



Photo: Jennifer Flemming

Mental health and psychosocial support in schools: Learner, teacher, caregiver, and community perceptions of programming and impact

Findings from qualitative research featuring the Amal Alliance
Colors of Kindness Program in Greece

Greece Learning Brief

Acknowledgements

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About the MHPSS Collaborative

The MHPSS Collaborative is a global platform for research, innovation, learning and advocacy in the field of mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). We convene key stakeholders – from children, youth and families with lived experience to service providers, researchers and policy makers – to work together for children’s mental health and wellbeing. We develop and share knowledge on the latest innovations and research on MHPSS in fragile and humanitarian settings. We advocate to ensure donors and decision makers hear the voices of children, youth and families and prioritize policy and funding for MHPSS. Visit www.mhpsscollaborative.org for more information.

Introduction

At the end of 2022, 40% of the nearly 110 million persons forcibly displaced globally were children under the age of 18.[1] Displaced children face acute and chronic adversities that significantly threaten their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.[2] The urgent needs of children in humanitarian crises underpin various policies and programmatic approaches that include increasing attention to both mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services broadly[3] and in education approaches specifically.[4] MHPSS in education in emergencies (EiE), including social-emotional learning (SEL), has been identified as an important pathway to address both children's mental health and psychosocial needs and to improve learning outcomes.[5]

There is increasing recognition that quality education is reflected not just in academic outcomes such as literacy and numeracy, but also in those indicating learner psychosocial wellbeing.[1] Learners are embedded within a context of specific relationships, environments, and systems that notably influence their daily lives, learning, and holistic wellbeing. These socio-ecological factors are complex and context-specific, and can have a significant impact on the efficacy of an intervention aimed at supporting children's growth and learning.[2]



Improved understanding of this social ecology around learners can lead to more relevant and impactful program design and implementation. The perspectives of children, caregivers, teachers, and relevant community and education system stakeholders are critical to understanding not just if an intervention is effective, but how, why, and for who.

This research set out to examine the enabling environments for MHPSS interventions delivered in education settings in humanitarian contexts, with specific focus on Amal Alliance's Colors of Kindness (Colors) program implemented in Greece.

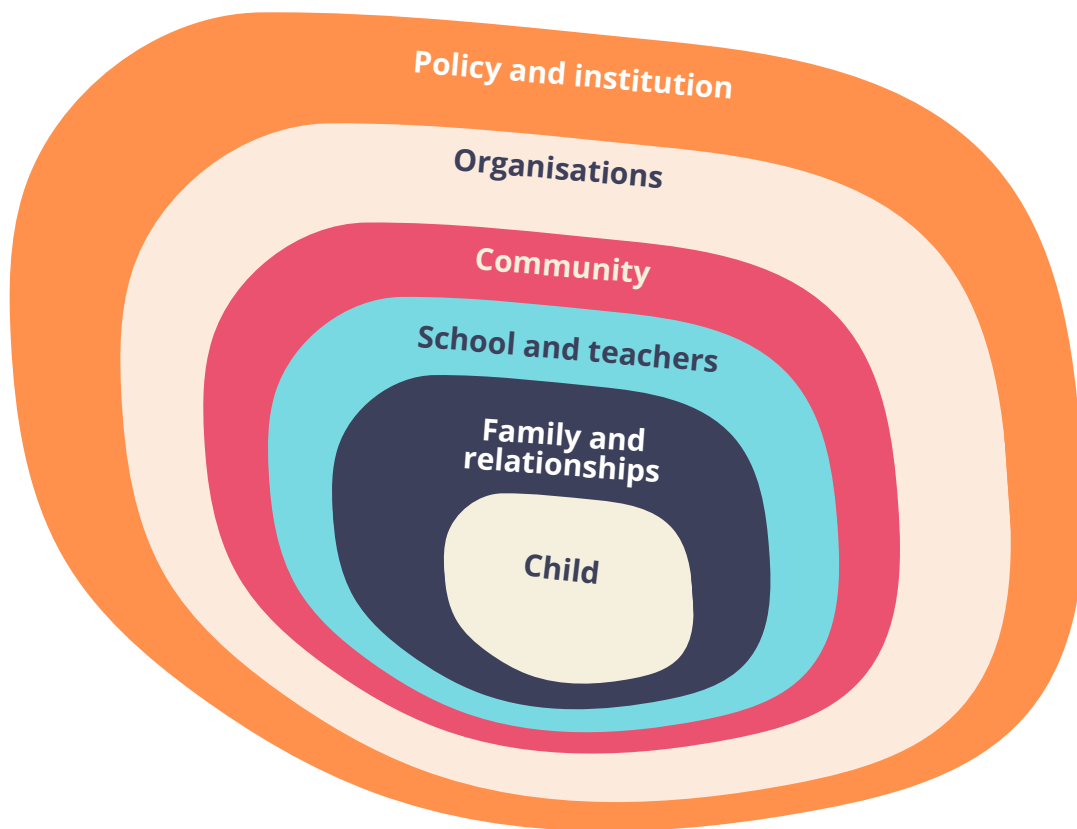


Figure 1: The social ecological framework for understanding children's psychosocial wellbeing in education contexts

Research objectives

To understand what contributes to an enabling environment for MHPSS interventions and approaches to improve holistic wellbeing, from the perspective of children, teachers, caregivers, and other education actors.

To understand the role of education systems, including schools (and formal and nonformal programmes), and educators in contributing to children's holistic wellbeing from the perspective of children, teachers, caregivers, and other education actors.

To describe similarities and differences of enabling environments for MHPSS interventions across diverse contexts, including both geographic location and type of emergency or adversity.

To understand how an MHPSS intervention may be useful and relevant in dynamic contexts, such as in the case of education interruptions, and what the role of schools is in supporting children's holistic wellbeing.

To understand the perceived impact of Amal Alliance's Colors of Kindness program in Greece, in order to contribute to organizational and programmatic learning and implementation.

Amal Alliance [1] is an independent humanitarian organization dedicated to empowering displaced and disenfranchised children through education and social development programmes around the globe in both refugee camps and formal school settings. Amal Alliance's *Colors of Kindness* [2] programme focuses on social emotional learning in order to (a) foster social and emotional skills of children to bridge the learning gap, (b) enhance the wellbeing of caregivers and their children, and (c) increase access to and engagement with distance learning. Amal Alliance works through its implementing partners (IPs) on the ground, who deliver Colors in their education response programming in locations across Greece. Research with six of these IPs in 15 distinct locations, as well as with general education actors in three additional locations, was the focus of this study.



Methods

To achieve the research objectives, the target population for participation in the research included children, teachers, caregivers, implementing organization staff, psychologists, refugee education coordinators, community-based education actors, and education officials (at local, regional, sub-national, and national level). The research team collected data from 62 total participants across Greece. This included data collection via five Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and 37 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in 16 distinct locations.³ FGDs were conducted with learners (5 FGDs). KIIs were conducted with caregivers (n=5), teachers (n=16), social scientists or psychologists (n=2), education management or administrative staff (n=5), implementing partner non-teaching staff (n=5), and with Amal Alliance staff (n=2). The participating learners were aged 6-12 and included both refugee/asylum seeking and host community children.



Greece context

Greece has long been a main gateway to Europe for refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world; As of February 2024, Greece hosted approximately 169,000 refugees, 18,000 asylum-seekers, and 17,800 stateless persons^{viii} with the majority from Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. Refugees and asylum seekers in Greece live both in camps and integrated into host communities in both urban and rural settings.

Currently, both camp and non-camp families face notable challenges to assuring their basic needs are met while they either await asylum decisions or work to integrate into Greek society. Refugees often face significant mental health challenges due to the traumas they have experienced prior to arrival in Greece, including exposure to violent conflict, displacement, and extreme loss. Many refugees suffer from conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.

These challenges are exacerbated by the uncertainty of their situations, lack of resources, and limited access to health and social services, often leaving affected populations underserved. The need for MHPSS services for displaced families and children in Greece is notable, and support services delivered by I/NGOs, civil society, and education actors is insufficient.

While Greek law extends certain rights and protections - including the right to access education and health services - to refugees and asylum seekers, there are few official policies that explicitly speak to MHPSS concerns of the population at large. Additionally, the translation of policy into practice to support displaced learners and their families is lacking.





Photo: Amal Alliance

Main findings

Understanding and responding to context of intervention

Understanding the dynamic context and ongoing challenges of displacement in Greece is essential in order to design and implement effective and appropriate MHPSS programming.

Displaced families across Greece face significant challenges in their daily lives - including unmet basic needs, financial insecurity, and the precarity of awaiting asylum decisions - which have notable impacts on mental health and wellbeing. Refugee learners' varied educational experiences as well as exposure to risk in their countries of origin and while on the move impact their holistic needs and opportunities upon arrival in Greece.

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These kids live in a camp with a wall that is six meters high, and they need to check in and out every time they come and go from the camp... This leads to a sense of feeling trapped, of being in prison, of not being able to move freely, of feeling like a secondary citizen, and of not being treated like everyone else.

Implementing Staff

Integration into Greek society is an ongoing challenge for refugee learners and their families.

Refugee services providers face many barriers in providing sustainable, quality support, including inconsistent coordination and collaboration with government actors. Integration of refugee children into the formal school system is encumbered by persistent challenges at the policy, school, and classroom levels. Across all research sites in Greece, there was limited access to MHPSS resources and services for refugee children and their families.

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In the refugee population here, we are talking about children who do not have...a stable environment in which they live and grows up. So it is very important to try to create safe conditions and a stable environment for these children in [education] spaces. And it is important to support them with skills they need, which will help them during the period they live in the camp... but the constant changes in conditions and policies, and the change to their refugee status... this does not create good conditions for the wellbeing of children.

Teacher, NFE

Perceptions of holistic wellbeing and the role of education

This research underscores the significant role of education in contributing to learner wellbeing and highlights diverse perceptions of educational community members on the value and purpose of school. **Research participants emphasize that a critical aspect of a safe learning environment is assuring the emotional and psychological safety of all children.**

Caregivers, teachers, implementing partners, and other education actors describe the value of school and/or education as strongly linked to children's wellbeing, especially as a place to develop character and values, and to learn social and emotional skills. Caregivers and teachers perceive school as playing an important role in fostering tolerance and exposing learners to diversity. Children perceive the greatest sense of safety and wellbeing from their immediate environments, especially their homes and schools, and from their close relationships, particularly with family and friends.

Teachers, caregivers, and other education actors believe that supporting the mental health and wellbeing of students is a critical part of a teacher's job. Teachers and education actors consider the involvement of caregivers as essential to children's education, but in the refugee context in Greece there are many systemic barriers to caregiver engagement.

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*Education here should be about getting children to a level at which they can interact as equals with their [Greek] peers. So that there is not this sense of... ostracization, of racism, of discrimination. But I think that that is very often is lacking, that this is not accomplished in the schools here. **Implementing Staff***



The teacher is not just a profession alone, but is an important role in society. This involves shaping the character of the children, together with parents. And to give knowledge to the children and create the foundation for something better in the future, to give hope. **Parent**

Perceptions of impact of Amal Alliance's Colors of Kindness programme (Colors)

Colors is viewed as a positive, relevant, and effective approach by the majority of research participants. The majority of Colors learners who participated in this research described positive impressions of Colors and could give specific examples of how they used it in their lives and how it made them feel. Colors teachers describe the usefulness of Colors activities in their classroom and for supporting and understanding their students. Teachers, implementers, and caregivers perceive a number of clear outcomes related to children's holistic wellbeing as a result of Colors. These include improvements in emotional recognition, emotional regulation and management, social and communication skills, self-esteem, and ability to express themselves. Colors implementers perceive a number of learning outcomes that relate to learning readiness and improved concentration and engagement.

Colors implementers perceive that a whole-family approach to Colors could improve social and emotional skills and positively impact dynamics in the home. There were a number of classroom-level challenges to successful implementation of Colors that were described by teachers and implementing staff. These included language, concepts and terms, age and development, duration of lessons, use of technology/tablets. There were a number of implementation-level challenges to successful implementation of Colors. These included high turnover rate of teachers and implementing staff; lack of access to camps, living spaces, and caregivers; ongoing mobility of learners; and space-related limitations.

Colors helped me to better control my emotions, like when I get angry or feel something too much. I think it's good for us to understand first of all what we feel and then be able to control it. For example, my brother and I used to fight a lot because we were angry or be frustrated. And we are siblings. But now before we fight I find a way to stop and calm down so that we don't have to be angry towards each other. I learned this from Colors because I can explain what bothered me and led me to feel the need to fight. It helped me explain to others what I feel, so that they understand that at that moment, for example, I am in a slightly more special psychological state. That I am angry and that it is better...if others are angry also...to talk and not fight.

Colors Learner

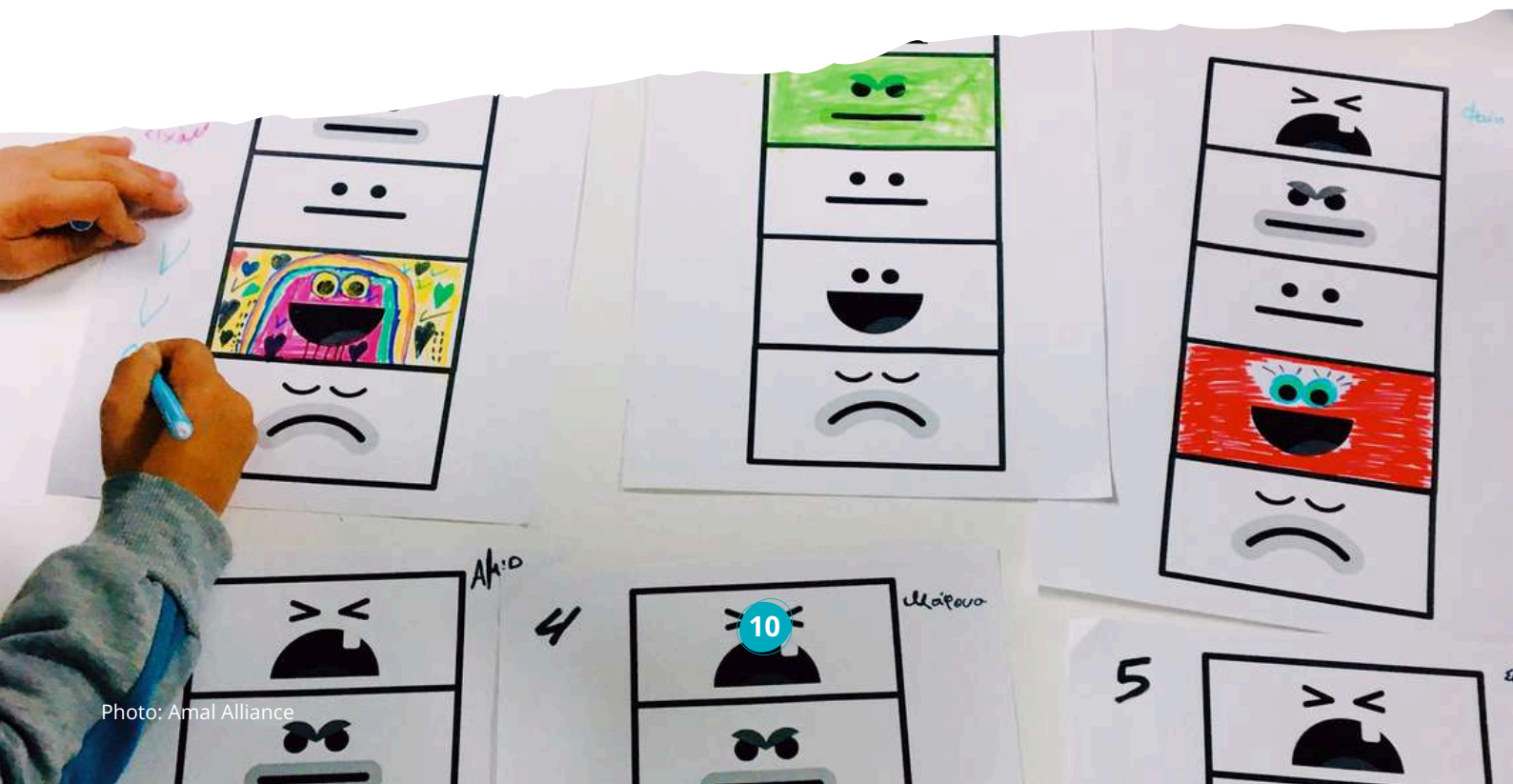




Photo: Amal Alliance

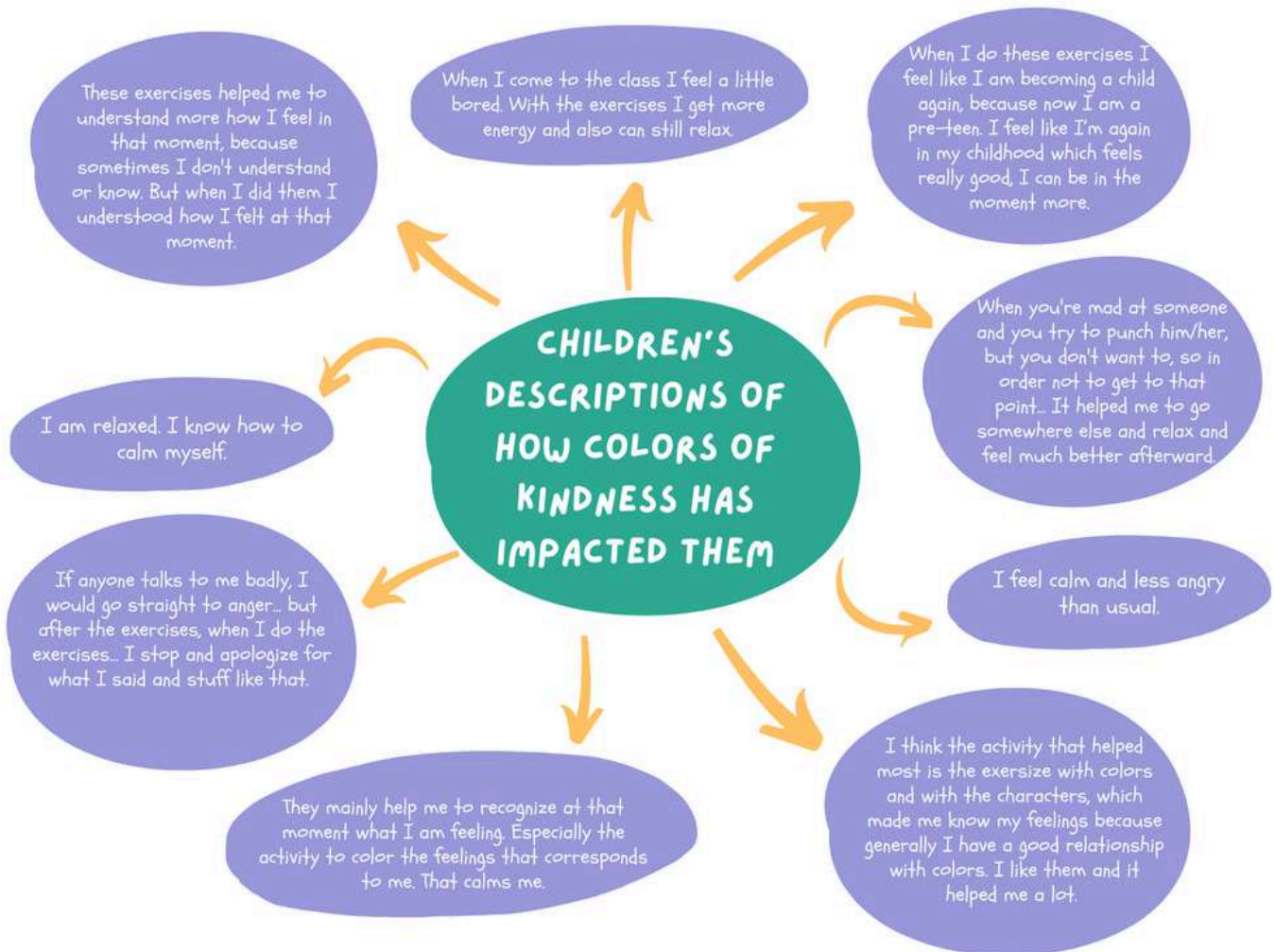
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Colors has helped me a lot as a teacher because I've learned so many new things about my students. What they really think and feel, what they like, and what is hard for them...All of a sudden a child would come to me and open his heart and tell me the things he was feeling. I felt so happy that this worked for him, but I also really gained something.

Teacher, NFE

In all sites of implementation, Colors has been contextualized to meet the specific needs identified in each location.

Implementers and teachers had suggestions for program improvements, and these often related to requests for further guidance, as well as simplification due to the challenges of the implementation context. Amal Alliance's sustainability strategy for Colors in Greece aims at institutionalization of Colors into the formal education system, with adoption by the Ministry of Education and eventual integration into the formal schools in Greece.





Call to action

To effectively implement MHPSS programs such as Colors, **implementers should focus on creating standardized approaches with the flexibility to adapt to contextual and cultural nuances.**

This calls for the development of contextualization tools to address unique local needs, including explicit support at the classroom level to teachers and facilitators who adapt lessons and activities in real time. Colors offers an example of openness and encouragement of such contextualization, which other implementers of MHPSS programming could learn from, while it is also noted that further support for **how contextualization is carried out** is needed.

Additionally, **advocating for the integration of MHPSS into national curricula, training, and policies is crucial to ensure continuity and sustainability.** Amal Alliance's work with the Greek Ministry of Education to scale and institutionalize Colors to the formal school system offers opportunity to learn about such processes, and should be further explored and learned from.

Implementers are urged to **document and share best practices, lessons learned, and case studies to build capacity and facilitate knowledge exchange both on a national and global scale.** While mental health of children is often reflected in national education policies, refugee-specific policy for education, health, and mental health are still lacking. Additionally, the financial and political commitment required to assure that MHPSS policy translates to action at the school level should be encouraged for all children.

Recognizing the value of local knowledge is essential; programs should be led or co-led by local entities to ensure contextual relevance. This assures adherence with the localization agenda of many I/NGOs in humanitarian contexts. By integrating local partners and leaders early in implementation—including programs designed or co-designed by local or national actors—such knowledge and leadership can inform implementation across the program cycle and beyond. In many humanitarian contexts, such as Greece, **this integration of both displaced populations and Greek actors is additionally essential to promote greater inclusion of refugee learners and communities.**



Call to action

Furthermore, **a focus on sustainable models is vital, including the integration of MHPSS into teacher training and alignment with formal education systems and policy.** Interdisciplinary collaboration is key, as MHPSS intersects with education, health, and social work. Lastly, a context-sensitive approach is crucial for effective implementation.

This involves **understanding the specific challenges, needs, and capacities of each community and its learners.** Ensuring safety, both emotional and physical, is foundational for MHPSS interventions. This includes creating safe environments in schools, including fostering trusting relationships amongst learners and with teachers and other adults. In Greece, there are specific classroom-level and implementation-level challenges to delivering effective MHPSS programming. In-depth understanding of these context challenges is absolutely essential.

The recommendations included in this report aim to optimize the impact and sustainability of MHPSS programs, emphasizing the need for standardized yet flexible approaches; policy integration; local knowledge utilization; and a context-sensitive, safety-focused implementation strategy.



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