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SOCIAL COMPETENCE
AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL

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Abstract

Children grow and learn in other places besides school. As they live in their homes and communities, they acquire culturally conditioned ways of behaving and of making sense of others' behavior. The authors observed children eating dinner at home and learning a math lesson at school, looking especially for participation structures, or patterns in the allocation of interactional rights and obligations among partners in an event. Although the same participation structures occurred during both dinner and math lessons, they were distributed differently across the constituent phases of the two events. It was only within the event at the level of the constituent phases that differences in the enactment of the two events appeared. What was distinctive about each of the phases of the two events was the set of participation structures that occurred and the relative frequency of their occurrence. The authors feel that their work suggests researchers must go beyond surface features of dissimilarity and/or similarity and look instead at people's understanding of rights and obligations and the communicative demands of situations in order to identify functionally similar contexts in the home and school. Exploration of these communication situations will provide new insights into ways to help integrate home and school experiences.
Social Competence at Home and at School¹,²

Susan Florio and Jeffrey Shultz³,⁴

For some time the interests of educators, psychologists, and anthropologists have converged on a very basic, yet deceptively simple idea -- that children grow and learn in other places beside school. This idea has implications for those concerned with the structuring of school learning environments and with the assessment of children's performance within those environments. In what seems a paradox, the quality of a child's school experiences appears to be related to the school's recognition that it is not the sole educative force in a child's life. The study reported here attempts to describe, through close analysis of two slices of children's life, different ways

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of participating and interacting at home and at school. It aims as well to speculate about those differences as sources of potential misunderstanding between teachers and children as they engage in academic activities.

**Communication at Home and at School: Problems of Continuity**

Psychologists consider the interface between a child's school life and non-school life in various ways as they attempt to understand the phenomenon of school learning.

Carroll (1963), for example, suggests a model in which some of the important determinants of school learning are not necessarily bound to the classroom lesson but are brought to it by the child. One such determinant in Carroll's model is aptitude. Defined as the length of time it takes a child to master a learning task in school, aptitude is a suggestive composite of nature's gifts and the child's prior experience applied to the task at hand.

From a different perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1976) suggests an interface between school and non-school life. In delineating what he calls the "ecology of education," or sets of forces affecting when and how people learn in educational settings, Bronfenbrenner suggests that people learn from participating in a range of social/ecological systems where they complete tasks with others. These systems -- families, peer groups, classes -- have points of contact. Both the learner in relation to each particular system and the systems in relation to each other are worthy of study since each plays an important part in school learning.

In both these models there is the implication that non-school learning can be helpful to children in the performance of school tasks. Yet
anthropologists and psychologists who have attempted to scrutinize the particular task settings in which children find themselves, and the interface of these settings, have generally found that experience in one task setting does not necessarily enhance performance of an apparently related task in another setting (see, for example, Lave, Note 1; Cole & Scribner, 1974; Cole, Hood, & McDermott, 1978).

One way to understand the lack of transfer described above is the idea of "negative transfer" which has been invoked by some psychologists in order to understand such situations (see, for example, Birch & Rabinowitz, 1951). However, studies involving negative transfer are experimental in nature and as such have to decontextualize both tasks and their performance. Experimental studies characteristically look at systematic variations in task structure in order to make sense of unsuccessful transfer of training in individual performance.

There is another way to understand why prior experience -- much of it in non-formal educational settings -- is not always helpful to children in school. Anthropologists, perhaps because they have tended to look at groups rather than individuals, have thought about this problem in interactional terms -- as the result of discontinuity, often cultural, in ways of approaching accomplishment of tasks.

Philips (1972), for example, studied Warm Springs Indian children at home and at school. Early in her studies she located one potential source of school failure for the children. The Indian children were found to engage in minimal talk during school lessons. However, upon close examination of the children's interactional styles in task settings both at home and at school, Philips noted that:
the social conditions that define when a person uses speech in Indian situations are present in classroom situations in which Indian children use speech a great deal, and absent in the more prevalent classroom situations in which they fail to participate verbally. (p. 371)

In Philips' work we have examples, on one hand, of prior experience which is concomitant with school situational expectations. In those instances, since the interactional behaviors of Indian children appear normal and natural, they go unremarked. On the other hand, Philips' evidence suggests that when situational expectations are inconsistent between home and school, the sense-making of children, which continues to be reasonable in terms of their prior experiences, can be misconstrued by teachers. Thus, the patterns of life extant in the homes and community of the Warm Springs children differed from those in the classroom and were not recognized there. The consequences were, in Philips' (1972, p. 392) words, "learning difficulties and feelings of inferiority."

We stated at the outset that the idea that learning occurs both inside and outside the school is a deceptively simple one. Its simplicity is deceptive because more than decontextualized skills and facts are acquired by children -- either incidentally or purposefully -- at home and at school (Florio, Note 2). As they live in the world, children acquire culturally conditioned ways of behaving and of making sense of the behavior of others -- they acquire interactional competence. Interaction is the medium in which both learning tasks are accomplished and mastery is demonstrated and inferred. In view of this state of affairs, there is the troubling sense that for children who acquire ways of interacting outside school that readily resemble those expected within school, prior experience may enhance performance. But what about those children whose prior experiences have been within languages and/or styles of interacting
and interpreting which differ -- even minimally -- from the mainstream? Often these children are misunderstood as they apply prior experience to the tasks at hand. This misunderstanding may lead to an underestimation of their talents and motivation, thus beginning the whole cycle of diminished expectations. The findings above suggest that one question to be asked is, of what use is prior experience to children under these circumstances?

**Studying Interactional Contexts at Home and at School**

The study reported here was launched partly in response to the suggestive findings of researchers working at the boundaries between formal and non-formal educational settings (e.g., Philips, Note 3, 1972; Cole, Gay, Click, & Sharp, 1971). We were interested in learning more about the ways in which the interactional contexts through which children navigate at home and at school are organized. Simultaneously, by looking closely at the experiences of children who were both newcomers to primary school and culturally different from their teacher, we hoped to understand better the nature of the discontinuity between interactional contexts at home and at school as lived by children and interpreted by their teachers.

Features of the study are detailed elsewhere (Florio, Note 2; Shultz & Florio, 1979; Bremme, Note 4). A summary of details relevant to the present discussion follows.

**Collecting Data at Home and School**

Field workers conducted participant observation and periodic videotaping in a predominantly Italian-American suburb near Boston. Over two years
of data collection, the researchers observed both classroom interaction in a kindergarten/first-grade class and the interactions of two members of that class at home with their families. Whole days were observed at school, at first periodically, and then several days each week. Also periodically during the first year of the study, two target children were accompanied home after school where their complete afternoons and evenings were documented. Ultimately, we hoped that by understanding the organization of face-to-face interaction in both settings, useful comparisons and contrasts could be made across them.

Identifying Similar Events at Home and School

In the process of data analysis (see Appendix), we developed heuristic techniques which were useful in coming to understand the organization of interactional events that occurred in both sites (Erickson & Shultz, Note 5). However, ways of validly and usefully comparing and contrasting interactional contexts at home and at school were more elusive. Philips' work had taught us that some contexts for interaction at school had apparently resembled interactional contexts at home more than others had. This finding implied that we ought to be able to identify points of contrastive relevance among contexts. However, such contrasts might be great or very subtle, and we needed to locate those that made a difference from the participants' perspective.

As we sifted through field notes and videotapes and talked to informants, we kept in mind Wittgenstein's (1953/1968) notion of "family resemblance," or that there exists in families a "complicated network of similarities" (p. 32e). The similarities, he suggests, can exist on several levels: overall similarities and similarities of detail. In addition, these levels can overlap and criss-cross. In
search of such resemblances, Wittgenstein advises the researcher, "Don't think, but look!" (p. 32e). Implicit in this admonition is that what might appear at first to be useful, formal ways of noting comparison and contrast might be, in fact, red herrings. That is, they might not produce differences.

When we first began to look for contrastive interactional contexts at home and at school, we looked at those which resembled one another in superficial form. For example, we thought of contrasting dinner time with snack time, or story time with bed-time story reading. But there was an important way in which we realized that we had been thinking rather than looking. We had been participant observers in these events, and our intuitions about them told us that they did not resemble one another in ways that were functionally relevant to the participants. It seemed that these events failed to resemble one another with respect to the function within them -- the uses people were making of one another, of space and props, of the abiding interactional rights and obligations of participants who were all involved in getting the instrumental work of the events accomplished.

We tried and abandoned several constructs in our attempts to identify units of analysis which might be appropriately compared and ways in which they might be comparable. We were seeking instances where children, when confronted with interactional events in school that resembled those with which they were more familiar at home, might be observed to apply strategies deemed appropriate in the home setting but inappropriate in the school setting. It was our hunch that it was at this level that such phenomena as those identified by Philips were operant. However, our initial, fruitless looks told us that comparison and contrast were not to be found at the level of the event itself. Therefore, we looked for
comparison at the level of the speech act -- again fruitlessly. For example, we thought that we might be able to ascertain that a reprimand, at home could be contrasted with one at school. But we did not see children misreading school reprimands -- at least not in the way we expected. Therefore, we were forced to consider other ways of comparing and contrasting situations at home and at school.

By attending to functional rather than formal similarities, we began to realize that we were interested in contrasting patterns of behavior which could be loosely construed as ones of style. As such, we were in search of ways of interacting which cut across levels of organization from talk and its structure to the level of the whole event.

From this insight, we returned to our field experiences and reflected on those ways of interacting at home and at school which had seemed as if they were at least potentially comparable in terms of style. We had the sense that mealtimes and teacher-directed group lessons might be such examples. While we were no longer seeking isomorphism in terms of literal tasks to be completed, props to be used, configuration in space, or speech acts accomplished, we were identifying events within which participation structures, or patterns in the allocation of interactional rights and obligations among partners in an event (c.f. Philips, Note 3; 1972; Erickson & Shultz, Note 5) seemed comparable. The work of Philips demonstrates that differing participation structures may be used to accomplish what on the surface seem to be the same type of interactional events. Similarly, our inquiry suggested that the same participation structures -- perhaps in different relations to one another -- could constitute formally different events. It follows, therefore, that to discover specific points of difference in the organization of participation structures is an essential task in the study of cross-cultural miscommunication.
Participation structures change from moment to moment across interactional events. They are worthy of study because they are the embodiment of the shifting rights and duties distributed among members of a group as together they accomplish both interactional and instrumental tasks. But interactional events are generally observed and experienced as continuous activity flow. To identify for analysis the participation structures which constitute it, it is necessary to segment the activity flow. Participation structures are not strung together like beads. They occur with some degree of patterned regularity that is sensitive both to the part of the event in which they occur and to those participation structures which they succeed and follow. That is, participation structures stand in some relation to the general topography of the interactional event of which they are a part. Thus, segmentation of the event into the contexts which comprise it is a requisite first step in the identification and study of participation structures.

When we examined, in detail, videotaped instances of mealtime in the homes of the focal children and academic lessons in their classrooms, we noted, first of all, important functional similarities within them. Both contexts for interaction involved one or several adults and a group of children in the completion of an instrumental task. In each case, the occasion for the gathering was other than mere conversation—a meal must be eaten, a lesson learned. Each context similarly has props related to the completion of the instrumental task; and special locales are appropriated on the one hand for dining and on the other for recitation. Additionally, participants typically carry consensual expectations into the interactional contexts regarding the tasks to be
accomplished, the relative rights and duties of participants, and the range of behaviors likely to be appropriate within such constraints. Cook-Gumperz and Corsaro (1976) consider the totality of these social and physical features of the setting to constitute the "ecological environment" of an interaction.

**Segmentation of Interactional Events**

Figure 1 contains our segmentation of the events -- dinner and math lesson -- into the contexts or *phases* which comprise the events. These phases were inferred by systematic observation of videotapes with and without the consultation of participants. Phase changes have been noted in two ways -- when either participants report that things have changed, or when behavioral changes in a number of communicative channels occur and the subsequent interactional behaviors of participants are observed to be organized differently (Erickson & Shultz, Note 5; McDermott, Gospodinoff, & Aaron, 1978). In the latter instance, participants may not be able to report some changes in phase because the changes are made by means of spontaneous shifts in posture or talk of which participants may not be consciously aware.

Patterns in the allocation of interactional rights and obligations that abide within these phases are the participation structures (see Table). More will be said about these momentarily. It is worthy of note at this point, however, that such segmentation reveals functional similarities in the dinner and the math lesson -- similarities which are manifest in the ways status and role are enacted by participants. For example, each event requires a phase of initial supervised preparation and setting up
Dinner  

Option I  
(recycle for dessert)

Option II  
(clear off table)

conversational arrangement:

I, II  
I (if IIIA occurs it may be negatively sanctioned)

I, IIIA, IIIB, IV

Math Lesson

prior scene  
(reading lesson)

conversational arrangement:

IV, II  
I, II (IIIA may occur occasionally at the ends of rounds but is negatively sanctioned)

I(IIIA occurs often with no sanction unless things get out of control)

II, IV

Key

/ = segmentation of interactional events into phases

/ / = segmentation within a phase of an interactional event

Note: See the Table on page 12 for a definition of the types of conversation represented by the roman numerals.

Figure 1. Segmentation of Interactional Events
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type I</th>
<th>Type II</th>
<th>Type III</th>
<th>Type IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conversational focus: single</td>
<td>conversational focus: single</td>
<td>conversational focus: single</td>
<td>conversational focus: multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narrative description: A conversation is occurring in which some participants are actively involved and others are observing. Those who are actively involved are either PRIMARY SPEAKERS or PRIMARY ATTENDERS. Those not actively involved are SECONDARY ATTENDERS.</td>
<td>narrative description: One conversation is occurring in which all participants are actively involved. One person speaks at a time addressing all other participants.</td>
<td>narrative description: Type I conversation is occurring. Some of the SECONDARY ATTENDERS chime in with topics and other relevant comments. The comments are not actively attended to by the PRIMARY participants in the Type I conversation.</td>
<td>narrative description: Several Type I conversations are occurring simultaneously. Where there is interchange between the Type I conversations, it is done by the SECONDARY ATTENDERS crossing over from their conversational arrangement to another by means of postural reorientation or re-direction of their backchannel listening feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interactional roles: one PRIMARY SPEAKER at a time</td>
<td>interactional roles: one SPEAKER at a time</td>
<td>interactional roles: one PRIMARY SPEAKER at a time</td>
<td>interactional roles: (see Type I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—one or more PRIMARY ATTENDERS at a time (can become PRIMARY SPEAKERS and must provide listening feedback to the PRIMARY SPEAKER)</td>
<td>—all others present are ATTENDERS (all participants are potential SPEAKERS; at least some of the LISTENERS at a time must give listening feedback to the SPEAKER)</td>
<td>—at least one PRIMARY ATTENDER</td>
<td>—one or more SECONDARY SPEAKER/ATTENDERS who can chime in vocally in the primary conversation but who may not become PRIMARY SPEAKERS or ATTENDERS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>—one or more SECONDARY ATTENDERS (cannot become PRIMARY SPEAKER ATTENDERS; may or may not provide listening feedback to the PRIMARY SPEAKER)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Type III B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>conversational focus: single</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>narrative description: A Type I or Type II conversation is occurring. This conversation is momentarily halted as some participants chime in with comments that introduce related topics. The original conversation may or may not resume after the side sequence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>interactional roles: collective commentary all participants are PRIMARY SPEAKER/ATTENDERS; there may be more than one of each at a time with one shared conversational focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of props. Next, each event entails the enactment of its raison d'être -- eating the meal or teaching and learning the academic material. Finally, each event involves a gradual wrapping up of the instrumental work that has been done -- a clearing off of the boards -- before participants can appropriately depart its social/ecological confines.

Description of Participation Structures

The underlying logic of participation structures involves the simple idea that to get things done in physical space and time and in light of the everchanging environment which interactional participants constitute for each other, a certain consensus must be continually worked out by the participants about who they are and what they are doing. In other words, in the ebb and flow of activity, different ways of being are negotiated. These ways of being are manifest in the communicative behaviors of participants -- in their gaze, postural orientation, linguistic choices, intonation, prosody, and so forth. To make matters more complicated, these ways of being are sensitive to cultural custom. Subtle changes in one or more communicative channels can change the tone of communication or even its fundamental sense.

Within each phase of both the dinner and academic lesson, we attempted to infer the participation structures by which interactants accomplished the tasks at hand. By means of continuous viewing of the videotaped interactional events, we first inferred that participants had four regular ways of arranging themselves interactionally for the holding of conversation (see Figure 2). In effect, one important underlying stylistic similarity in the meal and the lesson was the range of possible turn-taking economies that existed within them. Rights to the conversational
Figure 2. Conversational arrangements at dinner and during the math lesson.
floor — that is, rights and obligations of speaker(s) and attender(s) — were similarly manifest in the events. These participation structures were inferred by means of systematic shifts in the postural configurations of participants, by the presence or absence of vocalization on the parts of participants, by whether vocalization was talk or background vocalization, and by the presence or absence of other back channel behavior (e.g., nodding) by participants. Finally, our predictions about conversational arrangements were tested against new instances of the same interactional event, and by noting the presence or absence of negative sanctions.

One of the ways we were able to identify and differentiate between participation structures in the dinner and math lesson was in the manner participants arranged themselves to conduct conversation. The table summarizes these differences in the rights and obligations of conversational participants.

As we mentioned earlier, these arrangements were inferred by attention to such potential modes of communication as talk, other vocalizations, gaze, postural shifts, and the like. Systematic shifts in the presence or absence of behavior in one or more of these channels by participants, and negative sanctions when other than expected behaviors in these channels occurred, were the grounds for inference of their normative nature.

Figure 2 schematically depicts the conversational arrangements. These diagrams highlight the fact that the conversational focus (or foci) referred to in the table are literally that. In other words, one powerful way in which participants orient to the conversation at hand is by orienting their bodies — including their eyes — toward a common focal point. This use of posture and gaze is sensible in terms of the instrumental nature of the reasons for both of the observed interactional gatherings. In
the lesson, the focus of attention was the set of physical props which
the teacher was using to demonstrate for children and to quiz them about
gEometric properties. In the dinner, the focus of attention was a table
of food to be eaten. The single attentional focus in each of these activities
both signals and makes possible the activity's reason for being. Only during
the preparation phase in the lesson and the "beginning to wrap up" phase
in both events were there instances of conversational arrangement IV (see
Table) -- the occasion of multiple conversational foci with attendant multiple
physical foci.

Sources of Cross-Situational Conflict
and Their Implications

Even though all four participation structures occurred during
both dinners and math lessons, they were distributed differentially
across the constituent phases of the two events. At the level of the
event, then, the kind of participation structures that occurred and the
rights and obligations of participants were essentially the same. It was
only within the event at the level of the constituent phases that
differences in the enactment of the two events appeared.

What is distinctive about each of the phases of the two events is
the set of participation structures that occur, and the relative frequency
of their occurrence. However, not all of the participation structures occur
in each phase; and the participation structures do not occur with the same
frequency. The preparation phase of dinner (see Figure 1) is an example
of this. Type I and Type II (see Table) participation structures occur, with
Type I structures occurring more frequently. That is, conversations in
which one person speaks and everyone listens tend to dominate this phase.
This is in contrast to the wrap-up phase of dinner during which Type IIIa,
III B, IV, and I participation structures all occur, with the two Type III participation structures occurring most often. The sequential order of the participation structures within a given phase is not obligatory, except that Type III A and III B participation structures must always evolve from either Type I or II conversations by the nature of their definitions.

It is therefore not enough for a child to know which constituent phase of an event he or she is in in order to know how to behave appropriately relative to classroom norms for interaction. For example, the preparatory stage of dinner places different interactional demands on the child than the preparatory stage of the math lesson. At dinner there is a single conversational focus with one primary speaker at a time and primary and secondary attenders to it. During preparation for the math lesson, in contrast, there may be multiple conversational foci, and those attending must be ready to shift their listening and back channel feedback from one conversational focus to another. Thus, a situation at home in which more than one conversation is allowed may turn out to be a situation in the classroom in which only one conversation with the teacher as the focus is the norm and vice versa. A child entering school for the first time may make errors relative to the classroom's norms for interaction due to the ways in which participation structures and constituent phases are matched at home. The child may therefore "read" the situation accurately and determine which participation structures from his or her repertoire are appropriate for that kind of a situation based on the norms for interaction the child uses at home. But the choice of participation structures may turn out to be wrong relative to classroom norms for interaction.

There are several activities in our sample, however, in which such discontinuity does not exist. During these activities, the teacher
allowed the students to use the full range of participation structures that they used at home. This was especially true for the climax subphase (phase just prior to clean-up) of the lesson. It was during these times that students were allowed to use Type III participation structures, which are the most homelike and least school-like of all of the ways of carrying on conversations. This may have been adaptive for the teacher. At the most crucial place in the interactional cognitive environment of the lesson she opened the lesson's social organizational structure to ways of acting which were culturally congruent with ways of acting acceptable at home.

Evidence emerging from work with native American teachers and students (Erickson & Mohatt, Note 6; Van Ness, Note 7) and the Kamehameha Early Education Project in Hawaii (cf. Tharp et al., 1977) suggests that minimal adaptations by teachers in the direction of participation structures that are culturally congruent with the communicative traditions governing children's interactions at home, may not only not interfere with children's learning in the classroom, but may facilitate such learning. Such adaptation by teachers is not at the level of academic content -- that is, teaching about formal culture, heritage, and heroes -- but at the level of interactional process with its informal, transparent rule structure -- that is, at the level of invisible culture, as Philips (1974) so aptly puts it.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper we suggested that a direct comparison of home and school, while potentially fruitful for our understanding of communicative skills of school age children, was troublesome. Our work suggests that we must go beyond surface features of dissimilarity and/or similarity and look instead at people's understanding of rights and
obligations and the communicative demands of situations. Once we have taken this step, we will be able to identify functionally similar contexts in the home and school. Exploration of these communication situations will provide new insights into ways to help us integrate the home and school experiences.
Reference Notes


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Appendix

Data Analysis

The method used to arrive at a typology of participation structures is described in Erickson and Shultz, 1977. Basically, one of the dinner time tapes was examined in detail through repeated viewings and an initial typology of participation structures was formulated.

After the typology had been refined through further viewings of the tape, the validity of the typology was tested by examining other tapes of dinner time to see if the same kinds of participation structures were present in those tapes. Dinner time at the home of another student was studied in addition to other tapes of dinner time in the home of the student where the tape originally analyzed had been made. The typology was found to hold true for both the dinner time in the other home, and for the additional dinner times in the original home.

Different forms of verbal and non-verbal behavior were used to distinguish among the different participation structures. For example, the major difference between Type I and Type II (Figure 2) participation structures is based on the fact that Type I conversations involved two different levels of participation among attenders whereas in Type II conversations there is no distinction made among attenders. The differences in participation among attenders in Type I conversations are manifested as differences in three areas: (1) posture and body orientation; (2) gaze direction; and (3) backchannel listening feedback. Primary attenders in Type I conversations are required to orient their bodies towards the primary speaker, orient their gaze toward that person as much as possible, and provide some sort of backchannel listening response. Secondary attenders, on the other hand, are not required to provide the
same kind of non-verbal behavior as the primary attenders. They can look away from the persons carrying on the conversations, they can orient their bodies towards the center of the table instead of towards the primary speaker attenders, and they do not have to provide listening feedback. In Type II conversations, some of the attenders have to provide listening feedback (otherwise the speaker would probably stop speaking) but their listening behavior does not have to be as intense as that of primary attenders in Type I conversations. In other words, the amount of attention provided by attenders in Type II conversations falls somewhere in between the amount of attention expected of primary attenders in Type I conversations and the amount of attention expected of secondary attenders in Type I conversations. Similar kinds of evidence of differences in verbal and non-verbal behavior were used to distinguish among all types of participation structures.
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