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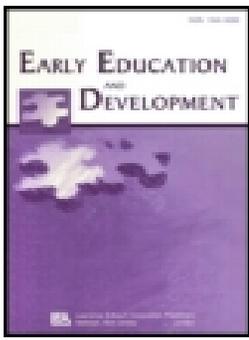
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The Answer Is Readiness— Now What Is the Question?

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Although readiness is often posed as the answer in early childhood education, there is typically confusion about exactly what question this complex term responds to. In this article, I explore common uses of the term *readiness*, examine their theoretical and empirical problems, and suggest a more synthetic conception that merges attention to the child, the school, and the community. I argue that readiness is an ethical responsibility we have to children that encompasses coordinated systems of early care and education and receptive schools that are developmental, inclusive, and accountable to all.

I am jealous of scholars who choose a topic for their research in a rational, intellectual way. I imagine them sitting at their desks, reading others' work and deciding that they could contribute to the knowledge base through a particular study or argument. In a very linear systematic process, the topic is identified, the literature is mastered, a design for inquiry is completed, data collected, analyzed, and a report written.

That has never been my experience with readiness. In an uncanny way, readiness always seems to choose me, pulling me back into the enduring conversations that percolate around this topic. Readiness is a childhood memory—of my mother trying to explain my brother's difficulties in school. It is a force in my kindergarten teaching, which took place during a period when the state of Missouri tried to make ready children by changing the kindergarten entrance age from October 1 to July 1. It was both the bond and differentiating force with my graduate advisor—a result of the seeds planted by her work but my ticket into the world of the academy. It was a topic of conversation during pregnancy when people heard that I would

have a summer birthday boy (Do you think you'll hold him out of kindergarten?) and later an almost Halloween baby boy (You'll be glad he'll be one of the oldest ...). I've looked at readiness from the perspective of predictive validity, through an ethnographic lens, through logistic regression. I have been a member on committees defining readiness, identifying benchmarks, developing systems. Every time I think I've heard all conceivable arguments, recycled or dressed up in a slightly new costume, every time I think I can't possibly turn it a new way for a new audience, I am drawn back in. And here I am again.

Why? I think it is because we know that the answer is readiness, but we are still searching for the question. In this article, I play a kind of intellectual *Jeopardy*, examining a variety of questions readiness has been connected with and suggest what I think might be the questions of best fit from varied perspectives.

SCIENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

My quest began with the quintessential tool for the 21st century—Google. I knew that a Google search would give me readiness-in-use, providing a sense of readiness's terrain. When I input kindergarten readiness, I got a whopping 117,000 hits for text and 364 hits for images. What does that mean? The numbers alone indicate that discussions about it are prevalent. What is more interesting is trying to understand what those discussions mean. In this section, I examine varied readiness discussions, pointing the way to a critique of our problems with finding the right question for readiness.

WHO IS READY?

The first example is probably the most prominent, an informal checklist that allows parents to rate their child's readiness for kindergarten. It is typically a list of skills and dispositions across development dimensions that are seen to be important for school success. A sample of this type of tool follows:

Kindergarten Readiness Checklist
Peggy Gisler, Ed.S. and Marge Eberts, Ed.S.

While there's no perfect formula that determines when children are truly ready for kindergarten, you can use this checklist to see how well your child is doing in acquiring the skills found on most kindergarten checklists.

Check the skills your child has mastered. Then recheck every month to see what additional skills your child can accomplish easily.

Young children change so fast — if they can't do something this week, they may be able to do it a few weeks later.

- Listen to stories without interrupting
- Recognize rhyming sounds
- Pay attention for short periods of time to adult-directed tasks
- Understand actions have both causes and effects
- Show understanding of general times of day
- Cut with scissors
- Trace basic shapes
- Begin to share with others
- Start to follow rules
- Be able to recognize authority
- Manage bathroom needs
- Button shirts, pants, coats, and zip up zippers
- Begin to control oneself
- Separate from parents without being upset
- Speak understandably
- Talk in complete sentences of five to six words
- Look at pictures and then tell stories
- Identify rhyming words
- Identify the beginning sound of some words
- Identify some alphabet letters
- Recognize some common sight words like “stop”
- Sort similar objects by color, size, and shape
- Recognize groups of one, two, three, four, and five objects
- Count to ten
- Bounce a ball

If your child has acquired most of the skills on this checklist and will be at least five years old at the start of the summer before he or she starts kindergarten, he or she is probably ready for kindergarten. What teachers want to see on the first day of school are children who are healthy, mature, capable, and eager to learn. (“Kindergarten Readiness Assessment,” 2005)

The readiness checklist is typically a developmental buffet, representing many types of skills that children develop as they enter kindergarten. They are often school specific in that they are foundational for basic literacy, numeracy, or just being a student. They are inherently normative as they are posed to support comparisons with a typical 5-year-old.

LOOKING FOR TROUBLE

The first example I call the *looking-for-trouble* readiness posting. These postings almost always begin by extolling the skills of a young child who is quite strong academically, but end with concern about whether he or she will be ready for kinder-

garten, often years in the future. Rather than providing guidelines for parent action that might support the development of readiness, the looking-for-trouble type looks for permission to delay kindergarten entry for relatively young kindergartners to be. The following excerpt is an exemplar of that approach:

Even though my daughter won't be going to school for a couple of years, I have two questions regarding readiness for Kindergarten. My daughter is 3-1/2. She knows her alphabet, numbers and reads at a first grade level and she knows some math. She is very interested in learning so I work with her often. However, her birthday falls on December 14, which is after the cutoff for Kindergarten. I am a stay-at-home mom so she does not attend any sort of preschool. I am not worried that she could keep up with slightly older kids academically, but I don't know how prepared she will be socially ("Parent soup," 2005).

HOW DO WE DEVELOP READINESS?

Recognizing that families provide the essential context for readiness, a number of organizations provide suggestions for parents for practices that support development in young children:

- Create opportunities for sharing in a non-threatening, pressure-free environment.
- Structure play activities by providing materials and social situations that encourage play. Through play, children learn concepts, how to interact with peers, practice using their large and small muscle groups, and practice making choices.
- Encourage conversation. Children learn about language and self-expression when they engage in verbal exchanges with others.
- Read aloud to your children regularly, and let your children see you reading. Educators agree that reading aloud to children regularly is a good predictor of early reading skills and an appreciation of reading. (National Parent Teacher Organization, 2004)

THE PRESS RELEASE

The final type is an announcement—of a program or policy touted to enhance readiness. These announcements can either announce the existence of a new program or they herald the outcomes generated by some program, practice, or policy. For example, in this press release from the University of California Davis, we learn about a kindergarten readiness program that targets premature and high-risk children through early intervention programming:

In the first clinic of its kind in California, the UC Davis Medical Center will launch a new program in early February that will support the developmental progression of

premature and high-risk babies up to age 5 and offer family intervention services to help assure the children will be kindergarten-ready. While technological advances have allowed an increasing number of children born prematurely to survive, about one-third of these babies suffer learning disabilities and developmental delays that can follow them throughout their lives. (University of California Davis Medical Center, 2002)

THE PROBLEM OF READINESS

What have we learned from this examination of readiness in use? The first thing is that readiness is the answer to many different kinds of questions. If you looked solely at the varied ways that readiness is portrayed in these discussions, one of the first issues to come to light is the problem of definition. What is readiness?

If we were to derive a definition from these examples, we might be able to say that it is a set of skills and dispositions that are loosely coupled with success in school. It encompasses diverse aspects of a child's development and it can be supported through certain kinds of practices. But beyond that, things get a little murky.

From these examples, should we think of readiness in terms of threshold—something you need x amount of to be able to profit from kindergarten? In this case, readiness is like that height mark at the amusement park—you have to be 42 in. tall to go on this ride. But what does it mean when readiness is a threshold? Is it for health and safety? Whose? For the health and safety of the teachers or the students? Is it because the characteristics of interest are somehow correlated with later school success? From the readiness checklists shown, it's hard to believe that performance on any of the indicators is a ticket to college (with the exception of being able to walk backwards 5–6 feet, but that is only important for clown college at Circus World in Baraboo, Wisconsin). The more important question is related to the equity of requiring a level of performance for admission to free and public education, given both the variation in rates of development in young children and the variation in the environments for young children.

Also at issue is the contrast between various dimensions attached to the notion of readiness. One typical contrast is between readiness's academic and social dimensions. If you look closely at the readiness checklist shared earlier, you see a crazy quilt of skills and dispositions representing these academic and social views. On the one hand, readiness is related to what children know when they come to school—their knowledge of letters, colors, and relations among and between concepts. These are teachable things, seen as related to the richness of the environment, or, if missing, as a marker of potential disability. Targeted intervention programs that serve children living in poverty or early childhood special education programs often focus on this aspect of readiness. On the other hand, readiness is posed as a way of being—a social aspect of being a student in the institution of the school. In practice, social readiness is seen as the ability to separate from parents,

to wait for a turn, to be a social leader (Graue, 1993; Smith & Shepard, 1988). And curiously, despite the focus on the social in most early childhood programs, this aspect of readiness is viewed as maturational—something that isn't taught but that comes to be in a developmental unfolding of the ready child (Graue, 2005; Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003). In surveys of parents and teachers, parents tend to focus on the academic whereas teachers have concerns about the social (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). This gap means that parents and teachers often miscommunicate about readiness. As noted later, the social and academic are applied in quite different ways to different groups of children.

Another contrast is focused on what or who is ready. Although we typically focus on ready children through our search for the skills or measures that will ensure school success, there have also been suggestions that we should focus on ready schools, places that provide developmentally appropriate curriculum for kindergarten-age children regardless of their skill level (Shore, 1998). An inherent weakness in posing readiness as if it were a choice between ready children and ready schools is that it is one of those thorny both-and situations. Readiness is at its core a relational concept—children are ready for something (ready for kindergarten, ready for bed, ready to go home). As such, it has to consider both the child and the school in its determination.

The final issue relates to the cultural variation in readiness meanings and practices—although virtually everyone recognizes the term readiness, what they mean and do related to it is vastly different. Let me highlight two differences. In a number of empirical studies, researchers have found that teachers and family beliefs about readiness shape the nature of kindergarten in local communities (Graue, 1993; Meisels, 1999; Smith & Shepard, 1988). Because of these differences, standards for who is ready and activities undertaken by families and teachers are locally determined. As a result, readiness has a geographic quality—even within the same school district, where you live shapes who is ready and the nature of responses by families and school personnel.

In addition to the cultural differences in readiness beliefs and practices, there is the thorny problem of different models of readiness applied to different groups. These different models are highly normative but based on vastly different assumptions about the resources available to children in their homes and communities and the mechanisms through which readiness is developed. The default model of readiness, which assumes adequate parenting and caregiving contexts, favors a maturationist-biological model of readiness in which waiting for readiness is an appropriate response. From this perspective, it is assumed that the home and community resources are of high quality, that what is slowed is the pace of development. The presumed goodness of the child and the home is at the core of this approach. This model of readiness is typically applied to White, middle and upper middle class families and their children. In contrast, the deficit model works from the assumption that the home and community are unable to provide the resources

to produce readiness. Interventions that provide quality learning contexts include publicly funded preschool programs for children seen to be at risk (like Head Start), parent education programs, and health resources. Targeting resources to particular subgroups is a response to scarce resources but also belies a deep distrust in the ability of certain families to support their children. It also allows us to ignore the basic inequities that produce the differences in contexts for White middle class children and children living in poverty. When we use different readinesses for different children, we open the door for inequality in the name of responding to difference. It is a convoluted outcome of the tyranny of good intentions.

THE PROBLEM OF MEASUREMENT

If definition of readiness is a problem, measuring the construct of readiness is fraught with difficulty. A basic tenet of measurement theory is that validity requires a clearly defined construct (American Psychological Association, American Educational Research Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education [Joint Committee], 1999). From the previous discussion, it is clear that readiness is anything but clearly defined. It varies geographically, by the population it is applied to, it is a composite of different aspects of development and there is variation in the degree to which specific dimensions are the focus. Analyses of readiness tests typically find them to have poor psychometric qualities (Shepard & Graue, 1993). But one would never know that from the array of tests purported to assess kindergarten readiness.

The measurement problems of readiness have two distinct elements. On the one hand is the problem of construct definition—whereas most would agree that readiness must necessarily comprise all aspects of development, even a multidimensional construct and instrument will probably underestimate the complexity. It is complicated by its relational nature. We might more profitably think of readiness in terms of process rather than characteristic, something contingent and developing rather than something predictive and semistatic.

The second element is related to uses of measurement—the variations in readiness practices, within and across groups, makes conceptualizing instruments and measurement systems very challenging. The intended purpose of assessment—the use to which its results will be applied—is the pivot point for every assessment design element. How we intend to use readiness assessments determines their content, how we gather the information, their technical requirements, and their consequences (Shepard, Kagan, & Wurtz, 1998). With so many ways to think about readiness—so many purposes and intentions, readiness testing is set to be what Lorrie Shepard called a morass (Shepard & Graue, 1993). We again focus on readiness as an answer but must agree on a question.

If we follow the guidelines for early childhood assessments, we are posed to focus on four different types of instruments with very different associated actions. These assessments and actions stand at the intersection of all the models of readiness, recognizing that development has a biological dimension that requires patience and nurturance (maturationist), that learning is facilitated by carefully calibrated teaching (environmentalist), that cultural meanings shape the ways that adults respond to children's readiness (social constructionist), and children live in all these models simultaneously (interactionist).

If we are interested in assessments to support learning, teachers would be doing readiness assessments in real classroom time to make day-to-day instructional decisions. Rather than focusing on predictive probabilities, readiness assessment to support learning requires fine tuned knowledge of development and the supportive actions that promote it across both the social and academic domains. Readiness assessment to identify special needs is based on empirically proven interventions that respect developmental variation while providing support when developmental is atypical. Readiness assessment related to evaluating programs and monitoring trends focuses on the institutional responsiveness to children's needs, with indicators that move inferences to context rather than child. The final type of early childhood assessment, high stakes accountability, would probably not be appropriate with young children given the variations in development and the problems of measurement with children younger than 8.

THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE, POLICY, AND PROGRAMMING

The core question this leads to is as follows: What actions are we going to take for children? Discussion of readiness, its definition and measurement are only of value if it promotes some kind of action on children's behalf. What can we do with readiness? What can we do for readiness? A wonderful chapter titled "Assessing Readiness" (Meisels, 1999) laid out an array of readiness views that shape interpretations of and outcomes for children. These views of readiness have within them assumptions about the mechanisms through which readiness develops and what we might do to catalyze that development. A microcosm of readiness discourse, Meisels (1999) showed readiness as maturation, readiness as intervention, and readiness as social construction in local communities. He thoughtfully showed how our practice and policy is often rooted in one of these conceptualizations when in fact all are present in the lived experience of children. He suggested a more synthetic approach to readiness, which he called an interactionist approach, that attends to both what children bring to school and what schools do in response. I would like to build on that conceptualization, theorizing it in a way that might not be typical for this kind of discussion but that might enrich our thinking.

The development of readiness discussions has had an evolutionary flavor to it—moving from simple functionalist views to more complex interactionist perspectives. But it is important to recognize that all elements of readiness perspectives live on in today's practice and policy often within the same person. What is hopeful at this point is a move away from exclusionary readiness practices that allowed systems to bar children on the basis of perceived readiness levels. In its place is a commitment to providing the very best opportunity to learn for all children, recognizing that kindergarten is too late to begin focusing on readiness.

Although formal definitions of readiness are difficult to come by, a number of states conduct statewide readiness screenings (Saluja, Scott-Little, & Clifford, 2000) and 17 states are part of a consortium developing readiness indicators (School Readiness Indicators Initiative, 2004). The focus of these efforts is a systemic approach to readiness that recognizes that kindergarten is a transition through loosely coupled institutions that provide services and have interest in children. An example of such an approach is the School Readiness Indicator Initiative, funded by the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. The goal of this project is to develop a comprehensive set of readiness indicators to inform public policy. These programs have several interesting characteristics. They work from the assumption that children and their families have diverse challenges, needs, and resources that must be considered if children are to be ready for school. They are typically broad-based, considering all elements relevant to children's development. They focus on policy relevant indicators that imply an action in relation to knowledge (we might do something if we find that $x\%$ of the children have no prenatal care). And they are most frequently indicators that are not just lying around and repurposed but are chosen for their utility in providing information for action. This is a major change and one that began with the work of the National Education Goals Panel in the early 1990s. An example is provided in Figure 1, the work of Wisconsin's Readiness Indicator group, which took an integrated approach to indicator identification.

This work indicates a move toward thinking of readiness in a much broader, synthetic way. Rather than focusing simply on a child's skills or dispositions, rather than examining only the intervention programs that address problems, rather than contrasting varied beliefs, or rather than singlemindedly trying to construct the perfect test, new views of readiness are complex, multidimensional, and process oriented. From this perspective, readiness mutually constitutes the social context of child development, the material resources available to support or constrain growth, the beliefs and practices that structure opportunity and the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive state brought to school. Because of its complexity, I see readiness as an ethical responsibility (Bakhtin, 1993)—a contract we have with children, their families, their teachers, and the future. It is a construct that simultaneously looks forward and backward evaluating the adequacy of social, personal, economic, and educational resources afforded by communities.

<p>Responsiveness: Family & Community Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health care & physical development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Access to health care ○ Prenatal care ○ Maternal health behaviors ○ Infant mortality ○ Low birthrate ○ Health & developmental screening ○ Dental care ○ Chronic health conditions • Family resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Family income ○ Parental employment ○ Poverty ○ Maternal education ○ Early parenthood ○ Family support • Early care & education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Availability (demand vs available space) ○ Quality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Accreditation & regulatory status ▪ Caregiver wages & Workforce stability ▪ Caregiver education & training ▪ Affordability • Community Conditions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Crime rate ○ Family violence & child abuse ○ Poverty 	<p>Receptiveness – School Readiness for Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher training & professional development • School policies & environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Parent involvement policies ○ School community partnerships ○ Before & afterschool programs • Student policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Retention ○ Suspension • Transition to K policies • Classrooms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Class size ○ Pupil teacher ratio
<p style="text-align: center;">Ready Children</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health & physical development • Social & emotional development • Approaches to learning • Language development & communication • Cognition & general knowledge 	

FIGURE 1 Adapted from Wisconsin Readiness Indicators (Wisconsin School Readiness Indicators Initiative Steering Committee, 2003).

What are the elements of readiness, from this new perspective? Although the other authors in this collection have focused on the child elements, I would like to focus on the community elements primarily. In some ways, what I suggest might seem like an early childhood wish list—but it reflects a belief that systems rather than individuals are responsible for, and gain authority from, readiness. It also reflects the values of my home state (or at least those who have worked on the readi-

ness indicators project) in that it joins concern for responsive communities with receptive schools to produce ready children.

As a starting point, I suggest that readiness is produced by the complex systems that support development for children ages 0 to 5. These systems are built and maintained by institutions, individuals, social groups, and businesses. In the current system they are uncoordinated, they are unevenly delivered, and inequitably arranged. A first step is to work to gain consensus on the goals we hold for early childhood development and care. This is a nontrivial undertaking as it spans the public and the private, the for-profit and the not-for-profit, care and education, custodial and interventionist, health, welfare, and safety.

A responsive system of early care and education would coordinate relevant service delivery systems so that there would be adequate health care, community support for children, choices for parents in caregiving and activity, more than child care that does neither harm nor good, publicly funded prekindergarten programs that are universally available operated in coordination with the private sector care system, and high quality, professionally educated staff. Readiness measurement would involve tracking all of these indicators of community responsiveness.

Receptive schools work across a series of tensions that sometimes seem insurmountable. One issue is that as large public institutions, schools have cultures all their own that quite often have impermeable boundaries. As such, coordinating with other groups and institutions is challenging and can be seen as lessening the authority in a fragile system. To be receptive, schools need to balance three values and practices that are sometimes posed as in conflict. Schools, as a first step, must be places that are developmental. The notion of a developmental approach has been articulated best by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), but there are two aspects I would like to highlight here. The first is that being developmental requires some knowledge of development—to be able to plan instruction that is likely to be appropriate for young children, knowing something about the typical patterns of development is helpful. And it recognizes that our knowledge of typical development is culturally bound within particular groups (mostly White, middle class). At the same time, this general knowledge must be applied to individual children and their families in locally sensitive ways. Children are not like buses or trains—their timetables are gloriously quirky and often proceed at rates that veer away from the norm. The key is to remember that the norm is something to be veered away from as it is just a measure of central tendency—something imaginary, as my son Sam likes to remind me. Setting a benchmark of reading at text level 5 for the end of kindergarten is a wonderful goal, if it is done with the recognition that our job as teachers is to do everything in our power to provide knowledge and opportunities for children to attain the goal but that some, despite our best efforts, won't do it until next year.

In addition to being developmental, receptive schools are inclusive. An inclusive school assumes that all children have a place in pedagogy, that thresholds have

limited value in planning instruction or placement of students. Instruction from an inclusive perspective is arranged to meet the needs of today's children here and now rather than some mythic group from another time.

Being developmental and inclusive are only useful if receptive schools are also accountable. In this case, I am not using a notion of accountability that is ledger-like or procedural. It is an ethical accountability that takes as a challenge the variability in needs that students bring to us. It presumes that children have needs, that we have the tools to support them, and that we do our best to support their learning. What that means is that we do not focus our teaching on the easy to teach or rely solely on providing children with experiences. Being accountable means that we are explicit about what we want children to learn, we link those learning goals to particular children's programs, that we design instruction with those two in mind, and that we consciously gather data about whether we've managed to do as we intended. And then we do it all over again. Being accountable requires an explicitness of purpose, a system of practice, and a recognition that children live readiness every day, regardless of whether it is social, psychological, or cultural.

WE KNOW THE ANSWER, BUT WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

My early work on readiness focused primarily on the readiness beliefs and practices of middle class and working class families and their teachers. I am spending a fair amount of time observing in high poverty schools. I watch as dedicated teachers struggle to meet the high standards every child deserves. I wonder what readiness can be if it encompasses children who have never held scissors or crayons, children with autism, children who translate between English and Hmong for both their parents and classmates, children whose parents are so overwhelmed by mental illnesses and poverty that they can't get out of bed. How do we use this construct that is also the tag for highly privileged children whose parents want them to be leaders or to be on the football team for 4 years? I try to knit together an understanding of readiness that works across all the children I have learned from and I remember why readiness is so important, and why we're making progress but at a glacial pace.

Any discussion of readiness, but most certainly any relating to measurement, must be clear about the questions it addresses. Without that clarity, policies, instrument development, and outcomes for children are likely to get tangled up in all the baggage that readiness necessarily brings with it. The other authors in this collection have provided insight into potential answers related to readiness and I would like to pose the questions. I'll leave it to the reader to connect the two. But as I offer these questions, I urge us to remain focused on the power of readiness to move people to action—some of it productive, some of it not, some of it focused on individ-

ual welfare, some attending to the inclusive opportunities for all. I end this article by posing the questions that I think we are ethically bound to address if we are to make readiness achievable for more children:

- What is a definition of readiness that we can agree on and that can be implemented in policy?
 - How does it encompass the community supports, school practices, and child characteristics that comprise this complex system?
- What are the critical elements of a policy system that supports readiness?
- What are the system characteristics of child opportunity that should be measured?
 - To whom should they be reported?
 - How should they be evaluated?
- What are the child characteristics that we can and should measure?
 - How are these related to policies and programs that are implementable in a loosely coupled system of early childhood care and education?
- What are the child characteristics that imply readiness intervention?
 - When are they measurable? How?
- How do we choose between targeted interventions or investments in general education quality?
- How do we merge readiness practices that differentiate by economic status?
- How can we use readiness to promote action for children, families, and their caregivers or educators?

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