

Learner-Centred Policies with Reference to Constructivism in the Implementation of the Curriculum

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ABSTRACT: *In the new South Africa, the major challenge has been to dismantle apartheid education. For the purposes of this article, from the initial process of introducing the first OBE in South Africa up to the recent strengthening of the NCS by the Minister of Basic Education (Department of Education 2010 (a) & Department of Education 2010 (b), the department hoped that there would be a positive impact made by the curriculum changes from Nated 550 to the current NCS. The Department of Education also had to address the educational challenges such as racial divisions at schools and inferior education where it continues to exist. Ironically, today's challenge for the department of education is to get teachers in the poor rural and township schools to teach.*

KEYWORDS: SASA, NEPA, OBE, NCS, CAPS

I. INTRODUCTION

This article presents a theoretical framework and the background on learner-centred policies with reference to constructivism in a South African education context. The new constructivist approach to education led to the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the South African Schools Act (SASA) and the National Education Policy Act (NEPA), also of 1996. The constructivist approach to the implementation of the curriculum started with the first Outcomes based Education (OBE) in South Africa and the principles thereof are outlined in this article. The introduction and the infusion of the National Curriculum Statement, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement and the old curriculum called NATED or Report 550, are all discussed in this article.

II. THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

Prior to 1994, education in South Africa was racially segregated by legislation. This resulted in many black people not receiving an adequate education (Du Plessis, 2005: 1). The apartheid education system was characterised by the Nated 550 curriculum policy that was both discriminatory and centralised. This education system exacerbated the negative perceptions and political tensions that culminated in political strikes throughout South Africa. The inferior education received by black people was one of the factors that led to the political resistance that, ultimately, resulted in the democratic general elections of 1994. The challenge facing education in South Africa is that in most township and rural schools black learners still receive inferior education compared to learners in town schools.

III. THE CONSTITUTION OF 1996

The general elections of 1994 ushered in new perspectives and paradigms in both the political arena and in education circles in South Africa. A new Constitution – the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa: Act No. 108 of 1996 – as well as other progressive policies such as a Bill of Rights and the National Education Policy Act (NEPA), were introduced. Both the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and the education policies aimed at transforming the curriculum and the education system along perspectives and paradigms that would make South African citizens to be able to participate globally.

Unfortunately, the problem of learners not being taught happens mainly in poor rural and black township schools. Although the apartheid perspective of looking at education ended with the introduction of democratic elections in South Africa, learners who daily experience late-coming and the absenteeism of teachers from classes are not benefitting from the new democratic education system in South Africa. Unless parents and other stakeholders in education stand up to assist the department in the implementation of the curriculum, for the benefit of the children, the knowledge of learners in poor rural and township schools will remain low.

According to this article, the way in which the principles of the NCS were designed, was meant to guarantee that education would be transformed for the benefit of all learners, teachers and the South African

society. Improving the implementation of the principles of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) by developing a comprehensive Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was critical to ensure the attainment of skills, knowledge, values and qualifications regardless of race, gender or religion, in accordance with the Bill of Rights. Therefore, the new perspective of the government that has implications for the curriculum is that education is a societal priority that must involve learners, teachers, parents and other stakeholders in society.

Contrary to the centralised perspective of the apartheid approach to education, where black people had no input to the design of their own curriculum, when the CAPS were introduced in South Africa, the government created a platform for teachers, subject advisors and other stakeholders to contribute towards the design and management of education and curriculum change. Unfortunately, most parents in the townships do not seem to support the education of their learners because they do not attend parent meetings called by the schools. This creates a situation in education where the very teachers who do not teach black learners in the rural and township schools, take the lead at education meetings and conferences meant to deal with problems and weaknesses in the implementation of the curriculum. Therefore, in strengthening the current NCS, it is important to ensure that any centralisation of education by the department must not be a shift from chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and some stakeholders may be marginalised (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996: Chapter 2 and Department of Education, 2012: 3).

IV. THE BILL OF RIGHTS

In South Africa it is the Bill of Rights that led to a new perspective of looking at things. It was introduced as part of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. These rights call for a curriculum that protects and enshrines the rights of all South Africans to human dignity, equality and freedom. To this end, access to education also features in the Bill of Rights (Constitution of South Africa: Chapter 2) and the policies of both the Department of Education and the African National Congress (ANC) as the ruling party (Department of Education, (2001a); African National Congress. 1992 [accessed 5 August 2009; African National Congress. 1994a and African National Congress. (1994b).

The South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 96 of 1996 evolved from the South African Constitution and the Bill of Rights. For the purposes of this article, the positive impact of the principles of the NCS and the infusion of the CAPS into the NCS should, therefore, enhance the quality of the curriculum offered to learners. The principles of the NCS and the CAPS are there to ensure that learners from rural, town and township schools are equipped with the skills, knowledge, values and qualifications needed by the learners and the country. These are skills and virtues that are necessary in the global world and which are laid down in the SASA.

The school subject Life Orientation was introduced mainly to help support in the process of acquiring learners with the skills, knowledge, values and qualifications that are needed by both the learners and the country. With the strengthening of the NCS with CAPS, it was hoped that the subject Life Orientation would develop learners to be able to face the challenges of life and be meaningful citizens in society (Department of Education 1997; Jansen, 1998; Botha, 2002; Department of Education, 2002a; Department of Education 2002b; Department of Education 2012; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Hendricks, 2004 & Christiaans, 2006).

V. THE SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS ACT (SASA)

V, (i) Aims and objectives of the South African Schools Act (SASA)

By virtue of the South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 96 of 1996, the state aims at involving parents, learners and members of society because the new perspective is that education is a societal priority that must involve all stakeholders who can in turn help to ensure that:

Values and principles of democracy are infused into education

The perspective that education is a societal priority stems from the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. The aim is to redress the inequalities that still exist in education due to the racial policy divisions of the past apartheid education system. New values in education, based on the Bill of Rights, the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) and the Life Orientation policy documents are now promoted. When curriculum designers and schools draw curriculum policies, they are required to base them on democratic principles of the National Education Policy Act, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements, other democratic governance and curriculum guidelines (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Chapter 2; South African Schools Act (SASA), No. 96 of 1996; National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 (NEPA) & Department of Education 2012).

The rights of the learners to basic education are realised

In the new education system built on principles of democracy in South Africa, the rights of learners to basic education are realised through learner-centeredness. While the teacher is important, the focus is supposed to be on the learner, and that parents and stakeholders in society must help to ensure that the learner must be in class and taught every day. The policies of the education system have to ensure that it is possible for all learners to learn and realise the learning outcomes by attaining the required skills, knowledge, values and qualifications (Department of Education 2012).

The education system is transformed

Political and educational perspectives guide curriculum transformation. The focus of this particular aim in the South African education system is that curriculum changes will take place until all the aims of transforming education in South Africa are met. The abovementioned aim means that education would be transformed by its shifting from a base of Christian principles to a base of constructivist principles. If looked at from the point of view of this aim of on-going transformation, then, the strengthening of the NCS with CAPS is understood. As already stated in this article, all learners would have access to education as laid down in the Bill of Rights. Parents, communities and other stakeholders in society would be involved in the transformation of the curriculum and the education system.

As an on-going process of transforming education and the curriculum, on 6 July 2010, education reported to the teacher unions and the public on radio SAFM, that the teacher workload and the number of subjects had been reduced. Contrary to the first OBE that was introduced in South Africa, the strengthening of the NCS with the CAPS implied that the focus should now be on teaching and learning and not on administration. Although the announcements of the curriculum and administration changes in education were welcomed by unions and society as “the last nail in the coffin of OBE”, the workload for teachers does not seem to have been reduced.

While strengthened with CAPS, the NCS is still characterised by outcomes-based features. Consultation by the Minister of Basic Education also strengthened the government’s approach that education is a societal priority. Therefore, in transforming the education system, all relevant stakeholders must be involved because it is expected that there will be a partnership between the state and the relevant stakeholders in society (Department of Education 1997a, Department of Education 1997b and Department of Education 1997c & Department of Education 2012).

VI. THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY ACT (NEPA) OF 1996

As part of this transformation of the education system, the National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 (NEPA) (Department of Education 1998b: 9) constituted one of the education policies that emerged from the Constitution and which operates alongside the South African Schools Act (SASA). NEPA forms the backbone of all the education policies in terms of which the new perspective is used to strengthen the implement the curriculum (Department of Education 2012).

VI, (i) The aims and objectives of education in South Africa

NEPA was a new perspective to transform and implement the curriculum. NEPA led to the introduction of new policies mentioned in this article. Through NEPA in South Africa a new system of education was therefore introduced. This meant a single education system with a new perspective for South Africa. The aims and objectives of this single education system included the following:

To advance and protect the fundamental rights of all

As stated in this article, in South Africa education became a fundamental right for all. To protect this right, parents are now compelled by law to take their children to school, at least in the school-going age which is between age six and sixteen. It was mentioned in earlier in this article that, parents and stakeholders are required to be involved in the process of changing the education system of the country. The state also takes care of the learner teacher support materials by providing these to both teachers and learners (African National Congress, 1994b).

To contribute to the full personal development of all learners

In contributing to the full personal development of all learners, the training of teachers is very important so that they can prepare quality teaching and assessment plans and be able to implement them. However, when the first OBE was introduced, the focus was on the learner, who was to be developed in order to participate fully in the society. It was for such reasons that the first OBE, Curriculum 2005 (C2005) and the

National Curriculum statement (NCS) were based on the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1962: 4 & Vygotsky, 1978 26). According to Gravett (2005: 19 in Nieman and Monyai, 2006), constructivism is learning is “an active process of constructing knowledge’. Teachers need to be skilled enough to manage the teaching and learning environment in a manner that allows the learners to create new knowledge, as they engage with fellow learners in the learning environment.

Constructivism as a theory was used and referred to in the training documents and policies of the department when the transformation of education started in South Africa. Constructivism focuses on the teaching and learning environment to encourage learners to take part and be responsible for their own learning. Constructivism was the philosophy of the earlier transformation policies and later the NCS. Different forms of assessment were, therefore, used to allow learners to develop. Although in constructivist approaches to the teaching and learning environment emphasis is not rigidly on content, textbooks, tests and examinations, these resources and strategies are also used to allow learners to develop. As stated in this article, the latest strengthening of the NCS with CAPS first seemed to be a direct contradiction to constructivist approaches to the learning environment and the first radical OBE that was introduced in South Africa.

To achieve equitable education opportunities and redress the past

In South Africa the vision of the Department of Education is to equip learners with the skills, knowledge, values and qualifications needed by them and the country. The aim is that the learners would be prepared for best opportunities in adult life (Department of Education 1997; Jansen, 1998; Botha, 2002; Department of Education, 2002a; Department of Education, 2002b; Fiske & Ladd, 2004; Hendricks, 2004 & Christiaans, 2006). This means that the task of teaching learners and equipping them with the required development so that they can have equal opportunities in life is not left to the teacher and the department of education alone. Parents and all stakeholders in education and society must be involved. The learner is influenced by both the school and society from the learner comes from. It is only through effective participation by all, that past imbalances can be redressed. This new perspective makes education to be a societal priority and not of education institutions alone.

To provide opportunities for and to encourage lifelong learning

Providing opportunities and encouraging lifelong learning is another important aim of NEPA. The problem with the curriculum transformation process is that the NCS curriculum which is based on outcomes-based principles is being transformed but the philosophy and the principles of the NCS remain those of outcomes-based education (OBE). Without transforming the principles on which the NCS curriculum is based, curriculum cannot be effectively transformed because the philosophy of the curriculum is not changed. The researcher argues that there is a difference between transforming and simply reducing subjects and the workload of teachers. For instance, the change from the rigid content and examination based curriculum of the apartheid era was a radical change that overhauled the education system in South Africa.

The aim of the NEPA on lifelong learning was that the content and assessment standards in the various subject policies would be designed in such a way that learning would not only be limited within the walls of the classroom. It is, therefore, important to ensure teaching and learning within the walls of the classroom is not overemphasized at the expense of lifelong learning. It is for such reasons that the philosophy of an education system must be clear and known to those involved. Learners, teachers, parents and society are encouraged to continue reading, as well as attending short-term enrichment and skills courses. Overemphasis on textbooks, common tests and examinations contradicts and weakens the principles upon which the NCS is grounded.

To achieve an integrated approach to education and training

NEPA, according to Section 29 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of South Africa, aims at using the curriculum to effectively equip learners for both a career path and higher education. Teachers are, therefore, expected to be well trained and skilled to prepare lessons and assessment plans that would ensure that the NCS policy of each school subject impacts positively on that specific subject. When the NCS policies and the CAPS of the different subjects impact on each subject in a school, learners could be able to learn and also take part in activities that train them to gain skills, knowledge, values and qualifications that are required.

This is a shift from a rigid, teacher focused approach to the teaching and learning environment. For the NCS policy and the CAPS of each subject to impact positively on that specific subject, there are formal and informal activities to help learners gain skills, knowledge, values and qualification as expected by society, as opposed to rote learning by learners. Strengthening the curriculum without ensuring an integrated approach to education and training could also isolate the curriculum from training and skills. Integrating education and training starts through active participation in formal and informal activities that develop and equip the learner.

To encourage independent and critical thought

Overemphasis on books, tests, examinations and teachers imparting knowledge, has elements of viewing the learner as an empty vessel that must be filled. As stated in this article, learners must be actively involved in their learning and not only through responding to questions asked by their teachers. NEPA aimed at helping learners to participate in a learning environment that makes them to ask questions and not simply be receptive to what their teachers present to them. If strengthening the NCS with CAPS included the strengthening of teachers, teachers would be confident in doing their work. They would be able to use content and relevant assessment activities to encourage independent and critical thinking. The problem is that the NCS is strengthened with CAPS but the teachers remain the same.

To promote a culture of respect for teaching and learning in education institutions

Learners are expected to be committed to their education and not be disruptive to the teaching and learning environment. Infrastructure and learning facilities must also be well looked after. Thus, as has already been stated, access to education is a basic right of all learners and it is a right which is laid down in the Bill of Rights. The perspective of the new education system is to provide opportunities that would lead to the development of all learners. This development of learners is expected to take place in stable learning institutions. It is also ironic that, as the NCS is strengthened with the CAPS, principals and the schools management teams who must manage both the changes and the new version of the curriculum are not effectively trained to manage the implementation of the CAPS better (Department of Education 2012: 5).

The aims and objectives of the strengthened NCS include improved learners outcomes that must be realised by ensuring that learners develop critical thinking skills. In this article the subject Life Orientation is considered to be the most important subject with regard to ensuring that education becomes a societal priority and learners develop holistically as was the intention when the first OBE and C2005 that are now withdrawn, were introduced.

VII. THE NEED FOR TEACHER TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The principles of the strengthened NCS for Life Orientation are aimed at transforming education and getting rid of the inequalities which were created by the former education departments (Pretorius, 1998a: 1–12). The principles of the NCS for Life Orientation incorporate ideals, norms and standards that require teachers to be trained. The problem is that teachers who have not been well trained or else were not able to teach the other subjects offered by schools have been given Life Orientation to teach (Toddun, 2000: 5).

To this end, Grosser and de Waal (2008) warn that, if teachers are not well trained and they do not understand how to implement the principles of the NCS and the CAPS, the learner's education will be impeded. This would be contrary to both the ideals of the principles of the NCS and the CAPS for Life Orientation and the Norms and Standards for Education (Department of Education 1997c & Department of Education 2012).

The new ideals, norms, standards and transformation of the NCS and the CAPS aim at creating equal opportunities for all learners and for all sections of the population. It is for this reason that either the lack of or else the poor training at the NCS workshops could lead to below standard implementation and contribute to the inability of principals and school management teams to manage the transformation of education which the South African society is expecting (Department of Education 2012; Fullan 2001: 4 Jansen & Christie, 1999: 9).

According to Boshoff (2007: 42), if principals and school management teams were well trained, they would be able to adopt different management styles in order to motivate teachers to increase their effectiveness. Teachers also need to be trained and supported so as to develop and project a feeling of self-confidence and to be perceived as well organised by their learners in the classrooms, and by parents and other stakeholders in education (Department of Education, 2003b: 2; Mbeje, Z. 2007: 60). In order to avoid impeding the learner's education and retarding the transformation in education, it is essential that teachers, as the core of the transformation process, be effectively trained and developed in terms of the implementation of the principles of the NCS and the CAPS in respect of Life Orientation (Department of Education 2012: 5).

In this article, the constructive creation of an environment that promotes lifelong learning and the development of learners and citizens are viewed as a demanding requirement that requires highly trained and skilled teachers. As emphasized in this article, teachers are the pillars in an education system. In order to have the required positive impact of the learning of Life orientation and other subjects, the system of education needs highly trained and skilled teachers (Ramatsui, 2006: 27). Providing teachers with common lesson plans, new textbooks, etc. and not train them how to use these resources is already a gap that needs to be addressed in the process of attending to the needs of learners.

VIII. OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION (OBE)

As the country was approaching the final years of the apartheid rule, the perspectives of looking at society changed. It was essential that the education system that had been designed based on perspectives that divided the society now undergo a transformation, as did happen in the change from the apartheid system of education to the introduction of the NCS and the CAPS. When the first OBE was introduced in 1998 it was later based on C2005 as vehicle that would help to implement it within a target period of 5 years, after this period there would be a review of the curriculum implementation process (Van Deventer 2009: 1 & Jansen, 1998).

The researcher argues that from the policies that have now been withdrawn such as OBE, C2005 that followed immediately after the introduction of OBE, the Revised National Curriculum Statement in the GET, the infusion of OBE in the FET schools, as well as the current strengthening of the NCS with the CAPS, these are all attempts of transforming the curriculum, in a South African context. These curriculum changes were also seen as attempts to move away from OBE soon after it was introduced in South Africa (Jansen 1998; Botha 2002; Fiske & Ladd 2004 & Todd & Mason 2005). In this article the strengthened NCS is still seen as an outcomes-based system based on a learner-centred pedagogy”.

It is important to indicate that in 1997, the education transformation process led to the training of national and provincial teams. One of the principles of transforming education included in the NCS states that learners must attain the skills, knowledge and values necessary in South Africa. The implication of the ideals of NCS and the CAPS is that teachers would be trained and developed to ensure that they would be able to make an impact in terms of the implementation of the principles of the NCS in order to teach learners to become critical thinkers. The problem, as emphasized by Van Deventer (2009: 127) is the fact that schools do not have qualified teachers to teach subjects like Life Orientation. The implication is, therefore, that the growth and development of learners does not take place (Department of Education 2012: 3).

In order to realise the anticipated ideal of good education as envisaged by the education authorities, teachers are expected to inculcate critical thinking, and the requisite skills, knowledge and values. The teachers must be capable of supporting learners in all their subjects. The NCS and the CAPS are infused with the principles and practices of social and environmental justice and human rights as defined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (s4(a) (i) and (ii) as well as (c) and (d); Department of Education 1996 & Department of Education 2012: 5).

The envisaged good education in South Africa is supposed to contribute to the upliftment of the social, ethical, moral and spiritual fibre of society as a whole. The implementation of the principle of the NCS, which is based on cognitive and social constructivist theories, is aimed at the transformation of the society and its people. It is, thus, no coincidence that the South African Schools Act is based on the tenets of our valued Constitution.

According to the departmental policies mentioned in this article the changes in the implementation of the curriculum were all meant to equip all learners with essential democratic principles, knowledge, skills, values and qualifications. This, in turn is in line with constructivism which is rooted in both the cognitive and social schools of psychology and in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, which reject the didactic notion that the learner is a blank slate. However, while some studies saw the introduction of the different education systems as progressive, Jansen (1998: 13) and Chisholm (2000: 16) consistently argued that the curriculum of the department was confusing and unlikely to succeed in South African schools because, even in America where OBE originated, it had not been successful.

As already mentioned in this article, the learner is no longer able simply to receive knowledge from the teacher in the classroom. The views of the constructivist theorists are in support of the National Education Policy Act (NEPA), No. 27 of 1996 & the CAPS, in terms of not only taking into account the academic performance of learners but also their thinking, intellectual adaptation, interaction, problem-solving skills, sense of responsibility, behaviour and interaction with the surrounding culture and social agents such as parents and peers. It is essential that learners acquire some knowledge of each other's cultures and that they are assisted to create a new culture in the South African society (Department of Education 2012: 5).

The NCS of January 2012 and the CAPS of 2012 were designed with the sole purpose of ensuring and protecting the highest good of our nation. The CAPS used to strengthen the NCS does not depart from the essence of the NCS. The NCS and CAPS no focus on the content and the assessment of the curriculum.

Learner participation in cultural events is encouraged to enable learners to communicate and to appreciate each other's culture and values. It is hoped that this, in turn, will address the country's moral decline, values and standards. It is essential that teachers be well trained and supported so that they are able to act as role models as they assist in raising both the literacy and the numeracy levels of their learners. The NCS and the CAPS intend to have a positive impact on the education of the learners by promoting learner participation. Teachers and officials need to be skilled in order to create a learning environment where learners will develop multilingualism skills, communication skills and other opportunities that both girls and boys may need (Department of Education 2012: 5).

Compared to a rigid teacher centred approach to teaching and learning, learner participation has such a major impact on changing how learning takes place in the classroom. The correlation between this article and Bhana et al. (2005: 4) is that there has been poor or no support for teachers to be able to implement important subjects like Life Orientation effectively. According to Bhana et al. (2005: 4) "the majority of teachers do not seem to have received training and support thoroughly. Without the appropriate training of teachers and the school management teams of schools, Both NCS and CAPS may not make the required positive impact in terms of the construction of skills, knowledge and values in line with the implementation of the principles of the NCS. Without proper teacher training teachers are likely to be caught up in an excessive use of integration in the lessons, which could cause confusion and undermine the attainment of learner outcomes (Brophy & Alleman, 1991:66). Notwithstanding the apparent problems, the integration and implementation of the principles of the NCS and the CAPS at schools remains critical.

According to Grosser and de Waal (2008: 42), even in terms of the new curriculum, teachers are not able to perform mediation in the classroom because at times the requisite curriculum management systems and policies are yet in place (Mothata, 2000: 23). The challenge of making an impact in education is further complicated by the decades of unequal distribution of both human and material resources and, hence, the majority of schools are either still under-resourced or dilapidated or both.

According to Davidoff and Lazarus (1997: 4), the cognitive and social construction of knowledge is made even more difficult because many schools are still overcrowded and without the required equipment and sporting facilities. The implementation of the principles of the NCS in order to produce learners who will be capable of attaining the critical outcomes remains a considerable challenge (Green, 2001: 129–140). Curriculum practices and offerings are neither cognitively nor socially equitable, nor are they aligned with the provincial and national strategies for curriculum and human development (Gauteng Institute for Educational Development, 2005: 1 & Department of Education 2012: 5).

This article intends showing that, for the successful implementation of the NCS, the CAPS and its principles, all relevant stakeholders in education "must be cooperating partners both in the social and cognitive construction and development' of the curriculum (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997: 7; Education Information Centre (EIC), 1996). In support of this view, Marris (1975: 121, in Fullan 1991: 31) contends that teachers are not able to assimilate innovation and change in the education system if they do not share in the meaning of such innovation and change.

IX. CONCLUSION

The process of transforming the implementation of the curriculum in South Africa started in 1998 with the first OBE that was implanted in grade 1. As already stated in this article, it was first OBE, which was shortly followed by C2005 as a transformational vehicle of implementing the curriculum. This C2005 which is now withdrawn was regarded as a South African version of OBE. Then followed the Revised National Curriculum Statement and the infusion of the NCS which have also been withdrawn. The strengthened NCS is a curriculum statement that replaced all the other versions of the curriculum. This article focused on the theoretical framework and learner-centred policies with reference to constructivism.

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