

Lessons *from* parents, and *with* parents in early literacy learning for migrant and refugee students

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“**Steep Learning Curve**”. (Carman, 2016, p.A1). This front page headline from the *Vancouver Sun* on the day in late August that we are completing this paper aptly describes the challenges that 700 Syrian refugee children living in the metropolitan Vancouver area will encounter a week from now when they enter Canadian schools. The Syrian refugee crises has caught the world’s attention with good reason but we tend not to pay much attention to the unprecedented, transnational movement of people that is occurring daily. Nor are we aware of the challenges that many children and families encounter as they transition to their new countries.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population (2015) reports that worldwide, 244 million people live outside their country of birth. Compared with 15 years ago, this is an increase of 71 million people or 40 percent, a global trend that undoubtedly will increase. Large scale refugee crises, similar to the one in 2015/2016 in Syria, are also likely to have continued, profound effects on migration.

The movement of people has led to the emergence of *superdiversity* (Blommaert, & Rampton, 2011), or a “diversification of diversity” (Vertovec, 2007, p.1025). For example, in the city where we work, 192 different languages are spoken in the schools and more than a dozen

different languages are represented in some classrooms (Statistics Canada, 2015). Furthermore, there are significant differences within cultural and linguistic groups in terms of educational and economic backgrounds, religious practices, migration histories, legal status, and length of residence in the new country (Wessendorf, 2014). People from different linguistic and cultural traditions may have few reasons to interact outside their groups, especially if they settle in ethnic enclaves or face barriers and obstacles as they attempt to settle in their new communities. However, public institutions such as schools, health services and social agencies have to meet the challenges associated with the complexities of cultural and linguistic diversity. Given the reality of the increasing transnational movement of people, as educators we must find ways to cultivate a sense of global interconnectedness and to build capacity for discussion across cultural, linguistic and other differences (Orellana, 2014).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to share insights we have gained and lessons learned from our cumulative 7 decades of teaching, conducting research with, and working with young immigrant and refugee children and their families. In particular, Jim Anderson draws on his work with colleagues implementing an intergenerational family literacy program with immigrant and refugee families called *Literacy for Life*¹ that focused on *real world* literacy activities and a bilingual family literacy program, *Parents As Literacy Supporters in Immigrant Communities*². Marianne McTavish calls on her twenty plus years as a primary grade teacher in inner city schools, as well as the early childhood teacher and co-researcher in the two year, *Literacy for life*

¹ Anderson, J., Purcell-Gates, V., Jang, K., & Gagne, M. (2010). *Implementing an intergenerational literacy program with authentic literacy instruction: Challenges, responses, and results*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning. Available at <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Research/FundedResearch/201009AndersonPurcell-GatesIntergenerationalLiteracy.html>

² Anderson, J., Friedrich, N., & Kim, Ji Eun. (2011). *Implementing a bilingual family literacy program with immigrant and refugee families: The case of Parents As Literacy Supporters (PALS)*. Vancouver, BC: Decoda Literacy Solutions. Available at: http://decoda.ca/wp-content/files_flutter/1314987684PALSinImmigrantCommunitiesResearchReport-Feb2011.pdf

project, and on her own research with immigrant and refugee families. Ji Eun Kim draws from her own experiences as an immigrant to North America from Asia, as well as her experiences as a researcher and an early childhood educator in Canada and Korea.

We have organized the paper as follows. After offering several caveats, we review and discuss some of the literature on key considerations and issues that we think are important for all educators who work with immigrant children and their families. These are: 1) home or heritage language maintenance and loss; 2) cultural models of learning and teaching; 3) diversity in family literacy activities and practices; 4) code-switching and translanguaging; and 5) bilingual children's literacy development in their second or additional language(s). We then review the research on some promising bilingual family literacy programs with immigrant and refugee families and conclude with the lessons we have learned from and with families.

Some caveats

Obviously, as literacy educators and researchers, children's language and literacy development and learning are of primary importance to us. However, as is the case with all children who we teach, we must remember that literacy-while potentially a powerful tool in supporting their cognitive, intellectual, psychological and social development-is but one aspect or facet of their lives. Perhaps nowhere is thinking of the **whole person** more crucial than in working with immigrant and refugee children.

Some other caveats are also in order. As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2016) points out, some newly arrived families will have experienced trauma as the result of famine, torture and war. Others will have spent considerable time in camps, or on the move, looking for a new home. Some families will arrive with very few possessions and resources, and for example, some parents will be unschooled or have very little

formal education. Other families will experience barriers to work, even if the adults are well educated professionals while others will experience difficulties gaining access to adequate housing or health care. On the other hand, some families will arrive in their new countries very well resourced and with the cultural and social capital that will allow for a relatively easy transition. To reiterate, as with other groups, there will be considerable variation across families and it is important that we not assume an essentialist perspective and make assumptions based on their migrant status. Instead, it is imperative that as educators, we get to know and understand families new to the country, to the greatest extent we are able. We next turn to some broader issues that need to be foregrounded as we think about working with immigrant and refugee families

Home Languages: Loss versus Maintenance

Many immigrant and refugee families speak a language different from the dominant or majority language of the countries and communities that are their new homes. As Lilly Wong-Fillmore (2000) and others have pointed out, immigrant and refugee children often begin to lose their home language on entry to preschool or school. There are complex and intertwining reasons why children and families abandon their heritage or home language. Intuitively, families know that acquiring the dominant language is a key to integrating into the new culture (Gorodzeisky, Sarid, Mirsky, & Slonim-Nevo, 2014) and for themselves and their children to be successful. Parents tend to believe that they are giving their young children a “head start” in the dominant language by using it with them, no matter their own level of proficiency in that language. For example, in North America, there are very strong, ubiquitous messages that parents should read storybooks to children in preparation for school and parents often interpret these enjoinders to mean that they

should read to them *in English*, even if they themselves have limited facility in that language. Indeed, responding to this situation, Tabors and Snow (2001) recommend that parents interact and read with young children *in their home language*, unless/until they are proficient in English. And of course, as Auerbach (1989) and Reyes and Torres (2007) point out, family literacy programs, perhaps unwittingly, sometimes devalue or undervalue families' home languages and their literacy practices, promoting the dominant language (e.g., English) and mainstream literacy practices. Sometimes teachers and other educators tell families to use the dominant language such as English with their children, and not to use their home language. At other times, this message is more subtle and the value of home languages are downplayed or ignored (Anderson, Morrison, Friedrich, & Teichert, 2016).

Obviously, most families want to learn the dominant language of their new country as quickly as possible. They recognize that "Host-country language is a powerful instrument used . . . to acquire and integrate the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of their new social environment." (Gorodzeisky, Sarid, Mirsky, & Slonim-Nevo, 2014, p.714). However, there are no reasons that we know of why children and families should lose their home language but there are compelling reasons why they should maintain and retain it. First, Bialystok and her colleagues have identified cognitive advantages and benefits across the lifespan of knowing and using more than one language (Bialystok, 2011; Bialystok, Abutalebi, Bak, Burke, & Kroll, 2016). Second, children's learning in a second language (e.g., English) is enhanced if their home language is already well established (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Third, French Immersion programs in Canada and bilingual programs in the United States and elsewhere demonstrate the feasibility of *additive bilingualism* (Lambert, 1981) - the notion that one can acquire or learn a second language while successfully maintaining one's home language. And fourth, as Wong-Fillmore (2000) and others

have pointed out, home language maintenance is important for intergenerational communication. That is, when children lose their home language as they acquire or learn the dominant language of their new country, communication is difficult (or impossible) when their parents and grandparents are not proficient in the new language.

Cultural Models

Immigrant and refugee families often bring with them different *cultural models* (Bennardo & de Munck, 2013; Holland & Quinn, 1987) of child development, learning, parenting and teaching. By cultural models, we mean that one's thinking and actions are guided by "cultural maps and assumptions in the substructure of our thought and action" (Crossley 1996, p. 11). In other words, cultural models determine "what is valued and ideal, what activities should be enacted and avoided, who should participate, and the rules of interaction" (Reese & Gallimore, 2000, p. 106) within a social/cultural group. However, as cultural psychologist Barbara Rogoff points out, our perspectives of children's learning "has been based largely on research and theory coming from middle class communities in Europe and North America" (p. 4). A classic example of a cultural model of early literacy learning in North America is storybook reading. Although studies show that some cultural groups do not engage young children in joint storybook reading (e.g., Heath, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Purcell-Gates, 2017), many educators assume that it is a "natural" phenomenon and that parents will know how to engage in joint meaning making, using the book as a prompt.

Researchers have documented how different cultural models are enacted in the lives of immigrant children. For example, Li (2009) described how the recently immigrated parents of Yang Li, a six year old first grader in a Canadian school, supported his literacy learning at home through direct instruction, emphasizing practice and repetition, and using flash cards. Li

elaborated that the parents' teaching "reflected their traditional Chinese perceptions of literacy learning" (p.106). Gregory's (2005) ethnographic work with South Asian families in East London captures the important role of siblings – not parents or older adults – in supporting each other's literacy learning at home as they re-enact and practice the literacy lessons from school.

An occasion in our own practice while working with Sudanese refugee mothers and their preschool children in an intergenerational family literacy program *Literacy for Life* vividly illustrates how the cultural models of families can be very different from the cultural models of North American educators. Working with the preschoolers, Marianne, who was the early childhood educator at the site, had encouraged them to "write" notes to their mothers to share with them during the parent-child together time. However, the mothers paid very little attention to the children's notes and on the way out of the session, deposited them in the recycling bin. Clearly, the mothers did not share the "widely held stance that celebrating children's drawings and scribbling demonstrates support for their emerging literacy development" (Purcell-Gates, McTavish, Lenters, Anderson, 2014, p.19).

Families' Diverse Literacy Activities/Practices

As previously discussed, children and families may cross borders due to circumstances related to war or political persecution. They may also move from their homeland to improve their economic circumstances or to reunite with other family members. As these families physically migrate, it is also important to remember that cultural, emotional and behavioral boundaries are crossed at the same time. For example, many families' non-Western literacy practices, particularly those based on oral traditions, are often no longer considered relevant in their new world.

Home literacy practices are defined by culture. Families will have different values, different uses, and different goals related to literacy. Recognition of the differences between cultures as to how literacy functions or is enacted and is perceived and valued (e.g., Clay, 1993) within families is an important point to remember as children move to formalized school settings. According to Dixon and Wu (2014), the most studied home literacy practice of immigrant and refugee families is storybook reading. Consistent with the notion that not all cultural groups engage in joint storybook reading, in their review of the literature, Dixon and Wu found that immigrant parents read less often with their children than do “mainstream” families. The reasons for this are varied: for example, parents may be unable to get books in their home language, they may have low levels of literacy in their first language, they may simply be non-readers, or shared reading is not a practice with which they are familiar (Stavans, 2015). Mothers were the most frequent reading partners in the studies Dixon and Wu reviewed, but sometimes extended family members, such as older siblings and grandparents, played important roles in reading with young children. It is also important to recognize that many of the families participated in oral storytelling, not just at bedtime, so the children were exposed to narrative genres and were accruing some of the same benefits as they would from shared book reading.

Studies examining the home literacy practices of immigrant and refugee families other than classic storybook reading reveal activities that are dynamic and interactive. A common shared practice between family members and their children is in the domain of schoolwork. Parents not only help their children with work required by the school (Dixon & Wu, 2015, Murillo, 2012) and teach their young children early literacy skills (Farver, Xu, Lonigan & Epp, 2013). However, within some cultures, school, not the family, is seen as being responsible for teaching children.

Other than schoolwork, many families' literacy practices involve reading for enjoyment and reading for information (e.g., reading pamphlets, phone texts, calendars, newspapers or letters), or for religious purposes (Murillo, 2015). Some families visit the library to support first and second language use (Murillo, 2012), and parents often employ traditional cultural ways of teaching to do so. Children may assist in the running and maintaining family businesses which include: reading and writing invoices and delivery forms, maintaining calendars and making bill payments, creating menus and flyers, and assisting with reading recipes for cooking. Some children also act as *cultural brokers* for their parents in helping them decipher school notices or health and government forms (Perry, 2009). Television and video watching assist families in keeping up to date with their cultural heritage or their connection with their home country. Viewing TV together also assists families with learning new cultural concepts, and children often write about or role-play TV characters from programs specifically geared toward them (Perry & Moses, 2011).

Code-switching and Translanguaging

To reiterate, many immigrant and refugee families bring a heritage or home language that is often a minority language in the society to which they immigrated. But as noted previously, when children enter preschools or elementary school, they are usually expected to use the dominant or majority language (e.g., English in North America). Historically, children from immigrant and refugee families have been required to use *only* the majority language at school (e.g., Garcia, 2009). However, researchers have found that children's use of both the dominant language and their heritage language is beneficial to their bi/multilingual development as well as their academic learning. Educators now recognize that *codeswitching* is a valuable strategy

wherein learners avail of their own language as a resource in constructing or developing new knowledge.

Code-switching involves using two (or possibly more) languages within an utterance or (i.e., code mixing) and between utterances (Garcia, 2009; Wei, 2011). Examples are, "I love to go to a *parc* (park in French)" and "This is my favourite toy. *J'adore!* (I like it!)." In early monolingual perspectives, code-switching was perceived to be a lack of ability to separate two languages, but current knowledge of language acquisition suggests, it is the productive, utilization of two languages simultaneously.

Several researchers have examined young children's code-switching as a useful pedagogical learning tool. In a study in Grades K and 1 monolingual English classrooms in Canada, Iannacci (2008) documented how code-switching enabled young English Language Learners to overcome the cultural and linguistic challenges they faced. Iannacci pointed out that code-switching enabled the children to improve formal and informal classroom discourses as well as their literacy practices in a hybrid form, using two languages. Wei's (2011) study involving 10 and 12 year old students in Chinese complementary schools in the United Kingdom showed that code-switching helped children's creativity and critical thinking and boosted their confidence as multilinguals.

More recently, *translanguaging*, (Baker, 2011; Cresse & Blackledge, 2010; Garcia, 2009) a broader notion of the use of two or more languages, has come into prominence. Garcia (2009) defined translanguaging as,

the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative

potential. ... [It] goes beyond what has been termed codeswitching, although it includes it.
(p.140)

Translanguaging is based on the premise that one actively uses two languages to negotiate meaning in a dynamic, socio-culturally pragmatic manner. It is consistent with an additive bi/multilingual view of language learning. Translanguaging is considered an effective pedagogical approach in bilingual classrooms, as it helps the development of "children's metalinguistic understandings and metacognitive awareness" (Garcia, 2009, p. 153). It is thought to provide four educational benefits: "a deeper and fuller understanding of the subject matter", "the development of the weaker language", "home-school links and co-operation", and "the integration of fluent speakers with early learners" (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012, p. 645). However, as Bauer and Guerrero (2016) point out, "classrooms are contested spaces" (p. 46) and children are sometimes not permitted to use their home language to support their development and learning.

Bilingual Children's Literacy Development in Second Languages

Learning the dominant language can be exceptionally challenging for young immigrant children who speak a different language. Although literacy acquisition in young immigrant children is under-researched, it is important that educators have knowledge of what we know about the processes involved in young children's learning-to-read and write in an additional language. This knowledge also has implications for parents other family members, as well as policy makers.

Researchers and scholars agree that there are similarities in learning to read in a first language and learning to read in a second language (e.g., August & Shanahan, 2006; Genesee &

Jared, 2008). However, because reading development is connected to oral language proficiency, children who are learning a second language may show gaps in their literacy development compared to peers who speak the dominant language (Bedore & Peña, 2008).

As discussed previously, historically, it was believed that successful second language acquisition depended on keeping the second language (L2) separate from the first language (L1) (Cook, 2001). However, researchers challenged this monolingual instructional approach for minority language students, asserting the lack of empirical support (e.g., Auerbach, 1993; Cummins, 2001; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders & Christian, 2006). On the basis that oral and written language are cognitive tools mediating learning, many educators and researchers now advocate a bilingual approach.

Cummins' theory of *Common Underlying Proficiency* (CUP) suggests that adequately developed skills in one's first language (L1) facilitate the development of subsequent languages. In other words, the cognitive skills and abilities that learners acquire in their L1 (e.g., literacy learning) will transfer to their L2 or additional languages (Arnett, 2013). For example, if a child has learned to read in their first language, the skills related to reading (e.g., decoding and comprehension) will be drawn upon while learning to read in the new language. Indeed, recent studies have found that specific skills, such as phonological awareness, metalinguistic awareness, grammar, and vocabulary of the L1 provide scaffolding for building knowledge of the L2 (Iluz-Cohen & Walters, 2012; Genesee, Paradis, & Cargo, 2004; Geva, 2000; Kruk & Reynolds, 2012; Madriñan, 2014).

Most studies of literacy acquisition that examine bilingual learners' cognitive processes do not include sociocultural variables and these variables have important influences on children's literacy development (Goldberg, Paradis, & Crago, 2008; Lesaux & Geva, 2006; Saracho,

1997). As Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory, and Arju, (2007) point out, “Culture is seen as understandings shared between members of a community, jointly created through social practice” (p. 222). Young children will enter school with diverse experiences and their own culture will determine the extent of their language development and literacy experiences. These experiences can greatly influence the development and use of reading and writing in the host country. As Teimourtash and Sakouri (2016) aptly point out, “In a sense, it is undeniable to assume, when students come to the classroom, they don’t come out of the blue; they come ‘loaded’ with their native language and a cultural heritage that nobody must deny or underestimate” (p. 399). Thus, as educators, we are also challenged to deepen our awareness of how students acquire language and how best to support them in leveraging their cultural and linguistic resources. This includes supporting student identities respectfully in order to enrich their learning and validate students’ home languages in the school environment (Cummins & Early, 2015).

In summation then, although historically many immigrant and refugee children and families have lost their heritage languages fairly quickly, there are compelling cognitive, cultural, linguistic, psychological and social reasons for educators to encourage and support families in maintain home languages. Families from different cultural and social groups tend to have different “cultural models” of early literacy learning. It is important that educators recognize and value these, even though they may not align with mainstream, western views. Expectedly then, the literacy practices of recent immigrant families often differ significantly from what we expect family literacy to “look like” and as we pointed out earlier for example, young children’s early attempts at writing and drawing are not viewed as important in some cultures. We now recognize that children who are learning a new language often engage in

codeswitching or translanguaging as they attempt to construct meaning and knowledge and educators now see these as productive strategies. And finally, we recognize that some of the cognitive and linguistic skills acquired in literacy learning in one language transfer to children's literacy learning in a second or additional language. We next turn to some initiatives that have shown promise in working with immigrant and refugee families.

Family Literacy Programs with Immigrant and Refugee Families

For several decades, family literacy programs have been seen as a venue for welcoming families to their new communities and orienting them to schools and educational practices that may differ significantly from those in their countries of origin. However, these programs have been critiqued (Auerbach, 1989; Reyes & Torres, 2007) because they are seen as privileging the dominant language such as English over participants' home languages and western, school-like literacy practices, and not the literacy practices from participants' homes and communities. In response to these critiques, educators have developed family literacy initiatives that attempt to be more responsive to the social contextual context of the families. For example, Zhang, Pelletier, and Doyle (2010) developed a bilingual family literacy program in a Chinese community in Canada. During the sessions held in community centers, the facilitators shared big books and encouraged and supported families' engagement in developmentally appropriate language and literacy activities. Each week, they also provided the families with rhyming books from a web-based source and with picture books, magnetic letters and so forth. They found that the children benefited from the program, with significant improvement in expressive vocabulary. Hirst, Hannon and Nutbrown (2010) reported on a home based, family literacy program with families of Pakistani origin in Sheffield, United Kingdom. A cultural worker from the community and an early childhood teacher visited homes regularly for a year, providing materials and resources,

demonstrating ways that families could support children's early language and literacy learning. Facilitators encouraged families to use their home language or English according to their preference. Hirst et al. found that children in the program scored significantly higher on measures of early literacy knowledge than children in a control group. In the United States, Boyce, Innocenti, Roggman, Norman, and Ortiz (2010) implemented the Storytelling for the Home Enrichment of Language and Literacy Skills (SHELLS) program with families in the Migrant Head Start program. Building on the notion that storytelling is literally a universal phenomenon, facilitators encouraged families to tell stories in their home language about their everyday experiences. They also supported families in making books based on their stories to share with the children. Compared with children who did not participate in the program, the children in the SHELLS program made significant gains in vocabulary. These and other studies also show that parents report that they have learned additional ways that they can support their children's literacy learning and become more confident doing so. We now turn to some lessons we have learned from our own work and that are consistent with the literature we just reviewed.

Lesson Learned From Immigrant and Refugee Families

-Many families abandon their home or heritage language in their desire to learn and to have their children learn the dominant language. However, with encouragement, explanation, modelling, and support, families do see the value of maintaining their language while learning the new one.

-The vast majority of families care deeply about their children and want to support their learning. For example, one father with whom we worked got permission from the farmer

who employed him to start his shift at 4:00 a.m. so that he could be free to attend sessions of the family literacy program with his young son held over lunch hour. However, families' perceptions of how to support children may not align with current, western pedagogy, and indeed, may be somewhat antithetical to it. For example, some will have their preschool children use flash cards or complete pages of worksheets practicing the formation of letters of the alphabet. Others will believe that supporting their children means providing them with materials and letting schools and teachers do the teaching.

-Families appreciate *seeing* different early literacy activities and therefore modelling-not telling- is important. For example, if we encourage parents to read dual language books with their children, it is important that we demonstrate or model for them, strategies for sharing the texts in ways that we know support learning.

-All families have "funds of knowledge" (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and it is important that we draw on these as much as possible. For example, in sessions where we discuss oral language development, we have families bring in and share rhymes, riddles and songs from their culture. Others have had families bring in photographs and other artefacts from their home countries to share.

-Families have agency and they enact this in different ways. Families often will incorporate their own more traditional cultural models into literacy activities, even when more interactive, child centered, approaches have been modelled. For example, some parents (and grandparents) continue to guide young children in a hand-over-hand manner,

as they attempt to write their name, immediately after a discussion of children's emergent writing with examples of different developmental stages and how drawing and scribbling are young children's attempts to construct and represent meaning.

-Related to this point, it is imperative that program developers consult with families and the community in advance and that they regularly seek feedback from them. For example, one group of families with whom we worked were dissatisfied with the "learning through doing" pedagogy that we were employing, and requested a more didactic explanation of the purposes of the activities. We complied, and provided explicit explanation of the purposes of the activities and the learning that occurred as children engaged in them.

-Some families do not understand the requests they we make of them in terms of supporting their children's literacy learning at home. For example, parents have shared with us that they simply did not know what was meant by the note that the child's teacher sent home at the beginning of the school year, requesting, "Please read to your child every night".

-Many family literacy initiatives focus on children's language and literacy development and little attention is paid to the adults, although it is usually an expectation that they support their children's literacy learning at home. Therefore, it is essential that we also provide support for adult language and literacy learning in family literacy programs.

-Although families want to learn the majority language and the culture of their new communities, many of them want to retain their ethnic and cultural identities. For example, one of our neighbors is a three generation family from Greece who have been in Canada for nearly a century. The grandchildren, who along with their parents, were born in Canada, speak Greek as an additional language, attend Greek gatherings and festivals, and maintain many traditions from their country of origin.

Conclusion

We hope that the lessons learned and insights that we shared in this paper will be food for thought for those who work with migrant families in an increasingly diverse and complex world. We recognize of course that as conceptions of literacy change especially in the digital age, new concerns and issues will arise and new approaches and strategies for working with families will be necessary. Our own experiences highlight the importance of collaboration, respect for difference and diversity, and the virtually universal desire of families to have their children do well in school and in life. As we stated at the beginning of this paper, the transnational movement of people will almost certainly increase and our schools and preschools will become increasingly diverse. It is therefore critical that we become aware of, and responsive to, the issues that migrant and refugee families face and to ameliorate as many challenges as we can through best practices informed by current knowledge and research. In some cases, this will entail our challenging hegemonic thinking and ingrained ideologies, in policy, practice and research. Although we focused on young children and their families in this paper, we believe the insights shared and possibilities offered can be applied to older children and adolescents, and indeed with migrant and refugee learners of any age.

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