

# Perceptions of Educators on Effective Culturally & Linguistically Responsive (CLR) Practices

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## Introduction

For more than three decades, researchers have examined strategies to teach students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). For the purpose of this article, students who are CLD are those whose ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, including English language learners and English speakers of other languages, differ from mainstream culture.

Literature espouses that one way to effectively teach students who are CLD is through the use of culturally and linguistically responsive (CLR) practices (Zhang-Wu, 2017). CLR pedagogy involves utilizing students' cultural knowledge, prior experience, frames of references, learning style, and personal and linguistic strengths to promote success (Gay, 2000; Li, 2013; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Richards, Brown, & Forde, 2007; Wyatt, Yamauchi, & Chapman-DeSousa, 2012).

According to Zhang-Wu (2017), "CLR pedagogy, also known as culturally relevant teaching or culturally congruent teaching, is a combination of culturally responsive and linguistically responsive teaching" (p. 33). Samuels (2018) elaborated that CLR pedagogy is

a student-centric approach that values students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of learning. Wyatt et al. (2012) considered CLR teaching a strategic effort to empower students and combat long-term and far-reaching effects of a "traditional oppressive colonial model" (p. 65) of education by providing instruction that reflects students' culture.

With the steady increase in the number of students with CLD backgrounds entering K–12 settings (Zhang-Wu, 2017), the present study aimed to contribute to the literature on culturally and linguistic practices by examining the current practices of teachers in CLD classrooms. In 2011, 9% of students over age five years had limited English proficiency (Pandya, Batalova, & McHugh, 2011). By 2014, the data indicated that more than 4.9 million students were English learners, representing over 10% of the total student population (Duncan & Gil, 2014; McFarland, 2016).

Presently, research has shown that students who are CLD make up 33% of the school population in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). The increasing population of students who are CLD and their learning needs and/or challenges are of great concern to educators, as research has indicated that students from CLD backgrounds tend to receive lower grades and drop out of school at higher rates than their nondiverse peers (Center for Public Education, 2007; Lopez & Iribarren, 2014).

The effectiveness of CLR practices is dependent on many factors, including the quality of teachers (Gay, 2000; Klingner

et al., 2005). Rychly and Graves (2012) explained that key characteristics of effective teachers of students who are CLD include being caring and empathetic, knowledgeable about other cultures, and reflective about beliefs and attitudes of their own culture as well as those of others.

Even with increasing research on effective practices, many educators enter CLD classrooms with no formal and/or minimal training (Garcia, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010). In fact, research has indicated that the majority of teachers of students who are CLD are unprepared to meet the demands of teaching those students (Li, 2013; Scott, Alexander, Fritton, & Thoma, 2014). Lopez and Iribarren (2014) postulated that the problem begins with educator preparation programs, where training of candidates on teaching students who are CLD has been inadequate.

## Conceptual Framework

Using Richards et al.'s (2007) explanation of ways to address diversity in schools, specifically the use of culturally responsive pedagogy, a theoretical framework was developed to guide this research. This framework is based on the premise that teacher beliefs greatly influence the effective use of CLD practices.

Once teachers are able to evaluate their own beliefs and attitudes, they may be able to efficaciously use CLR practices to promote inclusion, develop students' positive self-esteem, and promote students' success. Additionally, effective use of CLR practices may likely help improve: (a) *English language proficiency*,

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or the ability to speak, read, write, and comprehend English language; (b) *academic language proficiency*, or the ability to speak, read, write, and comprehend academic English and content-specific vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and academic discourse; and (c) *content mastery*, or the ability to demonstrate mastery of subject-area knowledge on academic measures (Center for Public Education, 2007, p. 4)

The theoretical framework discussed here identifies three dimensions of CLR pedagogy: personal, instructional, and institutional (Richards et al., 2007; see Figure 1).

The *personal dimension* forms the core of the framework, as the effective implementation of CLR practices begins with the teacher's ability to utilize personal views and perspectives on class teaching. The personal dimension addresses the cognitive and emotional process in which teachers must engage to become culturally responsive. It includes teachers identifying their own beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about students who are CLD and then comparing those viewpoints to the perspectives of students to inform instruction.

The *instructional dimension* is impacted by the personal dimension and focuses on the educator's ability to use teaching strategies to build and expand on students' knowledge, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and interests. This dimension deals with teachers' pedagogical skills in developing the content knowledge and language skills of diverse learners.

The *institutional dimension* relates to the broader structure of the educational system and deals with administrative factors that affect teachers' practices and beliefs. It includes school policies, administrative structure, and approaches to community involvement that impact the delivery of services to students from CLD backgrounds.

The effective incorporation of these three components—personal, instructional, and institutional—creates a learning environment that nurtures and promotes the achievement of CLD learners. Owing to limited time and resources, this qualitative study focused on two dimensions, that is, the personal and instructional.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of educators regarding effective CLR practices they

currently use in their classrooms to assist students who are CLD in attaining greater academic success. The following research questions were investigated:

*Research Question 1:* What are the perceived character/personality traits of an effective educator of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse? (personal dimension)

*Research Question 2:* What are teachers' perceptions of their roles in teaching students who are culturally and linguistically diverse? (personal dimension)

*Research Question 3:* What are the effective culturally and linguistically responsive practices used in K–12 settings? (instructional dimension)

*Research Question 4:* What factors impact the effectiveness of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy? (instructional dimension)

## Methodology

### Participants

Eight teachers of students who are CLD from public schools in the midwestern U.S. were chosen by convenience sampling to participate in this study. These teachers were known to the first

author and were asked to participate in an interview and a focus group. All teachers participated in both the interviews and the focus group, which lasted approximately one hour. Teachers from all educational levels in the P–12 system were represented (see Table 1).

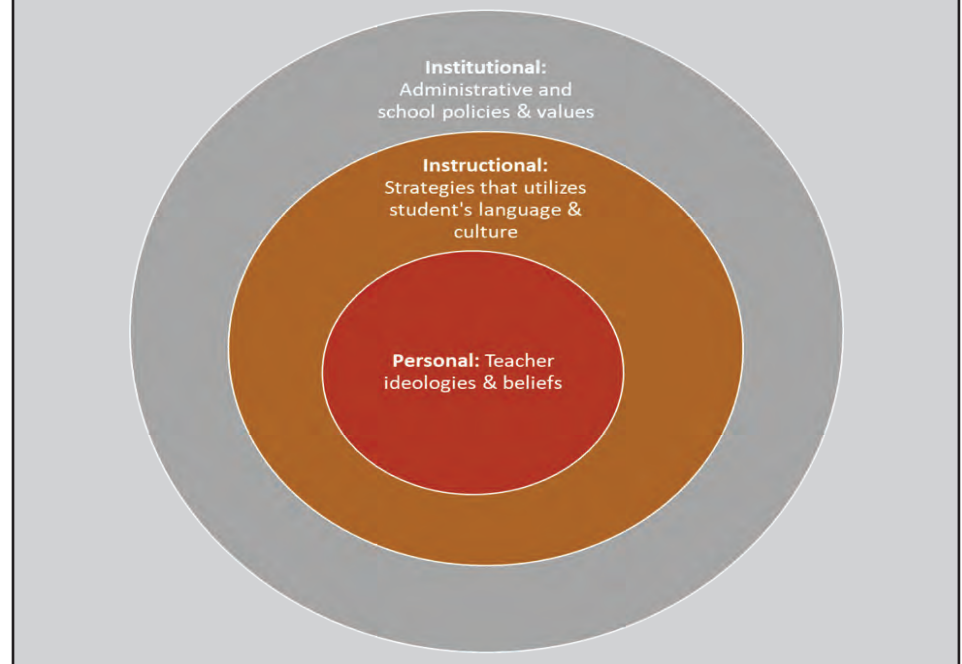
More than half of the participants (i.e., six) taught at the high school level (Grades 9–12). Teaching experience ranged from one to more than seven years, with half (i.e., four) having more than seven years of experience. Participants' workload included 4–17 students, where students' main languages were Spanish, Korean, or German. Participants worked with students from six to 32 hours a week, during which they taught English, math, reading, and/or language arts (see Table 1).

### Data Collection

Data from several literature sources were the foundation for researcher-created interview questions used to collect data for this study (Gay, 2010; Richards et al., 2007; Zhang-Wu, 2017). The interview schedule contained 13 questions (see Table 2), including five demographic questions and seven questions around the two dimensions (i.e., personal and instructional) in the

**Figure 1**  
**Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogical Framework**

Adapted from "Addressing Diversity in Schools: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy," by H. V. Richards, A. F. Brown, & T. B. Forde, 2007, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 39.



conceptual framework. Focus group questions were based on the conceptual framework and responses collected from the interviews.

**Procedure**

The researchers obtained approval from the institutional review board, and then a standard invitation of participation was e-mailed to known teachers of students who are CLD that included the purpose of the study, the consent form, and instructions on how to complete the interview. Only volunteers were used in this study. Participants were e-mailed a structured interview protocol to ensure consistency (see Table 3).

The interview sought to examine the effective cultural and linguistic practices utilized. The interview protocol was developed based on previous research on CLR practices (Gay, 2010; Richards et al., 2007; Zhang-Wu, 2017). After participants answered interview questions, the responses were analyzed, and a focus group date was set.

The seven questions asked in the focus group were based on responses from interviews and findings in related literature (see Table 3). During the focus group discussion, the interviewer asked probing questions for more detail (e.g., can you explain further?).

**Table 1**  
**Participants' Demographic Data**

Category	Number
Educational level taught	
Grades K–3	1
Grades 4–8	1
Grades 9–12	6
Work experience (years)	
1–3	2
4–7	2
>7	4
Caseload	
1–5 students	2
6–10 student	3
11–15 students	2
>15	1
Contact hours/week	
5–10	3
11–15	0
16–20	3
21–25	1
>25	1

**Analysis**

The data from the interviews and focus group were analyzed using deductive analysis and four-stage inductive and thematic analysis (Milner, 2014; Zhang-Wu, 2017). The deductive approach included coding and organizing data based on the conceptual framework. The inductive approach used data to drive emergent themes. Both approaches were used to increase the rigor of the study by incorporating the conceptual framework

and identifying new themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

First, the researcher did a meticulous reading of interviews to become familiarized with the content. Then, the researcher identified, classified, organized, and encoded sections of interviews and focus group responses into “units of meaning” and placed these under the two themes (i.e., personal dimension and instructional dimension) of the conceptual framework.

**Table 2**  
**Interview Protocol**

Category	Questions
Demographic information	1. At what school level do you teach? 2. How long have you taught students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)? 3. How many hours a week do you spend with students who are CLD? 4. How many students who are CLD do you teach? 5. What subject do you teach?
Personal dimension	6. What are your roles as a teacher of students who are CLD? 7. List and explain at least three extremely essential elements that you perceive contributes to effective teaching of the CLD population. 8. What (teacher) personal factors contribute (that you perceive) contribute to the success of CLD students?
Culturally linguistic practices (instructional dimension)	9. What are some of your best (effective) teaching practices for students who are CLD who are learning in an inclusive classroom setting? 10. What are some factors that impact instruction of students who are CLD? 11. Do you use a specific pedagogical (teaching) framework for teaching students who are CLD? If yes, explain. 12. How do you overcome the challenges that you encounter when teaching students who are CLD? 13. Discuss some of the resources that have been beneficial to you in preparing you to become more effective teachers of students who are CLD.

**Table 3**  
**Focus Group Questions**

Category	Questions
Personal dimension	1. What are some personality traits (skills) of effective teachers of students who are CLD? 2. What is your philosophical teaching approach to students who are CLD?
Instructional dimension	3. What are some effective strategies that you have used with students who are CLD? 4. Give scenarios/examples where effective strategies have been successful. 5. What are some cultural and linguistic factors that affect your teaching? 6. How do these cultural and linguistic factors impact your teaching?

Next, the researchers engaged in inductive analysis by setting aside the conceptual framework and conducting open coding of data from the interviews and focus group. The initial coding generated 17 codes, including diverse learners, culture, language, teaching strategies, and support, which were then categorized into three axial codes (i.e., teacher characteristics, educator support, and diverse pedagogy).

The axial codes confirmed the conceptual framework of personal and instructional dimensions of CLR practices. The data were integrated and synthesized with similar “units of meaning” identified for each theme (i.e., personal and instructional) in the conceptual framework to draw connections and to gain a holistic picture.

In the following section, findings are reported within the themes of the conceptual framework to answer the research questions.

**Results**

**Personal Dimension:  
Character Traits  
of Effective CLR Educators**

In response to Research Question 1, participants identified many character/personality traits of an effective educator of students who are CLD. All participants stated that effective teachers of students who are CLD are patient, caring, respectful, understanding, accepting, and empathetic.

One teacher explained that she taught one particular concept for an entire year, using different aids, mimes, and improvisation. Other character traits identified were cheerful, supportive, compassionate, trustworthy, and nonjudgmental. One participant stated that educators need “to possess a sense of humor for when things go hilariously wrong.”

In regard to Research Question 2, on participants’ perceptions of their roles in teaching students who are CLD, responses reverted to the identification of character traits. Participants saw their role as one where teachers “ensure students are in a respectful environment,” “accept students’ culture and language,” “are patient with students who do not speak English,” and “help others understand student perspective.”

All participants perceived their roles to include teaching content, modifying

curriculum, and being resourceful. One teacher explained that being resourceful includes “using any available recyclable material,” while another elaborated that it included “being flexible, using students’ misunderstandings as springboard to instruction.” They agreed that their role is to bridge the gap between home and school.

One participant noted, “I schedule time with translators so they can attend meetings with parents, and print and send communications to parents in Spanish.” Another participant stated, “I have students teach me words in Spanish and have them share their traditions/experiences with peers when we have group instructional time.”

In identifying their roles, participants identified their own beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about students who are CLD as empathetic and to “build pride and cultural and linguistic literacy.”

**Instructional Dimension:  
CLR Practices Used**

In connection to Research Question 3, on educators’ identification of CLR practices used in K–12 settings, participants identified many effective CLR practices (see Table 4). These practices were categorized under three themes: (a) establishing routines and providing accommodations, which involves creating predictability and accessibility in the classroom; (b) using

explicit instruction, which means using inductive and deductive structured, systematic teaching where students learn new skills using higher order thinking skills and participating in class activities; and (c) infusing technology in instruction, which includes using tools to enhance learning (see Figure 2).

All participants mentioned the importance of accommodations such as using a student’s native language and using translators. One teacher stated that she used Google Translate. Another strategy used by all participants was explicit instruction. However, explicit instruction was used in different forms. Four teachers stated that they modeled language use, three mentioned role-play, two pretaught vocabulary words, and six did read-alouds.

All participants noted that their instruction was structured and systematic. The strategy least used by participants was the infusion of technology. One mentioned that she used audiobooks, and another used text-to-speech.

Regarding Research Question 4, on factors impacting the effectiveness of CLR pedagogy, participants explained that effective communication and collaboration were key to using CLR practices. They stated that teachers should encourage parental involvement, celebrate cultural holidays, and establish an open line of communication with parents, family, and other educators. One participant

**Table 4**  
**Effective Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Practices**

<i>Accommodations / routines</i>	<i>Explicit instruction</i>	<i>Technology</i>
Use student native language where possible	Implement systematic, explicit instruction	Utilize audiobooks
Use translators	Repeat and allow continuous practice	Use text-to-tape
Establish effective classroom rules/routines	Model language use: “don’t just repeat louder and slower”	
Provide extra time	Teach vocabulary words before reading	
Give options	Engage in role-play	
Minimize use of figurative language, innuendos, colloquial phrases	Use sign language and pantomime	
	Read aloud	
	Use visual and audio aids	

brought out the institutional dimension, citing that having administrative support makes for easier and more effective use of CLR practices.

## Discussion and Implications

### Personal Dimension

The findings of this study parallel those found in previous research. According to the participants here, teachers must possess several essential characteristics to become effective educators of students who are CLD. Similar to other research, participants explained that teachers must be caring (Case, 2013; Klingner et al., 2005; Li, 2013; Milner, 2014; Rychly & Graves, 2012).

Gay (2002) defined caring as teachers holding students who are CLD accountable to the same standards as students who are not CLD. Milner (2014) expounded that caring involves building relationships where teachers expose students to authentic learning experiences and stay committed to the learning process despite its challenges.

Another key character trait all participants identified was that CLR

teachers must possess empathy. Empathy involves teachers understanding students' perspectives (Li, 2013; Rychly & Graves, 2012). According to Rychly and Graves (2012), "caring and empathetic practitioners who know their students are better able to assess and respond to student needs" (p. 48).

One participant noted that one must be able to "think your way to and through [teaching situations]," touching on an important component of the personal dimension of CLR practices: reflection (Li, 2013; Rychly & Graves, 2012; Scott et al., 2014). According to research, educators must be able to reflect not only on their practices but on their worldviews and beliefs about cultures (Zhang-Wu, 2017). Students' success is heavily dependent on teachers' ability to critically analyze their frame of reference (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Therefore one recommendation is that teacher education programs should explicitly incorporate more systematic reflective practices.

Systematic reflection involves several action steps, including (a) analyzing one's thoughts about other cultures,

(b) being flexible in thinking, (c) thinking from multiple perspectives, (d) filling gaps in CLR practice, and (e) evaluating new/modified CLR practices (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Figure 2 shows steps that may be taken to engage in systematic reflection.

Analyzing thoughts about other cultures entails the teacher thinking deeply about his or her own beliefs and identities. Being flexible in thinking refers to a teacher examining all possibilities of present and future teaching strategies that may be used with students who are CLD. Teachers must avoid dualistic thinking, where the teaching strategies are either one or the other. Thinking from multiple perspectives involves a teacher exploring and comparing both students' perspectives and their own perspectives.

Filling gaps in CLR practice includes two steps: first, identifying the differences between the various cultures, and second, seeking opportunities and implementing new strategies to improve outcomes for students who are CLD. Finally, evaluating new/modified CLR practices entails the teacher critically analyzing strategies used and modifying them based on students' needs.

Teachers must continuously engage in systematic reflection to ensure that they are aware of current trends in cultures. Teacher preparation programs may have educators engage in this systematic reflection through group discussions, cultural dialogues, question-and-answer sessions, writing of autobiographies, creating memoirs, conducting interviews with CLD families, and having home visits (Li, 2013).

The data gathered from participants of this study as well as from the literature show that teachers must take personal responsibility in becoming effective at executing CLR practices by developing positive character traits and by engaging in deliberate reflective activities. In addition, teacher preparation programs (i.e., institutional dimension) may help educators become literate in working with CLD populations by explicitly incorporating CLR practices into curricula (Li, 2013).

The combination of a personal commitment (personal) and teacher education program (institutional) focus shows that the integration of personal and institutional dimensions helps better

**Figure 2**

### Systematic Reflection

Adapted from "Teacher Characteristics for Culturally Responsive Pedagogy," by L. Rychly and E. Graves, *Multicultural Perspectives*, 14.

(1) Analyze one's thinking about other cultures & support with evidence

- What is your worldview?
- What stereotypes do you hold?
- What data/research support viewpoint?

(2) Be flexible in thinking-Outline all possibilities and try to avoid "either-or" scenarios

- What strategies are you presently using to teach CLD students?
- What alternative methods are you considering to improve learning outcomes?

(3) Engage in thinking about practice from multiple perspectives

- What are your perceptions about practice?
- What are students' point of view about classroom practice?

(4) Seek ways to fill gaps in practice

- What are the gaps in practice?
- What more need to be learned to effectively teach CLD students?

(5) Implement new/modified strategies and evaluate effectiveness

- How effective are the new teaching strategies?
- What more can be done?

prepare educators to face the challenges in CLD classrooms.

### **Instructional Dimension**

CLR practices are multifaceted but basically involve using students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds to make content more accessible (Gay, 2000). The participants in the study identified several CLR practices parallel to those mentioned in previous research studies, such as providing accommodations, implementing direct/explicit instruction, and using technology (Jones & Mixon, 2015; Li, 2013).

Li explained that CLD teachers must learn how to accommodate differences and include students' experiences. Participants in this study identified several ways they accommodate differences, for example, by incorporating students' native languages in lessons, providing extra time, and using translators.

According to Hughes, Morris, Therrien, and Benson (2017), explicit instruction consists of five essential components, including:

- (i) segmenting complex skills; (ii) drawing attention to important features of content through modeling/think-alouds; (iii) promoting successful engagement by using systematically faded supports/prompts; (iv) providing opportunities for students to respond and receive feedback; and (v) creating purposeful practice opportunities. (p. 141)

Similar to the available research, participants identified several explicit instruction strategies that have been effective in their classrooms with students who are CLD. These strategies include breaking down reading skills by teaching vocabulary words prior to reading, drawing attention by modeling think-alouds and language use, allowing continuous practice, and utilizing role-play and visual/audio aids.

The use of explicit instruction helps students actively engage in dialogue about life experiences, which helps develop language skills and connect old information with new information (Piazza, Rao, & Protacio, 2015). Through systematic use of explicit instruction, students engage in discussions, with both peers and teachers, where they are asked questions to activate higher order thinking skills.

Another strategy participants identified was the use of technology, such as audiobooks. There is little literature on technological strategies used with students who are CLD. Further research will be required on technological strategies used and their effectiveness. Other effective strategies identified in the literature include becoming aware of and learning the linguistic backgrounds of students, providing side-by-side dual-language opportunities, utilizing graphic organizers, and allowing students to draw pictures of their learning (Jones & Mixon, 2015).

A second recommendation is that teacher preparation programs may help educators become effective instructors of students who are CLD by incorporating practical experiences within a majority of their courses where candidates utilize instructional strategies in classrooms with students who are CLD. Educators may use explicit instruction to help elicit students' prior knowledge (e.g., KWL, story maps, semantic webs). In-service teachers may learn effective strategies through mentors and coaches who have experience teaching students who are CLD.

This present research study supports the findings of Klingner et al. (2005) that to become effective CLR teachers, educators must learn how to implement CLR practices and develop core attributes of care, respect, and responsibility.

### **Limitations**

Although the findings in this study contribute to a greater understanding of effective CLR practices, the study has several limitations. First, the sample used in this study was very small, selected through convenience sampling; thus results may have limited generalizability. Second, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data, and so participants may have disclosed selective socially desirable responses.

Future research will need to focus on direct observation of teacher practices in addition to self-reported measures. Last, the study focused solely on two dimensions, personal and instructional; therefore further research investigating the impact of all three dimensions—personal, instructional, and institutional—on instruction of students who are CLD may be required to increase the robustness of results.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers need certain competencies to translate knowledge into practice. Effective CLR pedagogy comprises two main components: teacher beliefs and values and specific teaching practices. It also involves celebrating diversity and embracing tolerance of differences.

Teaching diverse students and creating an appropriately inclusive and integrative classroom environment is a complex, constantly evolving journey. Utilizing a multidimensional approach (i.e., the incorporation of personal, instructional, and institutional dimensions) is necessary to enhance the learning of students who are CLD. Each student brings several factors, including biological, psychological, social, emotional, and spiritual, into the classroom. All these factors influence student learning and outcomes. Thus incorporating the CLR pedagogical framework in the instruction of students who are CLD is pivotal.

All interactions are to some extent intercultural. A quintessential element to healthy interaction between teacher and student is empathy. In addition to empathy, one needs a positive, caring communication style that includes openness, clarity of instruction, and student accessibility. It is imperative for the teacher who works with students who are CLD to take the time to understand the cultural values, special experiences, and skills the students bring to the classroom and to develop lesson plans based on the students' strengths.

It takes a deliberate effort by teachers to learn students' attitudes, motivations, and behaviors related to cultural identity (Li, 2013). Teachers must utilize students' strengths to work on areas that need further attention and development. Teacher education programs should encourage teachers to fortify existing skills, cultural values, and experiences that students bring to the classroom. The success of students who are CLD requires that teachers develop an awareness of cultural differences and similarities.

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