Attitudes of Teachers Who Implement School Mediation Programmes: A Case Study

Konstantinos Karakiozis[1] & Evangelos C. Papakitsos[2]

[1] Youth Counseling Station of Western Attica, Elefsina, Greece

[2] Center for Counseling and Vocational Guidance of Elefsina, Elefsina, Greece

Correspondence: Konstantinos Karakiozis, Youth Counseling Station of Western Attica, I. Dragoumi 24, Elefsina, GR 19200, Greece. E-mail: kkarakio@yahoo.com

Abstract

School mediation (or peer mediation) is an effective practice for resolving student-centered conflicts in the school context. According to the results of this qualitative research conducted at Secondary Education Schools of Western Attica (Greece), an area with particular social characteristics, school mediation programmes are a dynamic process and can contribute to: teamwork, communication and activation of students, changing attitudes and behaviors as well as inclusion of students with behavioral problems. These results are achieved despite the heterogeneity of the education programme followed and the heterogeneity of the population attending them. Under no circumstances, however, the implementation of a school mediation programme can be considered a panacea. On the contrary, it is proposed to be accompanied by other actions that will promote a different management spirit of the school and will improve the school climate.

Keywords: school mediation, peer mediation, school climate

1. Introduction

School mediation constitutes a process of peaceful resolution of a conflict in school life, between two or more disagreeing students with the help of a third and neutral student - the mediator - through a structured process with clear boundaries, active participation and direct communication of Parties, and having the purpose of constructively resolving the dispute (Artinopoulou, 2010, p. 144). In practice, the implementation of school mediation programmes has positive results both for the participants (pupils/students) and for their primary and secondary schools (Artinopoulou, 2010; Association for Conflict Resolution, 2007; Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Burrell, Zirbel & Allen, 2003; Cremin, 2007; Haynes, Haynes & Fong, 2004; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Center for European Constitutional Law, 2015; Liebmann, 2000; Stitt, 2004; US Department of Justice, 2000).

In Greece, school mediation is supported by the Child's Ombudsman (2013), it is a proposal by the Ministry of Education (Center for European Constitutional Law, 2015) and recognized in the findings of the National Dialogue on Education (Porismata, 2016). In the Greek educational system, school mediation programmes are implemented beyond school hours in Secondary Education over the past decade as annual extracurricular programmes of Health Education. The purpose of Health Education is to defend, improve and promote the psychological, physical and social health of students, on the one hand by developing their skills and critical thinking, on the other, by upgrading their social and natural environment.

The topics of Health Education, according to the documents of the Greek Ministry of Education in recent years (HMERRA, 2017; Stappa-Mourtzini, 2004), indicatively include four related fields:

- *Health*: Health as a cultural and social good, intercultural approaches in Health and disease, addictive substances (tobacco, alcohol, drugs), oral hygiene, accidents and safety, first aid, volunteering and Health (blood donation), diseases (AIDS, hepatitis B, thalassemia, cardiovascular diseases, diseases in the workplaces, sexually transmitted diseases, cancer).

- *Mental Health*: Affective and psychomotor development - trouble shooting, self-esteem, self-confidence - skills development, interpersonal relationships, developing skills for dealing with stress and fear, facing mourning, adolescence, attitudes and perceptions, mythology, historical perceptions of Health, customs, beliefs and folklore, monuments, works and archaeological sites (e.g., Health personifications, ancient temples and hospitals, etc.).

- *Human Rights - Democracy*: Poverty problems, illiteracy, democratic rights and citizenship, social exclusion, equal opportunities, gender equality, racism, xenophobia.
- *Quality of Life*: residence, Health and safety, quality of life in the working and social environment - exposure to toxic substances, life fitness, exercise and healthy lifestyle, dietary habits and genetically modified foods, volunteering, civil protection (prevention and emergency response / earthquakes, floods, fires), traffic and consumer education.

Consequently, the currently presented work broadly belongs to the second and fourth field (Mental Health, Quality of Life) of Health Education topics.

1.1 Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this research was to investigate the attitudes of teachers in secondary education schools of Western Attica (Greece), an area with particular social characteristics, who implement a school mediation programme, with the ultimate goal of critically evaluating these programmes. In particular, the following research questions were raised:

- How do the participating teachers assess the school mediation programme implemented in their school?
- Do school mediation programmes contribute to the changing of attitudes and behaviors of the participating students?
- What is the school climate in schools implementing a school mediation programme?

2. Method

The research plan has been part of a follow-up action that was originally designed as a series of systemic interventions (Papakitsos et al., 2017a; 2017b), aiming at improving the school climate and culture in an area (Western Attica, Greece) of acute social problems (see subsection 2.1). The interventions included the detection of the problem (Karakiozis et al., 2015a), along with the related training needs of the teaching personnel (Karakiozis et al., 2016; Foulidi et al., 2016), the presentation of the proposed methodology (Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2016; Papakitsos & Karakiozis, 2016) and the initiation of the main activities (Karakiozis et al., 2015b).

2.1 Particular Features of the Target Population

This study was carried out in schools of Western Attica (Greece), an area with particular social, economic and environmental characteristics, which have a decisive impact on the daily routine of school societies and the educational process itself (Papavasileiou & Mavrakis, 2013). Indicatively, we note:

- the high rate of unemployment in the particular area of the schools (24.2%), even before the actual manifestation of the economic crisis in Greece, according to the most recent data (General Census, 2011), while the average rate in the rest of Attica region was 18%;
- the existence of a large number of vulnerable social groups (immigrants, Roma, returnees, disabled people, women). More specifically, in the Municipality of Fyli (Western Attica, Greece) live: (a) about 6,000 Roma people (13.5% of the population) according to a study in 2010 (Regional Unit of Western Attica, 2015) and (b) approximately 5,000 migrants (4,500 migrant applications were submitted to the Municipality (General Census, 2011);
- the average age of the population is among the lowest in all Greece, just 35.3 years (General Census, 2011);
- cultural diversity / heterogeneity in the composition of the population. It is characteristic that 41.75% of the population living in the Municipality of Fyli was born in a different Region, in contrast to 25% for the entire country (General Census, 2011);
- the existence of large families in a larger percentage than the entire country (Greece). For example, 8% of women in Western Attica have more than four children (4.7% for the entire country and 2.8% for the rest of Attica region);
- the lowest educational level of the inhabitants in relation to the Attica region as a whole and the national average. For example, in the Municipality of Fyli (General Census, 2011), 8% of the population have a tertiary education degree, while in the Attica region the corresponding percentage exceeds 22%, while across the country is 16%;
- there are high rates of early school dropout in Junior High-Schools, compared to the national average. Particularly in Western Attica, the third worst performance is recorded at country level with 9.81%, when the national average is 4.23% (Observatory, 2017);
- the criminality in the region is considered particularly high;
- in general, Western Attica (especially the Municipality of Fyli) constitutes a particularly vulnerable

environmental area due to the fact that it has the largest landfill site in Attica, which in total extends to an area of approximately 250 acres and currently has a useful capacity of 13,625,000 tons. This area is in the vicinity of two more non-operating landfills and an active landfill, where more than 1,570,000 tons of municipal waste is disposed of annually, while the processing plant managed approximately 1,200 tons per day (Salvati & Mavrakis, 2014).

2.2 Research Methodology

The research planning followed has qualitative/retrospective research features (Cohen & Manion, 1994). It is acknowledged that social reality is not self-contained and unified, but it is constructed through the meanings that the subjects attribute to their own behavior and to the behavior of others (Kyriazi, 1998). In particular, personal semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers (A, B, C) in three different schools, who implemented (as accountable) the specific school mediation programmes during the school year 2015-2016. The three teachers (one being a head-master) that were interviewed are experienced (four to five years) in implementing school mediation programmes and have undergone different training in school mediation. During the school year 2015-2016, eight mediations were conducted by teacher A, five by teacher B (three formal and two informal) and none by teacher C.

2.3 The Interview - Analysis Process

During the individual semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, a free communication with the interviewees was encouraged, as well as the unconstrained recording of the specific characteristics of these programmes (Cohen & Manion, 1994), with the purpose of maintaining the spontaneity of the interviewees and to avoid the risk of *meaning dispersion* (Katerelos, 2001). The aim was to explore the importance that teachers attribute to school mediation, the potential benefits and the problems they confront, in other words, an evaluation of these programmes by the teachers who implement them. For this purpose, a series of questions were presented, not always in the same order, in a non-directional manner (Katerelos, 2001), concerning:

(a) What do you think about the school mediation programme?

(b) What benefits can pupils/students and the school derive from the implementation of a school mediation programme?

(c) What problems did you encounter during the implementation of the programme in the current school year?

(d) What is the role of school administration and fellow teachers in the implementation of the programme?

The order and exact wording of the questions was formed according to the course of each interview (Katerelos, 2001) and aimed at focusing on the data of each school. Finally, it is noted that there was a prior co-operation between the researcher/interviewer and the interviewees, due to a professional position in the local Secondary Education Directorate of Western Attica in the period 2012-2016. For analyzing the interviews, detailed readings were made and their common elements were categorized to compare issues between different cases (Creswell, 2011).

3. Results

The total of our interviewed teachers, regardless of experience or level of knowledge in mediation, highlighted a number of issues related to the implementation of school mediation programmes, such as: the heterogeneity of student-centered mediation teams from the three grades of Junior High-School (students with different knowledge and expectations), the number of team members and the follow-up of the mediation team. Appendix A summarizes the views of the three teachers on these issues.

The positive aspects of mediation, according to the teachers, include, among other things, teamwork, communication and the opportunity for students to be acquainted with new things. As Teacher A said: "just working as a group and talking about things that maybe this conversation is not happening in their homes; for example, this student may has a parent who encourages him to beat up his classmate ... through the communication within the programme he sees that this is not the right attitude, I think there is nothing better; having a choice."

Similarly, Teacher B pointed out: "Different classes, different groups ... they may not communicate outside their groups, but they act as a team when they are together in mediation ... this year, although relationships are more entrenched (among students), team is a team though."

Regarding the functioning of the mediation team, the role and obligations of students within the team and the assumption of mediator responsibilities, Teacher A stressed:

"You have to be honest and say I trust a student of the third grade very much that has conducted so far fifteen

mediations" (at the same time, she suggests to the rest of the students to act as observers).

However, the mediation team, and the mediation programme in general, does not mean that it is implemented without problems. For example, Teacher C pointed out:

"This year we practically did not mediate, because with the mediation type that we have learned (she refers to the seminar attended by the three participating teachers) the team is ready by Easter, because until then it has worked on its own techniques, and sincerely needs it. ... I feel that few students can run them ... so we had two girls from last year's mediation (programme) that this year attend the 2nd grade, but they did not have time ... we did not have the will to tell some students that they were out of the programme, we cannot or we are already too many or it does not fit you, since we all believe that all students have benefits from this programme; a personal gain. However, this was a difficulty in becoming a regular team and working on it, making the students mediators; I think this year it did not go so well." She continued (Teacher C) by asking a substantive question about the existence of school mediation programmes: "Now I do not know what's best; to train a team every time so we can have sensitized students and then in the end not being easy to mediate?"

3.1 Changing Attitudes and Behaviors

The views of the three teachers cited above suggest a dynamic process that is evolving. Typically, Teacher A described the process of change in practice, through the function of the mediation team: "The group itself sees points that do not work, which do not have a good effect on mediation and want and seek to change them. We are discussing and the process of mediation itself is changing" and continues by pointing out the bidirectional relationship of students and teachers "... (the students) live inside the process of mediation; we also see it in its evolution, through what we learn in course. Therefore, both we, as instructors, and the students contribute so as the mediation can have another progression ... (for example) the students said that if we keep notes, there is no active listening; it cannot work like this. It is good to look at them in the eyes, to see their movements, etc. (thus) one of the two now takes notes or we think very seriously that no one should during the mediation, but then the proceedings should be written down after the mediation."

The process of change, of course, includes teachers themselves. Indicatively, Teacher A mentioned:

"Every year I learn different things from the students and every year the team learns different things, and I cannot, since the mediation is evolving, to say stop ... I also form my character and change myself, because the purpose of anything that happens in school is the evolution of the individuals through what they do; so this thing is achieved only through mediation, through the programmes. As a process (it is) simple, yes it will give you a skill, but will it have changed you as a person in your bad behavior?"

As a result of this process, it is not only the creation of competent mediators but also the change of attitudes and behaviors of the participants. School mediation programmes, in other words, can be seen as an effort of personal self-improvement, self-understanding, as well as a starting point for internal change. The views of the three teachers on this issue are summarized in Appendix B.

Finally, Teacher B highlighted the functioning of the mediation team and the inclusion of students with behavioral problems and/or cut off from their classmates:

"I think things are left to them, they feel bad when the students involved in the mediation are misbehaving; they see that I do not let them feel like it is just fun. I think it's something very serious what we do … previously, I was looking for students who were naughty and more fussy, but I could also see a maturity; I was telling them 'you are in these groups, get some things and I want you to help me with this' ... it worked; they worked well enough and they were both trustworthy and their behavior improved. You gave them a different role that was complementary and somewhat new that it also rose their self-esteem, 'that I can work and so have the same results and means from this' ... and helped them ... they may not have the commitment of other students ... but they come, they try ... they try and want to work ... some students feel that they are out of some other structures ... from other groups and here they find something."

3.2 Training in School Mediation

The training of students in mediation is a crucial issue that is recognized by all three teachers. Attempting a comparison with research findings from Great Britain, where mediation is more successful in primary education, Teacher A raised an interesting concern:

"In England, it is more successful for the younger pupils and less for the older ones, because as younger you will not question it; as a teenager though of 12 years old you will crush it, question it, refine it, here you criticize your parent ... so to stand and succeed another process is required, and this is education."

Mediation training has similar characteristics to those reported in the international bibliography (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Lindsay, 1998). Teacher A (a trainer in mediation with a recognized presence) underlined in particular the role of game and experiential learning as well as the context of the educational process:

"They love it extremely when we play games in the yard, experientially. The team is bound ... training in mediation is the acquaintance with the others and the respect for their diversity ... it is good to be trained (the mediator) and that is why I spoke about non-violent communication; to be trained in a variety of things that will help him/her take a distance from things, be more objective, look for feelings, create empowerment ... They are skills that the mediator can develop in the programme, step by step, during the year and that's what can make him/her much more capable of discovering what lies behind the very facts."

Yet, the mediation process is something dynamic and cannot be confined to simply memorizing some phrases. Once again, as Teacher A said:

"It's something alive, thinking that students just repeat a few words; this ensures that they do not say things that would make the mediation difficult, not to be arbitrary and to say things that can get them subjectively involved in this matter … it helps them as well, but at the same time we tell them 'say it and in your own words', so as to look themselves, that is, not to be a typical 'we thank you for choosing the mediation etc.', being a sort of a poem. The students have to live it and for doing so they have to work it with many simulations ..."

To continue: "They may not know how to name it … but have experienced it ... e.g., active listening; if you have not given it to them through three or four games to understand what an active listening is, if at that moment the other person does not realize that you are mirroring him, that whatever you say even in your eyes shows something; it is very important ... that will not come up in 8 hours."

Teacher B reported respectively: "The truth is that I work more with the older students as mediators" and suggests the peer-training method for the group's operation: "some things (the older students) have heard them before, but I put them in the process of having those communicated by themselves. I'm starting a lot of things myself and giving them (to the elders) ... they see it in a mood 'we teach you something, listen to us, let us tell them.' I put them in this role a bit."

3.3 School Climate and School Mediation

Mediation, as teachers stressed, cannot have positive results without support from the school administration. It is characteristic that all three teachers take the acceptance of school administration for granted, the good relationship that exists and the inclusion in the climate of the school (Appendix C).

In particular, Teacher A pointed out:

- "Other things that happen at school have supported mediation, such as the activation of the 15-member students council, the 'Friends in the yard' or the 'groups of friends' (informal student teams) ... there are also other teachers who work on this subject."
- "It is exactly the same with the 15-member students council, it is an institution, it participates in everything, you give it value and this value returns a lot of things; in the yard the students interfere with those who are disturbing." The chairman of the 15-member students council is a mediator and the council in total is actively involved in actions both against instances of in-school violence and bullying and in school management, such as in the supervision of the school-yard in specific cases. At the same time, however, the right of the council members not to participate in mediation is recognized: "I would like having everyone (of the council) and even those (students) who question the effectiveness of mediation, highlighting again the role of adults; how will they act though (the students of the council), I think, depends on the culture of the school that trains them; the whole attitude of the school."
- Mediation has been incorporated into school regulations and "... has given a different 'glamour' to school, that in such a way students can manage to defeat violence is very important in an area where violence is standard ... it is another view."

This, of course, does not mean denying punishment, but trying to find a solution and having a student understand the situation. As Teacher A stated:

"I have given several punishments this year but what is very important for us is just that, to be punished but to understand why ... and with the parent always standing by; the parent must understand that we have nothing against the student ... there is no failed mediation, we want to provide a solution ... they want to finish the process so that these students do not get involved in a fight ... they have confidence. I do not know how it would work if they did not, and if they saw that you were punishing them in the sequel or you did it (the mediation) to use it (the punishment)."

In summary, all three teachers do not regard mediation as a panacea but as one of the many actions that a school can take. By submitting a personal testimony from an author's visits to the three schools and the communication he had with the students who participated in a mediation programme, their willingness and their need to look for alternative ways of managing/expressing their feelings is remarkable. Conflict management, in other words, was only the starting point, the trigger for the creation of the mediation team, which then acquires its own dynamics as a self-contained/discrete entity.

Moreover, it cannot be ignored for the three mediation programmes, as well as for the three teachers who gave the interviews, the acceptance and good cooperation both with the school administration and with their colleagues. In particular for the school year 2015-2016, the three schools made substantial efforts for the inclusion of students into the school environment, in cooperation with the local educational authorities (Secondary Education Directorate of Western Attica) and they developed parallel actions either as extracurricular annual projects (Papakitsos et al., 2017b) or autonomously, with the voluntary participation of students and teachers. Indicatively, and without excluding the rest of schools, at the school of Teacher A (Junior High-School) during the interview with her (14.30-16.30), a group of students played music together with their former classmates, now attending the Senior High School (which is located in another area!), while next to them another group learned Pontic dances for the celebration event to be held at the end of the school-year. These actions were implemented exclusively by the students, who showed a truly responsible attitude and self-action throughout the interview. In general, all three schools were open in afternoons (often until 18.00, although the school program was completed at 14.00), due to the implementation of extracurricular activities or other school-actions.

3.4 Discussion

Initially, it should be noted that the role of women-teachers in the implementation of a school mediation programme is dominant (Artinopoulou, 2010). This differentiation is likely to suggest, as recorded in other studies, a different way of thinking/dealing with problems and to some extent a different level of emotional maturity between the two sexes (Coleman, 2011).

In summary, according to the results of this research (for example, see: Appendix A, B, C and the quotes of the teachers' interviews above) as well as the related bibliography, the implementation of school mediation programmes may contribute to three fields:

(a) the development of the students' soft skills, e.g., social and communicative skills (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Flecknoe, 2005; Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018; Noaks & Noaks, 2009) and the improvement of their ability to resolve conflicts non-violently (Bickmore, 2003; Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018);

(b) the development of the students' personality and their ability to work in teams, e.g., a sense of responsibility (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018), the forming of a climate of co-operation and mutual assistance at school (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Burrel et al., 2003; Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018) and their inclusion in the school environment, preventing dropout (Lindsay, 1998). These elements contribute to the improvement of the self-respect of students (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Burrel, et al., 2003; Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018) and to the formulation of their personality in terms of autonomy and accountability (Bitel & Rolls, 2000; Burrel et al. 2003; Flecknoe, 2005; Karakiozis & Papakitsos, 2018; Noaks & Noaks, 2009);

(c) finally at school level, the benefits include improving the school climate (Noaks & Noaks, 2009; Flecknoe, 2005; Burrel et al., 2003).

However, the support from the school administration and the educational authorities presupposes the adoption of a culture of mediation that will be compatible with the vision of the school (Lindsay, 1998; Sellman, 2011). School mediation in other words is not a panacea but one of the many and complementary actions that a school can take to promote a framework of cooperation and mutual assistance (Appendix C).

3.5 Restrictions

The present research plan is subject to a series of limitations, such as:

(a) the research was conducted at a specific level of education (junior high-school) and schools of a specific area/municipality;

(b) the lack of environmental control (Kyriazi, 1998), due to the absence of a unified training syllabus and the implementation of parallel actions by schools;

(c) the attitudes of teachers who do not participate in the mediation programme, of the school directors of the two out of three schools in the sample and of the parents of the students have not been recorded.

At the same time, a quantitative research has been conducted for investigating the attitudes of students in the

particular schools regarding their participation in a school mediation programme; these results are to be processed.

4. Conclusion

School mediation programmes, especially in an area facing complex social problems, can contribute, among other things, to the inclusion of students in the school environment, to their activation, to the development of their social skills and to the improvement of their school's climate. However, they cannot be considered a panacea and their effectiveness is related to whether they are part of the total school culture and the school's administration model, having the support of all members of the school community. This suggests a school operating in a different organizational context, with different priorities, such as promoting the social/emotional/communicative skills of the students. The reference to school mediation, at the proposals of a public-policy dialogue on Education, is a good starting point for forming this framework.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A

Teachers' Views on the Functioning of the Mediation Team

Teacher A	"There were students who said 'I do not want to mediate' until they are over (with the programme). It does not tell me something; I do not mind; if he wants to, he can be active; something else can fill this, he gets whatever he can. For him, it is a job of a lifetime that he will later make use of in his debates and his own personal quarrels; I think the greatest benefit is that."
Teacher B	"... I start with a 'material' more ready so to speak, yet strangely, there are always 3-4 students every year, who are disputing yet attending until the end, who are in the school's fusspot students, and most offensive so to speak, but they want to participate in mediation."
Teacher C	"This means, except from a few students who stopped, that most of them wanted to keep in touch with the programme, even if they were absent sometimes ... nor can you let the students who have been participating every year to listen to the same things."

Appendix B

Teachers' Views on Changing Student Attitudes Through Mediation

Teacher A	"(Sometimes) we blame another person for what we feel, not for what the other person wanted to say ... behind what we say, our own issues are hiding and not those of our adversary. This is very helpful in mediation. There, you make the mediator to understand exactly what could have been done, because when you say what you could have done, if you know it, then you will be able to focus ... the mediation (matters) not only at school, solving fights, but what the student will get from mediation with him/her for the rest of his/hers life."
Teacher B	"You cannot train people to deal with other people's differences and not work on the part of your behavior and how do you think, how do you act as a person. It has to be part of your thinking and the way you work ... if it is something mechanistic, these same students will not be convinced to take it as a game ... if you manage to make this a part of their thinking and to apply it in themselves and in their relationships, then the entire issue becomes much more substantial."
Teacher C	"They began to care about each other, to observe behaviors, to approach you and to tell you something that has happened without feeling that they are telling on ... they have an anguish to talk, they have a lot of anxiety, they find you in the breaks, they also find you at the end of the session ... they are eager to talk, they are in a great need to."

Appendix C

Teachers' Views on the Relationship between School Mediation and School Environment

Teacher A	"(if we look at it as) a process that leaves power in the hands of students, but without estimating that students have a correct view and can contribute to a democratic school, then there is no reason to have the team ... the model reproduced by the school must be 'smooth', that is, I cannot tell the students to mediate, to come here, to give them a couple of days of expulsion. I should focus myself on changing the student's behavior, letting myself talk to the student. That is, the teacher should take the student and have a conversation with him/her; more than a punishment ... (this suggests) a framework in the school of non-punitive management of bad behaviors, of mocking many times on bad behavior ... and after that to discuss it; then, it will be corrected within it (this

	framework).”
Teacher B	“If this becomes the basic ideology of the functioning of the school, the context of its function goes into this logic, and it has come into this logic (the particular school); I have to say, everything works complementarily ... It is like a puzzle that comes and fits into the whole function of the school. Not that it does not work (otherwise), because it worked in previous years as well, but it was more fragmented.”
Teacher C	“I think there are issues as well that mediation cannot solve ... it cannot be a bad behavior of a student towards a teacher, … or whenever there is a fight, the incident cannot go in mediation; there is a limitation here.”

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