmed. It is developed through interactions with the significant others in each child's life. Adults can nurture children's active engagement by creating an appropriate daily environment where children can access information, express their opinions, support them, make decisions about issues that concern them and participate. Children do not have all the skills needed to participate and act effectively from birth, but through contact with children and adults they can cultivate and develop their engagement (Jerome & Starkey 2022).

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