

## Successful Practices for Immigrant Parent Involvement: An Ontario Perspective

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*This article brings together the perspectives of 21 immigrant parents who speak eight different languages and have been in Canada less than six years with those of 61 teachers and 32 principals who work in schools with English as a second language (ESL) populations of 20% or greater who have been recognized for successfully involving immigrant parents in their children's schooling. We highlight successful school practices for formal and informal immigrant parent involvement in their children's school learning, for communicating with immigrant parents, and for learning more about the language and culture of their students and their families. The gap between the language of home and school remains the greatest barrier to successful communication partnerships; parents, teachers, and principals should continue to find ways to utilize mother tongues in ways that support student learning in English.*

Early research reported the benefits of home-school partnerships in supporting children's scholastic achievement and in enhancing parents' attitudes about themselves and the roles that they and school personnel play in their children's learning (Epstein, 1987; Henderson, 1987; Smrekar, 1996). Teachers recognize the benefits derived from such partnerships by gaining insights about their students and their home environment, which support what Delpit (1988) terms the necessity of accessing the "culture of power" for school success.

Yet the widespread acceptance of the efficacy of supporting parent involvement in their children's schooling is not evidenced in widespread practice. Mother tongue, socio-economic status, culture, and education levels influence parents' readiness to engage in home-school partnerships, as well as the roles they are able to play in such partnerships (Lareau, 1989; Moles, 1993; Smrekar,

1996). Immigrant parents in Moles' (1993) research often felt uncomfortable and fearful when visiting their children's schools because they had difficulty communicating effectively in English. They were unaware of the school's expectations for parent involvement and unfamiliar with the technical language used by teachers to describe curriculum and instructional strategies. Teachers in Delgado-Gaitan's (1996) and Purcell-Gates's (1995) research did not recognize these barriers to immigrant parent involvement. Instead, they misinterpreted immigrant parents' minimal or absent participation in school-related events as evidence that parents were not interested in their children's schooling. Similarly, Cummins (2000) found that "if ability to speak English and the knowledge of North American cultural conventions are made prerequisites for 'parental involvement,' then many of those parents will be defined as apathetic and incompetent and will play out their pre-ordained role of non-involvement" (p. 8). These studies correlate parent involvement with their "learning to decode the system" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 13).

**Recent research examines literacy practices in new immigrant homes and sheds light on the value of factors like the mother's education, language and range of literacy activities found in the home. For the most part, these were case studies of family literacy practices of one ethnic group.**

Parents in Bernhard and Freire's (1999) study lamented that communication with teachers about their children's progress was often limited to a 10-minute interview when the teachers' scripted questions and comments did not

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invite participation or response. Dyson (2001), in her study of Chinese parents' involvement in their children's schooling, concluded that parents wanted communication between home and school to be more culturally sensitive and broadly inclusive of family practices. Villenas and Deyhle (1999) concluded that Latino parents felt kept out of schools by the negative ways they were treated and that their children were subject to low teacher expectations explicitly due to their ethnicity.

Recent research examines literacy practices in new immigrant homes and sheds light on the value of factors like the mother's education, language, and range of literacy activities found in the home. For the most part, these were case studies of family literacy practices of one ethnic group. Melzi, Paratore, and Krol-Sinclair's study (2000) of immigrant Latino mothers participating in an intergenerational literacy program reported a high incidence of mothers' storybook reading with their children at home. Similarly, Xu (1999) found that new immigrant Chinese parents consistently engaged in Chinese and English literacy practices with their young children. Li's (2003) case study of a Chinese-Canadian family revealed that while in-home support for education was strong, it did not necessarily translate into positive results for their children's school success. We feel that our study provides parallel data, but from multiple perspectives, of the untapped resources available by understanding and embracing mother tongue literacy practices of the home in school.

## Methods

### Participants

Our study brings together the perspectives of a range of immigrant parents with those of teachers and principals. The 21 parents speak eight different languages and have varying levels of education—from middle-school through post-secondary education. Seventy-five percent of parents had been in Canada less than two years at the time of the study. The others had been in Canada less than six years, having arrived from the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia. Their stories provide a snapshot of immigrant parents' support of their children's literacy at home and at school that crosses linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic lines. It is a picture with particularly Canadian characteristics and, more specifically, Ontario characteristics. Toronto is recognized as one of the most multicultural cities in the world. This has partly come about because of a historical commitment in Canadian law to bi-lingualism and, later, multi-culturalism. Compared to the United States, the dynamics of ethnicity then tend to play out

differently in Canada, where South Asians and Chinese vie for the position of largest visible minority status along with East Indians, Arabs, and those of African or African-American descent. Participants in our study, including new Canadians, are informed through various sources, school, the media, and government policies of this aspect of Canadian identity. Canadians tend to see themselves as part of a mosaic, rather than a melting pot model of nationhood.

The 61 teachers and 32 principals recruited work in schools with English as a second language (ESL) populations of 20% or greater were recognized by their school boards for fostering successful home-school partnerships. Both in the interviews and surveys, participants highlight successful school practices for communicating with immigrant students' families, for learning more about the language and culture of their students' families, and for making the most of homework to help parents support their children's literacy. These schools are part of large boards that cut across large portions of the greater Toronto area and, therefore, include more rural as well as urban schools with socio-economically mixed populations.

We sent surveys to 79 teachers and 39 principals in six public and Catholic school districts in the Canadian province of Ontario. The return rate was 77% for teachers and 79% for principals. There were even numbers of primary and upper elementary teachers in the sample of 61 participating teachers. Almost half the teacher participants (48.4%) had taught for less than five years. An even greater percentage of participating 32 principals (84%) had been school administrators for less than five years.

In surveys, we asked teachers about their views on the role of parents in supporting their children's literacy and on factors influencing new immigrant parents' support. We asked about modifications they make to instruction and homework for ESL students, and ways in which they communicate with parents of their ESL students. We asked principals about immigrant parents' involvement in school activities, the ways in which ESL students' literacy learning influenced staffing, scheduling, homework policies, parent-teacher conferences, and their views on the role of parents in supporting their children's literacy learning. We gave participants a number of choices for each question and asked them to check all that applied. One choice was always "Other: [please list]." Surveys for principals and teachers also contained three open-ended questions that invited a short written response about what they were proud of in supporting ESL students and their parents, what they would like to improve, and what they needed to reach their goals.

Categories describing practices for effective parent/school partnerships supporting ESL students' literacy learning that emerged in this process included:

1. Homework and parents' at-home support;
2. Informal parental involvement in classrooms and schools;
3. Formal parental involvement in classrooms and schools;
4. School-based initiatives to develop partnerships and cultural awareness.

We interviewed 12 of the teachers (all women) and 10 of the principals (four women and six men) who had returned surveys and indicated interest in further participation. All principals worked in K–8 schools. Six of the interviewed teachers taught grades K–3, four teachers taught grades 4–6, and two teachers were teacher librarians. Interview questions were similar to those in the survey, as we asked teachers and principals to elaborate on their views and to give examples of their practices in supporting parents of their ESL students.

We used various methods to recruit parent participants. Initially, we asked principals and teachers who participated in the interviews if they would be willing to send information letters home with their students. These letters, translated into Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Tamil, and Vietnamese, invited parents to contact one of the authors of this article or the translators. From this mail-out, we received calls from parents who later took part in the interviews.

Two researchers shared the responsibility of conducting interviews with the teachers and principals. Interviews with one parent from Hong Kong, another from mainland China, a third from Israel, and the focus group with four Sri Lankan parents were conducted in English by one of the authors. These parents and the four Arabic speaking parents had children in participating schools. The remaining nine interviews were conducted by Serbian, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin, and Arabic-speaking research assistants. The research assistants recruited the remaining parent participants from their communities. They taped and transcribed the interviews and translated them into English.

In interviews of approximately 30 minutes in length with the 21 new immigrant parents, we asked about the reading and writing that they did in English and their mother tongue, and the ways in which they helped their children read and write in both languages. We asked for parents' views on what teachers and parents should do to help children read and write. We also asked how they felt that their children's teachers and principals could help them to support their children's literacy. We asked about the frequency of their visits to their children's schools and what the purposes of these visits generally were. We also wanted to know about the ways in which parents got involved in their children's learning in their home countries.

We calculated percentages of each response to survey questions that invited teachers to check all appropriate

responses. We used inductive analysis to draw out themes from the written survey responses and interview responses. The categories we derived were used to organize our report of the results.

## Results

### Homework and Parents' At-Home Support

All but 3.3% of participating teachers assigned regular homework for their ESL students. Teachers maintained that *regular homework* is key to ESL student success and an effective way in which to gauge the kind of support ESL students were getting at home. Teachers generally made modifications to homework assignments by decreasing the number of tasks ESL students were required to complete. Independent reading and reading aloud to someone at home were the most frequently assigned types of homework. Other types of homework included writing definitions of unfamiliar words and explanations of vocabulary using the children's mother tongues, completing phonics pages, preparations for oral presentations, independent research, and library visits.

Other types of homework specifically modified for ESL students included providing tape recordings of books for students to listen to while they read, encouraging students to draw pictures if they were unable to write words in their written assignments, and giving students different reading materials to provide information about Canada and their immediate environment. One teacher provided extra time for ESL students to edit their writing with their teacher or an ESL teacher assistant, tape recording the editing conferences so students could listen to them when editing their writing. Another teacher sent home a model assignment and parent tip sheet to help parents work with their children. Other teachers established a peer tutor system so that ESL students could telephone their peer tutors if they had difficulties completing the homework. In two schools, ESL students had the option to stay after school to work with older peer tutors on their homework. One teacher also gave students his/her e-mail address and was willing to act as a consultant when students needed help with their homework. Sometimes teachers assigned reading in the children's first language or material that was easier for the children to read for homework. One teacher held meetings with ESL students' parents on a monthly basis to show parents how they could help their children with homework. Many teachers indicated that they drew on their school's ESL teachers' expertise when making modifications.

Nearly all of the interviewed new immigrant parents had clear expectations that regular homework should be assigned by their child's teacher. They valued homework as a means of understanding what their child was

accomplishing in school during the day. For the most part, the new immigrant parents wanted at least the same amount or more homework currently given. They also wished to be provided, through the child's *agenda* (homework diary/calendar), with ways to communicate their questions and concerns to the school. As a Serbian parent said, "Our children have to maintain some sort of homework journal or agenda, which I like. . . ."

Teachers, principals, and most parents participating in this study believed it was important for new immigrant parents to read and write at home to support their children's English literacy learning. One teacher asserted, "I think the parents are the primary teachers of literacy to their children. They teach a love of literature and the love of listening to a story. And if it's a priority in your house that literature is important, then I think kids will pick up on that." Two of the Serbian-Canadian parents agreed, saying, "Parents should lead by example and enjoy reading themselves." Participating parents read English newspapers, magazines, and professional texts, such as internet websites, e-mails, and books. Parents who were not formally employed outside the home said that their primary English reading involved reading newsletters and forms that their children brought home from school, as well as the children's literature that their children brought from school or public libraries. The Chinese-Canadian parent explained, "I began to read some children's literature. It's interesting and also easy for me to learn and to read so I began with Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* series."

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In addition, parents, teachers, and principals agreed that support for ESL students' literacy in the home should largely take the form of reading and writing with children in English and their mother tongue. One teacher

explained, "Immigrant parents should be doing exactly what the English-speaking parents are doing: reading to their child every day, talking about what they're reading, and having conversations with their child. It can be in their mother tongue. It doesn't need to be English." Frequently, teachers and principals commented in surveys and talked in interviews about supporting students' first languages in order to give them a further advantage in reading and writing in English.

Participating parents engaged in a range of reading and writing activities with their children in their mother tongue and in English. Many parents read books in English and/or their mother tongue to their children. They wanted their children's teachers to send home lists of recommended books that their children could read in the evenings and during the summer. In addition, the Taiwanese parent advocated having school libraries open after school hours so parents could borrow books with their children. Parents who felt they were unable to read with their children in English (because their command of the language was not sufficient), nor in their mother tongue (because the script was too difficult for their children to decode), still set aside time after school for their children to read. The Colombian-Canadian parent, for example, read two pages and his son read two pages of English books sent home by the school, as well as Spanish books borrowed from public libraries.

Apart from encouraging their children to write e-mails and letters to friends in their home country, homework was the primary form of writing in which participating parents engaged their children. All parents helped with or monitored their children's homework, depending on their facility with English and their understanding of the curriculum topics. Two of the Serbian-Canadian parents and the two Egyptian-Canadian parents preferred the practice in their home countries of having a course textbook for each grade level that parents could borrow/purchase, so they were aware of what their children were learning and what was yet to learn in each subject. The Chinese-Canadian parent, maintaining the tradition of her home country, had purchased the grade one book used in Chinese schools for her daughter to work through at home.

Interviews revealed some important discontinuities in how each group perceived their roles and responsibilities in relation to homework completion. Despite teachers' attempts at modification, some parents did express concern that they could not support their children's English reading and writing at home because, in the words of one parent participant, "my son reads better than me." The attitudes of teachers and principals mirror this, as 85% felt that the demands of a second language hampered immigrant parents' involvement in their children's literacy learning. One principal described parents' anxieties in this way: "The parents are very

apologetic that their English is so poor, and they're very, very hesitant to help their children." There was also concern expressed among the teachers that some minority language parents could not read proficiently in their mother tongue.

### **Informal Parental Involvement in Classrooms and Schools**

Most parents participating in this study viewed their involvement in school activities as a means for learning more about Canadian schools and improving their own English and, consequently, their children's. The Taiwanese-Canadian parent said, "I learn English from school . . . My English has improved and I know how I can explain myself. I have more chances to talk in English and I learned the culture, too." One of the participating Sri Lankan-Canadian parents and the Chinese-Canadian parent volunteered for field trips, monitored children's playground activities during the lunch recess, or helped prepare materials in their children's classrooms with the hope of improving their English to a level that would enable them to get a job. These parents and parents from Dubai, Serbia, Jordan, Israel, and Hong Kong volunteered in their children's classrooms to observe how their children were progressing. For this same reason, all parents participating in the study occasionally talked informally about the children's progress with their teachers when picking up or dropping off their children.

Some of the parents participating in this study volunteered to provide specific expertise to students and teachers. One Egyptian-Canadian parent, with a diploma in computer science, helped her child's teacher in the computer lab. Two of the Serbian-Canadian parents, who had post-secondary degrees in science, had volunteered at the school's "Meet the Scientist Day," and the Sri Lankan-Canadian parents helped with cultural days, explaining traditions of their home country.

From the teachers' and principals' perspectives, parent involvement at school most frequently took the form of helping individual students with reading and writing (26.2% of teachers observed this) and through accompanying classes on field trips (81.3% of principals observed this). Teachers and principals viewed parent involvement as a means of enhancing students' learning experiences, rather than for informing parents of their children's progress or for developing parents' familiarity with Canadian educational practices and expectations and their facility with English.

For the most part, participating parents worked full-time jobs, were taking ESL courses, or had young children at home. They were unable to volunteer on a regular basis in their children's classroom or for school activities. Over 90% of principals and 82% of teachers recognized these realities in immigrant parents' lives.

Approximately half of teacher and principal participants felt that new immigrant parents may be reluctant to get involved in their children's education at school because the views on acceptable forms of involvement in the schools in their home country conflicted with those of Canadian school contexts. One teacher explained, "I always welcome parent volunteers at any time, but though some immigrant parents might be available during the day, they wouldn't be the ones to volunteer because they don't feel that that's their place—to be acting as a teacher or working as a teacher." The Chinese-Canadian parent concurred with this: "In China, teachers are authorities in education and so parents don't interfere. They think teachers are doing the right thing." However, many other parents said that this was not the case in the schools that their children left in their home countries. Parents whose children had attended private schools in their home countries of Jordan, Dubai, Colombia, and Hong Kong were accustomed to parent involvement in their children's learning, both at school and at home. A Chinese-speaking principal was able to raise the participation of parents on the school council from 2 to 15 parents in one year as a result of telephoning each home to invite parents or caregivers to the first council meeting.

### **Formal Parental Involvement in Classrooms and Schools**

Participating schools went to great lengths to facilitate communication between immigrant parents, their children, and school personnel, hiring translators to assist with parent-teacher conferences as frequently as funding allowed. Bilingual teachers, administrators or support staff in the school, and members of the community also served as volunteer translators. Almost 90% of teachers relied on the parent/teacher conferences with a translator to explain the details of the report card, though a good number of the teachers were concerned with issues of confidentiality when translators were present. Just over 40% of teachers went over the report cards with students face-to-face so they could explain them to parents. They also held student-led conferences so students could translate. Few parents cited parent/teacher interviews as an effective means of communication with the school, however. One parent felt that a 15-minute interview twice a year was completely insufficient, while others expressed unease about their English abilities in the interview setting.

On the other hand, parents consistently expressed their beliefs that written communication, including the use of notes in the student agendas, permission forms, signing of tests, newsletters, and reports cards, was essential to effective home/school communication. Parents noted the value of the student agenda as a means of "seeing progress." Report cards were cited by parents as being an

important means to learn about their children's progress, though not as important as the regular communication through the school agenda. About half of participating teachers stated that they used simplified language to describe student learning in students' report cards. Very few (9.8%) had the option to have the report cards translated, however.

### **School-Based Initiatives to Develop Partnerships and Cultural Awareness**

Schools participating in this study helped foster partnerships with ESL families through a variety of in-school programming, an array of support mechanisms, and through pursuing opportunities for professional development that helped staff better understand their students' home cultures. In addition, a number of the teachers and principals had been immigrants to Canada, so they knew the challenges that parents of their ESL students faced and were able to anticipate ways to support the families.

Teachers and principals have been actively involved in professional development to learn more about the language and culture of their non-native English-speaking students. One teacher, for example, explained that "almost all of my students have Spanish-speaking backgrounds, [so] I interest myself in their culture; the soccer, for example." Another teacher, herself an immigrant from Pakistan, empathized with immigrant parents who viewed homework as essential to school success: "I always have to make sure that I give extra credit homework, and you wouldn't believe how many kids end up doing the homework for extra credit. Parents love it." In addition, teachers have taken courses to learn about effective teaching for supporting ESL students' learning, embarked on international travel, and attended conferences celebrating linguistic diversity.

Participating schools offered adult ESL classes, established newcomer orientation groups, and supported settlement activities within the school. They learned the languages of their students by participating in heritage language classes. In addition, teachers invited new immigrant parents to school to help children write dual-language books for classroom and school libraries.

Parents learned about the school culture through these initiatives. They found the availability of adult ESL classes to be the most valuable. Indeed, some parents expressed a desire for more and for flexibly timed ESL classes for adults within schools. These classes were scheduled either during the day for parents with small children requiring daycare or after work for the whole family, which were the best times for immigrant parents. As one father put it, "ESL classes for the adult should be held at the same school as the kids so the whole family feels they belong in the school. . . ."

## **Conclusions and Implications**

We bring together the perspectives of immigrant parents, teachers, and principals with those of researchers to highlight issues and implications for supporting immigrant parents' involvement in their children's literacy learning at home and at school.

### **Supporting Informal Parental Involvement at Home and At School**

Parents interviewed in this study expressed a desire for more informal contact with the daily life of their children's school. Even if they were unable to volunteer or attend council meetings, parents wanted to communicate with their children's teacher through notes in the agenda, through newsletters, and through signing homework. Parents regarded these exchanges as opportunities to increase their English fluency as well as increase their comfort level with the expectations of the Canadian school system. As Naughton (2004) proposes, schools that maintain an open-door policy encourage parents to participate in daily activities. Increasing these kinds of informal communication may also serve to mitigate the perception held by teachers and principals that immigrant families cannot help teachers to support their children's literacy learning. Parent comfort level with the school system and, more directly, their own confidence interacting in English will likely increase as a result.

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The results from this study point specifically to the potential for improved home-school communication embedded in the process of homework completion. School administrators and teachers may want to look more closely at expanding the use of agendas so that parents may use them, if they wished, as tools for

communicating their concerns to their children's teacher. This idea is supported by Dyson's (2001) conclusion that Chinese immigrant parents want communication that is less "generalized" and that more "readily responds to parental concerns" (p. 471). Effective use of the agenda for communication may lay the groundwork for potentially richer and more meaningful encounters at reporting time. Parents would likely feel a greater sense of ease and control if they were able to use the agenda in the parent-teacher interview as a communication tool.

While there was a portion of the parents interviewed who said they were unable to volunteer in the schools, our study revealed that a significant number of parents tried in whatever ways they could to be present in the school environment. Once again, parents preferred informal rather than formal opportunities, including helping out with field trips or occasionally volunteering for a cultural day event. If, as Bernhard and Friere (1999) suggest, immigrant families sense a kind of impersonality in Canadian schools, our findings indicate that informal opportunities for involvement offer ways for schools to expand their communication with new immigrant parents. These informal interactions might take the form of a school-based ESL class, a cultural night, or a school barbeque, rather than, as has been the tradition, the twice-yearly parent-teacher conference.

Parents participating in this study reported that they willingly signed homework, talked to teachers informally, volunteered at their schools, and generally felt that this was part of their responsibility toward their children's education. Some parents were clear in noting the different educational traditions in their home countries, and most also maintained that they were very aware of and fully accepted the expectations of the Canadian school system. Whether they agreed or not with the differences, parents were more than willing to work within its parameters. These generally positive responses from the parents do suggest that our parent-group sample's socio-economic status is such that they experience a level of financial security and social acceptance, which allows them to feel a degree of safety and comfort about their involvement in their children's schools. We can see this either as a limitation of our study or, possibly, a constraining aspect of the larger context from which the data were collected. Immigration policies in Canada have, in recent years, tended to favor the admittance of professionals, and our sample group certainly supports this shift.

Linguistic barriers, however, remained persistent for parents and influenced teachers' and administrators' perceptions of immigrant parents' participation. This finding speaks to the need for schools to offer more varied second-language learning opportunities for families. It also supports the conclusions offered by Cummins (2001) that "the first step to validating bilingual students' home

language is to recognize that the attempt to eliminate their home language from school is a blatant example of coercive relations of power" (p. 3). Cummins and others call for a more enlightened school language policy that builds upon the second (or multiple) languages that may be spoken and read at home.

Findings from this study also suggest that teachers and principals in schools with large ESL student populations are working hard to engage in a variety of professional development activities in order to gain a better understanding of their immigrant students' languages and cultures. In turn, their efforts will continue to support the development of culturally and linguistically sensitive home-school communication. The positive impacts of these activities are mirrored in the perceptions held by most of the immigrant parents that the schools were trying to accommodate and respect their home cultures.

### **Supporting Formal Parental Involvement at Home and School**

Principals in our study all used translators during reporting time and utilized multi-lingual staff to support effective communication during these periods. The fact remains, though, that only a small percentage of reports cards were translated. As a result, parents often had to rely on friends and family to interpret them. Similar problems existed with parent participation in the twice-yearly interview process, which was never cited as an effective communication tool by parents. If culturally sensitive communication practices are the goal, school boards and administrators may wish to focus attention on improving the accessibility of these formal mechanisms of communication for immigrant parents, and find ways to make report cards and the parent-teacher interview process more enriching.

Participating principals, teachers, and parents agreed that immigrant parent participation on school councils was limited by linguistic and economic factors. The one notable exception was the Chinese-Canadian principal who managed to increase parent participation substantially through direct appeals to parents in their own language. The implications of this example and other findings related to formal parental involvement in classrooms and schools lead us to conclude that practices embodying a multi-cultural, multi-lingual approach whenever possible will, inevitably, serve to foster better home-school communication. Each stakeholder group shares the important goals of supporting student learning and developing an open and respectful relationship between family and school. This being said, each group perceives its role in this process as being influenced and sometimes limited by a web of socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural factors.

Clearly, there is a wide range of successful school practices for communicating with immigrant students' families, for learning more about the language and culture of their students and their families, and for making the most of homework to help parents support their children's literacy. Participating parents, teachers, and principals identified specific practices, some not previously recognized, which support effective home-school communication, particularly in the area of informal parental involvement and home-school communication. More can be done, especially in harnessing the rich mother tongue literary practices at home by teachers and principals so that they can better achieve school success for their students and connect that success to the larger community.

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