

Child leading role and childhood education spaces

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Abstract

This article aims to emphasize make-believe play as a driving force reflecting on the actions carried out by children with their peers in their interactive constructions. It is part of a qualitative ethnographic research with children and narrative. The article seeks a dialogue between empirical data collected in the field and the theoretical framework provided by authors from the sociology of childhood and pedagogy, respectively William Corsaro (2011) and Lisaura Maria Beltrame (2021), among others, highlighting children's protagonism during make-believe play. The analysis of the data gathered during the research took place at crossroads in the light of reflexivity and narrative research in an interpretative way. We highlight, as a result, the the relevance of make-believe play for the construction of children's cultures, with moments of free play providing potential for children's protagonism in early childhood schools.

Keywords: Early childhood education. Protagonism. Childhood. Educational practices.

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O protagonismo infantil e os espaços de educação das infâncias

Resumo

O artigo tem como objetivo enfatizar o brincar de faz de conta como propulsor do protagonismo infantil, refletindo sobre as ações realizadas pelas crianças com os seus pares em suas construções interativas. É parte de uma pesquisa qualitativa, etnográfica com crianças e narrativa. No artigo busca-se um diálogo entre dados empíricos construídos no campo e o referencial teórico com autores e autoras da sociologia da infância e pedagogia, respectivamente com

William Corsaro (2011) e Lisaura Maria Beltrame (2021) entre outros(as), enfatizando o protagonismo das crianças durante as brincadeiras de faz de conta. A análise dos dados construídos no decorrer da pesquisa deu-se encruzilhando caminhos à luz da reflexividade e da pesquisa narrativa de forma interpretativa. Destaca-se, como resultado, a relevância do brincar de faz de conta para a construção das culturas infantis, sendo os momentos de brincadeiras livres os quais proporcionam potencialidades ao protagonismo infantil nas escolas da infância.

Palavras-chave: Educação infantil. Protagonismo. Infância. Práticas educativas.

El protagonismo infantil y los espacios de educación de los niños

Resumen

2 El artículo tiene como objetivo enfatizar el juego de la imaginación como propulsor del protagonismo infantil, reflexionando sobre las acciones realizadas por los niños con sus pares en sus construcciones interactivas. Es parte de una investigación cualitativa, etnográfica con niños y narrativa. En el artículo, se busca un diálogo entre datos empíricos construidos en el campo y el referencial teórico con autores y autoras de la sociología de la infancia y pedagogía, respectivamente con William Corsaro (2011) y Lisaura Maria Beltrame (2021), entre otros(as), enfatizando el protagonismo de los niños durante los juegos de la imaginación. El análisis de los datos construidos en el curso de la investigación se dio en la encrucijada de caminos bajo la luz de la reflexividad y de la investigación narrativa de forma interpretativa. Se destaca, como resultado, la relevancia del juego de la imaginación para la construcción de las culturas infantiles, siendo los momentos de juegos libres los que proporcionan potencialidades al protagonismo infantil en las escuelas infantiles.

Palabras clave: Educación Infantil. Protagonismo. Infancia. Práticas educativas.

Introduction

Children, who for a long time were neglected by society, are now highlighted by childhood researchers as producers of cultures and protagonists of their practices, thus constituting the various childhoods. We present an excerpt from a qualitative, ethnographic research with children and narrative, with childhoods and make-believe games as the theme of this article. These childhoods, often made invisible by society, through research in the area of childhood sociology and pedagogy, have been valued, and games are perceived as a means of propelling child leading role.

The conception of the child present in the research understands he/she as “[...] a social being, rooted in a time and space that has, therefore, a history, a geography [...]” (Beltrame, 2021, p. 68): children who, during make-believe games, interpret the reality in which they experience and build concepts and cultures. The various languages they use during their experiences and games, when heard by adults, make it possible to understand the constructions and interpretative reproductions they make.

Reflecting on children’s language and make-believe games, Marchi and Evangelista say that

Language is one of the bases of children’s cultures due to the development and acquisition of symbolic codes (interpreted and creatively reproduced), and it is in the domestic space and at school that children primarily develop them, through make-believe, or social-dramatic game, which corresponds to the interpretative re-reading of episodes of cultural routines (Marchi; Evangelista, 2023, p. 12).

Considering that “[...] from the social interaction, of which language is the expression, is that the child builds their own individuality” (Salva and Beltrame, 2022, p. 154), we elaborated discussions about empirical data and theoretical references, aiming to emphasize the play of make-believe as a propeller of child leading role, reflecting on the interactions carried out by the children of a Preschool B class of a public school and their peers. We believe, therefore, “[...] that it is in the different relations of the world around him/her

that the child is built as a social, historical and cultural being" (Salva, Beltrame, 2022, p. 156),

In this article, the first point of reflection seeks to bring to visibility research with children, which, although it has grown in recent years in Brazil, is still a topic that has many aspects that need to be thought about. Listening to children is still a necessary exercise that perhaps requires a paradigm shift.

Research with children makes no sense if the paradigm continues to be one in which what adults do and say is valued more than what children do and say. In this sense, looking, listening and being attentive, although fundamental, is not enough if we are not able to take the children's perspective seriously (Salva, 2024, p. 100).

For this reason, part of the article is dedicated to thinking about the methodology of research with children.

We continue with details about the methodology developed in the context of the investigation. The next section reports and analyzes the children's interactions and games, and finally the final considerations.

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Research with children and their possibilities

Children's involvement in research begins in the area of developmental psychology, when researchers took children as objects of research. In the 1970s, Hardman (1974) proposed the Anthropology of Children, in which the informants of the social world of children were children themselves, studied in their own rights and not as future adults (James, 2019). Around 1980, childhood studies are also leveraged from the perspective of the historian Philippe Ariès and, from then on, the studies of the Sociology of Childhood (Corsaro, 2005; 2011) and the Pedagogy of Childhood (Faria, 2011; Faria; Prado, 2005).

With advances in the studies of childhoods and children, new conceptions of children are emerging, which need to be valued. The sociology of childhood,

By recognizing and making visible the voices of children, it gives rise to new concepts and methodological approaches that begin to be carried out with children (with their full or indirect participation) and no longer only on them. The studies now take into account the children's capacity for action (Marchi; Evangelista, 2023, p. 5).

Brostolin, when starting the presentation of his studies, states that

The dialogue that the Sociology of Childhood has mobilized with other areas of study has been fundamental to understand the childhood lived by children from themselves, as the only condition to account for the complexities that are revealed in their worlds of life in contemporary times. (Brostolin, 2023, p. 2).

Building reflections, Corsaro (2011, p. 16) highlights that "children are active agents who build their own cultures and contribute to the production of the adult world; and childhood is a structural form or part of society." We can still find more recent studies that are in line with the understanding of children that we defend, highlighting that "[...] children have characteristics that are specific to their stage of development, which does not make them less competent or incapable as social actors, but rather makes them a unique and, at the same time, plural group". (Brostolin, 2023, p. 8).

This new perspective places the child as an individual representative of a generational category and inhabitant of space, understood as a competent social actor, a reason that makes them a legitimate contributor and participant in research: Childhood, the social space or structural space of society (Qvortrup, 2005). However, the ways in which children occupy social spaces are diverse, which is why it is necessary to understand childhood in the plural, a concept that helps us to understand different ways of living of children (James, 2019).

The new conceptions of children and childhoods suggest, therefore, research with children, children as individuals participating in the research and the visibility of childhood in its plurality. As researchers, we fell into the misconception of using the term *giving children a voice* to refer to the need to make them visible. James leads us to reflect when he states that

Giving children a voice is not simply or just letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution that children's perspectives can make to our understanding and theorizing about the social world (James, 2019, p. 221).

After all, children have their own voice and their right to speak, what we need, as researchers and adults who live daily with children, is to exercise attentive, sensitive listening, which "involves care, attention and not just listening in the sensory sense" (Brostolin, 2023, p. 8), that is, listening to children and everything their various forms of language have to tell us. Corsaro (2011, p. 40) once again makes us reflect when he highlights that "we need to consider children as part of a social group that has a place in the broader social structure." And who better than the children themselves to talk about their culture, about childhood? Research with children is then increasingly urgent and necessary.

While participating in society, children also interpret and recreate it. Corsaro (2011) presents *interpretive reproduction*, a term that carries with it the idea that children contribute to the production of cultures, not only internalizing the world around them but also recreating it in an innovative and creative way. According to the author,

Interpretive reproduction views the integration of children into their cultures as reproductive rather than linear. [...] Children do not limit themselves to imitating or internalizing the world around them. They strive to interpret or make sense of their culture and participate in it. In an attempt to make sense of the adult world, children start to collectively produce their own worlds and peer cultures (Corsaro, 2011, p. 36).

Making childhoods and children visible and listening to them in research is, therefore, urgent. But how to select scenes, words and phrases that present the children's point of view and not that of the adult/researcher? Qvortrup (2005) points out the concern about childhood assuming the role of a category dominated by the adult world. When conducting the research, the informants are the adults, who select the children's speeches and the scenes to be presented during the research. Hendrick (2005) presents the problematization of adult world when he highlights that most of the documents that talk about

children were and are written by adults. In addition, the author discusses the need to give authorship to the voices of children, allowing them to question the opinion of adults, especially when it comes to matters pertinent to childhoods. According to the author,

Children are at an inherent disadvantage when they talk to us and try to present themselves as self-aware actors. Only when the mentality of adult world is overcome will it be possible to hear a more authentic and probably more unsettling set of voices – because there will certainly be many occasions when children contest and contradict our views (Hendrick, 2005, p. 48).

There are different methodological possibilities for research with children, through which we seek to value children, childhoods and the cultures they construct in society. We seek to present an excerpt from the qualitative research of an ethnographic perspective with children and narrative, which included the participation of twenty children from a Preschool B class of a public school, emphasizing the play of make-believe as a propeller of child leading role. Below we present the methodology of the research carried out and the contribution of the children chosen for the construction of this article.

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Methodology

The qualitative ethnographic research with children and narrative was carried out in a public early childhood education school. Twenty children from a Preschool B class were invited to participate in the research, since it had only two adults, and the relationship of coexistence between the children and the researcher took place a few years ago. It is understood the need for distance to carry out a research, however, in the case of the research carried out and that originates this article, the methodology itself required proximity for the production of empirical data and distance can be built from data interpretation and analysis. It is, therefore, a constant exercise of approximation and distance, requiring continuous surveillance by the researcher.

Conducting research with children requires considering the individuals and the social rights that belong to them. Brostolin reinforces that,

The Sociology of Childhood, by assuming that children are full social actors, competent in formulating interpretations about their worlds of life and revealing the social realities in which they are inserted, considers participatory methodologies with children as an important methodological resource, in the sense of assigning to the youngest the status of individuals of knowledge and not of simple object, instituting collaborative forms of knowledge construction in the social sciences that are articulated with modes of production of knowledge committed to social transformation and the extension of social rights. (Brostolin, 2023, p. 3)

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Conducting research with children involves, as discussed earlier, assuming them as active, participatory and protagonist individuals. Because it is a methodology in which the researcher is inserted in the research field for a longer time and lives with the individuals, ethnography became very interesting for research with children developed by the researcher, since there was already a bond between her and the children, and the length of stay and relationships allowed. Jenks (2005) argues that, although ethnography is not a method of interest, it is quite suitable for research with children, since “Children are allowed to take part” in the research. According to Corsaro,

Among the main advantages of ethnography are: 1) its descriptive power; 2) its ability to incorporate the form, function, and context of the behavior of specific social groups into the data; 3) its capture of data (in field notes and/or through audio or video recording) for repeated accurate analysis (Corsaro, 2009, p. 83-84).

Ethnography allowed the researcher to make use of several methods for data construction, such as the field diary, which included the researcher's records and could include records of the children themselves, photography and filming, which enabled the capture of the children's various forms of language, and informal conversations, in which it was relevant to request the children's help so that, as an adult researcher, she could understand their interpretations.

The field diary was organized on two parts, in the first one, the records were made during the interaction with the children, and the second one was used to carry out reflections and connections with concepts previously elaborated by authors. We can then say that the research took place empirically, since some of the categories of analysis were built in the course of the research from the expressions of the children.

Colombo (2016) highlights the importance of carrying out reflexivity, especially during research with children, since it is seen by the author as a way of questioning himself about his own actions and about the methods used in the research to understand reality and to insert himself in it. According to the author "[...] a constant work of self-reflection and analysis allows the author to present himself as capable of going beyond appearances, not to retell himself, but to highlight what most of his readers do not want, or are not able to see". (Colombo, 2016, p. 18).

Christensen and James (2005, p. XVII) also argue that "Reflexivity is not only common to the discourse and practice of the researchers, but also a resort adopted by the children who participate in the research." It is pertinent to highlight what children think about the importance of the presence and participation of the researcher in their daily lives, making their interpretations about the role of the adult in daily life, who is not a teacher.

The researcher coexisted with the children of the class sometimes a few hours, sometimes the whole shift, in a period of approximately three months, starting the insertions in October and staying with the class until the last school day, in December. During this period, the children went through a process of acceptance of the researcher as such, since she was already part of the school's management team. There was also a process of redefinition of the role of the then researcher, since she acted as pedagogical coordinator in the school where the research was carried out, but it was necessary to change the role and broaden the look at the moments when she was seeking to understand childhoods and children.

The researcher became, as stated by Corsaro (2011), an atypical adult, since she failed to fulfill her role before the school as coordinator, at times

not being seen by the children as a teacher or a child. The acceptance of the children is perceived, especially when they invite the researcher to participate in their games, or when they explain the games so that she can understand the constructions that they made.

Research requires ethical commitment and a relationship of trust, especially in research with children. Research ethics is part of the health area, but currently social research has also prepared its own documents of consent to participate in the research. Thus, after authorizations from the keeper and the school, we carried out terms of acceptance of participation in the research with the children.

Children have for a long time been, and we can consider that they may still be, neglected in research. Their wishes are not always respected, since the need for an adult responsible for this child is considered. Considering the conceptions of children presented and defended above, it is understood that there was a need for children to decide whether they wanted to participate in the research. To this end, a conversation circle was held with them, in which they understood what would be happening in the following months and, through representations and symbols, chose to participate or not in the research. Then, the document was forwarded to those responsible.

In addition to written documents, there were other ways to identify and understand the interest or not of children in the research, especially when it comes to very young children (Corsaro, 2011). We must consider that children make use of various languages to express themselves. The removal, silencing or embarrassment presented by the individual can be a way of demonstrating the lack of interest in participating in the research.

Barbosa (2014, p. 241, author's emphasis) argues that "[...] research with children is only justified if it brings something important (and good) TO the children, if it improves the quality of their lives, if it opens up new spaces for being and living". From this perspective, the research places the children as the protagonists, as in the episode we experienced with them, presented below, which will make it possible to discuss childhoods.

The construction of the data and their analysis took place at a crossroads in the light of reflexivity and narrative research in an interpretative way. Corrêa (2018) builds, during her research, the crossroads of paths, understanding the role of the researcher before the group with which the research is built,

As part of the group walking the path, it is up to the researcher to be more than a scribe of these narratives and experiences, but someone who thinks about them, analyzes them, interprets them, not from the perspective of "truths or certainties". The interpretation will be based on the experience, on the formative experiences, crossing paths that intersect, intertwine, become crossroads that bring and lead to new, same or different paths (Corrêa, 2018, p. 69).

Crossing paths, therefore, we reflect and dialogue with the records of the field diary, photographs, videos, children's speeches and authors' contributions in order to build the research. Next, we present an excerpt from the research, aiming to emphasize the make-believe game as a propeller of child leading role.

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"You're not supposed to go in yet, we're cleaning up, dude!"

Children are members of social groups and, through interaction and play, they interpret the reality in which they live and play a leading role in its history, thus producing their own cultures. We therefore chose to focus on children's playtime in order to highlight its importance for the development and production of childhood culture and because we realized, during the course of the research, that play is a driving force behind children's leading role.

In the school where the research was carried out, it is possible to perceive that children and childhoods are valued, not seeking to anticipate the stages subsequent to Early Childhood Education and seeking to be in line with the provisions of the National Common Curricular Base when the inseparability between caring and educating in Early Childhood Education is defined:

The conception that links educating and caring, understanding care as something inseparable from the educational process. In this context, daycare centers and preschools, by welcoming the experiences and knowledge built by children in the family environment and in the context of their community, and articulating them in their pedagogical proposals, aim to expand the universe of experiences, knowledge and skills of these children, diversifying and consolidating new learning, acting in a complementary way to family education – especially when it comes to the education of babies and very young children, which involves learning very close to both contexts (family and school), such as socialization, autonomy and communication (Brasil, 2017, p. 36).

Outdoor spaces are constantly explored by children in childhood education contexts. We were in one of the outside spaces of the school, one of the little squares. However, the children asked the teacher to play ball and wanted to go to another area, which is wider and has fewer playground equipment. The teacher agrees to the exchange and, together with the children, we go to the upper little square. This space has a soft sand area, which has some playground equipment that can be moved by children; an upper concrete area that is commonly called a stage; and a little house with some wooden furniture inside – a table with chairs and a counter with a sink – and some plastic kitchen instruments. A space that was built and planned to expand the possibilities of exploration to be carried out by children.

Figure 1 – The little house: a space for exploration



Source: The authors (2023).

The National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education (2009) show the relevance of interactions and games as structuring axes for educational practices in Early Childhood Education, highlighting the child as a builder of its educational process, presenting it as

A historical individual with rights who, in the interactions, relationships and daily practices he experience, constructs his personal and collective identity, plays, imagines, fantasizes, desires, learns, observes, experiments, narrates, questions and constructs meanings about nature and society, producing culture (Brazil, 2010, p. 12).

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Upon arriving in the upper area, Maurício asks the teacher if he can get a broom. She authorizes it, even without knowing what the child wants with the broom. He goes to the service area and requests a broom for the school's employees. When he returns, he begins to clean the little house that is used by the children and realizes the need for a shovel to gather the dirt. Returns to the service area, now requesting the shovel. Upon returning to the outside area, the cleaning process begins:

- *We're cleaning the little house, it's a mess!* says Maurício.

Manoel enters the little house and immediately Murilo scolds him:

- *You're not supposed to go in yet, we're cleaning up, dude!*

- *This little house is a mess, we do not enter the little house, but it is a mess* – Maurício points out.

Maurício takes the broom from Murilo's hand:

- *Let me sweep, you can't.*

Murilo then looks around and has the idea of getting a little wooden cart to carry the sand taken from the little house. In a thick voice he says:

- *Fill it here, put it here and I'll unload it.*

Maurício loads and Murilo unloads the sand. A few more boys approach and sit down. Maurício sees them sitting down and says:

- *Let's go to the service, my children!*

But the teacher ends up calling the children to come in, because it's time to go home. Murilo asks Mauricio for permission to return the broom and Mauricio authorizes it:

- *Go, my son!*

Meanwhile, Manoel makes a pile with the chairs, draws the children's attention and says:

- *Look, I made a building!*

The boys then organize the little house, put the furniture back in their places and when Maurício leaves he finds:

- *All that remains is to close the window!*

Murilo, in turn, draws his friend's attention:

- *And the door! Look, there is no more door lock!*

- *Oh, leave it like that...* – says Maurício, and the children go to the reference room.

Field diary, 2023.

During the observations carried out with the class and the period of coexistence, many games caught the attention of the researcher, as well as it was possible to perceive that in the games the children have freedom to lead their practices. Beltrame (2021, p. 92), in his research, presents play as “[...] a reflection of social relations, that is, the child learns to play by observing and interacting with the world around them [...]”, thus agreeing with Corsaro (2011), when he argue that, through play, children perform the interpretive reproduction of reality, that is, they not only reproduce the reality to which they belong but also interpret it.

Salva and Beltrame (2022, p. 152) understand “[...] make-believe game as a moment of great interaction and formation of children, through the learning and development relationship that it provides, when they are playing [...]”, being, therefore, “[...] in the interaction, in their daily lives that the child develops their values, their way of perceiving the world, assuming positions before the world, building knowledge about the world and about themselves” (Sueli; Beltrame, 2021, p. 154).

Figure 2 – “*This little house is a mess*”

Source: The authors (2023).

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Maurício and Murilo certainly accompany their parents in the development of routine and organizational activities in their homes and, when thinking about starting the game in the little house, they are faced with the disorganization that bothers them. We may think that the children were not playing in the scene above, however, when we analyze the interpreted characters, the instruments used and the organization, we realize that, yes, they are playing and performing various interpretations.

Murilo has the idea of looking for a broom, but he has little ability to sweep the floor, thus making Maurício the protagonist, and it is possible to see that he starts to protect the interactive space (Corsaro, 2011), ensuring that the other boys who seek to enter the game do not occupy his space. This exchange of roles is evident when Maurício calls the other children “*my children*”, giving them different roles – his role and that of his inferiors –, that is, making it explicit that he was in charge. According to Salva and Beltrame,

For the construction of play, it is necessary that the child assumes any role, that he/she plays a leading role, and that it is not him/

her. Without this there is no make-believe game. As soon as the role appears, the make-believe game appears, and this does not consist only in the interpretation of the role of the adult, but also of another child (Salva; Beltrame, 2022, p. 92).

Another moment in which the change of roles is evidenced is when Murilo seeks the little cart to carry the sand that had been taken from inside the little house and changes his voice, failing to interpret one of the children to then interpret the driver who was carrying the sand.

By playing roles, the child not only gives meaning to their physical actions, but also rediscovers the cultural meaning of childhood and being a child. It is a human activity of social and joint construction of meaning that requires complicity and cooperation – even for the existence of childhood itself (Beltrame, 2021, p. 94).

Figure 3 – Loading the wagon



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Source: The authors (2023).

The child, when interpreting roles, also produces his interpretations of the environment and social relations, thus producing the cultures of childhoods.

The scenarios, the themes, the contents, the characters played by children in make-believe games are those that are closest to them, their reality, their experiences. They portrays what they see, hear, feel in its daily life (Beltrame, 2021, p. 137).

It is evident, therefore, the importance of games as promoters of child leading role in different spaces. In schools, there is an emptying of play, and these moments are used by adults to carry out demands other than being and listening to children. Play is also seen as a moment by many as irrelevant, but of paramount importance for children, who, while playing, perform here what is most serious for them: the production of their own cultures.

Final Considerations

18 Research with children has been increasingly present in education, enabling greater visibility and emphasis on children and making children's cultures visible to society. It is necessary to greatly expand discussions, evolve, research is possible and methodologies tend to be increasingly improved in order to contemplate the singularities of childhoods and children.

Discussions and elaboration of documents that allow children to make decisions about their participation in research are necessary, since the more studies are developed, the clearer are the autonomy and authorship of the children. It is time for society to recognize childhood and its cultures.

The Sociology of Childhood has been building knowledge relevant to society, highlighting the production of cultures by children, especially in moments of free play. Children who understand the society in which they live and reproduce actions common to their daily lives, but interpreting them, modifying them.

During the research that aimed to analyze how educational practices in Early Childhood Education consider children and their leading role as the center of the pedagogical process, with their own languages and expressions

as elements of analysis, it can be seen that it is still necessary and possible to evolve in relation to the appreciation of children's cultures and the leading role of children in Early Childhood Education spaces. Do we often find ourselves talking in leading role, but are children really starring in their story or do the adults who live with them still restricting them in and controlling their languages?

Children, while playing organizing the little house, play different roles, interact with their peers, control the entry of new individuals into the game, defending their spaces of leading role. Considering the studies presented by Corsaro (2011), we conclude that they are moments of great production of childhood culture, since, through the relationships and interactions made possible by play, assuming different roles, children interpret the reality to which they belong.

In the course of this excerpt, we seek to emphasize make-believe game and child leading role and we must consider that it is in play that children have greater freedom of expression. We can see that, through make-believe games, children are curious, exploitative, questioning, safe or insecure. They are children who seek to know, explore and build cultures, interpreting and demonstrating their diverse interpretations through play. Children who are potency and who need to be valued.

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