



Not Too Big To Fail: How Teacher Education Killed the Foundations

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Why Do I Have to Go To School?

Nearly forty years ago, Jonathan Kozol wrote on the perennial question posed by children: “Why do I have to go to school?”¹ Rightfully, in our view, he admonishes those who would “act as though it were a foolish question.”² We take issue, however, with his characterization of their canned response: “It is for your own good.”³ Kozol treats this as an act of dishonesty. If they were honest, he says, they would tell children that “they go to school for something that is called ‘their nation’s good.’”⁴ This presumes, of course, that adults know any more than children do about the origins of compulsory schooling, its history, and the ideas that have shaped its practices and defined its purposes, let alone how those practices and purposes are linked to Kozol’s treatment of “something that is called ‘their nation’s good.’” In fact, however, most people know nothing about the Foundations of schooling, and that includes a growing percentage of the people who work in schools and teacher education programs.

Over the course of the past twenty years, those college and university programs responsible for certification and licensure of school professionals have trended toward dropping coursework in educational Foundations from their required curricula. Our analysis leads us to conclude that contemporary conditions will soon drive Educational Foundations into academic extinction. While we, as scholars working in that field, take no gratification from our conclusions, we find ourselves incapable of expressing any shock or surprise over anything other than the fact that it’s taken the teacher education establishment so long to throw Foundations under the proverbial bus.

Returning to Kozol’s argument, we disagree that people are dishonest for telling children that compulsory schooling is “for their own good,” not because we think it is, but because we can find three reasons why people who say such things to children are not self-consciously lying. First, they don’t know what forces led to the establishment of compulsory schooling. Second, how could they possibly believe otherwise, given the extent to which approximately eight generations have internalized the legitimations created to convince them of the benevolence of schools? Third, and paradoxically, they could be right, depending on how we define what is “good” for children.

As Foundations scholars, most of us have at least had the opportunity to study the origins of compulsory schooling during the course of our training and ongoing professional development. Studying the Foundations of compulsory schooling, however, can be an altogether different experience from studying the Foundations of education. We know many Educational Foundations scholars who spend essentially no time keeping abreast of the contemporary forces driv-

1. Jonathan Kozol, *The Night is Dark and I am Far From Home*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975/1990), 34.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

ing the policies that impact the lives of students and school personnel. They prefer to spend their time studying the history of ideas and different philosophies of education. In spite of the differences in our foci, most of us would agree there is a colossal gap between our highest educational ideals and what actually transpires inside schools and classrooms. And most of us, if only in the courses we teach, advocate strongly for closing that gap.

Those ideals most certainly inform whatever value we assign to education and, therefore, the “good” we believe should come from schools for children. For many of us, we derived those ideals from what we’ve always been told, sometimes by our teachers in school, about the ideals and values of America. Allegedly, those values came to us from our nation’s “founders,” and the democratic institutions they created to serve those values that defined our society as a democratic society. Having grown up during the Cold War, we certainly learned that our democratic society was superior to any communist society. As we matured, however, we came to recognize a multitude of gaps between what we were told to believe and what we actually witnessed, experienced, or learned from MAD Magazine. Clinging to our fundamental belief that America was, in fact, a democratic society, we thought we could work to close those gaps, but it would take many more Americans to recognize those same gaps and work with us. We believed that schools could and should play a vital role in this great democratic project. Future generations, after all, held a major stake in shaping the kind of social order they would want to inhabit. One of the best democratically-minded definitions of education comes from Everett Reimer:

Education entails the conscious use of resources to increase people’s awareness of the relevant facts about their lives, and to increase people’s abilities to act upon these facts in their own true interests. Of major importance to most people are the laws which govern them, the ideologies which influence them and the institutions, and institutional products, which determine the impact of their laws and ideologies upon them.⁵

As Takis Fotopoulos explains, “A fundamental precondition for the reproduction of every kind of society is the consistency between the dominant beliefs, ideas and values on the one hand, and the existing institutional framework on the other.”⁶ What many of us should have learned by now, however, is that the “dominant beliefs, ideas and values” of America are not democratic ones. This is because, in stark contrast to what we had always been told and grew up believing, “the existing institutional framework” that defines the character of American society does not correspond to what we once believed to be a democratic form of government. In reality, market institutions function as our dominant institutions; they define America as a market society. Contrary to the democratic principles of autonomy and community reflected in Reimer’s definition of education, Fotopoulos helps us recognize heteronomy (subordination to external authority) and individualism (looking out for #1) as the basic organizational principles of market institutions. In accordance with those principles, you advance your self-interest by doing what you are told and not questioning the authority of those who tell you what to do and what to believe. Fotopoulos goes on to explain that these market principles “involve the values of inequity and effective oligarchy (even if the system calls itself a democracy), competition and aggressive-

5. Everett Reimer, “Freeing Educational Resources,” in *After Deschooling What?* Illich, Ivan. Edited by Alan Gartner, Frank Riessman, & Colin Greer (New York: Harper Collins, 1976), 49.

6. Takis Fotopoulos, “From (mis)Education to Paideia.” *Democracy in Nature*, 9:1 (2005): 1.

ness”, and it’s easy enough to see how schools express those values.⁷ As elements of a larger quasi-meritocratic system, schools function as competitive arenas where children earn their future positions within the stratified social order—our American class system. Ostensibly, they compete to demonstrate who possesses the strongest abilities, but those who demonstrate the most enthusiastic compliance are typically judged to be “the best and brightest.”

In light of all this, then, people who tell children they must go to school “for their own good” are not mistaken, and it really does not matter whether they understand the origins of compulsory schooling or not. And they are really under no illusions about whether or not schools serve education as a democratic value. Having internalized the ideas, values, and beliefs of our market society’s dominant institutions (our dominant social paradigm), education as a democratic value matters little to them. The principle of heteronomy conditions them to accept compulsory schooling as a necessary evil to be treated like a commodity. What you gain from the process matters little, so long as you get through the process, and the more years of the process you can endure, the better off you’ll be.

At the beginning of each semester, we encourage our students to recognize that the children who will sit in their classrooms one day won’t be there because they want to be. They’ll be there only because the government forces them to be. Therefore, our first and most important job as teachers is to *inspire* them to want to be there and to *want* to learn with/from us. So, we then tell them that we recognize they are not in our classes because they want to be. As much as we might like to believe it, we understand that none of them is there because they have heard wondrous stories of the pearls of wisdom that regularly flow from our lips. They are there only because the course is—for the time being—a required course, and that we hope to be able to inspire them to want to learn with/from us. Following this, we also tell them that, as they sit there examining the syllabi we’ve just handed out, their minds are performing an economic calculation. They are trying to determine how much labor or energy they will have to expend in order to get what they want from our courses. We also tell them we know that what they want from my course is not learning. Rather, they are there to accumulate credit hours, because once they acquire enough of them they can take them to the registrar’s office, cash them in, so they get the hell out of school as fast as they can. In our combined 42 years of teaching, we’ve never had a single Foundations student deny or raise objection to this.

But what does this tell us? Even those people who aspire to be teachers in our schools do not value education, not even their own. It makes us question our sanity, doesn’t it? After all, if a person doesn’t value their own education, why should we entrust them with the education of other people’s children? Schooling for them has always been an exercise in performativity. They’ve learned not to take interest in learning, but they take a very deep interest in knowing what they *have to do* to get whatever grade they want. Again, schooling for them is not about education, it’s about individualism—looking out for #1, doing what you have to do to consume however many years of schooling you can tolerate to get what we really want; namely, a job.

In the end, their parents were right. Going to school really was “for their own good,” provided that you understand school solely as a commodity, and education solely as an economic value. But Kozol was right, as well. In elaborating on what he means by ““their nation’s good,”” Kozol says that children

Go to school to learn how *not* to interrupt the evil patterns that they see before them, how *not* to question and how *not* to doubt: to learn to vote with reasonable regularity,

7. Ibid.

to kill on orders and to sleep eight hours without grief. They go to school to learn to be proficient at mechanical procedures, docile in the presence of all processes they do not understand, acquiescent in the presence of a seeming barbarism. It is not so much they learn to be ‘cruel’ people. Rather it is, they learn it is not needful to be urgent in compassion or importunate in justice. Not positive desolation, but a genial capability for well-behaved abstention in the presence of despair: this is the innocence we teach our children.⁸

In his estimation, these lessons relate to “the first objective and the most consistent consequence of public school...the perpetration of a U.S. value system.” That value system, however, does not flow from the general mythos of American culture. It flows from the basic organizational principles of our dominant institutions. While our cultural myths define American exceptionalism in terms of our deep love and commitment to democracy, freedom, and equality, our dominant institutions (what are now *global* corporations and the “representative” democracy that serves them) function in accordance with the principles of heteronomy and individualism, and the values of inequity and effective oligarchy, competition and aggressiveness. Compulsory schooling originated from the demand to reproduce those dominant institutions, their organizational principles, and their values. As suggested by Kozol, their success hinges on inhibiting people’s ability to recognize, or at least their willingness to confront and act upon the glaring contradictions, between our self-aggrandizing, national mythos of America as a bastion of democracy and the reality of America as a corporate oligarchy.

Before you can teach people how “*not* to interrupt the evil patterns that they see before them,” you have to teach them not to see those patterns. They must learn “how *not* to question and how *not* to doubt.” Most of us in Educational Foundations never learned those lessons. Most of us view questioning and doubting as fundamental to the educational process. This does not hold true for the majority of people who choose teaching as a profession. For those of us who once taught in P-12 schools, part of our decision to leave related to marginalization by most of our peers and our administration. Now, instead, we find ourselves marginalized within teacher education by our peers and our administration.

Critical Thinking & Critical Pedagogy As Stated Ideals for Schooling?

School, back when we were children, was of the “sit down, shut up and don’t ask questions” variety, and, despite decades of reform efforts, it largely remains that way. Students are lectured at from an early age, given endless, mindless worksheets to complete, and taught that quietly and compliantly accepting the endless tedium of school leads to a diploma. Competition for recognition of good classroom behavior, or high performance on state and federally mandated tests, often results in the exact opposite behaviors from our brightest and/or most creative students.⁹ Between the two of us, we have taught courses in teacher education programs at five different universities across the country. Each of those institutions submit surveys to their graduates asking them for feedback on how effectively their programs of study prepared them for teaching. Without exception, teachers say they wish they would have had more instruction in classroom management. They fail or refuse to see that the discipline problems in their classrooms stem

8. Kozol, *The Night is Dark*, 34.

9. Lori Flint, *Self-interventions of gifted underachievers: Stories of success*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 2002. United States. Dissertations & Theses: Abstract only. (Publication No. AAT 0804251).

from curriculum problems and instructional problems related to the teachers' own behavior problems. Rewarding students with extrinsic rewards as a means of managing their behavior and winning their compliance kills any natural curiosity about the world that the children may have had before beginning kindergarten. Clamoring for more effective classroom management strategies represents an admission on the teacher's part that no effort will be made to make the content more interesting or more relevant, and no effort will be made to make the mode of instruction more engaging. Along with the question of "Why do I have to go to school," children and adolescents also frequently ask: "Why do I have to learn this?" And too often, the only answer given them by teachers is "so you can pass my class" or "so you can pass the test." No effort is made to help the child find any intrinsic motivation for learning challenging material. Instead, the emphasis remains on getting students to perform (i.e., to earn food pellets, get good grades or please the teacher).

Such teacher behaviors persist despite pre-service teachers taking Educational Foundations courses, which include

Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy...Each invokes the term "critical" as a valued educational goal: urging teachers to help students become more skeptical toward commonly accepted truisms...And each has sought to reach and influence particular groups of educators, at all levels of schooling, through workshops, lectures, and pedagogical texts. They share a passion and sense of urgency about the need for more critically oriented classrooms.¹⁰

By the time they reach college, however, the majority of those who choose to teach have already learned the lessons described by Kozol as serving "their nation's good." They've already internalized a tacit understanding of the interplay of heteronomy and individualism. Examining the widening gaps between who we say we are and what we say we do in the name of education and who we really are and what we really do in schools might force us to do something about those gaps, but that could mean we'd have to challenge some external authority, and that might not serve our individual interests. So, it's not hard to understand why these teacher education candidates express so little value in their required Foundations courses. Some of those same teacher education candidates who "grow up" to be teachers, of course, also "grow up" to work in teacher education and in state departments of education, where curricular decisions are made. And those decisions increasingly include the wholesale elimination of Foundations coursework or replacing them with courses with such vanilla titles as "Introduction to Teaching."

We can't help but chuckle at the irony when we examine the "official" curricula in any school (private or public, P-12 or postsecondary) to see the lip service paid to critical and creative thinking. We find demands that not only knowledge, but certain attitudes or dispositions valuable to learners' success in school or eventual careers, be taught, including creativity, persistence, open mindedness, problem solving ability, collaboration, tolerance of ambiguity, metacognition, and others. Ask business and industry employers what they value in workers, and they assert to value these same skills and dispositions.

Employers today often sit on advisory boards to educational institutions in order to ensure the desired curriculum is on the daily agenda, as well as lobby legislators to change curricula to make it more business-friendly, or as the new Common Core curriculum refers to

10. Nicolas C. Burbules & Rupert Berk. "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits" in *Critical Theories in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz & Lynn Fendler, 45-65 (New York: Routledge, 1999).

it, “College and Career Ready.”¹¹ (To-date, 45 of the 50 states have adopted the Common Core as their state curriculum, while 16 of the 50 United States have adopted 21st century readiness standards for their students that, “fuse the three Rs and four Cs—critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation—within standards, assessments and professional development programs.”¹²) Many of these supposedly desirable knowledge, skills, and dispositions are located within a sound liberal arts education, the basis for many teacher education programs because “teaching is a complex practice, part science and part art, that requires critical thinking, astute judgments, and deep caring. Preprofessional programs must be able to educate future teachers into these skills and knowledges.”¹³

If we already know our ideals for teaching and learning, and we’re already teaching what we need to teach, why is it that schools and teachers cannot or will not change how they do business?

The Cycle of Compliance

There are two primary and interconnected reasons why schools as we now understand them won’t change. The first being whom we encourage, train, and retain as teachers, and the second being the institutional nature of schools. We recognize, however, that teacher education represents a redundant process. Teacher education candidates have, for all intents and purposes, already learned how to be a teacher from having observed them and from being observed and judged by them for 13 years. The majority of students choosing teaching did so because teachers rewarded their compliance when they were students in school. Now, they want to be rewarded with that same kind of compliance from their own students in their own classrooms. Hence, the following discussion should not be taken as a criticism of teachers *per se*, but rather a criticism of the institutional processes that give shape to their personalities and their behaviors that contribute toward the cycle of compliance that, in turn, helps reproduce our society’s dominant institutions.

Teachers’ Personality Types

Numerous studies by Piirto (and others) indicate a wide disconnect between teachers’ personality types on the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and those of the students most likely to embrace and benefit from critical and creative thinking—the same kind of thinking that goes into Foundations scholarship and Foundations coursework.¹⁴ The MBTI is an instrument with 126 items, and which “forces” the respondent to choose between one extreme and another. It is theoretically based in Jungian personality theory and provides information about preferences in four pairs of types: introversion vs. extraversion, sensing vs. intuition, feeling vs. thinking, and judging vs. perceiving. Sixteen learning styles, or types are possible, with each type being a combination of the four preferences.

Beyond Piirto, Keirse said, “SJ teachers...are not only the types most likely to choose teaching (56% of all teachers), but they are also the types who are most likely to stay in teaching

11. *Common Core State Standards Initiative*. Corestandards.org.

12. “The Partnership for 21st Century Skills.” <http://www.p21.org/state-initiatives/overview-of-state-work>.

13. Dan Butin, “Guest Editor’s Introduction: How Social Foundations of Education Matters to Teacher Preparation: A Policy Brief.” *Educational Studies*, 38:3 (2010): 219.

14. For an in-depth explanation, see Jane Piirto, 2007.

as a lifelong career.”¹⁵ Engleman, in studying over 200 graduate education students, found that between 53% and 69% of them fit the SJ profile.¹⁶ Gabbard states about these same teachers, “literature also provides evidence that the authoritarian dimensions of their personalities lead them to create learning environments that are antithetical to the freedom and openness to innovation requisite to creative work.”¹⁷ If we extrapolate the data, these numbers and others indicate that somewhere between 56% and 70% of SJ’s are characterized by Golay as “Actual Routine Learners” or ARL’s, people who need considerable order within and around themselves and others.¹⁸

These people feel a need to establish and preserve social units, which fits with their demand for clear expectations and specific, clearly defined procedures for accomplishing a task. These traits align with their tendency to be meticulous as well as highly industrious. As students, ARL’s also display a very strong need to please and receive approval from authority figures, including and especially their teachers. In turn, they hold authority figures in reverence, deferring to that authority through obedience and conformity.¹⁹

From our combined 40+ years of teaching experience, we also recognize SJs, or ARL’s as the type most likely to be directive, controlling, compliant to authority, and anxious, or even hostile, when confronted with open-ended assignments, and least likely to embrace creative challenges or to want to engage in critical thinking. And, Actual Routine Learners grow up to become Actual Routine Teachers who perpetuate the cycle of compliance in schools, often creating hostile environments for those who are different from themselves—including and especially, we would argue, Foundations scholars who would dare push them to challenge the status quo in compulsory schooling.

Why Teachers Don’t Like Students Who Aren’t Like Them

Westby and Dawson studied classroom teachers and found they tend to prefer the opposite of critical and creative thinking: absolute “conformity and unquestioning acceptance of authority.”²⁰ Their studies show that teachers “appeared to have a negative view of characteristics associated with creativity,”²¹ while Torrance found “the reason for teachers’ preferences is quite clear—creative people tend to have traits that some have referred to as obnoxious,” including forgetting to be polite, refusing to accept answers blindly, and being critical and negative of others, including teachers.²² Studies of creative people across the spectrum of careers, found that creators described themselves as critical-thinking, risk-taking, impulsive independent, and deter-

15. David Keirse & Marilyn Bates, *Please Understand Me: Temperament Character Intelligence* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesius Book Company, 1984), 6.

16. Melissa Engleman, “Applying Learning Styles and Personality Preference Information to Online Teaching Pedagogy,” *Journal of Interactive Instruction Development*, 19:3 (2007): 3-10.

17. David Gabbard, “Circling the Drain: Why Creativity Won’t Be Coming to School Today...or Ever,” *Critical Education*, in press.

18. Keith Golay, *Learning Patterns and Temperament Styles* (Newport Beach, CA: Manas Systems, 1982).

19. Gabbard, “Circling the Drain.”

20. Erik Westby & V.L. Dawson, “Creativity: Asset or Burden in the Classroom?,” *Creativity Research Journal*, 8:1 (1995):

1.

21. *Ibid.*, 8.

22. Paul E. Torrance, “The Creative Personality and the Ideal Pupil. *Teachers College Record*, 65, (1963): 222.

mined, which “may not be the most positively viewed characteristics of children given the teacher’s goals of maintaining order and attending to multiple children.”²³ Teachers did, however, prefer students whose characteristics included, “sincere, responsible, good-natured, reliable, and logical...to be creative and still be liked by the teacher, children must also display the properties that make them easy to manage in the classroom.”²⁴

Noland, English, and von Eschenbach’s studies found that early career and preservice teachers’ ideas about what constitutes the ideal student were largely based upon their supervising or mentor teachers’ concepts of the same, and that those ideas didn’t necessarily change with experience.²⁵ Current research indicates that bright creative children are at risk for being rejected by teachers in hostile classroom environments that kill creativity. And, since we know that environment is key to fostering critical and creative thinking, rejection by teachers may lead, at the least, to a lack of recognition, and worse, to punishment.

If critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity and innovation in both preservice Foundations courses and school curricula are all so desirable for our students’ outcomes, why aren’t these taught or reinforced in our public schools? Perhaps because most of the ARL’s who pursue teaching don’t like or understand them, thus ignore mandates to teach these characteristics and skills?

Despite legislative mandates and pleas by business and industry for school personnel to teach the knowledge, skills, and dispositions we want and need for our society to evolve, there is pushback *against* teaching these very skills from right-wing conservative politicians like newly elected North Carolina governor Pat McCrory, who said “there’s a major disconnect between what skills are taught at the state’s public universities and what businesses want out of college graduates.” Further, “So I’m going to adjust my education curriculum to what business and commerce needs to get our kids jobs...” will not subsidize Liberal Arts studies, but create legislation to change the higher education funding formulae to “not [be] based on how many butts [are] in seats but how many of those butts can get jobs.”²⁶

The second reason why the learning environments found in the vast majority of compulsory school classrooms have never and, probably, will never nurture creativity, and why teacher education programs will never value Educational Foundations, relates to the institution of compulsory schooling as it as it pertains to our society’s larger institutional framework and political economy. As previously discussed, our system of compulsory schooling was never intended to serve the value of education, though, collectively, we seem incapable of recognizing or admitting this to ourselves. The origins and meanings of our institutions are not transparent to us, and very few people actually study the history of compulsory schooling. This leaves the vast majority of people vulnerable to being propagandized into blind acceptance of the illusions created to manufacture their consent. They are taught to believe, for example, that schools are inherently benevolent institutions. In fact, to speak legitimately about education in this country, one must present the school as a messianic institution capable of delivering the individual and/or society into some condition of secular salvation. Pastoral images of kind, loving, virtuous, and motherly female teachers serve to mask the more authoritarian reality. After all, as Aldous Huxley wrote of the dystopian world he created in *Brave New World*, “that is the secret of happiness and virtue—

23. Westby & Dawson, “Creativity,” 2.

24. *Ibid.*, 8.

25. Ronald Noland, Dewey English, & John von Eschenbach, “Effect of Laboratory Experiences on Undergraduates’ Perception of the Ideal Pupil,” *Roeper Review*, 7 (1984): 27–30.

26. Tyler Kingkade, “Pat McCrory Lashes Out Against ‘Educational Elite’ and Liberal Arts College Courses,” *Huffington Post*, Feb. 2, 2013: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/03/pat-mccrory-college_n_2600579.html.

liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny."²⁷

Conclusion

We have attempted to trace the seemingly inevitable extinction of Educational Foundations to the institutional values of schools that shape the personalities and the behaviors of those who work in them. Educational Foundations, as a field dedicated to the critical analysis of schools and society, will never be popular in a society that Cornel West, borrowing from Henry James, describes as a "hotel civilization"—a place that is never dark, where the lights are on all the time, and characterized, in part, by a deep obsession with comforting our conscience and our consciousness through sentimentalization and denial.²⁸ A hotel civilization, in West's view, that "believes itself to be innocent. Believes itself to be not just the best, but near perfection. It's an infantile mentality to ascribe any innocence to oneself at the deepest level, and for a nation to believe itself innocent means that you're going to end up with a sentimental, melodramatic culture that cannot deal with the tragic, and cannot deal with wounds and scars."²⁹ Moreover, a culture that cannot deal with the reality of its own past, present, and predictable future.

In his aptly titled *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*, Chris Hedges discusses famed historian Daniel Boorstin's recognition of this same tendency: "Americans, he (Boorstin) writes, increasingly live in a 'world where fantasy is more real than reality.'"³⁰ He warns:

We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so "realistic" that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very house in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience.³¹

They are also our schools.

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27. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), 10.

28. Cornel West "Race Matters." University of Florida. Shands Auditorium, Gainesville, FL. February 16, 1999; borrowed from Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd, 1907).

29. West, "Race Matters," para. 10.

30. Chris Hedges, *Death of the Liberal Class* (New York: Nation Books, 2010).

31. Daniel Boorstin as cited in Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 15.

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