

# Tough, Intelligent Accountability!

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## Introduction

Scotland has embarked on a major educational reform programme with action plans that will see radical reform over the coming years. The aim is to raise the standard of education throughout Scotland, with the ambitious plan for all Scottish schools to attain excellence. The responsibility for realising this plan is shared at national, local and school levels. The approach calls for top-down and bottom-up action at all levels of its implementation. The responsibilities of each stakeholder in the education process have been established and standards have either already been set or are in the process of being reviewed.

There will be new standards for teacher education which will involve revitalising initial teacher education and enhancing continuing professional development of teachers. The Standard for Headship will be revised, and there will also be new selection procedures to ensure that all headteachers are prepared for school leadership. There will be a new curriculum for pupils aged 3 – 18 which will focus on learners and their individual needs. Alongside the new curriculum there will be changes to the assessment system, with more emphasis on formative assessment and the development of personal learning plans. Self-evaluation of schools will continue to be at the forefront of school development and improvement. However, the present system of self-evaluation using *'How Good is our School?'* (SEED 2001) will be changed from a 4-point to a 6-point quality indicator scale which will include a new excellence standard for schools and local authorities. This 6-point scale will also be used by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) to carry out school and local authority inspections.

There is optimism for significant system change that will result in a higher standard of education that prepares Scotland's young people for effective participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The reforms will unfold in the coming years and their effectiveness will be monitored and evaluated. It is too soon to

tell what the impact of many of these reforms will be. However, some of the reforms proposed have already been tested by a number of local authorities and schools, and the authors of this paper have been involved in the evaluation of pilot schemes. This has provided an insight into some of the key issues of implementation, particularly in relation to the balance between the professional freedom of teachers and their public accountability. This paper discusses the tensions that arise from the need to meet local and community priorities and at the same time achieve national and international outcomes. The authors will draw on local education authority initiatives in Scotland that are attempting to expand curriculum flexibility and to improve standards for all students to illustrate how it is possible *'to build, at each level, systems of tough, intelligent accountability that foster ambition and allow proper, informed public scrutiny.'*

## Background

Before considering the pilot initiatives in more detail, the context of the reforms is briefly outlined. A number of initiatives have led to the programme of reform, much of it stemming from the Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Act 2000 and a National Debate on Education.

The Scottish Executive's vision is for a Scotland in which every child matters, and where every child, regardless of his or her family background, has the best possible start in life. The Act set out five National Priorities in Education (see Appendix 1) and made clear that the Scottish Executive, local authorities and schools had a shared responsibility for seeking improvement. The five priorities indicate that improvement is not only about academic attainment, but rather the development of the whole child. The Act (2000) created a new statutory framework for school education that devolved responsibility to the local level

for finding the best solutions for achieving improvement:

*'... it shall be the duty of the authority to secure that the education is directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential.'* (Standards in Scotland's Schools Etc. Act, section 2, para 1)

In 2002 the Scottish Executive undertook an extensive consultation of the people of Scotland on the state of school education through a National Debate on Education. The Executive sought a broad range of views, including those of pupils, parents, teachers and employers. The views were analysed (Munn et al. 2004) and the Executive promised a set of actions in response to the findings of the debate. The agenda for action has been published and is entitled *'Ambitious, Excellent schools'* (Scottish Executive 2004a). The actions aim to: raise expectations by aiming high; give more freedom to teachers and schools to take decisions about the learning needs of their pupils; provide greater choice and opportunities for pupils to help them reach their own potential; and provide better support for learning for young people in challenging circumstances. The action plan underlines that delivering excellence in education requires both professional freedom and public accountability. To that end the Scottish Executive says that it will act to build at each level, *'systems of tough, intelligent accountability that foster ambition and allow proper, informed public scrutiny'* (Scottish Executive 2004a, 6). The key question is what does *'tough, intelligent accountability'* mean?

The Ambitious, Excellent Schools document recognises the importance of ensuring *'professional freedom for teachers and schools to tailor learning to the needs of individual young people'* (SEED 2004a, 14). It points out that the people best placed to make judgements about the learning needs of individual young people are those who work with them most closely. It says that within a framework of clear national standards and local authority support, teachers and other professionals in schools must have the freedom to exercise their professional judgement to deliver excellent learning and teaching. The implication is that teachers are free to decide what is best for their individual students, but at the same time they have a responsibility to ensure that high national standards of education will be upheld. The document is clear about the roles of SEED, local authorities and schools:

*'We will focus the role of the Scottish Executive on the national framework to ensure that Scotland performs well, that we stand comparison with the other high performing nations, and that we improve our performance over time. We will expect local authorities to drive improvement at the local level and to add value to the work of their schools. We will expect schools to meet the needs of their community, and each and every one of their pupils.'* (SEED 2004a, Ambitious, Excellent Schools, 20)

Tough, intelligent accountability suggests that the systems must be tough enough to ensure high standards of provision are continuously aspired to, but also be designed in a way that ensures that they do not interrupt learning and teaching in schools. At a national level, standards are set to ensure that all students have a secure foundation in literacy, numeracy and other essential skills and capabilities to help them achieve their potential. SEED highlights its responsibility to benchmark Scotland against international standards, particularly through the use of international evaluations such as the OECD's PISA study, in order to bring about further improvement in performance.

The local authority's role is to support and challenge schools to deliver continuous improvement. Quality Improvement

Officers or an equivalent will work with schools to encourage them to set high but realistic standards for every student to aspire to. Where standards set are not being reached, learning and teaching strategies will be challenged. The local authority has a responsibility to provide support to help their schools identify where improvements can be made. The emphasis on working *with* schools to do this is clear. The responsibility of providing a high standard of education that meets individual needs is shared between local authorities and schools.

The new focus on achieving learning outcomes means that schools and teachers have greater freedom to decide how best to achieve the outcomes in their particular context. However, with increased freedom comes greater accountability. Intelligent accountability systems should inform and support school and student development as part of a quality improvement cycle rather than merely judging performance (Livingston and McCall 2005). To achieve this there will be a continuing emphasis on self-evaluation in Scottish schools. To maintain the momentum already achieved, a third edition of the self-evaluation tool, *'How Good is Our School?'* (SEED/HMIE 1996, 2001), is planned. The aim is to provide further support for schools in the self-evaluation process and encourage them to progress from being a 'good school' to an 'excellent school'. The role of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) will be to build on school self-evaluation. The extent and nature of HMIE engagement with schools will vary depending on the school's own capacity to ensure improvement. Lack of shared agreement about the standards set would inevitably lead to mistrust and create tension between stakeholders at national, local and school level. Just as there is a need for clarity concerning standards at national and local authority level, schools must set clear targets, monitor them rigorously and use the self-evaluation process to inform action plans for improvement.

## Future learning and teaching programme

At the heart of the major reform programme is the review of the curriculum. *'A Curriculum for Excellence'* (SEED 2004b) states that *'our aspiration for... every young person is that they should be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and work'* (SEED 2004b, p12). While the current curriculum in Scotland has strengths in its balance of breadth and depth, a significant proportion of students are not achieving what they are capable of. The National Debate responses showed that many people felt that the curriculum was overcrowded with too many subjects. The review suggests that the number of subjects that students take should be reduced and that students should be given more choice – about what they learn, what exams they take, and when to take them. Prior to the publication of *'A Curriculum for Excellence'*, a more flexible curriculum was implemented and tested in number of pilot projects in Scottish schools. These projects provide SEED with an important research/evaluation base and the evidence suggests that some of the current curriculum reforms are based on 'informed policy' rather than political rhetoric.

The authors were commissioned by SEED to evaluate the implementation of a Curriculum Flexibility Project in one local education authority. It is an example of one of the pilot projects and of national, local and school levels working together to meet individual student needs and secure higher attainment. The project is one of a number of pilot projects supported by SEED's Future Learning and Teaching Programme (FLaT). The aim of the FLaT Programme is to encourage schools, education authorities and other bodies with an interest in education to create a learning and teaching environment for the future which

is sensitive to individual needs, will promote attainment and which tackles the barriers to inclusive learning and teaching in the community. The projects explore ways to develop the curriculum with a view to promoting creativity, innovation and excellence and, in particular, test ways to achieve the national priorities in education. In addition, the projects aim to develop, in collaboration with SEED, local authorities and others, a coherent approach to a sustainable, long-term strategy for the management of change in learning and teaching. The findings have the potential to act as models of good ideas and practice for what the school of the future might look like. The evaluation of the Curriculum Flexibility Project in one local authority (Livingston, McCall and Seagraves 2004) provides an insight into how a 'system of tough, intelligent accountability' might work in a way that allows schools the freedom to take decisions and make changes in order to meet the needs of their pupils within a local and national framework designed to provide support and raise standards.

## The Curriculum Flexibility Project

Five secondary schools were selected by the local education authority to participate in the implementation of the Curriculum Flexibility Project. The aims of the project were:

- To secure higher attainment
- To provide students with improved subject choice and more appropriate provision
- To develop consensus on the way forward with teachers, students and parents
- To facilitate curriculum planning in schools that is responsive to needs and effective in delivering outcomes
- To create time for activities that promote social competence, creativity and education for work
- To ensure the centrality of the principles for planning the delivery of the curriculum which lie at the heart of the authority's strategy, *'Raising Achievement for All'* (North Lanarkshire Education Department 1998)
- To emphasise the school as a 'learning community' with a firm emphasis on a positive and inclusive ethos.

The implementation of this innovation was set in a national and local authority framework that was crucial to how it was viewed by teachers and consequently to the successful outcomes that were achieved. In each of the five schools the teachers recognised a need for a more flexible curriculum to suit the needs of their students and felt sufficiently supported by the national and local framework of guidance to implement change.

At a national level, *Curriculum Design for the Secondary Stages: Guidelines for Schools* (SCCC 1999) was published. It established a national framework of advice concerning the curriculum of the secondary school within which local authorities and schools might operate. The Guidelines aimed *'to provide schools with clear, coherent guidance on the structuring of the learning experiences of young people in Scottish secondary schools while offering the necessary degree of flexibility to enable schools to take account of their individual circumstances'* (SCCC 1999, 2). They offered local authorities and schools the possibility of designing a curriculum more suited to the needs of their local community and individual pupils and were endorsed by the Scottish Executive in Circular 6/99 (Scottish Office Education and Industry Department [SOEID] (now known as SEED) 1999), which said that they *'offered scope for flexibility and innovation while providing an appropriate framework for planning continuity and progression in pupils' learning and should be useful to schools in raising standards of attainment'*.

In 2001, the local authority involved in the FLAT evaluation issued its interpretation of the guidelines (*The Curriculum of the Secondary School: Guidance for Schools*). Their guidance has to be understood in relation to the authority's *Raising Achievement for All* (1998) strategy. It points out the prevalence of economic and social disadvantage within the local authority area and the impact this has on the ability of young people and adults to reach their potential. Education is recognised as a way of breaking the cycle of disadvantage. The report states, *'It is imperative that the department of education provides a curriculum and services which challenge and enable young people and adults to achieve whatever they are capable of achieving, irrespective of socio-economic background, gender, race or levels of ability or disability'*. (RAfA, 2).

The report argues that there is a need for a radical look at the nature and basis of 'achievement' in order *'to arrive at a comprehensive definition of achievement which would do justice to the rights of diverse groups of young people and adults to develop their talents and abilities within an educational context'* (RAfA, 3). It highlights a shift in thinking which suggests that achievement is influenced by the background and experience of the individual – *'irrespective of individual levels of ability, factors of group identity such as socio-economic background, gender, race, disability and so on will make a difference'* (RAfA, 3). It suggests that different approaches must be taken with different 'groups' if achievement for all is to be supported effectively, and that the definition of 'achievement' adopted must extend beyond that which can be measured by traditional means. It concludes that 'achievement' must be recognised and supported over a wide range of activities and contexts.

The national guidance established what could be called a 'national standard' for curriculum flexibility. It set the boundaries for the innovation. Local authorities were then able to interpret the guidance in the light of their own policy context. One of the main aims of the evaluation undertaken by the authors was to assess the methods employed by the local authority to support and encourage innovation in schools and to manage the diverse approaches taken by schools to implement curriculum flexibility.

The local authority strategy provides a policy framework that allows schools to develop according to their own needs. Consequently, responsibility for progressing curriculum flexibility is devolved to schools, and this enables schools to find solutions that are relevant to the needs of their pupils and their own context. When interviewed, the Director of Education in the local authority said, *'We recognise that individual schools have individual needs. The main approach is to enable schools to develop ideas as much as possible at school level'*. He added, *'We aim to provide schools with a flexible framework with broad principles, not detailed prescription'*. The headteachers interviewed all appeared to welcome the opportunity to seek local solutions within a policy framework. One of them said, *'The local authority's 'one cap does not fit all' policy was inspirational'*.

The Head of Quality and Support Services at local authority level said that schools are best placed to identify the areas that pose the greatest challenge for them and they should be empowered to develop curriculum flexibility according to their own priorities. He emphasised that the education authority's leadership role is to provide a framework for schools and to work with headteachers to support and encourage them to develop innovative solutions according to the needs of their own school. According to a headteacher in one of the schools involved in the pilot project, the local authority guidelines gave him the 'green light' to make the curriculum changes he and his teachers already felt needed to be made in order to accommodate their students' needs. Prior to the publication of the local authority guidance they had recognised that

the curriculum did not serve the needs of all their students. Discussions had taken place in school concerning aspects of the curriculum structure that caused concern. The headteacher said that the curriculum was too rigid and restrictive and suggested that it was impacting on the attainment, motivation levels and behaviour of some pupils. In some cases students were being forced to take subjects that they did not wish to take and that were beyond their level of ability.

The publication of *The Curriculum of the Secondary School: Guidance for Schools* (2001) provided the authority with a means to encourage schools to develop ideas and at the same time to manage diversity. On the one hand, it made recommendations giving schools a structure to work within, and on the other hand it invited schools to consider areas for development that might require further investigation. Interviews conducted with the headteachers and teachers indicated that the document had indeed been used to initiate discussion in school. The guidance made clear to the schools involved that they needed to have a sound rationale for any changes to the curriculum and that students and parents should be kept informed. The development of curriculum flexibility was set firmly within the overall context of raising attainment and the local authority guidance emphasised that schools should continue to work towards approved qualifications. However, at the same time the guidance document gave schools the opportunity to develop innovative approaches to the curriculum.

A key factor in the relationship between local authority and school levels was trust. The Head of Quality and Support Services explained that the guidance document issued to schools was developed through close consultation with headteachers. He said, *'Our policy development is grounded in reality. The local authority's strategy is for policy to arise out of consultation'*. Local authority personnel said that they sought to develop a climate of trust and respect between the authority and the schools in order to tap into the best of thinking. They said that their aim was to open up thinking and encourage headteachers to come forward with their own ideas.

The Director of Education for the local authority explained that there is not the same need or impetus for seeking alternative curriculum solutions in all the schools in the authority. He said that schools could develop at their own pace, according to their own dynamics. He indicated that initially the local authority encouraged volunteer schools to come forward. This enabled the authority and the schools to pilot alternative curricula where a specific need for change had been identified, eg poor results, low motivation, poor attendance, high rates of exclusion. By using a small number of schools in the initial stages, the local authority could allow each school to take its own pathway and changes could be developed in an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary way. Local authority personnel said this strategy resulted in *'champions of curriculum flexibility'*, and these champions were then able to share good practice with their colleagues at headteachers' meetings and at the national conferences organised by the authority. In this way the local authority sought *'to model to all schools the successes of some schools'*.

The strategy adopted by the local authority of enabling grassroots development within a framework of local authority guidance appears to be effective. The majority of headteachers and teachers interviewed spoke positively about schools being able to initiate ideas within a framework that gives clarity concerning policy direction.

The strategy of gradual change according to the needs and dynamics of the school was also welcomed by the headteachers and teachers interviewed. This appeared to give relevancy to the changes and was more likely to command support from teachers, pupils and parents. In addition, the strategy to ensure ongoing consultation with teachers, students and parents was

also welcomed as it reassured schools that policy decisions were made with knowledge of the reality of the school context.

The Head of Quality and Support Services explained that ongoing support is given to the schools as part of the general system of support and encouragement that is provided by the authority. He explained that he and other members of the Quality and Support Services make regular visits to schools. He said that he visits schools and *'walks and talks with headteachers in order to see what the issues are'*. He emphasised that curriculum change should be driven by the schools themselves via the headteacher and the departments. He said that headteachers should feel empowered, and in turn the teachers should feel empowered, to identify issues that need to be resolved and put forward their own ideas for change. This strategy is clearly designed to encourage schools to take ownership of the development of curriculum flexibility. The regular communication system between schools and the local authority appears to allow an effective two-way exchange of information which was the key to mutual respect and trust.

## Discussion

As will be apparent from the above, initiatives in curriculum change in Scotland have attempted to avoid the major dangers and lack of impact of top-down models by adopting a much more inclusive approach involving the major actors at each level and stage in a developmental process. The inadequacy and general lack of impact of top-down models have been demonstrated in numerous international studies, eg Fink (2003) on experiences in Canada; Bishop and Mulford (1999) on those in Australia; Hill (2002) on developments in New Zealand. In England over the last 20 to 30 years not only has there been a plethora of top-down initiatives, but the most recent developments have also marginalised the role of local government (Kogan, 2002). In Scotland a number of studies evaluating earlier initiatives (e.g. Swann and Brown 1997) have emphasised the distinction which must be drawn between teachers' awareness of recent initiatives at government (or national) level and their internalisation and willingness or ability to act upon them. A number of authors (e.g. Cuban, 1994) have commented on the surface features of change often being evident but the reality of changes in practice being rather different since, as Hargreaves (1997) noted, *'teachers develop, define and interpret'* government policy and teachers in Scotland, as elsewhere, are often reluctant to change practice in response to external exhortation (see e.g. Bryce and Humes 1999). Whether policy change results in change in the classroom appears to be dependent on teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of the changes proposed and the perceived relevancy to the context in which they work.

Are the recent developments in Scotland no more substantial than the froth on a cappuccino, aesthetically pleasing and eye-catching, but ultimately often concealing a rather weak and unsatisfying cup of coffee? We would argue that the developments have the potential to be rather more satisfying and have longer lasting impact if certain conditions continue to be met.

Firstly, there has to be a continuing agreement at all levels and by all players that the ultimate goal of education is the maximisation of educational potential for all and that the focus has to be on achievement and not on the more restricted concept of attainment. It is apparent from the case study set out above that there are opportunities to achieve this goal through the provision of frameworks at national level which provide a large degree of flexibility at local authority and school levels for variation in: the detail of the curriculum offered; its

mode of delivery; and the strategies used to evaluate student achievement. It is our view, supported by the evidence we have gathered, that paradoxically such a national framework acts not as a constraint but as a device for permitting greater freedom to the local authority and its schools to devise learning experiences suited to their pupils.

Secondly, there has to be further work carried out to implement an assessment programme that recognises a broad definition of achievement and provides good feedback at all levels in the education system. Since 2002, the Assessment for Learning Programme in Scotland has sought ways of developing practice in assessment with an emphasis on the use of formative assessment to assist pupil learning. The programme has been piloted in schools in local authorities throughout Scotland. A top-down, bottom-up model of implementation was used and an evaluation of the programme (Condie, Livingston and Seagraves 2005) has shown that teachers' responses are, on the whole, very positive. However, it will be necessary to overcome the perceptions held by some teachers in earlier studies (Hutchinson and Hayward 2005) who consider that formative assessment strategies will prove unacceptable to users of assessment information beyond the school such as local authorities and the Inspectorate. The power of formative assessment is well-understood (Hayward et al. 2004, Threlfall 2005) but teachers and others must be convinced that such strategies can serve multiple purposes by experiencing their use, at least partially, at local, national and international levels (Priestley 2003, Livingston and McCall 2005). A consultation exercise (*Assessment, Testing and Reporting 3 – 14, SEED, 2003*) sought the views of the educational community, including parents, on aspects of assessment policy 'intended to deliver a system which fits the needs of the children, supports effective learning and teaching and which places accountability at the most appropriate level'. (SEED, 2003, 3) The framework of the assessment programme has three interlinked strands: assessment *for* learning, which is concerned with classroom interactions and feedback that is focused on the individual needs of the learner; assessment *as* learning, where students' participation in assessment and reflection helps them to become better learners; and assessment *of* learning, which is concerned with finding out how much individual students or groups have learned, at what level, and how well. To be successful, all elements of the programme have to be valued. Up until now the emphasis has been on assessment *of* learning, mainly in the form of national examination results. A more flexible curriculum that is designed to meet the needs of individual students and help them to fulfil their own potential requires an assessment system that is able to report on the full range of their achievements. School inspections should make even greater and more consistent use of the school's self-evaluation processes and outcomes and thus explicitly demonstrate the more extensive use of internal, formative assessment strategies. In addition, further and higher education institutions and employers will also need to be made aware of the value of an assessment system that records more than the results of formal examinations. These will be key factors in persuading schools and teachers that professional freedom to make decisions about what is best for individual students is more than policy rhetoric.

Thirdly, although the ultimate emphasis in '*Ambitious, Excellent Schools*' (SEED 2004a) is on the use of 'tough, intelligent accountability' to drive the excellence agenda, we would argue that the highly desirable aspiration to excellence and continuing improvement can best be delivered if the accountability is proportionate and appropriate to purpose. In particular, evaluation as a support for learning must be regarded as the key feature in the educational process, and accountability as a summative outcome measure drawing

on all available assessment information rather than being a primary free-standing feature. The focus throughout should therefore be on the achievement of all the national priorities rather than on a narrow subset of them such as attainment. To do otherwise would be to emphasise the importance of the froth on the coffee rather than its underlying qualities and our students, school, local communities and our nation should demand and receive more than that.

## Conclusion

### What standards? Whose standards? What for?

In Scotland, there is an aspiration for high standards of education to be achieved so that every school is an excellent school. The five national priorities indicate that education of the whole child is important to ensure the best preparation for life in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The national priorities say that education should develop in young people a sense of physical, mental and emotional well-being and enable them to become responsible citizens with respect for themselves and others and be able to contribute effectively to society. The curriculum review recognises that successful learners should be able to use literacy and numeracy skills and think creatively and independently. The review also recognises that the curriculum should complement the important contributions of families and communities.

On the one hand, SEED will act to ensure that high standards are maintained and, where necessary, improved. Use will be made of international surveys such as PISA to ensure that Scotland remains in the top performing countries in all areas measured. A strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy and examination performance will continue. On the other hand, the review of the curriculum and the assessment system indicate that there is recognition that a broader definition of achievement that celebrates individual students' potential must be developed. This shift in what is perceived to be of value in the educational system will not be easy for teachers, parents or employers. National, local and school levels will have to work closely together to ensure that the new emphasis on outcomes enables flexibility without compromising standards. The interaction between the implementation of the outcomes-based curriculum and the Assessment for Learning Programme will be vital to the success of the reform process, as will the willingness of teachers, students, parents, higher education providers and employers to embrace and understand the changes.

A process of consultation has provided a sense of shared standards. The National Debate, consultation on assessment, testing and reporting and pilot studies have enabled schools, local authorities, parents and others to provide feedback to SEED about their views concerning educational standards. This consultation process, together with a top-down, bottom-up model of implementation, is essential to create this sense of shared standards. The consultation processes must continue as the implementation process unfolds if the feelings of shared ownership are to continue. As the case study indicated, these feelings are dependent on building mutual trust and respect among all stakeholders.

A tough, intelligent accountability system that is designed to support learning and teaching, which fits the needs of individual students and which places accountability at the most appropriate level, must be agreed at national, local and school levels and should be seen as a continuing process and not as a one-off completed exercise.

## Appendix 1: National priorities

1. To raise standards of educational attainment for all in schools, especially in the core skills of literacy and numeracy, and to achieve better levels in national measures of achievement, including examination results.
2. To support and develop the skills of teachers, the self-discipline of pupils and to enhance school environments so that they are conducive to teaching and learning.
3. To promote equality and help every pupil benefit from education, with particular regard paid to pupils with disabilities and special educational needs and to Gaelic and other lesser used languages.
4. To work with parents to teach pupils respect for self and one another and their interdependence with other members of their neighbourhood and society and to teach them the duties and responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society.
5. To equip pupils with the foundation skills, attitudes and expectations necessary to prosper in a changing society and to encourage creativity and ambition.

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