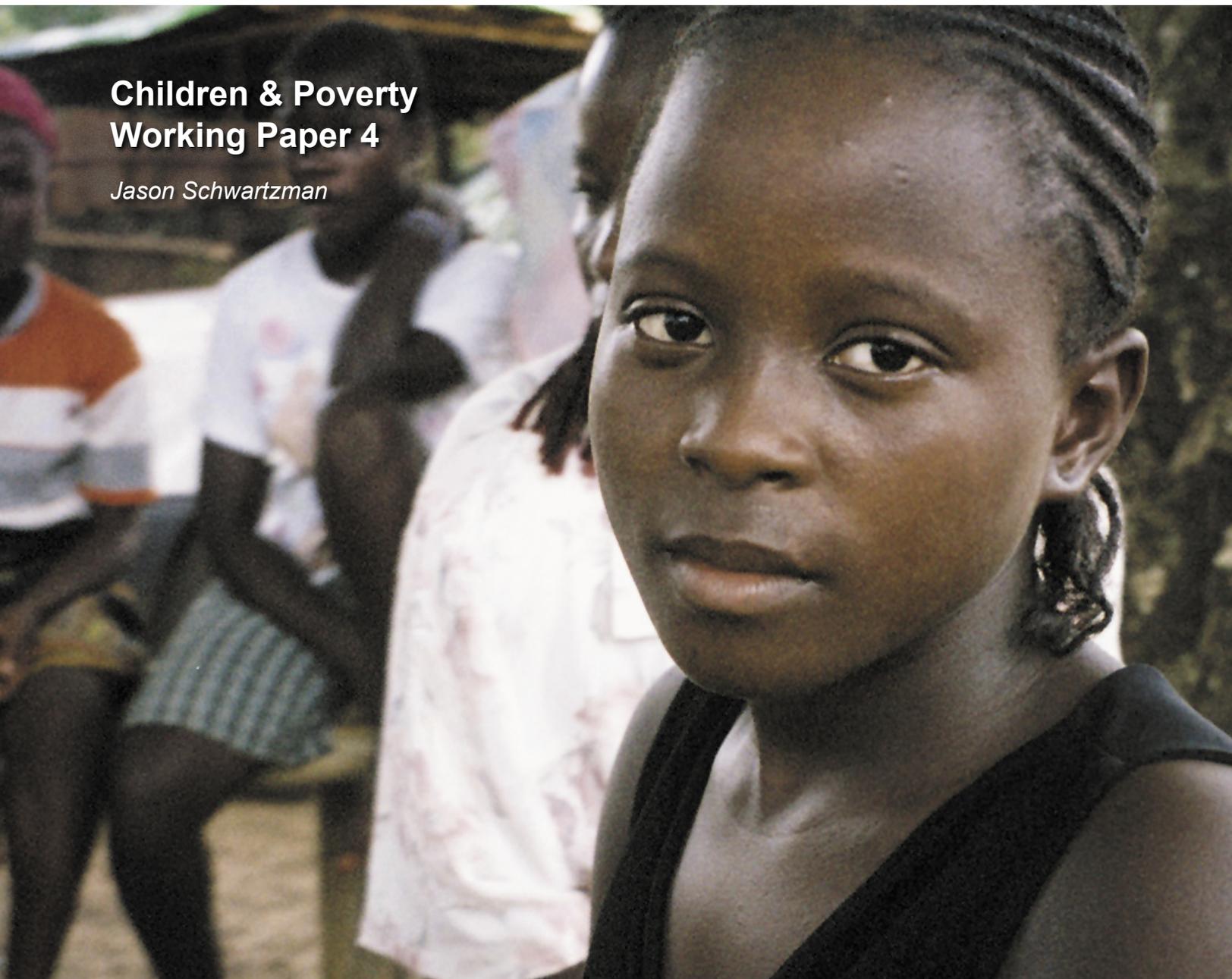


Promoting the Agency of Young People

Children & Poverty Working Paper 4

Jason Schwartzman



CCF

A Member of ChildFund International
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Working Paper 4

Promoting the Agency of Young People

Jason Schwartzman

This working paper is the fourth in a series dealing with Children & Poverty.

Other working papers in this series include:

Working Paper 1:

Understanding Children's Experience of Poverty:
An Introduction to the DEV Framework

Working Paper 2:

Improving Children's Chances:
Linking Developmental Theory and Practice

Working Paper 3:

Child-Context Relationships and Developmental
Outcomes: Some Perspectives on Poverty and Culture

Working Paper 5:

Children's Rights, Development and
Rights-Based Approaches: The Way Forward

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Glossary of Terms

ASB	Antisocial Behavior
CCF	Christian Children's Fund
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DEV	Deprivation, exclusion, and vulnerability
IGS	Income Generating Scheme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RBA	Rights-based Approach
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
SES	Sex and Socioeconomic Status
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNHCR	U. N. High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRISD	U. N. Research Institute for Social Development

Foreword

In 2002, Christian Children's Fund (CCF) commissioned a comprehensive study on the experience and the impact of poverty on children. The resulting three-part series, *Children and Poverty*, provides a fascinating and thought-provoking summary of major issues from the perspective of children, youth and parents. CCF offered this study to community and colleagues as a contribution to our common field of endeavors – breaking the cycle of multigenerational poverty.

The findings of the Poverty Study provided CCF with the opportunity to reflect on and debate the implications for our programs – how we develop them, work with communities, and evaluate our effectiveness. Key issues emerged from the Study that have been discussed in a set of Working Papers, which are now circulated for your review, consideration and discussion. The first of the working papers defines and discusses the proposed Poverty Framework for our work with children and is of critical importance to our future programming efforts. This Paper and the other four are summarized below:

Working Paper 1

Understanding Children's Experience of Poverty: An Introduction to the DEV Framework

In light of the findings from CCF's poverty research, this paper argues that children experience poverty in three domains: Deprivation, Exclusion and Vulnerability. Each of these domains is examined individually, although it is shown that the complexity of poverty for children emerges from the interplay of all three, rather than from any one alone. In this way, it is hoped that the DEV Framework will assist staff in deepening their understanding of child poverty and consequently designing and supporting more relevant and effective programs.

Working Paper 2

Improving Children's Chances: Linking Developmental Theory and Practice

The paper explores the importance of linking research to practice in designing effective and appropriate interventions that aim to improve the developmental chances of children living in difficult circumstances. Interventions should be informed by a knowledge of developmental epochs and pathways, as well as sources of influence at different points in development. Further, it is noted in the paper that the developmental level of the target children, the risks they face and local child rearing practices must be understood before an intervention is planned.

Working Paper 3

Child-Context Relationships and Developmental Outcomes: Some Perspectives on Poverty and Culture

The paper points out that programs must be sensitive to the several contexts that simultaneously influence the child's development – the ecology that surrounds the child, the developmental period he or she is in, and the developmental domain (social, emotional, cognitive, physical). It also seeks to provide a more thorough discussion of some of the complexities of child-context interactions in poverty contexts. Cultural practices form a central component of the child's context. The second half of the paper explores the ways in which cultures structure the experience of childhood.

Working Paper 4**Promoting the Agency of Young People**

As a child-focused organization, CCF places the well-being of children and youth at the heart of its work, and the measure of success has always been the benefits accrued and the results achieved. In the past, however, this has not necessarily meant that programs directly engage and work with young people, or expect them to take a leading role in program development and implementation. In this paper, we describe how CCF has come to place children and youth at the center of its attention, how the concept of agency is changing our program practices, and why this evolution advances our goal of broadening and deepening CCF's impact on children's well-being.

Working Paper 5**Children's Rights, Development and Rights-Based Approaches: The Way Forward**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether CCF should adopt a rights-based approach to programming. After providing a brief overview of the international human rights movement, the paper examines the strengths and limits of rights-based approaches. It concludes that although a strict rights-based approach is too narrow operationally for CCF, children's rights should be integrated more fully into all aspects of CCF's work. CCF can make its most significant contributions through a distinctive combination of child-focused, strategic programming that addresses urgent needs, integrates child protection into all programs, and reduces the underlying sources of poverty, particularly deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability.

We look forward to continued debate and reflection through dialogue with CCF staff and partners, children, youth, parents, partnering organizations, and colleague agencies in our collective efforts to decrease children's vulnerability, strengthen their resilience, and reduce poverty.



Michelle Poulton, Ph.D.

Vice President, International Program Group

Introduction

The well-being of children and youth is central to the work of Christian Children's Fund (CCF), a child-focused, child development organization, and the measure of success has always been the benefits accrued and the results achieved. However, in the past this has not necessarily meant that programs directly engage and work with young people¹, or expect them to take a leading role in program development and implementation. In this paper, we will describe how CCF has come to place children and youth at the center of its attention, how the concept of agency is changing our program practices, and why this evolution advances our goal of broadening and deepening the impact CCF has on children's well-being.

Putting Young People at the Center

Giving prominence to young people has been fueled to a large extent by CCF's two-year, organization-wide research initiative, *Children and Poverty*², in which focus groups of parents, children and youth were organized in a multitude of countries. Through these direct conversations, CCF learned about their unique experiences of poverty. Talking directly with young people about these issues has not traditionally been a common practice within CCF, and we came to understand that their perspective often differs from that of adults. In the past, the voice of children and youth was likely to have been overshadowed by parental thoughts, feelings, and insights, which were often the basis and the fuel for program development and implementation. Engaging young people in these discussions led to a fundamental conclusion and signaled a profound shift in program thinking – that we should be viewing young people not as beneficiaries of programs but as actors in their own development. To quote directly from one of the *Children and Poverty* study's central conclusions:

“...children are not passive recipients of experience, but are instead active contributors to their own well-being and development. They think of themselves as contributors to their families, playing their own part in the care of younger siblings and incapacitated adults and in household maintenance and survival. Indeed, the assumptions of age-appropriate roles and responsibilities within the family and community can be a vital source of self-esteem and motivation for children.”

These insights from the *Children and Poverty* study became recommendations for moving forward:

- “Children’s perspectives on poverty need to be incorporated within all policies and programs that aim to assist them directly.”
- “It needs to be understood that children are not the helpless victims of circumstances but instead are active agents in their own right.”
- “Supporting children in their own protection and in their role as change agents entails the development and use of participatory child-focused methodologies and methods....”
- “A key aim...is to increase resilience in children by supporting their coping skills, building on their resourcefulness and competencies and fostering protective mechanisms within the wider environment.”

To move forward, CCF refined its basic model for working with communities around the world. The principles that guide this model include the following:³

- CCF’s work will be based on a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of the adversities faced by children, and of the assets that poor people draw on as they confront adversity; and
- CCF’s work will be designed to enhance the leading role of children, youth and parents in poor communities, by ensuring that they are the primary protagonists in program implementation.

In the past, much of CCF’s attention focused on adult knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and participation as a strategy for effecting change in behalf of children and youth. With this shift, CCF recognizes that directly engaging young people is equally vital.

Defining Agency Developmentally

A dictionary definition of “agency” is “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.”⁴ For CCF, this capacity is understood to be part of infant, child and youth development, something that evolves as the newborn grows into an adult. To understand human agency, CCF draws on theories and research that demonstrate how children construct knowledge through their own actions on the world (Piaget), how they are an equal partner in human interaction from birth (Stern), and how they actively reach out to people to create relationships that meet their own social and emotional needs (Garmezy). When CCF uses the term “agency” in the context of human development, we refer to processes in which the infant, child, or youth is an initiating or willful force that drives experience and his or her own further development.

CCF views agency as a social phenomenon, one that is part and parcel of the child’s natural development as a member of a family, peer group, and community. As children grow up within this social sphere, their capacity develops to cooperate, communicate, and exert influence within groups. The related terms “protagonism” and “participation” enhance the definition of agency in terms of this social dimension, connecting a child’s capacity as an individual to the child’s involvement in collective action as part of a group:

- Protagonism: “The right and the ability to advocate on one’s own behalf, to be in control and a part of decision making processes and interventions.”⁵
- Participation: “...the sense of knowing that one’s actions are taken note of and may be acted upon – which is sometimes called ‘empowerment.’”⁶

If you think about it for a moment, these related terms of agency, protagonism, and participation highlight the human capacity to act willfully as an individual and as part of a group. What’s missing is the voice of the individual – a concept that includes the idea that what young people have to say is of value, but moves beyond this idea to recognize the fact that developing one’s voice means that one is also developing a perspective or a unique point of view, and this is, in turn, intimately linked to the development of one’s identity and sense of self. By including voice, we are acknowledging the distinct value of each particular child and youth – that each of us has a gift we bring to this world, and one of the challenges we all face is to discover what this gift is.

Starting Points to Promote Agency

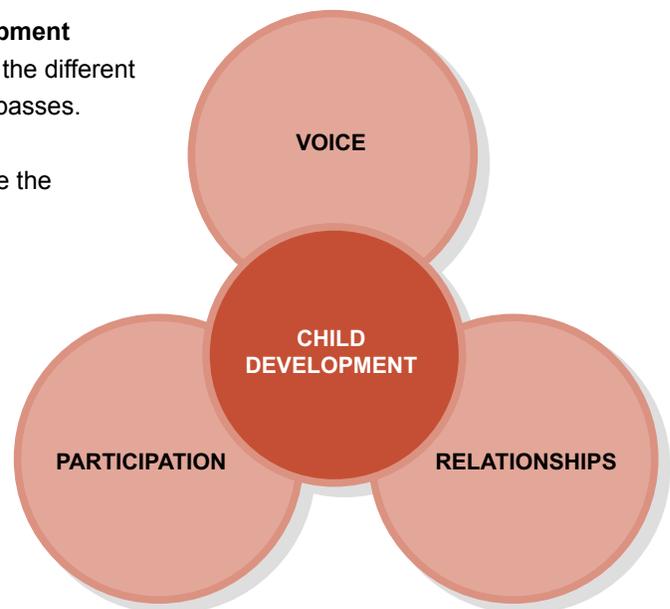
Concepts that describe human development are not the same as programming principles and practices. Just because we, as human beings, actively construct our own development doesn't mean that we, as professionals, will organize programs for or with young people using these same concepts. How do we design programs to promote agency?

According to research and evaluation findings, elements of high quality programs that foster the development of children and youth include the following:

- **A holistic approach** to working with young people, with developmentally appropriate programs and opportunities to grow so that younger children remain involved as they mature into older youth;
- **Opportunities for young people to contribute** in ways that are relevant and matter to them, both in the development of their own programs, and in the development of their community;
- **Caring and trusting relationships** that enhance feelings of trust and safety among children and youth, and between them and staff, volunteers, families, and community members; and
- **Engaging activities that set high expectations for young people**, activities that focus on the strengths of children and youth, foster their resiliency, and prepare them for adulthood, while retaining the elements of choice, challenge, fun, and friendship.

Drawing on this research, CCF has developed a framework that guides program development. As represented below, CCF incorporates four elements into program design. They are:

- Programs will be designed to facilitate the **development of each child** in holistic ways, taking into account the different phases of development through which each child passes.
- The **voices** of children will be heard and will shape the direction of programs.
- The **participation** of children and youth in leading roles in their own development, and in the development of their communities and societies, will be central to program implementation.
- Through program implementation, meaningful **relationships** will be formed between children, and between children and adults.



CCF is operationalizing this framework in the following ways:

- **Ensuring that children and youth are listened to, and have meaningful and regular opportunities to contribute** to their community's efforts to make life better for both adults and young people. For example, focus groups of children and youth are organized as part of community-wide participatory planning processes in ways that are designed to result in programs that address issues they prioritize as being critically important. Similarly, they are asked to provide feedback and evaluate programs once they are being implemented.
- **Institutionalizing the voice of young people through the formation of Child & Youth Associations** that are responsible for working with Parent Associations to guide program development and implementation that the community has identified through a participatory planning process. These Associations are formed in each community where CCF works, and a select number of representatives are elected to serve in a multi-community Federation that is the legal entity and grassroots organization with which CCF partners for the purpose of community development. This means that organizational bylaws ensure that child and youth representatives have equal status with adults, an important factor for overcoming the power imbalance with adults, and the cultural practices that often confine young people to the "seen but not heard" category.
- **Providing opportunities for children and youth to be directly responsible for the implementation of programs they care about** as part of an overall community development, poverty alleviation initiative. As program initiatives are developed and implemented, committees are formed, composed of representatives from Child, Youth, and Parent Associations. These committees oversee the array of programs that are being implemented. Children and youth take on direct oversight responsibility for a subset of programs, as negotiated among the representatives to the multi-community Federation.
- **Organizing Child Centered Spaces, Children's Clubs, and other types of like-minded programs** that are child-focused, engaging spaces where children and youth can go on a regular and ongoing basis to participate in activities they've come up with. These programs function to strengthen relationships among young people and adults, give them opportunities to express themselves and reflect on their lives, and build their capability to participate in and contribute to their community.

Challenges

In moving forward, the state of knowledge and practice within the field poses a challenge to CCF and other organizations that are seeking to work with young people as partners. These challenges include the following:

- **The capacity to participate unfolds as children grow into adults, but the skills that build capable participants across the childhood and adolescent years have not been systematically documented.** Documentation is important since programs can be designed to promote these skills at an early age, and programs can also be designed to accommodate children who have yet to develop them. Until we figure this out, programs may have greater success with older rather than younger children (or vice versa), may appeal to limited numbers of children, or may be successful for short periods of time but lack longevity. Since participation is something that's done as part of a group, the developing ability of a child to understand the perspective of others, to cooperate with peers and adults, to express oneself and communicate thoughts and feelings, and to critically think about issues – these are all foundational components. Equally important are how a young person sees him or herself in light of cultural factors that may inhibit his or her desire to contribute, social dynamics that may add to low levels of self-esteem and the self-perception that one has nothing worthy to say, and power imbalances with adults that may curtail efforts to hear and be heard.
- **Since participatory experiences are new to many young people, even if they have the capability, they still require time to master what is expected.** As yet we have not articulated a stepwise process that allows for this. For example, an often-cited diagram is the “Ladder of Children's Participation,” which clearly captures the different ways adults may organize projects to allow for different degrees of child and youth initiative and decision-making. We need to create something similar that helps adults and young people to envision a process that encourages voice and participation within mixed-age groups so that over a series of months participants are enabled to become comfortable expressing themselves, critically reflecting on issues, engaging in activities, and experiencing a sense of accomplishment. Otherwise there is a danger that the lack of perceived movement forward will frustrate individuals and undermine their desire to be involved.
- **Capacity building for facilitators who work with children, youth and parents is needed, but we have not yet clearly articulated the core competencies the facilitators require in order to promote voice, participation, protagonism, and agency.** The competencies are likely to cover two overarching skill areas: how to work with young people, and what activities to do with young people. Examples of topics include child-friendly methods for engaging young people in active, hands-on ways that encourage expression not only through words, but also through pictures, music, role plays, etc. Additional topics include child and youth development and the implications for age-appropriate programming, how to work with and manage groups of young people, and how to resolve conflicts. Although detailing core competencies is a challenge, this is compounded by a scarcity of organizations that are positioned around the world to partner with NGOs working directly with young people, to build staff capacity in a sustained manner.

The Vision We Are Reaching Toward

Ultimately, why do we think that young people should be active participants, protagonists, and have their voices heard? We believe that young people require certain abilities to successfully transition to adulthood. Fundamentally, we want children to develop into adults who are able to express their thoughts and feelings, be creative in their approach to life, feel connected to the diversity of people around them, and have hope that through their own actions they can live a life that will make them happy. Key competencies include being able to think critically about what's happening around them and to work constructively with others to effect change. Thus, they need to be skilled in cooperation, collaboration, listening, and communicating their thoughts.

Programs therefore need to be organized around principles that will engage young people, seek their thoughts and feelings, and enable them to effect the changes important to them. The concepts of voice, agency, protagonism, and participation are intended to help us reflect and throw new light on how we view young people and their abilities, inspire us to work directly with them, and push us to create programs and methods that engage and involve them.

Endnotes

- ¹ The term “young people” is intended to encompass both children and youth, who are 18 years old and younger.
- ² Feeny, Thomas and Boyden, Jo (2003). *Children and poverty*, Richmond, VA: Christian Children’s Fund.
- ³ It is not our intention to review this model, but if the reader is interested in learning more about it, please see CCF’s series, Pilot Notes.
- ⁴ Merriam-Webster Online (www.m-w.com).
- ⁵ The Concerned for Working Children (2002). *Protagonism: A Journey in children’s participation* (www.workingchild.org/prota9.htm).
- ⁶ Boyden, Jo and Ennew, Judith (1997). *Children in focus: A manual for participatory research with children*. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen.
- ⁷ Eccles, J. and Gootman, J.A., (eds.) (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press. Cited in World Youth Report 2003: The global situation of young people. New York: United Nations Publications (www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wyr03.htm).
- ⁸ Hart, Roger A. (1999). *Children’s participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. New York/London: Earthscan.

Christian Children's Fund (CCF) is an international child development organization which works in 33 countries, assisting approximately 10.5 million children and families regardless of race, creed religion or gender. CCF works for the well-being of children by supporting locally led initiatives that strengthen families and communities, helping them overcome poverty and protect the rights of their children. CCF works in any environment where poverty, conflict and disaster threaten the well-being of children.

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