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Ankur Madan
ankur.madan@apu.edu.in

Neerja Sharma
neerja.lic@gmail.com

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Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: Preparing Schools to Meet the Challenge

Dr. Ankur Madan*

and

Dr. Neerja Sharma**

Abstract

In India, inclusive education for children with disability has only recently been accepted in policy and in principle. In light of supportive policy and legislation, the present paper argues for individual initiative on part of schools to implement programmes of inclusive education for children with mild to moderate disabilities in their elementary school classrooms. The paper provides guidelines in a generalized mode that schools can follow to initiate such programmes. The guidelines were derived from an empirical study which entailed examining prevalent practices and introducing inclusion in a regular school setting. It is suggested that schools can implement inclusive education programmes if they are adequately prepared, are able to garner support of all stakeholders involved in the process and have basic resources to run the programmes. The guidelines also suggest ways in which curriculum adaptations, teaching methodology and evaluation procedures can be adapted to suit needs of children with special needs. Issues of role allocation and seeking support of parents and peers are also dealt with.

*Ankur Madan is Associate Professor in Programme of Education at Azim Premji University, Bangalore, India.

**Neerja Sharma is Associate Professor in Human Development and Childhood Studies, Lady Irwin College, University of Delhi, India.

Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: Preparing Schools to Meet the Challenge

It is now widely acknowledged that to achieve the goal of universal education in India and in order to fulfill provisions laid out in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009) the education of children with disabilities cannot be put on the back burner. Inclusion or the education of children with disabilities in regular classrooms must be adopted both as an ideology and as a practical solution to support the Education for All adage, and to bring about equity in education in India. In this context, this paper argues for individual initiative on part of schools to extend facilities for children with disabilities within their regular school settings. The paper further provides guidelines that schools can adopt to set up inclusive education practices.

Understanding Inclusive Education in the Indian Context

As a phenomenon that has gained recognition in India only in the recent past, arriving at a consensus definition and developing a clear understanding of inclusion both as a concept and as an ideology has been predictably hard. Referred to as a concept that originated from a Western mindset, inclusion has been dismissed and often misunderstood. Singal (2005a) stated that inclusive education is "...a concept that has been adopted from the international discourse, but has not been engaged with in the Indian scenario" (p.9). In another context, she says that the use of the term inclusive education appeared more fancy and politically correct and hence was adopted by practitioners and policy planners without necessarily developing a clear understanding of the notion behind it (Singal, 2006). Sharma (2010) too refers to it as a *convenient term* adopted by policy planners as it appears to be more child-centred as opposed to

being school-centred. It was only as recently as in the 90's that some voices arose in support of the ideals of inclusive education in India. Jangira (1995) and Kaur and Karanth (1993) warned against the disregard of the Western paradigm. They emphasized that this repudiation was likely to postpone the attainment of the goal of Education for All.

Difficulty in developing a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education has also stemmed from the fact that the term has often been interchangeably used with integration. Whereas the use of terms like mainstreaming and integration with reference to education of the disabled is well-documented in policy and legal taxonomy, inclusive education has been a recent entrant. As Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) pointed out, inclusive education originated as a challenge to the restrictions imposed by the existing models of mainstreaming and integration. It has however often been misconstrued as being a synonym for integration. In a study of teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusion and inclusive education in Indian schools, Hodkinson and Chandrika (2009) used the term 'terminological ambiguity' to refer to a lack of clarity and elusiveness in its understanding. It is pertinent that the two concepts be recognized as distinct not only in meaning and ideological affiliation but also their diverse implications for practice. Whereas integration pertains to a locational or geographical and social integration of children with special needs in regular classrooms, where readiness of the child with the disability is considered as a precondition for its success, inclusion subscribes to a 'whole school' approach.

Originating from the social model of disability, inclusion advocates schools' role in adapting and making accommodations within their system to assimilate children with varying learning needs (Lindsay, 2007). The importance of school in empowering and playing a mitigating factor in the lives of children with special needs has been found by several researchers

in India and elsewhere (Chhuakling, 2010; Conners & Stalker, 2003; Vyas, 2008 as cited in Sharma & Sen, 2012). According to Alur (2002), “inclusion is about minimizing exclusion and fostering participation for all students in the culture within a wider framework of support for all children in ordinary schools” (p. 19). Mittler (2006) pointed out that inclusion was based on a value system that celebrated diversity. Ainscow (1999) viewed it as a never ending process that depended on continuous pedagogical and organizational development within the mainstream. Inclusion encompasses curriculum flexibility, pedagogy, infrastructural changes, sensitization of parents and peers as integral components of the accommodations that schools must make. Hence, initiative and commitment on part of a school must be viewed as imperative to the successful implementation of an inclusive education programme. Unless a school wholeheartedly embraces the ideology of inclusion in principle and in practice, there are no guarantees for its success.

Apart from admitting children with mild disabilities who can be educated in regular classrooms, inclusion also addresses the needs of hundreds of children already present in regular classrooms who are affected by mild to moderate learning difficulties which go largely undetected and untreated. These children carry the risk of becoming dropouts due to poor school performance and may suffer from irreparable psychological and emotional trauma throughout their growing up years besides never being able to achieve academic success. Poor sensitivity of stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents and peers) and lack of readiness of the system become additional factors contributing to their deprivation. Practice of inclusive education, therefore, also prevents exclusion of children with disabilities from the mainstream.

Policy Support for Inclusive Education

As mentioned earlier, inclusive education has been embraced in policy and in principle as the way forward by all major establishments related to elementary education in India in general and disability in particular in the last two decades. Originating from the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), which Ainscow and Cesar (2006) referred to as “the most significant international document that has ever appeared in the field of special education” (p.231), inclusive education received widespread recognition across the world. In India, schemes such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children, IEDC (1974) launched by the Government of India and the Project Integrated Education of Disabled Children, PIED, launched during the Sixth Five Year Plan (1985-1989), had laid the foundation for inclusive education to be adopted at least in principle. The IEDC scheme was replaced by the Inclusive Education of the Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) in 2008 (NUEPA, 2009). The District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) adopted the inclusive education philosophy in 1997 (Sanjeev &Kumar, 2007). The Persons with Disability Act (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) 1995 emphatically stated the need for equal opportunities for persons with disability and directed state and local authorities to take appropriate action towards meeting the goal. The Rights of Persons with Disability Bill, 2012, yet to be tabled in the Parliament spells out the goals of inclusive education with a clear sense of direction. The Bill directs educational institutions to provide inclusive education to children with disability with respect to admission, identification, infrastructure, teacher training, social and academic development, educational aids, curriculum and examination reforms (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2011).

Policy support for inclusion gained impetus with the launch of programmes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) during the Tenth Plan (2001) and the Right to Education Act, 2009. Undoubtedly an important milestone in India's struggle to achieve the elusive Education for All goal, the Act provided the much needed patronage for education of children with special needs as well. It is clear that the goals set out for achievement of universal education in India go hand in hand with the principles of inclusion. Leaving behind children with disability in this race would therefore be both counterproductive and frivolous. A holistic approach, involving school personnel in processes of admission, identification, curriculum adaptation, teacher training and examination reform, among other dimensions is likely to improve the quality of education in general and contribute to the now bigger challenge facing the Indian education system, that of retention and making education more contextually and culturally relevant. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 1995 (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2005) pointed to reforms in this very direction.

However, even though support for inclusive education in India looks promising in policy, it cannot be overemphasized that the incongruity between policy and practice remains an unfathomable challenge. The mere existence of ambitious goals in policy has not ensured their expression such as to reach anywhere near the desired results. Perhaps, it is in the light of this realistic situational analysis that some voices have arisen in support of co-existence of special education facilities along with different models of inclusive education practices (Sharma, 2010). Although a debate on factors responsible for the ineffectiveness of the system is warranted, it is not the focus of this paper. On the other hand, this paper attempts to build a case for individual effort on part of schools to provide inclusive education facilities within their regular settings. As one looks towards achieving the goal of universal education for all children in the elementary

years, it is up to schools to take the lead and brace themselves for the challenge. As the RTE mandates involvement of both private and public players in the process, no school can afford to escape responsibility. Further, it must be emphasized that an inclusive education programme in a school cannot exist as an appendage. It requires holistic involvement and participation of school personnel at all levels of administration and academic decision making. The authors also support the view that the process of inclusion could be seen as a continuum where gradual initiation of personnel, involvement of parents and inclusion of children may happen. As long as the provisions benefit the child and are cognizant of the child's developmental, social and emotional needs, different models of inclusion can be experimented with. In this context, guidelines for implementing programmes for children with disabilities in regular school settings are presented in the following sections.

The guidelines presented here have emerged from the doctoral work of the first author. The study was conducted in the state of Delhi, India, in two phases. In the first phase, a detailed assessment of prevalent practices was carried out using a mixed methods approach, including structured observations, administration of questionnaires, checklists and open ended interviews conducted with the major stakeholders. In the second phase, a component of action research was incorporated where in a programme of inclusive education was introduced in a school that had expressed its willingness to participate in the study. The recommendations presented here were arrived at on the basis of a detailed assessment, evaluation and monitoring of the various components of the initiative over a period of one year. Personal sharing by teachers, parents, counsellors and children further enriched the research experience.

Setting up a Programme of Inclusive Education

A hypothetical example of a school has been taken to prepare the guidelines. The steps have been presented in a temporal manner to enable easy comprehension. It may be noted that no description has been attached to the school and the recommendations are presented in as generalized a manner as possible to enable adoption of the guidelines by any school system, under any affiliation.

The following premises form the basis for the guidelines:

1. Schools can implement inclusive education programmes at their own initiative.
2. Schools must be fully convinced and committed to the objectives of inclusive education. Consent and wholehearted support of the school management and personnel is pertinent to the success of the initiative.
3. The central recipient of the services is the child. Hence, creating an optimum environment to optimize the benefits to the child should be the primary objective of the programme.
4. The nature of the programme should be flexible and in the form of a continuum such that it can be adapted to suit each individual child's academic and social needs.
5. Schools must be cognizant of their strengths and weaknesses in order to adapt the guidelines based on their institutional nature and characteristics.

Getting Started

1. The administrative head seeks permission of the school management committee to set up the inclusive education programme.

2. Policy is formulated for implementation of the programme based on a realistic assessment of the need and resources available in the school. Clarity and consensus is sought in developing an understanding of fundamental concepts, such as arriving at a common definition of terms like inclusion, special needs, integration, learning difficulties etc. Conceptualization and internalization of the meaning of inclusion are important for the success of the programme. Joshi (2010) suggests that a movement away from treating stakeholders as passive recipients of a predetermined concept is essential to ensure ownership and to prevent a sense of loss when such an effort fails.
3. Objectives of the programme are formulated clearly stating:
 - a. Primary recipients of the programme
 - b. Short-term and long-term gains
 - c. Type and processes of delivery of services
4. Funds for implementation of the programme are arranged.
5. At least 1-2 teachers are identified from within the system to play a key role in implementation of the programme at the initiation stage. If required, a special educator and/or a Resource Room teacher and/or a Counsellor is appointed to help in the training and orientation of the rest of the school personnel.
6. A physical space is identified to serve as the Resource Room where children who need academic help outside the classroom in the initial stages of the programme can be placed.

Preparing the School

The school initiates steps to judge the readiness of the institution in accepting the programme. Judging the readiness of the school and preparing it to accept such a programme

is crucial to its success (Singal, 2006). The following endeavors on part of the school may help:

- a. The administration must be aware of inherent factors within the school that may hamper the success of the programme. Shortage of teaching staff, possibility of resistance from parents, acute shortage of funds, poor administrative control and lack of infrastructure in the school, are likely to pose impediments in setting up of the programme. It is important to rule out these factors or to resolve these issues at the outset.
- b. Support of all teaching and administrative staff is desirable for effective programme implementation. Initially, a questionnaire may be circulated among teachers (with the option of anonymity) to gauge their attitude towards inclusion and disability in general.
- c. *Preparing the Teachers*. Small group meetings with teachers may be held where the administrator presents the programme in a formal manner. Free expression of ideas and apprehensions should be permitted during such meetings to allow teachers to clarify their doubts and seek appropriate answers. Negative attitudes, lack of affect and poor preparation of teachers have been recognized as causing more harm than good in initiating inclusive practices (Sharma, 2010; Sharma, Moore & Sonawane, 2009). Inviting experts and practitioners working in the field and sharing concrete examples of good practices already being implemented elsewhere may prove useful in inspiring and motivating the teachers.
- d. It is desirable that at least a few regular teachers of the school undergo specialized training to work with children with special needs. Short-term and ongoing in-

service training programmes for teachers organized by governmental agencies such as the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) or a local NGO may prove useful in this regard. Gradually, these skills must be imparted to all the teachers of the school. Elaborating on the content of such teacher training initiatives, Forlin, Loreman, Sharma & Earle (2009) suggested that the focus of the programmes should be on the sociological aspects of disability rather than on the causes and characteristics of disability. Strategies that teachers can adopt for working with children in the classroom are discussed in a later section.

- e. *Preparing the Children.* Just as preparation of teachers is essential for the success of the programme, all the children of the school must be sensitized about the purpose of the programme and the children attending it. It is critical that children are presented with facts and that the sensitization process is not a onetime affair. Constant reinforcement is necessary for children to truly appreciate and respect diverse needs of children with different abilities. Storytelling, role plays, informal discussions in class and sharing of experiences by children attending the programme are some steps that the school may consider to undertake. Teachers must present information to the children in a factual manner and the programme should be projected as integral to the school.
- f. *Preparing the Parents.* Parents of all the children in the school must undergo orientation and sensitization to ensure their full cooperation. Interaction with experts, meeting with administrative heads and teachers should be used to educate parents about the need for such a programme. It should be highlighted during these interactions that the presence of children with special needs in the classroom

is likely to improve the teaching-learning experience of all the children and help in their holistic growth and development. Wholehearted participation of parents is imperative for the success of any such initiative.

- g. *Infrastructure.* Based on the type of disabilities the school is likely to admit, the school must make some basic infrastructural changes. Building of ramps, railings, disability friendly toilets, and magnified sign boards may be some of these. However, if only children with learning disability are likely to be admitted in the beginning, these preparations may not be necessary. Providing facilities for physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy are desirable within the school setting but need not be considered as preconditions to setting up the programme. As mentioned earlier, it may be a good idea to have a space designated within the school premises to carry out the functions of the programme during the initial phases. This room may be labeled as the Resource Room which all the children of the school could identify as a place where some of the children spend some of their school time learning and doing activities. Setting up the room in an interesting and creative manner is likely to generate positivity and not invite ridicule or resentment from the children. In fact, it may be a good idea to encourage all the children to walk into the room and explore it in order to alleviate their curiosity and to spend some time doing interesting activities. The room should be centrally located and not deliberately hidden from the main buildings and activities of the school. It may be noted that the room need not be set up opulently. A simple, basic and child friendly setting is likely to prove more accessible and useful. The room may also be used by teachers to store teaching

aids, brainstorm ideas, learn new teaching techniques and exchange student information.

The Implementation Process

As the school prepares itself for the setting up, procedures of admission and screening must be laid out. Although it is eventually desired that all children, irrespective of the nature of their learning need and disability be part of the regular school system, it is important to be adequately prepared for the challenge. If the resources and facilities in the school do not permit such a scenario to begin with, it is sensible to be restrictive and admit only those children that the school is well-prepared to work with in the initial stages. For instance, if infrastructure support or a trained teacher to help a visually impaired child is not available in a school, the child is unlikely to gain from such inclusion. Intervention process, curricular adaptations and teaching strategies require careful planning and must be worked out in detail.

Screening of Children and assessment of their learning needs can be done through standardized instruments if resources are available in the school. Alternately, children may be admitted on the basis of assessment documents produced by parents. Children, who are already attending the school and may be suspected to have learning difficulties, can be separately assessed by agencies within or outside the school. Parents and teacher reports must be taken into consideration to establish performance levels and intervention areas for each child.

Intervention Procedures and organizational aspects of the programme must be worked out through a coordinated effort among the regular teachers, resource room teachers, administrative staff and parents. Students should be allocated to attend classes based on their ability, performance level, special learning needs as well as competence of teachers in handling the

learning needs. Issues of grouping, frequency of interaction with the special educators, areas which require specialized help, need for psychological counselling etc. are some matters that must be resolved through consultation with all the stakeholders.

Curriculum Adaptation and Teaching Strategies. Adapting curriculum to suit the individual need of each child is central to the ideology of an inclusive education programme. It is important here to reiterate the ‘whole school approach’ and involvement of all concerned personnel in the process. Undoubtedly, making curriculum adaptations is a huge challenge considering the constraints imposed by large classroom sizes, examination driven teaching practices, poor teacher training, among other systemic rigidities that are a part of our school systems. Hence, it is recommended that adaptations to the curriculum are made in a phased manner and with the support of *all* personnel concerned. It should also be clear that curricular changes do not imply teaching altogether different syllabi and topics to children with disabilities. According to Armstrong, et al. (2010) research evidence supports the view that curriculum adaptations made for children with special needs also work well with all the other children in the school. Hence, practices adopted for them may be extended to improve the general teaching learning environment of the whole school. In fact, it is imperative that teachers prepare themselves to deal with diverse learning needs of children in their classrooms, as homogeneity in learning needs is an oversimplified and mythical notion. As an illustration of the above recommendation, for instance, the Resource Room teacher may suggest some specific modifications to the classroom teacher which are suitable for a particular child with special needs. The classroom teacher can then choose to apply the same method to teach a certain concept to the entire class if she finds it appropriate and more effective. For instance, the teacher may find that preparing flash cards of

sight words and displaying them in the classroom is a good way of teaching spellings to all the children and not just those with learning disabilities.

Parental support, peer teaching and frequent review can go a long way in ensuring successful curricular changes. As Mukhopadhyay (2002) suggested, assessing learning style of each child, duplicating, modifying without changing concept, substituting, giving similar experience and omitting, when unavoidable, are some strategies that teachers in the classroom can adopt. Apart from imparting academic concepts, children may be given tips on organizing their work, following complex instructions by breaking them down, developing regular work habits, simplifying text, note-taking, drawing conceptual maps and improving oral communication skills. Including extra-curricular activities as an integral component of the curriculum for the children with special needs must be emphasized. This would go a long way in boosting their self-confidence, learning new skills, exploring creative abilities and most importantly, in enabling their social and emotional adjustment. When all the children of the school participate in school activities equally in a non-threatening environment, inclusion would truly happen.

Teaching methods adopted to work with children in the classroom must complement curriculum adaptations. Goal directed, individualized strategies using methods like preparing the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) are recommended. Special attention may be paid to pace of learning and the level of performance of each child in class. In general, it would be beneficial for all the children in class if strategies like problem solving, experimentation, questioning, and concentrating on areas of difficulty are encouraged more than rote learning. Short breaks to retain attention span, peer teaching, co-teaching with Resource Room teachers, and using creative and interactive teaching aids are likely to support curriculum adaptations. Determining

learning styles of children, using techniques such as scaffolding and mind mapping (Reid, 2005) have been effectively used in inclusive classroom settings in the UK.

Undoubtedly, challenges for classroom teachers are immense if they have children with diverse learning needs in the classroom. Support from the administration, parents and opportunities to acquire new learning techniques through training can raise their morale and help teachers take on the challenge. The key to success also lies in internalizing the ideals of inclusion and recognizing the fact that innovative teaching practices and individualized attention benefit all children and make the teaching learning process more effective and satisfying.

Evaluation. Just as curriculum adaptations and teaching strategies need to be adapted to suit learning needs of each child in the classroom, methods of evaluating their performance must undergo modifications too. Some relevant points to keep in mind in this regard are: a) children with special needs in the classroom should be assessed on their individual abilities and progress. Unfair comparisons with other children should be avoided. b) Criterion-referenced testing methods may be adopted. c) Evaluation should be conducted on a regular basis using several criteria instead of just one. Substituting written exercises with oral assessment, discounting spelling errors, providing a scribe, giving extra time during examinations, reducing syllabi, exemption from studying some topics or including non-academic activities as criteria for assessment could be options that may prove useful based on each child's ability and learning need.

Role Allocation and Interaction among Stakeholders

Effective coordination and cooperation among key personnel and all the stakeholders is essential for the programme to run efficiently. Some general guidelines may be followed in this regard:

1. Role allocation must be based on the personnel's expertise and willingness to be involved in the programme.
2. Clear delegation of roles is desirable to ensure smooth functioning of the programme.
3. Team work over delegation of assignment based on hierarchy should be encouraged.
4. A formal and effective means of communication, electronic and/or oral must be established to enable documentation and exchange of ideas among the personnel.
5. Continuous feedback and opportunities to express concerns and apprehensions must be provided to motivate personnel and address attitudinal issues.
6. Scheduling regular meetings among administrative staff, regular and resource teachers and with parents is of critical importance. It is also important that this is incorporated in the time table of the concerned personnel such that there are no unprecedented delays due to lack of time and opportunities for procrastination. It is desirable that face to face meetings are held every fortnight. Discussion of progress of each child, issues related to their social and emotional adjustment, enhancing teaching strategies and garnering support from parents and the peer group should be on the agenda.
7. *Parent Support.* Parents can play a key role in ensuring success of the programme. The parent-teacher dyad can lend strong support and impetus to the programme because they share similar goals and concerns. Efforts should be made to ensure that parents develop a trusting and positive relationship with the school and form permeable home-school

boundaries (Sharma & Sen, 2012). Establishing clear channels of communication, seeking parent support for identification of the problem, preparation of the intervention plan and keeping them abreast with the teaching methods and progress of their child on a regular basis could be a few initiatives in this direction. It is also a good idea to create informal space for interaction between parents and teachers and parents of the rest of the children of the school.

8. *Peer Support.* Just as parents can lend support to the programme, the peer group too should form an integral component of the implementation process. In an inclusive setting peer support can be sought in different ways. For instance, peers can play an important role in ensuring that children with special needs are not socially and academically isolated. Peer tutoring, cooperative learning, mentoring, reciprocal teaching in the classroom, participation in extra- curricular activities together and grouping of mixed – ability children for outdoor activities and during free hours are some such measures. Teachers may have to pay extra attention to ensure that there are no incidents of ridicule or discrimination against any of the children by the peer group.

Programme Evaluation

All aspects of the programme must be evaluated on a regular basis. Some parameters for evaluation of the programme could be: monitoring the intake of children, assessment and identification procedures, attitude of teachers, parents and peers, degree of participation of all personnel, adequacy and availability of resources, reviewing training inputs required for curriculum adaptation and teaching methods, performance of children and impact of the programme on all the children and the institution in general. It must be asserted that even if at the

time of initiation, the programme does not fulfill all criteria for being truly inclusive, continuous effort must be made to strive toward such a goal.

Conclusion

The above guidelines summarize a set of recommendations that schools can adopt to implement inclusive education programmes for children with special needs within their regular set ups. The recommendations have been presented in a generalized mode to permit schools to interpret, modify and adapt the guidelines based on their individual needs and characteristics. It is pertinent that schools that initiate such programmes assess their strengths and weaknesses at the outset and ensure adequate cooperation from the school management as well as the administrative and teaching staff. It is important to state here that an inclusive education programme does not require resource overload or elaborate preparations. With policy support, opportunities for training of teachers and cooperation from parents and the peer group, inclusive practices can be effectively adopted by any school. Clarity of vision, commitment to the goal of inclusion, and a perceptible understanding of the nuances involved in such an initiative are central to the success of the programme. According to Joshi (2010), emotional commitment to inclusion emerges when the intellectual understanding of the concept goes through a democratic visioning process involving all the stakeholders expressing their opinions and feelings.

By taking lead in this endeavour, schools that express a sense of ownership towards implementing inclusive education programmes will not only imprint their participation in the Education for All goal but will also pave the way for others to follow. Let there be no doubt that inclusion is the way forward for this country to provide quality and meaningful education to *all* its children, and participation in this national agenda is no longer a matter of choice.

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