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Teachers in Action: Delivering Individualized Education Plan

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Abstract

The role of teachers involved is very important for an individualised education plan (IEP) to serve its purpose to children with special needs. This is because they are engaged directly in the programme's implementation and in determining the children's learning. Additionally, the role would require them to forge collaboration with the parents for a successful programme. The objective of this research is to investigate the teachers' perceived role in the IEP. Two types of instruments were used; semi-structured interview on seven teachers and questionnaires on 17. Results indicate that the teachers believe they understood their roles and have met them. They also feel that involving parents in the programme is important. Planning and reporting on activities carried out is also important, but they should be receptive and sensitive in the process. Furthermore, they admit that they could improve further become more effective. To this, it is concluded that the school plays an important role in support of the teachers' growth and competency in the field.

Keywords: Teachers, individualized education plan, collaboration.

1.0 Introduction

Teachers' roles have become even more challenging as they have to cater not only to the needs of students but also to meet up with parents' expectations. The initial training that teachers go through not only prepares teachers in applying their skills in giving instructions and adapting curricula but also to be able to join forces and

become partners with the parents. Teacher-parent collaboration will make a vast contribution if both parties aim that the same goal is to improve students' achievement and excellence in education. In a study done by Harris (1998), it was indicated that individualized education plan (IEP) should place students with special needs in the most appropriate programme and the process acts as a mean to explain in an understandable manner to parents on their children's needs.

Examining the function of IEP in meeting the mandated goals and objectives, it was found that the requirements are not clear, teachers lack the skills in implementing programmes or teachers are not able to report correctly on the students' actual experience and development (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999; Shearin, Roessler, & Schriener, 1999). Shea and Bauer (2003) stressed that teachers could only develop appropriate activities in IEP after having a thorough understanding of parents' and their children's needs. The National Council on Disability (1996) also believes that it is important to enhance the ability of families to collaborate not only with teachers in sharing decision-making authority for students but also to the service system as a whole.

Teachers play an important role in IEP implementation and in determining students' learning. Teachers would face various problems if they failed to connect school and home in enhancing students' development. Success would come easy if teachers and parents recognized each others' roles in IEP. The impact of teacher-parent partnership in IEP can also include Erikson's psychosocial theory that looks at children's development through a series of stages which require them to interact with their social environment (Parke & Locke, 2003). It would be fascinating to find out teachers' perceived roles in IEP as they both should aim towards similar objectives as the parents and that should be in helping students progress further in their learning thus become independent individuals in the future.

2.0 Teachers' Roles and Their Perception

The Education Ministry of Malaysia has recognized and realized that teachers teaching students with disabilities play more challenging roles in meeting the needs of the students (Utusan Malaysia, 2005). These include having knowledge in the field of learning disabilities to equip them with the necessary skills required to teach in this field. Apart from implementing educational plans, they also have to locate and create appropriate methods and teaching materials to be used in the classrooms. It is important to note that the philosophy in teacher-parent collaboration influence directly on how teachers should provide services such as in IEP and also how they should be trained to deal with the children as well as their parents (Olive & McEvoy, 2004). Indeed their technical role requires them to be competent in diagnosing and teaching while their human relations role needs them to be sensitive in dealing with the children and parents (Lerner, 2002; Phillips & McCullough, 1990).

Lee-Tarver (2005) conducted a survey study on 100 teachers to find out about their perceptions of the utility of IEP in regular education setting for students with special needs and used questionnaire to collect the data. The questionnaire used consisted of demographic information as well as 16 questions evolving around the importance of IEP for the students with special needs based on teachers' perceptions. The results have shown that more than 71% of the teachers involved agreed on the benefits of IEP and 23% of them used IEP as a tool to evaluate students' educational programmes. The study also identified that teachers realized the significant role they play and are able to contribute constructively to the IEP process.

Result in such studies may be due to changes in the federal regulations and requirements. The law stipulated that special

education and regular education teachers are encouraged to be proactive and are required by law to be involved in IEP process. However, the responses in Lee-Tarver's (2005) study had also indicated that in closing the gap between policy and IEP implementation, the teachers felt that they needed essential training and support. Such initiatives are necessary in order for them to provide quality services for students who have various needs and types of disabilities.

Research carried out by Yi Ding, Gerken, VanDyke, and Fei Xiao (2006) intended to find out on the opinions and perspectives of special education teachers as well as parents on IEP in China. A total of 100 teachers were selected at random in this survey study and majority of them showed strong support in utilizing individualized instruction. However, 74% of the teachers involved were uncertain about the implementation of IEP because of their inadequate experience to knowledge and training required for effective execution. As Cramer (2006) accentuates, there are many factors to be explored as being knowledgeable in IEP alone is not sufficient and is not able to guarantee that teachers will succeed in their attempt to provide valuable service programmes for students with special needs.

The study has also revealed the potential barriers in carrying out individualized instructions for students with special needs. Although such programmes might benefit and support special education in China, it was articulated that these programmes should be culturally susceptible and suitable to fit into the economic as well as the country's social context.

Educators are expected not only to be positive in understanding the complex families of their students but they are also expected to be well-equipped to teach the diverse population in the special education field (Bratlien & McGuire, 2002; Brabeck & Shirley, 2003). Callicott (2003) reiterated that in order to get cooperation from

parents and family members, teachers were required to have the willingness to examine myths and stereotypes within the family structure itself besides having the objectivity in teaching. In enhancing their effectiveness as service providers, teachers are also expected to be aware of cultural biases as an important step towards being flexible and tolerant (Thomas, Correa & Morsink, 1995). However, teachers may be reluctant to explain to parents on their intentions in educating their children for there may be underlying fear that parents may exert unwanted influence over teachers' work (Steinberg, 1996).

As teachers expect diversity in their classrooms, it becomes imperative that they examine their own cultural expectations and recognize any biases that may contribute to negative effects on their roles in collaborating with the diverse families (O'Shea & Lancaster, 2001; Rivera & Smith, 1997). Teachers need to play their role effectively by approaching people as individuals and being open minded in all home-school alliance especially one like the IEP process. Swap (1990) in an extensive two-year study concluded that activities that promote pleasant and informal conversations allow mutual interest between teachers and parents could overcome communication barriers that might exist between them.

According to Gerber (1991), teachers who go through long-term benefits of a collaborative school environment tend to be receptive to developments and showed more dynamism in their career. Teachers value opportunities for discipline in collaboration and the positive communication that materialized from the process that team members go through (Malone, Gallagher & Long, 2001). Shapiro and Sayers (2003) emphasized that the special education teachers as key players, contributed to a unique perspective in imparting meaningful information and intervention strategies towards achieving the IEP goals. Apart from that, teachers should also allow parents with

opportunities in which parents can see for themselves how the activities in IEP are being carried out; to refer them to support groups or other parents with children of similar disabilities and also to inform parents of their legal rights (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2004; Guernsey & Klare, 1993).

Teacher-parent conferences often require lots of sensitivity and diplomacy to be practiced especially on teachers' role (Hallahan, et al., 2005; Smith, 2004). This is particularly true in IEP meeting when it involves students' behavior or poor academic progress. Teachers need to gather as much information as possible from variety of sources to confirm that the students have certain social, emotional, or behavioral problem before including it in their IEP (Bateman & Linden, 1998).

When Gartin, et al., (2002) conducted a survey in four states in USA, they found that teachers taking advocacy roles on behalf of students and having to work with others actually felt vulnerable and pressured. This is supported by Cramer's (2006) finding which portrayed that as teachers are invited to work with parents they take it as both a request and a challenge. Nonetheless, she added that including parents in decision-making and educational programmes has many rich returns whereby among others, they should assist teachers to meet the needs of students more effectively.

Studies done have cited that teacher' attributes such as positive attitudes, active planning to involve parents, continuous teacher training, involvement in professional growth and personal competence as highly related to successful teacher-parent collaboration (Epstein, 1995; Galinsky, 1990). Lynch and Hanson (1992) believed that teachers, who are accommodating, in spite of inadequate resources, will encourage parents' participation in their children's educational development and yield remarkable results.

When teacher-student ratio is small, teachers generally contact parents more frequently and varied (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). It was also found that teachers sometimes perceived parents' involvement as insignificant or trivial thus making collaborative effort more difficult (Welch & Sheridan, 1995). Teachers also reported lack of time, resources, organizational support, and heavy workloads as barriers to collaborate effectively with parents (Idol-Maestas & Ritter, 1985).

By examining the roles teachers play in the implementation of IEP over the last decades has drawn attention to important aspects required among the teachers. Collaboration with parents on advocacy issues will be more successful if they practice certain strategies. Teachers have to take their duties seriously in documenting and explaining to parents the details in the IEP process concerning the individual students. Some teachers feel that they are insufficiently trained to work with parents and this will further induce negative thoughts as well as feelings in partnering with parents. Other roadblocks include being sensitive toward the cultural differences among the parents, keeping the relationship relevant and respecting parents' perspectives are vital factors in forming successful collaboration.

It is also important for teachers to listen to parents' feelings and validate their needs as well as expectations. However, as findings have shown, teachers may feel frustrated over parents' demands that may prompt teachers to dispose any effort toward collaborating with parents. Although teachers should demonstrate commitment in establishing effective communication with parents about the development of their children in learning, collaboration requires teachers to be tolerant and have a positive mindset to guide them in planning as well as implementing IEP. Collaboration therefore needs to be modeled in the teacher-training programme and taught in methods classes (Conoley, 1989; Foster & Loven, 1992; Hudson, Correa, Morsink, & Dykes, 1987; Idol & West,

1987; Midkiff & Lawler-Prince, 1992; Parental Involvement in Education, 1994). Understanding the intricacies in successful collaboration with parents is essential as teachers need to involve parents in decision making, concerns, and advocacy issues.

3.0 Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used as mixed method was able to enhance the data. Two types of instruments are used namely the semi-structured interview questions and questionnaires.

The researcher intended to look into teachers' perspectives towards their roles in IEP process. The questions involved in this section evolve around teachers' tasks in implementing IEP that begin even before the actual implementation of the program and throughout the year. Teachers were requested to give their opinions on how they were going to determine the goals and objectives that were prepared for the students. There were 10 questions out of which one of them was a negative one.

A total of 17 teachers were involved in the case study. All of them were given the questionnaire. Only seven teachers were interviewed as data were saturated at that point.

4.0 Result and Discussion

A. Qualitative Output on Teachers' Roles They Perceive They Play in the Implementation of IEP

In understanding the roles that teachers believed they play in IEP, majority of the teachers felt they have carried out their roles as required. They accentuated a few roles which were quoted from the interview sessions and they were discussed in detail. Five teachers had cited their views on involving parents and respecting their views. Their excerpts were presented in Table 1.

One of the aspects that were reiterated by the teachers was to involve parents and allowing them to understand IEP better. They believed that they needed to ensure that parents had really understood what was going on in IEP meetings. IEP only started recently in the school. As teachers understood that parents should be involved in IEP

implementation and in decision-making, they believed that parents' involvement was necessary in order to gain their cooperation. These findings were supported from statements elicited during the interview.

Table 1: Involving parents and respecting their views

Identification	Interview excerpts
T1	I need cooperation from parents and I told them about their children's development and weaknesses. I want parents to know and try to help at home. If they have the time, they can come to school and see how IEP activities are carried out and give their opinions.
T2	We need to enhance our relationship with the parents as it can help improve our understanding about the students. Our ties with the students can also be strengthened.
T4	IEP is important for their children. If they feel that the activities are not suitable then we can discuss with them. We have to explain that the activities are for their children's benefits... We have to discuss and explain what IEP is all about. We can do it by calling them and ask them about their children's progress. We can also ask them when they come to school. Usually teachers will determine the objectives. When we meet the parents we will ask if they agree to the objectives. If they do we will proceed. To some parents maybe they feel that the objectives are not suitable for their children.
T5	We should let parents share their concerns and decide what they think their children need in their IEP. However, usually these parents will discuss with us and the decision on what is best will be decided together.
T7	Teachers suggest what is best for the students. Sometimes this will be based on parents' requests. Then I will ask for the principal's or his assistance for their opinions and for them to check my plan and ideas. Then I will carry them out.

Teachers also believed that they should respect parents' views with regards to IEP. Majority of the teachers agreed that the objectives of IEP

should be prepared by them with the help of the school before presenting them to the parents, during IEP meeting carried out at the beginning of the year

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which parents were strongly encouraged to attend. Parents' would decide whether they agreed on the objectives set for their children. If they do, they were required to sign an agreement. Otherwise, teachers would then consider parents' suggestions and then make necessary amendments to students'

IEP after discussing with the school and parents again.

Apart from involving parents and respecting their views, four of the teachers also reiterated that they needed to plan and report on the development of IEP. Their views were cited in Table 2.

Table2: To plan and report

Identification	Interview excerpts
T3	In all our planning, we should also report on what we do, what are the objectives, the short and long term targets and what students have achieved. If targets have been achieved then we know if the programme planned for the students is successful or not... If we don't report then we don't know if we had succeeded. Perhaps the targets set are too high for the students. Then we can lower the targets in students' learning activities.
T5	I always refer to what I have reported in my plans to determine my next action. I have to identify ways to improve on the approach taken. Then it would be easier to reach my target. Of course the target cannot be too high and it has to be something attainable.
T6	We have to plan according to what we want to teach the students. We cannot plan something using materials that are hard to find. That is why we need to plan properly so that we don't encounter any problems when we teach. The materials that we use are the teaching aid... Actually our school provides us with a lot of facilities and resources. It is really up to the teachers' initiatives.
T7	I will draft my plans step by step and allow the our Principal to look at it and comment on my ideas. Usually, he will give me suggestions on how I can improve them. He may also point out on things that I missed out during my planning.

Apart from writing out the plans for the individual students' activities, teachers also reported on the outcomes of the activities that were carried out. Through this procedure, teachers could check and verify students' progress thus making adjustments whenever necessary. They could also monitor students' development and find ways to improve on the approach they took in delivering knowledge and skills to students. Their ideas could

also be shared with other teachers as well as the principal who could provide them with suggestions or advice that they could heed. Planning in IEP should be emphasized as it allowed teachers to prepare themselves for the lessons and provide students with the necessary materials to learn more effectively.

With such detailed plans and reports, it would also be easier to discuss with parents on their children's development in IEP. These are valuable information that should be shared with parents thus becoming an avenue in which parents could share their ideas on how to help their children further. Reference could also be made if unexpected things

were to happen during the sessions and ways to overcome or prevent such problems could be handled more effectively in the future. Teachers cited ways in which they would improve on their skills in delivering IEP services. Table 3 presented their views in this aspect.

Table 3: To improve on skills

Identification	Interview excerpts
T1	It will be good if we can organize workshops that involve both teachers and parents. We can invite specialists in this field to give us a talk and suggest ways in which teachers and parents can use to enhance students' learning. From such workshops, teachers and parents can also contribute ideas and share their problems.
T3	I will do my best. I am not a specialist. There are ways that we can do to help students. I have to seek knowledge. Teachers cannot sit still. We have to go out for training to learn. If the school cannot sponsor then use our own money... We have to make effort. The school must also find and send teachers for training.
T5	IEP is not that difficult to carry out. It makes our work easier. Like a doctor, we have to identify the problems and then provide treatment.

Teachers believed that they would do their best in carrying out their roles in IEP. However, they feel that there is room for improvement and upgrading their knowledge and skills in this area. They took their own initiatives to expand their understanding to provide better services to parents and their children. Teachers mentioned that they would turn to their superior or more experienced colleagues for advice. They would even use their own money to pay for training if they could not get sponsorship from the school. This shows that they took up their role seriously, were dedicated and also committed in their job.

Teachers felt that IEP was necessary apart from students' daily lessons and did not have any apprehensiveness in carrying out their roles. They

agreed that many advantages could be gained from IEP. These advantages identifying students' need better, giving individualized instructions, and building bonds with them. Teachers knew that IEP could be carried out effectively if they could relate to their responsibilities. Teachers believed that their roles include getting parents involvement and thus gaining their cooperation in IEP implementation. They cited that they also needed to respect parents' views on what they felt necessary for their children's IEP. Teachers were in perceptive that apart from planning and implementing IEP, they also had to write reports on students' progress. Teachers expressed their knowledge and concerns in carrying out their roles effectively in IEP implementation and as such require training to improve on their skills further. As teachers play

vital role in IEP implementation they believed that they were responsible in determining the success of the programme.

B. Quantitative Output on Teachers' Roles They Perceive They Play in the Implementation of IEP

Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for teachers' perceived roles in IEP implementation. The overall mean score for teachers' understanding was 3.26, indicating a moderate level of perceived roles in IEP implementation. Mean scores for items related to teachers' perceived roles were between 2.65 and 4.18 indicating moderate and high level of perceived roles. The highest mean value was 4.18 for item 7 (I make sure the parents really understand what happens in the meeting). Mean value was also high for item 25 (*IEP is not required as the services provided by special education teachers like me are sufficient in developing students' potentials) with the mean of 3.82. The lowest mean for the items were in the moderate levels. Two of the items with the lowest mean were item 11a (If the parents cannot attend the meeting, I call and discuss through the phone) and item 19b (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school and I).

C. Triangulation of Qualitative and Quantitative Output on Teachers' Roles They Perceive They Play in the Implementation of IEP

Teachers had expressed their perceptions on the roles they play in IEP implementation during the interview session. The themes from the interview session that match with items in the questionnaire would be discussed further.

Teachers emphasized that it was important for them to meet the parents so that they could discuss and explain further to parents on IEP implementation. This supported their effort in ensuring that they involved parents so that their views could also be sought. In item 5 (I explain in detail the IEP process before the meeting) with the mean of 3.53 and item 6 (I explain in detail the IEP process after the meeting) with the mean of 3.59 showed that parents were explained by the teachers before and after their meetings. Item 7 (I make sure the parents really understand what happens in the meeting) with the mean of 4.18 showed parents perceived their roles highly in this aspect. Item 11a (If the parents cannot attend the meeting, I call and discuss through the phone) and 11b (If the parents cannot attend the meeting, I decide on another date to meet and discuss with them) with the mean of 2.65 and 3.18 showed further efforts that teachers made to get parents to be involved in their children's IEP.

Table 4: Percentages, means, and standard deviations for items on teachers' perceived roles in IEP implementation

No.	Item	SD %	MD %	SLA %	MA %	SA %	Mean	StD
5	I explain in detail the IEP process before the meeting.	5.9	5.9	23.5	58.8	5.9	3.53	.94
6	I explain in detail the IEP process after the meeting.	5.9	5.9	17.6	64.7	5.8	3.59	.94
7	I make sure the parents really understand what	-	5.9	5.9	52.9	35.3	4.18	.81

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	happens in the meeting.							
11a	If the parents cannot attend the meeting, I call and discuss through the phone.	23.5	17.6	29.4	29.4	-	2.65	1.17
11b	If the parents cannot attend the meeting, I decide on another date to meet and discuss with them.	5.9	23.5	29.4	29.4	11.8	3.18	1.13
19a	In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by me.	-	5.9	35.3	58.8	-	3.53	.62
19b	In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school and I.	-	11.8	70.6	17.6	-	3.06	.56
19c	In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school and me.	-	-	70.6	29.4	-	3.29	.47
20c	I refer to the goals and objectives of the IEP that have been determined when writing progress reports.	-	5.9	47.1	47.1	-	3.41	.62
25	*IEP is not required as the services provided by special education teachers like me are sufficient in developing students' potentials.	-	5.9	17.6	64.7	11.8	3.82	.73
	Total						32.6	
	Overall mean						3.26	

Teachers stressed that they determined students' objectives in IEP in which parents' agreement was sought during discussion. They

perceived that they need to respect parents' views and necessary amendment would be made once both parties had agreed on the students' IEP

activities. Item 19a (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by me) with the mean of 3.53, item 19b (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school and I) with the mean of 3.06, and item 19c (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school and me) with the mean of 3.29 showed that although IEP objectives were proposed by the teachers with the involvement of the school, parents' views were sought during meeting.

From the interview sessions, it was strongly emphasized that apart from planning, teachers wrote reports based on the objectives of the students' IEP and what had been achieved from the activities. Based on their own reports, teachers could adjust the activities to suit the abilities and capabilities of the students. Based on item 20c (I refer to the goals and objectives of the IEP that have been determined when writing progress reports) with the mean of 3.41 showed that teachers would refer to the goals and objectives of IEP that had been determined when writing progress reports.

Teachers felt that they should improve on the skills in implementing IEP. They showed concern on the services that were rendered to the students and stressed that there is always room in which they could further improve on their knowledge as well as skills in IEP. This was reflected in item 25 (*IEP is not required as the services provided by special education teachers like me are sufficient in developing students' potentials) when majority of them thinks that IEP is necessary apart from students' daily activities to further support their learning.

Teachers had voiced their perspective on the roles they play in IEP and they were parallel to the items on the questionnaire. Although teachers were not highly confident in carrying out their roles, based on the qualitative and

quantitative findings they had shown that they had put in effort to be more productive. From the interview sessions, they mentioned important aspects in IEP implementation that they were supposed to deliver. Their views were supported by the principal who had been observing the teachers from their IEP planning as well as from their service delivery.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Teachers had to provide IEP service to the students and their parents. Therefore, students and parents were at the receiving end. As mentioned before, teachers play major roles in contributing to the success of IEP at the school which include documentation work and reporting of IEP activities as well as to carry them out accordingly to students. Teachers also need to assess the progress of the students accordingly and report to parents. Among other roles, they were also required to establish good relationship with parents to gain their cooperation. Teachers need to advice and explain to parents about the necessity for them to collaborate with teachers in order for parents to realize on its importance. As their roles are diversified, this might have contributed to a moderate range of overall mean value.

From the interview findings, teachers felt that it was their responsibility to involve parents in IEP implementation. Epstein (1995) and Galinsky (1990) thought that teacher-parent collaboration could be enhanced when teachers' illustrate positive approach to attract parents to participate in their children's education. Such attitude should be encouraged because when teachers find ways to help parents they would be encouraged to dedicate themselves in their children's development (Lynch & Hanson, 1992). However, this finding did not support Welch and Sheridan's (1995) findings when they found that teachers did not emphasize on parents'

involvement and thought that it was not important for the students' success.

Teachers revealed that they had prepared the proposed ideas on students' IEP activities prior to their first meeting at the beginning of the year with parents. During this meeting parents' opinions were sought and they had to come to a common agreement before IEP activities commenced. Teachers' view in this aspect was in contrast to Steinberg's (1996) statement as he believed that teachers were hesitant in sharing their proposed ideas as they did not want parents to have bearings on their thinking and work. Gartin et al. (2002) and Cramer (2006) added that teachers may feel pressured in taking up these responsibilities but they cannot avoid the fact that parents have the right to make decisions in their children's education.

The researcher feels that the findings deferred as teachers involved in the study may have different views on parents' right in making decision in their children's education. Due to cultural context, teachers may feel that they do not do justice to parents if their opinions are not sought. After all, IEP is all about rendering appropriate services not only to students but also their families. Moreover, teachers at the school have been briefed about their roles and are aware of parents' right to have a say in their children's education.

Apart from involving parents in IEP implementation and soliciting their decisions, teachers perceived that they also need to plan and report on activities that were carried out with students. As Shapiro and Sayers (2003) highlighted, teachers play an important role in informing parents on their children's learning outcomes as well as steps they took to develop students' abilities. Nonetheless, teachers should be receptive and sensitive in sharing issues that students might have with their parents (Hallahan, et al., 2005; Smith, 2004).

Teachers had also stressed that they would improve on the skills in the roles they play by going for training or getting guidance from knowledgeable resources. Teachers did not feel that they were well equipped and felt that they could improve further into becoming more effective. School plays an important role in ensuring that teachers were updated with education needs that continuously evolve. Furthermore, teachers at the centre have to adapt with students with diverse learning disabilities that required them to be resourceful and competent in this field.

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