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Towards empowerment for food and eating in ECEC

Francesca Vaghi

The need for transformative change

Where do children fit?

What roles do food and eating play in English early years settings? Given that only voluntary guidelines for food provision currently exist in policy frameworks for early childhood education and care (ECEC), mealtimes in early years settings can take any number of configurations, depending on the available resources a setting is able to dedicate to this. Food has a central function in providing nutrition to children, yet is implicated in myriad other projects. Several scholars, following Norbert Elias (1994), have already noted that infant feeding is central to the ‘civilising process’ we all undergo as human beings (for example, Lupton 1996; Albon and Hellman 2018); table manners and the regulation of the self when eating, for example, are considered clear markers of what makes a ‘civilised body’. In current ECEC discourse, which increasingly prioritises school readiness, feeding children also becomes part of the task of preparing children to become integrated into the primary education system.

Adherence to voluntary food guidelines is also among the criteria considered in the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) assessments of early years institutions in England; these are provided in the ‘Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage’ from the English Department for Education (DfE). This document indicates a few broad standards for food and drink: ‘Where children are provided with meals, snacks and drinks, they must be healthy, balanced and nutritious’ (DfE 2017, 28). It also emphasises the importance of food
hygiene and outlines the procedure that should be followed in the event of a food poisoning incident. Parallel to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the 'Eat Better Start Better' (EBSB) programme, developed by the (now defunct) charity the Children's Food Trust in 2012, is also used by some settings as a reference for food provision (Action for Children 2017). In contrast to the lack of specificity in the EYFS, EBSB provides meticulous advice on food groups, portion sizes and sample menus for all the meals that settings might offer to children (breakfast, lunch, snacks and supper). Aside from these two actors, the National Health Service (NHS 2018) also offers general guidance to early years settings, through campaigns such as 'Change4Life'.

Aside from being considered in Ofsted inspections, what children are fed in ECEC certainly matters greatly to parents as well. Menus are often part of what might make a setting more or less appealing to families, and this is particularly salient in the largely marketised context that currently exists in England, in which different private settings compete with each other to attract clients (see Chapter 6).

Yet, where do children fit into these considerations? If looking at ECEC policy frameworks, food seems to be largely implicated in reinforcing a still-prevailing vision of the child as a malleable future adult. If considered as a criterion that will contribute to receiving a positive Ofsted report, or a quality that potential (parent) customers will look at in making a decision about where to pay for ECEC, children’s food and eating become a lot more about validating institutions in the eyes of official actors and families than about valuing children’s daily experiences and preferences.

This chapter thus aims to propose a different view of food and eating in the ECEC context, through ethnographic accounts drawn from research conducted over a 12-month period in a state-maintained nursery and children’s centre in inner London. The purpose of conducting this research on children’s food policy and practice in ECEC is to show that the universalism of policy and bureaucracy sits uncomfortably alongside the particularism that feeding and eating in the early years entails. This results in unintended consequences, such as contradictory public health messaging and arbitrary policy interventions, which rarely align with practitioners’, parents’ and children’s practices and intentions.

An overview of the policy frameworks and assumptions that operated in the setting where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork will be provided to contextualise my case study. Following the work of Clark (2017) on listening to children (see Chapter 9), and of Nolas, Aruldoss and Varvantakis (2018) on ‘idioms of childhood’, the chapter will then...
delve into an exploration of the alternatives that children created in their daily mealtime routines. It will be shown that children valued the convivial and social roles that food and eating played for them at school, which in turn were an important way in which self and peer identities were constructed by the children in this setting. I argue that this has significant implications for how we might (re)think what constitutes children’s well-being, beyond biomedical understandings of this notion. Drawing from Ruth Levitas’ utopian studies, the premise that ‘alternative or oppositional social practices [can] create new, or at least slightly different, social institutions’ (Levitas 2013, xiii) will be put forward.

Policy and bureaucracy in ECEC

It is July 2017, and I am interviewing Ipsa, one of the lunchtime assistants working at Ladybird Nursery School and Children’s Centre. As with all staff members who are involved in feeding children at the setting, I ask her what she thinks is the most important aspect of her job. She replies:

To make sure that the children have a nutritional, balanced diet, and encouraging the child to try different foods. Because certain children are just used to their traditional foods ... so it’s really important that we open them up to all the different kinds of food that is available ... [E]ach child is different so you have to go with each child, you can’t just have the same ... how can I put it ... routine for all of them, because it doesn’t work, some children get too emotional when they don’t want something on their plate. And just that they enjoy it [lunchtime] as well. Eating can be fun as well. So letting them experiment, even if it means touching and feeling as well, it’s important ... yeah, we encourage them to use their knives and forks but it’s important to have the sensory ... because there are children ... like, in my tradition [Indian], we use our hands to eat, so a lot of children that do come, we tend to notice that they really do use their fingers and their hands to eat, because that’s what they’re used to back home. So yeah, just understanding every child’s background, because we have such diverse children that come in, it’s important to understand what their background is as well.

I am struck by Ipsa’s answer to this general question, as she encapsulated in just a few minutes many of the aims that staff members had to take into account, often simultaneously, when feeding children at Ladybird. Looking back on our conversation, months after the end of my fieldwork,
I realise Ipsa’s account highlighted the way in which many ECEC and public health policy discourses play out in the daily lives of the people that I worked with. It also made it clear that there is a need to transform the way in which food and mealtimes are thought of in ECEC, not as part of a set of mechanisms that should result in measurable outcomes, but as components of a ‘slow pedagogy’ (see Chapter 9) that takes children’s experiences and viewpoints into consideration.

Nonetheless, this approach sits in contrast to how ECEC policy in the UK has evolved in the post-Second World War era. Randall argues that, relative to other welfare states in Europe, the UK has given little priority to the establishment of reliable ECEC services; she attributes this to the government’s ‘(partial) incorporation of a liberal philosophy … and strong male breadwinner assumptions’ (2002, 219) in the years after the war. In subsequent decades, ECEC policy has tended to be changeable and inconsistent because ‘the primary groups affected as “consumers” – mothers and children – lack political organization or leverage’ (Randall 2002, 224). This, she further contends, is also linked to, and contributes to, the devalued status of care work. Such devaluation, it needs to be said, is not a phenomenon confined to the UK; women’s (and children’s) lack of political leverage is historically and geographically pervasive (Lister 2003). Alongside these ideological underpinnings, Randall has also shown that ECEC in the UK is a particularly fragmented policy domain, with a tension between childcare and early education, but also historically between education and public health, which further blurs the aims and outcomes sought by official actors when developing legislations (Randall 2002).

This, in part, created a fruitful environment for the proliferation of a more market-orientated model of ECEC provision during the Thatcher years, when maternalism remained influential but also became ambiguous as women began to form an increasing part of the workforce (Randall 2002). This stance carried on, under subsequent Conservative as well as Labour administrations, and some of the rhetoric around ECEC policy that emerged in these decades continues to this day.

Currently, preparing infants for primary education is an increasingly prominent aim in ECEC policy and curriculum (DfE 2011, 2017), and one in which the language of early intervention and neuroscience frequently gets invoked (an important critique of this policy discourse has been developed by Gillies et al. 2017). The rhetoric around school readiness, for obvious reasons, is largely future-orientated. The DfE (2017, 5), for example, states that the EYFS framework ‘promotes teaching and learning to ensure children’s “school readiness” and gives children the
broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life’.

The future-orientated language of ECEC policy needs to be evaluated. As already suggested, it reinforces a view of children as ‘becomings’ rather than ‘beings’, valuable for their potential as future adults (Qvortrup 2005, 5). Several scholars in the sociology and anthropology of childhood have taken issue with this. Mayall argues that this is a result of a ‘continued dominance in the UK of positivist development psychology’ that frames children as ‘socialisation projects’ (2006, 13). By a similar token, Moran-Ellis suggests that embedded within ECEC policy is a paradoxical assumption about children being simultaneously ‘dangerous’ and ‘in danger’, which leads both to an overemphasis on safeguarding and guaranteeing children’s rights, as well as a desire to control them through policy interventions (2010, 189). These underlying assumptions have important implications with regard to children’s food policy. In particular, the notion that early intervention matters because habits developed in the initial stages of life are irreplaceable and/or irreversible (Albon 2015) also plays a big role in this discourse.

These conceptualisations of the child and ECEC aims are linked to several other policy domains in England. Childhood obesity and related non-communicable diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes, have been a central public health concern across nations in recent decades, and England is no exception (NHS 2016; Goisis et al. 2016; Perkins and DeSousa 2018). The Health and Social Care Information Centre has conducted the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) since 2005, which entails the collection of body mass index (BMI) data for children in reception class (4 to 5 years old) and Year 6 (10 to 11 years old) in state-maintained schools in England. Results from the most recent NCMP report show that in the reception class 9.5 per cent of 610,435 children were either overweight or obese (Stats Team, NHS Digital 2018, 2). Similar trends have been recorded elsewhere; for instance, in 2014 the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS) published a briefing using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, which revealed that one in five children born in the UK at the beginning of the new century were obese by the age of 11 (CLS 2014).

The notion that health trends reflect structural inequalities is prevalent in these reports; the level of obesity at reception class age was twice as high in the most socio-economically deprived areas compared with the least deprived (Stats Team, NHS Digital 2018, 13). Although several scholars have called the ‘crisis’ narrative of childhood obesity into question (see, for example, Moffat 2010; Maher et al. 2010; Warin et al. 2008),
and measures such as the BMI are also increasingly deemed problematic by social scientists and health professionals alike (Kelly and Daniels 2017), this trend is nonetheless a cause for concern, particularly its role in widening health inequalities (Schrecker 2017; Rougeaux et al. 2017).

The discourse about food provision in the early years context has responded to such evidence. Indeed, in a 2018 report on the government’s childhood obesity strategy published by the Health and Social Care Commons Select Committee, the early years sector is identified as a crucial domain for intervention (House of Commons Health Committee 2018). Nonetheless, as stated earlier, only voluntary food guidelines are available for early years settings, and service providers face a number of challenges in their attempts to meet these, particularly within the state-maintained sector in which I conducted my research. Although Ofsted follows mandatory regulations for providers of early childhood services within the EYFS, there are no associated statutory nutritional standards; this has meant that actors such as the Children’s Food Trust and the NHS were key promoters of voluntary dietary guidelines at the time during which I carried out my fieldwork.

Daily practices

To return to my conversation with Ipsa, we can see how these official discourses have had an impact on daily practices within ECEC settings. Ipsa’s concern with promoting healthy eating and a varied diet was salient, as well as managing children’s ‘emotions’ during lunchtime, which other staff said to me was something important that children should learn for their transition between nursery and primary school. Ipsa also expressed the difficulties professionals can face when applying public policies in a diverse context, such as the one in which she worked. As stated earlier, the EYFS talks about food provision in vague terms, overlooking that healthy food and eating might mean very different things to different people. The cultural significance attached to food is also often missing from nutrition-driven perspectives, as other scholars have emphasised (see, for example, Karrebæk 2013; Caldwell 2014). However, the precise guidelines that are put forward in the EBSB programme – which emphasises that children’s diets should be varied, consist of fresh ingredients, and be cooked on the premises if possible – do not acknowledge the material constraints that settings might face in providing meals to children. At Ladybird, staff often mentioned that the cost of offering the food suggested in EBSB was beyond the school’s budget. The setting did not have its own kitchen, so the food served was made by an external
provider. The competencies staff might need to develop in order to prepare such meals are also not addressed in the guidelines.

Indeed, the task of feeding children in an institutional setting was further complicated by the various (and at times competing) ethics of care (Tronto 2010) of different staff members. Ruby, who fed children at breakfast and ‘tea club’ (supper), was much more determined to get children ready for ‘big’, or primary, school than some of her colleagues. During our interview she explained why she believed mealtimes to be so important in preparing them for this change:

The transition from nursery to reception is very different, because the children in the reception age group they eat in a big hall … and it’s very, it’s big, there’s rows … the comfy environment that you have in nursery, it’s not like that in the schools. So children could get lost in that kind of setting … they need to learn how to be independent, to do things for themselves.

Not all staff members were equally committed to fulfilling these aims, however. In Ipsa’s account above, wanting to teach children about healthy eating and manners was emphasised; she also expressed a desire to make mealtimes ‘fun’, and a concern for being mindful of each child’s ‘routine’. Others were critical of the contradiction posed by the structured nature of mealtimes, in which children were engaged in a much more formal mode of learning (about the nutrients in food or about table manners, for example). This stood in contrast to the rest of the day’s activities at Ladybird, which were far more child-led. Joyce, the lead early years practitioner at the children’s centre, said to me that:

the children are here all day, they are doing an activity on the table and being encouraged to play with this, feel this, then they [the adults] clear the table and put food on it and they’re told, ‘Don’t play’. But 10 minutes ago they were playing on that table … so that to me, that’s part of it, they have to play with their food … [A]ll we are doing is telling them to play except for this half an hour when they sit down with their food, that’s insane. How are these kids supposed to know they’re not playing now?

Joyce’s comment, as opposed to some of the views that other staff members shared with me, highlighted the mismatch that can often exist between how official ECEC guidelines specify what should happen within a setting, and children’s daily lived experiences. While teaching children
about healthy eating and preparing them for primary school can perpetuate a future-orientated vision of childhood, Joyce’s position seems to get closer to an approach that takes listening to children’s viewpoints into consideration.

Towards transformative change

The children’s perspectives

The work of Clark and Moss on the Mosaic approach and listening to children (Clark 2017) was fundamental to my exploration of the alternative practices that children created during mealtimes at Ladybird (see also Chapter 9). As well as valuing the multi-method and participatory framework developed by Clark and Moss through the Mosaic approach, I consider their commitment to understanding children’s lived experiences within institutions particularly important. As they argue, it is crucial to explore ‘children’s views and experiences of everyday life in the institutions they attend; as members of communities rather than consumers of education or users of products’ (Clark 2017, 27, original emphasis). Parallel to this, I also draw from the work of Nolas, Varvantakis and Aruldoss (2018), in which they extend the concept of listening to children by calling for researchers to further engage with children’s everyday, embodied and creative forms of communication, what they call ‘idioms of childhood’; a process that ‘helps us to make sense of children’s worlds, and to identify their meanings and agency’ (Nolas et al. 2018, 4).

In my own work, I consider children’s drawings, role-play, humour, conversations, and non-verbal interactions as idioms of childhood. I was particularly interested in the ways in which children contested adult norms and re-appropriated mealtimes at Ladybird, emphasising the social, caring and convivial dimension of sharing food, which I understood to be most valuable to them. Particularly during breakfast and ‘tea club’, children monitored each other’s behaviour and preferences more openly, often assuming an adult-like role when doing so, and expressing what they thought was right or wrong about each other’s food practices, showing an awareness of staff members’ expectations about their eating habits. Children also claimed some authority during mealtimes through role reversal. For instance, they reminded each other to say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ when asking for food, a task that was pervasive among the staff, alongside the frequent reminders to ‘be kind to each other’ and the repetition of ‘sharing is caring’. In line with my aim to adopt a ‘least adult
role’ (Warming 2005) in my research, I also complied when children asked me to lend them my badge, which other adults did not do. When this happened, they would ‘become’ me, and I them, which then meant they would boss me around a little, either telling me to wash my hands or to also eat what was being served to them.

Acts of resistance performed by children, as I observed them, were a way to subvert adults’ control, yet also a way to establish unity and express group belonging. Showing that they knew what others liked was one of the ways in which this manifested itself. One morning, when Ruby asked Eva (4 years old) what she would like for breakfast, Crystal (also 4 years old) answered instead of her, saying enthusiastically, ‘She’s a Rice Krispies girl!’ – as indeed Eva was, since this was always her choice of breakfast food during the time I spent at Ladybird. Similar moments were also common during the more logistically complex and formal lunch hours. Once, while one of the lunchtime assistants was passing food to the group she and I were sitting with, Amir very decisively told her what she should give his friend Cem (both 4 years old): ‘He likes chicken, and baked potato, and salad!’

Unity was also emphasised in the new mealtime norms that children established, in a manner similar to that in which adults communicated the standards they wanted children to abide by. For instance, rules were created about how certain foods should be eaten: a recurrent case was that of the berry compote and Greek yogurt dessert option at lunch, which children unfailingly instructed each other to mix, ‘to make it pink’. On an occasion during which I too ate this, but kept the compote and yogurt separate, Crystal was puzzled about my choice and asked me if she could mix my pudding for me, to which I agreed. During ‘tea club’, if spaghetti was being served, children would very often dangle the pasta above their faces from their forks and into their mouths, a technique that was predictably not appreciated by the staff members, yet one through which the children bonded by exhibiting each other’s ability to eat spaghetti in this way.

Humorous talk was one of the most effective ways in which children challenged adults’ attempts to regulate their mealtimes, as in this instance that I observed in April 2017:

For a couple of weeks now, the children’s silverware has been missing from the children’s centre, so we have had to use plastic cutlery at tea club instead. This has not gone unnoticed by the children, and Crystal brings it up today as she struggles to stab a piece of broccoli with her plastic fork. A humorous conversation between Ruby and
the children, about what could have possibly happened to the metal cutlery, ensues: ‘Is it in the microwave?’ ‘Is it in the fridge?’ ‘Maybe it’s in the office!’ Fred says, ‘I think Fran hid it!’ I reply jokingly: ‘No, I wouldn’t do that!’ and he continues, ‘I think you hid it in the oven!’ ‘In the oven??’ I say. ‘Yes,’ he says, ‘or I think you pooped on them!’ I tell him that, ‘I really wouldn’t do that!’ and he says, ‘Or maybe you just peed on them! Or farted on them!’ I laugh and keep saying that I wouldn’t do any of those things. I notice that Ruby has meanwhile stopped partaking in the conversation, and she soon stops us from continuing with these jokes: ‘This is not something we talk about at the table’, she says.

Most provocations by children were certainly engaged with and recognised by the staff. Ruby’s change of tone during the conversation about the missing cutlery signalled that talk of ‘poo’ and ‘pee’ were perceived as ‘threats’, or attempts by children to overturn adults’ pedagogical roles at the table. Moments of tension such as these provided me with insights into the various resistances adults faced in trying to shape children’s daily practices. This not only shifted the discourse about food and eating away from the control of adults, but it also challenged the much larger ‘civilising’ project in which food and mealtimes are implicated. Yet, observing these tensions also shed light on children’s abilities to resolve any number of situations on their own.

One instance stands out from a day on which I was helping a lunchtime assistant by sitting with Simon, a 4-year-old boy with special needs. In the months that I spent getting to know him, Simon never seemed to like having lunch at Ladybird, and days on which the staff succeeded in persuading him to sit at the table with the other children were a cause for celebration. This alone was perceived as a victory, since Simon was unwilling and, to a considerable extent, also physically unable to eat the food provided at the nursery. His mother told us that, due to complications after being born prematurely, he had difficulties consuming solid meals, so his diet at home still consisted primarily of pureed foods. One of the aims of him attending lunch at Ladybird once a week, on Tuesdays, was to introduce him to different kinds of foods and it was hoped that eating with children his age would provide encouragement. On this particular day, Simon was more distressed than usual when the time to have lunch came; as he often did, he cried intensely and refused to sit on his chair, so I was holding him on my lap. At one point during the episode, he refused to continue sitting on my legs and lay down on the floor; as this was unfolding and the lunchtime assistant and I looked to
each other concernedly, Johnny (3 years old), who was sitting to the left of Simon and me, leaned towards him and affectionately patted Simon on the head. After this brief interaction, Simon stopped crying and sat on his own chair, next to Johnny, and lunch continued without further difficulties.

Similar situations unfolded at ‘tea club’, where children were trusted to be more independent and staff members often took their preferences a lot more into account. Here, children had greater freedom to make mealtimes a caring and social time for themselves, and were often also able to resolve conflicts and issues unaided by adults. In December 2016, I observed the following interaction:

Jasmine fills her cup with milk and exclaims, ‘I can pour myself!’, followed by Lucy who also says happily, ‘I poured it myself!’ holding her cup of milk carefully with both hands. Robbie also grabs the milk jug and pours himself a drink, but doesn’t stop in time: the milk overflows in his cup, causing a spill. He looks embarrassed by this and glances worriedly at Joyce, who is running tea club today, to check if she noticed what happened. In the meantime, Crystal jumps out of her seat and brings him some paper towels to help him clean up.

Instances like these shed light on the crucial role that group unity and peer culture dynamics played in children’s daily life, and the importance of creating spaces in which self and peer identities can flourish on children’s own terms. This has important implications for how we think of children’s well-being, beyond a biomedical framework.

Alternative institutional spaces and practices

In this chapter, I have argued that historical and current ECEC policy frameworks in England have tended to perpetuate a future-orientated vision of the child. Under this model, paying attention to what children find valuable and meaningful in the present can be neglected in favour of achieving measurable outcomes, preparing them for future education and, in the case of food and eating, teaching them about healthy habits. I have shown how these discourses have had an impact on adults’ practices within the early years setting in which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork. Parallel to this, I have explored how children were able to contest adult attempts to regulate mealtimes through role-play, humorous conversations and non-verbal interactions and, in doing so, to promote
group unity and conviviality during mealtimes. I have asked what food is for in the early years, taking adults’ and children’s perspectives into account.

To conclude, the question that remains is what this small-scale, ethnographic study can contribute to this book’s vision of a transformed ECEC landscape in England. To move towards this transformative change, the competencies and knowledge of practitioners should be given proper consideration. Many of the Ladybird staff were aware of the contradictions that some of the policies and guidelines they were required to follow posed to their practices, with consequences on children’s enjoyment of mealtimes. Listening to children should thus take precedence in this transition.

Drawing from Levitas’s work on utopian studies (2013), I would like to suggest that we can view listening to children as an oppositional, or transformative, practice. I have shown that paying attention to idioms of childhood reveals what children deem most meaningful about food and mealtimes, with significant implications for how we might think about children’s well-being within institutions. Creating a space in which children are trusted to be more independent and autonomous can empower them to resolve situations as they arise without the need for adults’ intervention. As Moss and Petrie (2002, 113) have argued, creating ‘children’s spaces’ means recognising the potential of ‘the collectivity of children who will exert their own agency, and make use of the opportunities and resources that the space provides’ so that “‘children’s spaces” [are] for children’s own purposes’.

In developing these considerations, it is therefore important to also ask what the purpose of teaching children about healthy eating might be in a context such as the one in which I conducted my research. First, the question of diversity should be considered, as the notion of ‘healthy eating’ had various meanings to the children and families I met, who were from a number of different backgrounds, but also to the staff members who worked at Ladybird. Second, the context of austerity in which the (shrinking) public early years sector currently operates created a number of contradictions. At Ladybird, for instance, the local authority stopped providing funding to give fruit as snacks at the children’s centre, while simultaneously increasing public health messaging about diet and nutrition. Similarly, nutrition-driven approaches that emphasise individual choice as a key determinant of health outcomes are also problematic when those to whom these messages are promoted are socio-economically disadvantaged (Ulijaszek and McLennan 2016), as many of the families at Ladybird were.
With this in mind, it becomes even more apparent that what children deem meaningful about food and eating in an institutional setting should be prioritised.

Further reading

An article by Sophie Alcock, ‘Playing with rules around routines: Children making mealtimes meaningful and enjoyable’ (Early Years, 2007), available at https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140701594426, is a case study from an early childhood centre in New Zealand. It offers interesting insights about children’s participation in mealtime group activities, showing similar interactions to those described in this chapter. The author contends that playful behaviour is a way in which children express their own objectives during mealtimes, that is, to create a sense of ‘togetherness’ in the peer group, which is separate from the adult objective of giving nourishment and establishing a routine.

A brief paper by Francesca Vaghi, ‘Drawing, sounds and play: Understanding children’s viewpoints and participation’, available free at https://entanglementsjournal.org/drawing-sounds-and-play-understanding-childrens-viewpoints-and-participation/, delves deeper into the child-centred methodologies used in her research. It outlines how innovative methodological and theoretical approaches can be used to understand children’s viewpoints, and how these might offer a way into recognising their voices in matters that have an impact on their day-to-day lives.

Notes

1. The names of participants and of the setting have been changed to ensure anonymity.
2. These guidelines were originally drafted and promoted by the charity the Children’s Food Trust, which closed in 2017 due to lack of funding. This original source is no longer available online, but the document referenced in this article is the same.

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