

Drama's Potential for Deepening Young Children's Understandings of Stories

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Abstract The benefits of drama have been reported extensively in educational research literature; however, few studies provide an in-depth analysis of how drama is used in early childhood classroom instruction for readers who struggle with comprehension. The focus of this study is: How do young children build literary understanding through drama? This seven-month qualitative study took place in a rural elementary school and shows how 10 first-graders who had been identified for the school's reading support program were capable of demonstrating rich understandings of children's literature on multiple levels through drama.

Keywords Early childhood education · Children's literature · Struggling readers · Drama · Qualitative studies

A small group of first-grade boys had just finished independently reading *Oh, Jump in a Sack* (Cowley 1998), a 16-page book about a naughty balloon that was trying to escape from the tip-toe family. One of the boys jumped up and said, "I want to read the story on tip toes!" He tip-toed around the room and, while he was reading the book, he gave different voices to the tip-toe cat, the tip-toe woman, and the rest of the tip-toe family, who were all trying to catch the naughty balloon that kept flying away from them. The rest of the group had to try it out, too, so soon all five boys were tip-toeing around the room while reading the story softly to themselves. The next day they eagerly asked if they could read the story again and perform it by taking

the roles of the characters in the book, as they had done with other stories.

Dramatic responses can arise spontaneously in classrooms while children are reading literature, which are known as performative responses (Adomat 2010; Sipe 2008.) There are also a variety of more structured dramatic approaches that are used in schools, such as choral reading, creative drama, role play, process drama, readers' theatre, puppetry, and sociodramatic play. A teacher can build upon spontaneous performative responses in guiding children to understand stories more deeply; similarly, a teacher can plan more structured drama activities before, during, and after the reading of a text.

This study draws upon three related drama approaches in the classroom: drama in education (Bolton 2007), which uses drama to learn about other subjects in the curriculum; process drama (O'Neill 1995), which uses a variety of theatre techniques, and story drama (Booth 2007), which uses a story as the starting point for drama activities. These strategies can enhance young children's engagement and deepen their understanding of literature. This article adds to the few studies that provide an in-depth analysis of how drama is used in classroom literacy instruction or how drama helps to promote the development of literacy for young readers or readers who have been labeled as "struggling" (Crumpler 2007; Edmiston 1993; Wilhelm 2007; Wolf 2004). The central question in this study is how do young children build literary understanding of children's literature through drama?

Using Drama in Literacy Learning

The benefits of drama for students of all ages and abilities have been reported in the research literature over the past

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30 years (Bidwell 1990; Bolton 2007; Booth 2007; Galda and Liang 2003; McMaster 1998; Miccinati et al. 1983; Wagner 2003). Drama requires many of the same language abilities and thinking skills that are fundamental to reading comprehension. A child who uses drama to understand stories must be able to express the important details of plot and character, word meanings, the sequence of the story, and relationships of cause and effect. This requires the ability to interpret, to draw inferences, and to apply one's knowledge and experiences to the story. In order to dramatize stories, students must understand them deeply (Wilhelm 2002).

Very few studies about drama and reading comprehension have occurred in early childhood classrooms. In his work in a kindergarten classroom, Crumpler (2007) used process drama techniques in a series of responses to literature. First he previewed the story, looked at the pictures, and discussed the story. Then a drama activity was structured around the text. He found that the children were able to become more active meaning makers through these kinds of interactions with texts as they assumed multiple roles or positions as reader/actors. The social aspects of texts in a community of participants were particularly important. "This exploration unfolds as participant/readers position and reposition their own and others' understandings...that become part of the collaboratively constructed drama world" (p. 6).

In an earlier study, Edmiston (1993), worked with first-graders to create dramatic activities in which they took up certain themes and issues from the story *Jack and the Beanstalk*. By immersing themselves in character roles, they were able to have experiences from within the story world. After reflecting on those experiences, these first-graders were able to "discover new insights into the characters, the themes, and themselves" (p. 252).

Wilhelm (2007) points to the significance of using drama with readers who have been labeled as "struggling." In Wilhelm's work with middle school students, he found that these readers tend to think of reading as a decoding process rather than an active meaning-making process. Drama supports the idea of reading as an active process of meaning making, in that it helps readers to experience and learn about texts from the inside perspective of taking a role and moving around the story, and from the outside perspective of extending or reflecting on the story. Active participation in the story world creates "a context for more sophisticated comprehension and the creation of elaborated meaning" as students gain multiple perspectives and viewpoints on stories (p. 91).

These studies have important implications for young readers. According to these studies, readers who struggle with literacy have difficulties entering into the story world and sustaining active meaning-making processes within it.

Drama not only provides a scaffold for understanding texts, but by physically moving around in stories, children are fully immersed in stories for sustained periods of time. Therefore, children are able to gain multiple perspectives about texts and personalize their interpretation of texts while they react as characters to the implications and deeper meaning of stories (Wilhelm 2007).

The classification of readers as "struggling" has been debated, as it tends to focus instruction on students' weaknesses, rather than strengths. Moeller (2004), in her study of fourth-graders engaged in literature discussion groups, questions what a label of "struggling reader" means:

The readers who struggle...may be labeled in ways that decrease their access to engaged readers and efficient decoders. Rather than being included in heterogeneous in-class groups that offer multiple opportunities to both display and witness a range of competencies and to participate in higher-level, complex learning activities, they have a greater chance of being tracked into remedial classes or being isolated by their higher achieving peers (p. 420).

Readers who are given supplementary reading instruction are often relegated to programs that emphasize the mastery of basic skills (Allington 2005). In contrast, Moeller found that such readers can benefit from discussions of literature, which create rich understandings as multiple viewpoints enrich and extend each other. However, certain learners, such as the children described in this article, may also benefit from expanded ways of expressing and creating meaning of stories.

An Expanded Definition of Reading Comprehension

Comprehension has traditionally has been understood as the knowledge of narrative elements, such as plot, setting, and theme (Sipe 2008). However, this study seeks to take a broader and more comprehensive view of comprehension, or literary understanding, which includes how children can create and express meaning through multiple modalities. Hancock (2007) suggests that enlarging and expanding a student's repertoire of responses to literature, such as through writing or drama, encourages readers to explore an enriched, interactive involvement with a book.

Traditional early childhood curricula tend to separate the arts and literacy as different meaning-making systems. By adding drama to classroom practices, literacy moves beyond communication through reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Moran and Meyer 2009); with drama, children can also express and create meaning through gesture, movement, language, and vocal intonations.

It is through multiple modes of exploration and expression that children develop literacy both in the traditional sense of reading and writing, and in the expansive sense of communicating with others and making sense of life. Young children's dramatic expression encourages literacy while developing creativity and imagination (p. 208)

Being directly engaged and involved through drama helps children to identify with the literature they read (Hancock 2007). Drama is able to make a unique contribution in the making and sharing of meaning, and has been shown to be particularly helpful for students with learning disabilities or second language learners (Bernal 2007).

School Context

This article reports on part of a 7-month qualitative, descriptive, and naturalistic study that took place in Grove Elementary School, located in a rural-suburban area outside of a major city in the US (all names of places and people used in the study are pseudonyms.) The district articulated its language and literacy framework as one of "balanced literacy." Balanced literacy provided a variety of reading, writing, and word study experiences throughout the language arts block as well as content area subjects. Reading included read-alouds, shared reading, literature circles, guided reading, and reading conferences. Writing activities included writer's workshop, as well as group and individual writing conferences.

One of my responsibilities as an elementary reading specialist was to coach teachers in their classrooms on various aspects of language arts teaching as well as to work with the teachers in providing instruction that addressed the diverse needs of the students in his or her classroom; the majority of my time was devoted to the primary grades. My goal in working with teachers was to help support their growing professionalism in being able to orchestrate a variety of important literacy experiences that enabled the diversity of learners in their classrooms to become engaged with literacy and literature and to thrive within a rich literacy environment. I supported students who struggled with literacy by providing them with extra attention, practice, and guidance with the goal of enabling them to become independent learners.

Throughout the study, I provided supplemental instruction within the regular education classroom for small groups of children who had been identified for the reading support program based on criteria established by the district. The district was in a rural farming area that was slowly becoming a suburban area, and a wide socioeconomic range of students was represented. The 10 children in this study belonged to two first-grade classrooms; eight

were European-American, and two were Latinos. One of the children spoke Italian at home, and two children spoke Spanish. Seven of the children qualified for free or reduced breakfast and lunch.

As a reading specialist in an elementary school with over 600 students, I considered whether this particular school would be an appropriate site for my research. I was interested in choosing a site and selecting a group of children that would provide an example of "purposeful sampling" (Maxwell 2004). As Maxwell states: "It usually makes more sense in a small-scale study to deliberately select cases, individuals, or situations that are known to be typical. A small sample that has been systematically selected for typicality and homogeneity provides far more confidence" in the conclusions drawn (p. 71). The children who were chosen for the study were those labeled as "lowest achieving" after beginning-of-the-year literacy assessments were completed; therefore, I was able to focus my research on a group of 10 first-graders who had gone through a formal selection process in qualifying for supplemental reading instruction.

I chose to examine literary understanding and drama within my practice as a reading specialist. Dramatic and other artistic responses have long formed an important part of my philosophy of teaching, and the insider perspective as researcher was a methodological choice, in that it allowed me to participate in drama activities alongside the children and gain first-hand experience of how they build their literary understanding from within the drama itself.

Drama activities were woven within the language arts activities; children engaged in drama activities approximately once a week. Before or during a whole-class interactive read-aloud discussion with either of the two classroom teachers or with me (Wiseman 2011), I worked in small groups for drama activities. When literature is used as a starting point for process drama techniques, the exploration of the meaning of the story is of central importance, not a reenactment of the story. I used the issues, themes, characters, mood, conflict, or spirit of the story as a beginning for dramatic exploration (Booth 2007). Process-oriented techniques, such as hotseating, role play, and tableaux, allow children to move from surface and literal readings of stories to deeper considerations of the layers of meaning within literature (Wilhelm 2002).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection took place over a period of 7 months, and included transcriptions of audiotapes and videotapes, field notes, interviews with teachers, student reflection on drama activities through discussion and writing, observation of students in other classrooms, and drama activities. This article focuses on the drama activities that the children

engaged in and the conversations the children had before, during, and after drama activities. The discussions and drama activities of these children were videotaped and audiotaped. Drama activities took place during and after read-alouds or the shared reading of children's literature. The books represented a variety of genres and were chosen from curriculum materials and students' self-selection. In all, the audio- and videotapes of 18 drama activities were fully transcribed, and the audiotapes of 8 additional activities were partially transcribed or summarized. Data were drawn from two classrooms, each with 5 children eligible for reading support: Nathan, Dorrie, Matt, Ryan, and Natasha; and Zach, Brett, Andrew, Bobby, and Kevin.

Through an ongoing review of my data sources, I began to find emergent categories of how children built literary understanding through drama. The codes, themes, and topics were reviewed and refined through a constant comparative method, and significant categories in the data arose (Strauss and Corbin 2007). Three major conceptual categories of literary understanding were created from an analysis of the data: textual (76 %), personal (7 %), and social responses (17 %). Textual responses included all responses that referred to the text as a way of building narrative meaning. The term "text" is broadly defined to include the actual text of the picture book or big book, the story that was built up through drama, and other texts mentioned in reference to the book or story drama. Personal responses included all responses that showed students using the text for their own personal purposes; and social responses showed how children worked together in creating a social meaning-making framework which contributed to literary understanding.

Because the majority of responses concerned textual or narrative meaning making, this article provides an in-depth examination of textual responses, specifically, responses about character understanding. Within textual responses, the largest subcategory of responses (68 %) was about character understanding. Responses about "character" included references that children made to their own characters in a drama activity or the character in a story and included statements about character traits, actions, thoughts, and feelings. In the following sections, I will outline how I prepared for drama activities within the classroom, and then give examples of how children built understanding of characters by using several drama techniques: role play, tableau, and hotseating.

Planning for Drama

In planning drama lessons, I pinpointed the problems, issues, roles, situations, and tasks that students were asked to represent. As a first step in planning a drama lesson, I

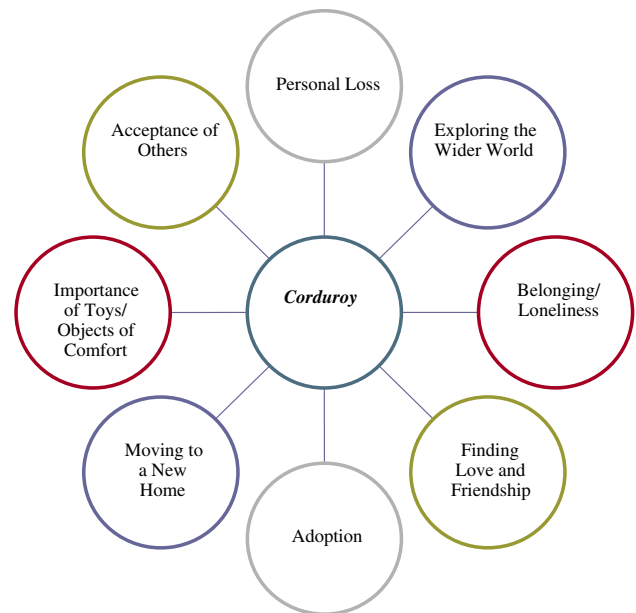


Fig. 1 Web of possibilities

followed Tarlington and Verriour's (1991) suggestion of creating a "web of possibilities," which is a visual way of mapping ideas, issues, and themes that the story suggests. In preparation for a drama activity based on *Corduroy* (Freeman 1968), a story about a little bear that is looking for a child to take him home from the store, I mapped themes and issues that were explicit or implicit in the story, such as: personal loss, exploring the wider world, belonging or loneliness, finding love and friendship, adoption, moving to a new home, the importance of toys or objects of comfort in children's lives, and acceptance of others (see Fig. 1 for a web of possibilities for drama activities for *Corduroy*).

Key Questions

After brainstorming possible themes and issues related to the story, I formulated more concrete, key questions related to those themes that I could pursue through drama. For example, for the theme of "personal loss," I wrote, "how do the other toys in the department store feel after *Corduroy* leaves?" For "moving to a new home," the question was, "what will life be like when *Corduroy* arrives in his new home?" In exploring the issue of "adoption," I wondered how the animals that were left behind in the department store might go about finding a home for themselves.

Viewpoints and Contexts

After writing down key questions to explore, I considered possible viewpoints and contexts for both myself and the children. For example, the viewpoint might be that of *Corduroy*, the other toys on the shelf, the night watchman,

the little girl, the mother, other people who work or shop in the department store, or an administrator from the toy adoption agency. The viewpoints could be from a character in the story, both major and minor, as well as characters from other stories or made-up characters, such as the administrator. Each viewpoint was placed within a specific context. For example, *Corduroy* and the girl were together in their new home, the toys on the shelf were left behind in the department store, and the toys that were left behind were interviewed at the department story by the administrator from the toy adoption agency.

Tensions, Surprises, or Problems

Within the context, tensions, surprises, or problems that arose from the onset of the drama or during the drama demanded action from the participants and helped the drama to develop (Booth 2007; O'Neill 1995). Several problems or surprises that demanded action in the *Corduroy* drama were: when the night watchman told the other toys that *Corduroy* had disappeared from the shelf and asked them to solve the problem; when *Corduroy* and the boy or girl had to describe how they felt just as they arrived together in their new home; and when the administrator arrived with letters from boys and girls telling the toys that they wanted to adopt them. Tensions, surprises, or problems can also arise as the drama develops and the issues at stake acquire significance for the participants; they can be introduced by the teacher taking a role in the drama alongside the children and heightened by teacher questioning throughout the drama (O'Neill 1995).

Role Play

To explore the issues and themes in *Corduroy*, I started out with a revolving role play activity, which allows children to take turns playing different roles (Wilhelm 2002). The children worked in pairs. One child in the pair was *Corduroy*, and the other child was the girl or boy who adopted him. *Corduroy* and the child talked to each other about how they felt when they were chosen as the toy and when they went home together for the first time. The scene then switched back to the department store, and the children did a role play as the toys that were left behind. I decided to take the role of the night watchman, so that I could interview the children. I wanted to explore the feelings of loneliness and confusion that the toys experienced when *Corduroy* was gone and to resolve the problem of how they might find new homes for themselves. The third part of the drama involved a visit from the toy adoption agency, in which I played the role of the administrator. The tension was created when she brought a letter to the toys stating that there were little boys and girls out there who wanted to

adopt a toy into their family. The toys described themselves (e.g., "I'm cozy and I want love") and wrote a letter to their prospective families. This technique is known as "writing in role" (Wilhelm 2002). The combination of drama activities was chosen to explore major themes in the story as well as character feelings and motivation, and to provide solutions to some of the underlying problems and tensions implicit in the story. Throughout the drama, the children were challenged to work on a high level of critical thinking and problem solving.

Hotseating

The following excerpt shows how children developed complex understandings about characters through "hotseating." A student or students in the hot seat are addressed, advised, questioned, or interviewed by other children. As Wilhelm (2002) describes: "This strategy invites students to hone their ability to analyze characters, infer, elaborate, and think on their feet" (p. 82). The student in the hot seat assumes the role of a character and responds to questions and situations in that role.

Before children became familiar with the technique of hot seating, we practiced how to ask questions of a character in the story. After I read a story aloud to children, I would discuss the kinds of questions we could ask a character in the story. On a chart, overhead, or computer, we would compile questions that focused on the character's actions and motivations in the story, such as what the character was thinking or feeling at key points in the story or why he or she acted in a particular way. First I modeled hot seating for the children by taking the role of a character in the story, and the children asked me questions. Then I let the children try out a character's role from the story with the help of the chart we had generated together. After the children became familiar with the technique, they were able to interview characters easily without support. The following excerpt occurred after the children had practiced the hotseating technique repeatedly with other stories.

Based on *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens 1995), the children and I took turns as members of the rabbit family in interviewing Bobby as Bear, the main character who wants to sleep instead of working in his garden. In the story, the mother and father rabbit and their bunnies make deals with Bear to plant crops in his garden, and they promise to give him either the tops or the bottoms of the vegetables after the harvest. But they always trick Bear. I asked Bear what he was thinking and feeling when he got leaves instead of the carrots:

Bobby: (in a grizzly bear voice, slouched in his chair) I was getting sad because I never eat anything but garbage! That's all I could eat until I grow

- my own garden! I'm never awake! 'Cause I'm too tired. I never get enough sleep at night.
- Zach: (imitating Bobby's "bear dialect") Why didn't you get no sleep at night?
- Bobby: I get no sleep at nighttime. I only get sleep in the day. None at night! Yes, youngster? (calling on one of the bunnies)
- Brett: Why didn't you plant some other stuff? Like...
- Bobby: Like tomatoes?
- Brett: Yeah.
- Bobby: Well, because my father never stays home and helps me with anything, so I just lay around. I get no help, so I just lay around.
- Andrew: How about if you call your dad?
- Bobby: Sure, that would work!

Bobby, in role as Bear, explained his feelings about getting stuck with the leftovers from the garden. He offered a series of excuses as an explanation for his own lack of industriousness. The other children, in role as bunnies, asked him questions in an attempt to understand him and made suggestions about how he might solve his problem. Throughout the interview, children created dialogue, even using the appropriate "bear dialect," inferred Bear's feelings, explained his traits, tried to solve his problems, and questioned and discussed the implications of his actions. Hotseating brought the text and characters to life, because they were able to see the characters, feel their presence, sense their emotions, and become part of the text (Wilhelm 2002). By assuming multiple roles, children were able to develop interpretations of the story from multiple perspectives.

The excerpt below highlights the kinds of out-of-role responses about character that children made as they planned for drama or solved problems in the middle of the drama. *Owen* (Henkes 1993) is a story about a little mouse that is entering school and knows he cannot take his blanket, Fuzzy, to school with him because he is too old for objects of comfort. He desperately wants to find a way of bringing Fuzzy to school. In a variation of the hotseating technique described above, I was in role as Mrs. Tweezers, a character in *Owen*. Mrs. Tweezers interviewed the children out of role to see if they could come up with some solutions to Owen's dilemma:

- Teacher: What should Owen do about his blanket?
- Nathan: He should put it in the back of his pants.
- Dorrie: He can hide it in his backpack.
- Ryan: Or his lunchbox.
- Teacher: And how would you sneak that out if you're already in school?
- Nathan: I'd make it a magic blanket.
- Matt: Make it invisible!

- Nathan: It can fly. And he could make it invisible. He could fly invisible.

The children made numerous suggestions about actions that Owen could take in order to solve the problem of taking his blanket to school, and the suggestions ranged from practical and somewhat sneaky methods to imaginary flights of fancy. In thinking about solutions for the characters in the stories, children were thinking like authors as they weighed the possibilities for characters and made decisions about their actions.

Tableaux

One group of first graders created tableaux, or frozen pictures, of scenes from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (Hillman 2000). In tableaux, students create visual pictures with their bodies, emphasizing key details in the story and key relationships among the characters (Wilhelm 2002). As a preparation for tableau, the children discussed which of the scenes might be most important to the story after they had read the big book together. Some of the children suggested the scene in which Goldilocks is alone in the bears' home and is trying out the chairs, beds, and porridge to find the one right for her. Other children thought that the moment when the bears found Goldilocks asleep in the bed was the most dramatic in the story. Illustrations from the book influenced their choice of important scenes; the children understood that illustrators had already gone through a process of interpreting important moments in the story for visual depictions.

By the time the children read *Goldilocks* during shared reading time, they were already familiar with the drama technique of tableau. The children had a few minutes to decide on a scene, assign roles to everyone in the group, and to practice how they would stand and move as their characters and in relation to other characters. In building a tableau, the group moved around; but when I called out "freeze," they remained still in their places. The group chose the scene when Goldilocks was discovered by the bears. Dorrie lay down and Nathan, Natasha, and Ryan surrounded her. Father Bear was very angry, Mother Bear had a quizzical look on her face, and Baby Bear was amused. Goldilocks was terrified as she stared up into the faces of the Bear Family. When I called out "freeze," Goldilocks had just scrambled out of bed and was preparing to escape from the house as quickly as she could.

I added the drama technique of "tapping in" to the tableau. In this technique, the teacher or another student can tap participants in a frozen tableau to come to life so they can make a comment; for example, they can explain their actions, feelings, or details of how the story got to this

point (Wilhelm 2002). In the Goldilocks tableau, I tapped one of the frozen figures and asked the child what he or she was thinking or feeling. The characters came to life and spoke.

Nathan: I'm mad! Get out of my bed! Fix my chair!
 Natasha: What are you doing here?
 Ryan: I think she looks funny in Daddy's bed.
 Dorrie: I'm scared, because the bears will eat me all up.

In creating a tableau, the children expressed the key elements of the story in a visual representation. In preparing for a tableau, they reviewed the story, looked at the pictures, and decided which scenes would represent an important moment in the story. This understanding was translated into gesture and movement as the children created appropriate expressions and stances for their characters. Adding "tapping in" to the tableau allowed children to express what their characters were feeling and thinking at that particular moment in time.

Through drama, children immersed themselves in the story world, moved around within the story, viewed the story through the characters' eyes, and made decisions as characters. As characters, they entered into different characters' points of view or attitudes and enacted situations or conflicts, thereby gaining multiple perspectives and viewpoints about the story. Children were able to express their literary understanding through multiple modalities: language, movement, gesture, and voice intonation. Children moved beyond the literal meaning to explore the consequences and implications of the story or to create new stories. In all, the interpretive moves made by children in role and out of role showed a complex understanding of narrative meaning.

Discussion

The view of literary understanding developed in this study is a far cry from the kinds of instructional opportunities and approaches that are usually prescribed for readers who struggle with literacy, especially young ones. Most early intervention programs focus heavily on phonics instruction, and comprehension instruction is often relegated to later grades (Allington 2005); however, drama allows young children an avenue of exploring meaning in texts that they are unable to read. They can enter story worlds and explore all of the narrative elements in an active, creative way. As this study shows, drama takes children beyond what we might expect of them. Through drama, young readers are able to enter the story world for sustained amounts of time, meanings go beyond literal comprehension, and the text is used as springboard to explore complex themes and issues.

Children who were looked on as readers who struggle with comprehension of stories were able to rise way above the labels and perceptions. By standards of year-end assessments, the children in this study showed significant improvements in all measures of reading and writing, and 80 % of the children were released from the reading support program, an unprecedented result. Children came to love reading, literature, discussing books, playing with stories through drama, and were able to develop complex and sophisticated understandings that were of deep personal significance to them and were forged by a community of inquirers.

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