

The Professional Identity of Social Educators: A Review of the Literature.

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Abstract: We live immersed in a society characterized by the enormous number of changes that occur day after day, which has given rise to many new social needs. To meet these needs, the figure of the social educator has become essential. The present research consists of a systematic literature review that aimed to analyze the most recent studies on the professional identity of the social educator. For this purpose, the PRISMA methodology was used with the help of the ReSiste-CHS framework (Codina, 2018). After searching the databases (WoS, SCOPUS, and Google Scholar) and applying various inclusion/exclusion criteria, a total of 15 documents were selected and subjected to a thematic analysis. Among the main findings, we highlight the wide variety of aspects involved in shaping the identity of social educators, the significant training gaps in the training plans of this sector, and the difficulty in defining the functions and competencies of this figure. Finally, future lines of research are proposed, such as the need to restructure the current curricula of social educators or the development of more studies from a biographical-narrative approach that will allow us to better understand the identity of these professionals.

Keywords: Social Educator, Social Worker, Professional Identity, Training, Systematic Review.

Introduction

Social Education is a pedagogical discipline that is continuously changing. Among the actions that the professionals in this field carry out, it is worth mentioning the responses provided to the various problems emerging in society at both social and cultural levels (Amador et al. 2014; Morales 2012; Torres et al. 2001). Therefore, this figure can be considered a professional whose scope of action is extensive, diverse, changing, and linked to the demands and requirements of a society that is in a state of continuous evolution and change (Ruiz et al., 2015). In this sense, the social educator becomes an "agent of change in social action" as they intervene in very diverse fields to carry out their work as a professional (Amador et al. 2014, 59).

Despite the obvious importance of this figure in today's changing societies, there exists relatively few studies that have explored this figure in depth as it would be observed in our review. Therefore, there is a need to develop studies that analyze knowledge about the construction and development processes of the professional identity of social educators. For this reason, the present work gives an account of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) carried out with the basic aim of analyzing the most recent studies on the processes of construction and development of the professional identity of social educators. To this end, the present research work attempts to address the following questions:

- What aspects are discussed in the various studies on the professional identity of the social educator?
- What are the characteristics of the studies carried out (e.g., authors, country of reference, study objectives, the methodology implemented, instruments, and participating agents)?

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- What are the most relevant contributions to the professional identity of social educators?
- What are the main biases of this research field?

This review aims to contribute to existing knowledge on social educator identity research in several ways: (1) to establish a general overview of the existing knowledge highlighting points of interest; (2) to determine research needs in this field of study, i.e., to establish future lines of research; and (3) to contribute towards improving the training and development of the social educator.

The Social Educator's Professional Identity

When we approach the concept of identity, we must do so from a multidimensional perspective since it is an ongoing and multidimensional aspect which evolves based on social, communitarian, academic and contextual experiences (Barkhuizen 2016a, 2016b; Kumaravadivelu 2012; Macias et al. 2021). Besides that, nowadays, when considering identity, we must think of poststructural lenses (Gee 2000) which suggest that human beings are conformed by multiple selves. It is an ambiguous term that develops progressively depending on various factors (psychological, social, cultural, and biological) throughout an individual's life (Ruvalcaba et al. 2011). Similarly, to understand the evolution of a person's identity, we must consider their interactions with the environment, as these social interactions will considerably influence their development (Ruvalcaba et al. 2011).

Identity is a concept that is part of the individual and one that undoubtedly evolves due to socialization. That is, while the person has characteristics that define them and make them unique, they also identify and feel part of a certain social group and their singularities (García et al. 2016; Ruvalcaba et al. 2011). In this way, identity is generated and molded to the context that surrounds it. It thus appears that there are two categories of identity: personal and social (García et al. 2016).

Identity is shaped in parallel to the life biography of each person, together with the attributions that others make about them and the self-perceived identity of each individual. Regardless of the time of life, identity construction is influenced by historical, cultural, and social events. In other words, the various experiences that occur throughout life — from childhood at home or school until we encounter the world of work — all shape the individual's personal and professional identity (García et al. 2016).

According to Ruvalcaba et al. (2011), professional identity (PI) is based on personal identity, but is reaffirmed through professional practices. Briggs (2007) adds that PI is based on the perception of self-image, competitiveness, and efficiency in the workplace. For this, it is essential that the individual feels that they are a fundamental part of their work context.

In this sense, we can determine that the professional identity of the social educator is shaped, within a dynamic process as part of their life experiences, which, on many occasions, comes from viewing the profession as a vocation, and this is strengthened according to their professional ethics, their job, and the role they play in it (Briggs 2007). In the case of social educators, it is the adjective that accompanies their name that determines the identity of this professional (Julià 2011).

The practical training period also plays an important role in the construction of professional identity. Before embarking on this stage, the professional may have certain conceptions or perceptions of their profession based on theoretical work, which may change or increase after the experience and contact with social reality. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the essence of the social educator's daily mission and those elements that influence the emergence and evolution of the individual's professional identity (García et al. 2015).

For this reason, it is postulated that this professional identity "does not arise spontaneously nor is it obtained automatically, but is built through a complex, dynamic and sustained process over time," which starts from experiences and contexts that have taken place in childhood and is strengthened throughout initial training and professional practice (Edison 2012, 1).

Methodology

Objectives

This research aims to analyze the most recent studies on the processes of construction and development of the professional identity of the social educator.

Starting from this general objective, the following specific research objectives are set out:

- To describe the main characteristics of each of the studies analyzed (e.g., methodology used, temporal distribution of the studies, and main emerging themes).
- To identify the most relevant biases and specify future lines of research linked to the topic in question.

Research Design

This study is a Systematic Literature Review conducted in accordance with the ReSiste-CHS framework developed by Codina (2018). This framework is made up of four different phases that seek to maximise the systematisation and rigour of the review process. This helps to achieve a high degree of quality and robustness of the review, to minimise possible biases in the selection and inclusion of studies, and to reduce the subjective nature of traditional narrative reviews. Each of these phases will be detailed below.

Data bases and search equations

Two different databases were used because of their relevance in educational sciences (Web of Science, SCOPUS, Google Scholar), one of which is an important source of grey literature. The following keywords were applied for the search: *social educator, social worker, Social Education, professional identity*. These terms were selected due to their high frequency of occurrence in previously consulted articles and because they perfectly describe the article purpose. Finally, these words were combined to create different search equations.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion/exclusion criteria used were selected according to the principles of quality and appropriateness established by authors such as Booth, Panpainnou and Suttton (2012). These criteria are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Exclusion/Inclusion Criteria.

<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Exclusion Criteria</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Studies published in English or Spanish.▪ Studies that present relevant information about our object of study.▪ Studies linked to the field of Social Education.▪ Studies published between 2000 and 2021	All studies that do not meet the inclusion criteria are excluded.

Source: Arjona-Castilla, Caballero, Mula-Falcon.

Evaluation and Selection of results

Following the search and application of the inclusion/exclusion criteria, a total of 15 articles were selected. Figure 1 shows the various stages of the literature review.

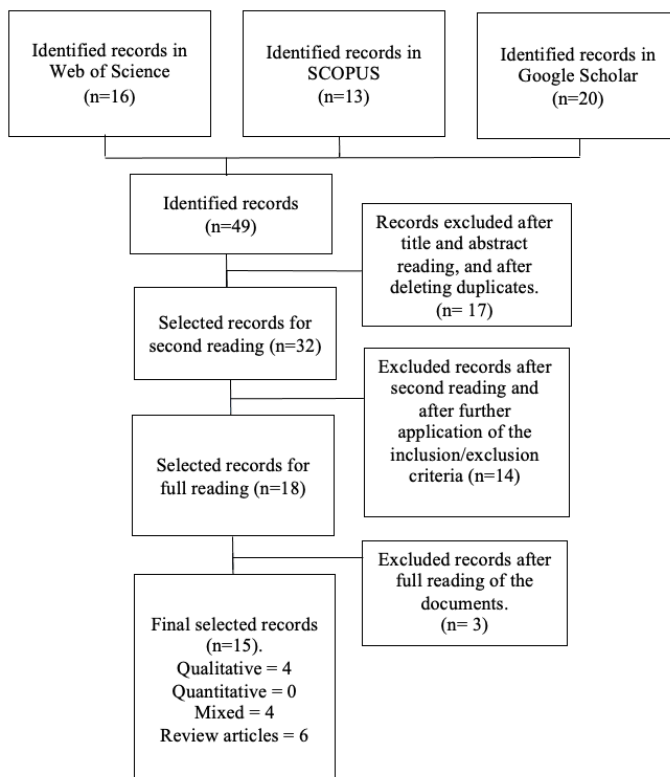


Figure 1: Flow Chart of the Stages Followed in the Review Process.

Source: Arjona-Castilla, Caballero, Mula-Falcón

Analysis

Once the 15 documents had been selected, each was subjected to an in-depth reading, recording basic information such as authors, year of publication, the objective of the research, methodology, instruments, and characteristics of the sample and main conclusions. Subsequently, the extracted information from each selected document was analyzed in greater depth.

First, the main characteristics of the studies were described. We then conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the studies using the qualitative software Nvivo 12. To this end, an emergent thematic analysis was developed based on the readings of the documents, which made it possible to detect a series of main themes that coincided between the different studies that made up the review. This process was carried out by three different researchers who, after individual readings and reflections, developed a discussion process that allowed the final emerging themes to be determined by consensus. The aim of this process was to obtain a structured and coherent analysis process that would contribute to obtaining the highest possible degree of objectivity in the process of analysing the results.

Results

General description of the studies

Time evolution of scientific production

Considering the selected documents in the three databases mentioned above, the following graph (Figure 2) shows the temporal evolution of publications on this topic:

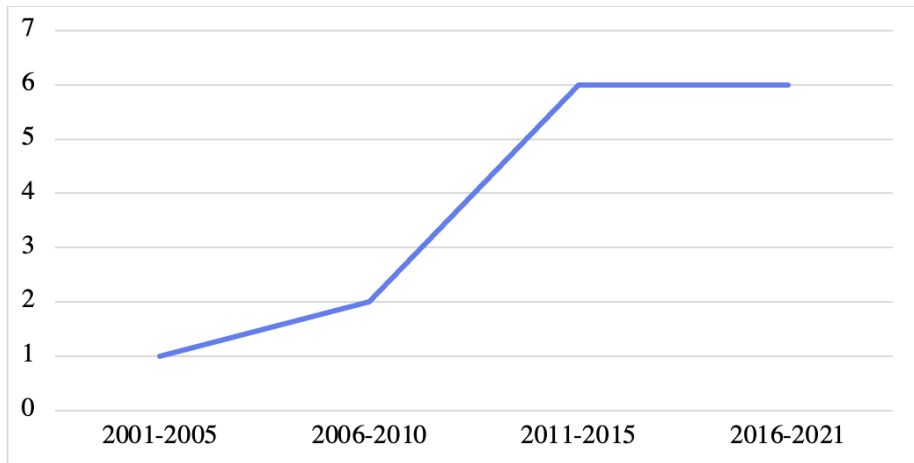


Figure 2: Temporal Evolution of Scientific Production.
Source: Arjona-Castilla, Caballero, Mula-Falcón

According to this graph, there was a notable increase in the number of studies related to the figure of the social educator in the period from 2006 to 2015, dates that coincide with the initial implementation of the Bologna Declaration (2010). This involved the educational reorganization of university degrees, including that of Social Education.

Methodological design

Of the 15 articles chosen and analyzed for this systematic review, four followed a qualitative study methodology (Cardenal 2017; Eslava et al. 2018b; Fullana et al. 2011; Varela 2017; Bolívar 2007), four employed a mixed methodological design (Eslava et al. 2018a; García et al. 2015; García et al. 2016; Vila et al. 2020) and the remaining six were review articles (Amador et al. 2014; Julià 2011; Melendro et al. 2014; Ruiz et al. 2015; Scarpa and Corrente 2007; Torres et al. 2001).

Findings

In this section, we will present the two themes that emerged from the analysis of the documents (Braun and Clarke 2006): the professional development of the social educator and the characteristics that determine the professional identity of the social educator.

The development of the social educator's professional identity

Few studies have addressed the issue of the social educator's professional identity since this question is somewhat complicated (although it is no less relevant). On the one hand, the professional identity of the social educator makes it possible to recognize the essence of the daily work that they carry out, as they are subject to thorny changes that occur in the context and society in which we live, which generate multiple socio-cultural environments. But, on the other hand, it allows us to know what circumstances influence the development of a subject's professional identity (García et al. 2015; García et al. 2016).

To establish the professional identity of the social educator, knowledge about their life experience, self-image, expectations, and personal values acquires great significance, since according to Petrus (1998), quoted in García et al. (2015), "social education is conditioned by its own history" (p. 1015). In other words, the profession as a vocation linked to social issues is, on many occasions, due to life experiences (Cardenal 2017). Therefore, it appears that one of the challenges of studying and recognizing the identity of the social educator is that personal identity — and, with it, professional identity — is affected by the different situations that the person deals with in both their personal and professional life trajectory.

A case study conducted by Cardenal (2017) revealed that both the job insecurity of social educators after their period of university training, and the constant fluctuations of the labor market due to the economic recession of 2008, make it difficult for them to adhere to a specific professional identity. In this case, an "identity-trajectory" (p. 82) is forged that does not depend exclusively on the task as a social education professional, but on all the experiences that have occurred throughout the person's life (e.g., volunteering, precarious work experience, unemployment, and self-employed training, etc.), which are both professionalizing and recognition experiences.

To this, Bolívar (2007) adds that, together with the positive and negative experiences that occur throughout the student's life, professional practice considerably impacts the development of professional identity. Therefore, in the research by García, Martín et al. (2015) and García et al. (2016), three dimensions were analyzed to obtain information on the professional identity of the social educator concerning the period of professional practice: self-image, the social mission of the profession, and the values of the person. Regarding the first dimension of self-image, a high percentage of students express a positive view before starting their work placement, denoting high self-esteem. On the other hand, some students report negative self-esteem before the start of this period for various reasons, including lack of knowledge in the field, lack of experience, and insecurity.

Concerning the social mission of the profession, there are some discrepancies between what happens before and after the traineeship period. Of particular note is the willingness to learn, enthusiasm and motivation, collaboration or support at the beginning of the internship, and self-reflection on the work or knowledge acquired at the end of the internship. Concerning the third dimension, the study reveals that personal values are part of the personality and competence of each individual and that, depending on the situations or contexts in which one of these values intervenes, one or another will predominate.

The findings of a comparative study of social educators carried out by Eslava et al. (2018b), also supported by Cardenal (2017) and Fullana et al. (2011), show the relevance of professional recognition for the reinforcement of professional identity. In other words, it is not enough to simply know one's competencies and functions in the field of socio-educational action, but the action must be made visible and recognized in order to strengthen professional identity.

Consequently, it is perceived that the development of the social educator's professional identity is affected after the initial training period, giving special relevance to professional practices (Eslava et al. 2018b; García et al. 2015; García et al. 2016).

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that social education is a profession of an inductive nature, in which practice eventually comes to shape work that brings together various

specialized activities in different fields (García et al. 2015; García et al. 2016). For this reason, each individual becomes more professionalized in one or another field, which therefore impacts the development of their identity.

Traits that determine the professional identity of the Social Educator

The social educator could be defined as a person capable of carrying out socio-educational interventions in different areas and with different types of populations, whether they are minors at risk of exclusion or in leisure activities that fall within or outside the curriculum, young people, adults, or those who belong to the elderly category (Amador et al. 2014; Julià 2011; Melendro et al. 2014; Torres et al. 2001).

While this figure is indeed responsible for the learning process of the subjects, when it comes to the school environment, their work must go beyond the merely academic. Among the functions of the social educator, socio-cultural mediation is particularly noteworthy, that is, being open to the knowledge of other societies and cultures, sharing diverse experiences, and proposing solutions to adverse situations (Torres et al. 2001; Vila et al. 2020).

The social educator has two fundamental tasks: prevention and support. The first refers to educating people so that their social coexistence is favored, while the second is concerned with improving the socio-cultural links of people living together in a society. This help that the educator provides will always depend on the socialization of the group of people and the specific context where the educator's action occurs (Torres et al. 2001; Vila et al. 2020).

This professional receives training in various fields and is thus able to act in different areas and contexts, which enriches their profession and increases job opportunities (Eslava et al. 2018a). In addition, these professionals stand out for their ability to adapt and intervene in the face of new and ever-changing needs in today's society along with their involvement in integration work as well as social development. (Eslava et al. 2018a; Ruiz et al. 2015; Torres et al. 2001).

In the following sections we will describe the various identities that social educators develop in their work as professionals:

a. The social educator as a communicator and social agent

The Social educators are characterized by certain features that define them as a person and a professional. Therefore, it is worth highlighting their ability to communicate, which gives rise to socio-cultural interrelationships between different groups. In addition, communicating allows for an exchange of thoughts and feelings. To this end, both verbal and non-verbal communication must be considered, as gesticulation and non-verbal expressions are sometimes even more relevant than language itself (Torres et al. 2001).

In addition to the above, among the characteristics that allow the social educator to carry out their work effectively and inclusively, we can highlight the following (Torres et al. 2001):

- First, they must be an observer. Observing is a fundamental aspect of obtaining information about the environment or context in which they find themselves, along with the people, their attitudes, and their social relations.

It is then important to analyze these situations and plan the best way to intervene to improve the situation or the problem in question.

- The intervention by the social educator then takes place. At this point, the pre-planned actions are put into practice to obtain a benefit along with personal and social development in the individuals with whom the intervention occurs.

- The last phase involves a process of reflecting on the intervention implemented. In other words, this takes the form of "feedback" that allows for analyzing and evaluating the results obtained so that these can be considered for future actions or used to improve those that are not considered entirely satisfactory.

This is not an easy task since the socio-educational process is a challenge whenever we talk about the social field in which we work with people. Therefore, it is a priority to have good personal self-knowledge to discover the group in which the social work is carried out (Torres et al. 2001).

However, as indicated by Eslava et al. (2018a), this is compensated by the great professional commitment shown by social educators, who stand out due to their attitude towards work and the perseverance shown towards achieving the established goals and objectives.

b. The social educator as a leader and coordinator

According to Torres et al. (2001), the social educator as a leader is a figure who directs a specific social group but whose function goes beyond ordering or organizing their work.

A leader is the one who involves all their team in the objectives proposed as a group, the one who listens and cares for others, feeling like a member of the group. As stated by Torres et al. (2001): "The feeling or nature projected by a given group may be the feeling and nature that describes the social educator of the group" (p. 216).

In this sense, it appears that the social educator as a leader must also adopt the role of coordinator of a group or collective. For this purpose, they must be familiar with the different components of the group — including their characteristics, their weaknesses, and strengths — so that the group functions as a whole as required. Moreover, according to Torres et al. (2001), the coordinator, in this case the social educator, must be accepted by the members of the group and feel that they are part of it, so that all members are able to work in harmony towards a common goal.

In addition to the above, the social educator as a leader must have the ability to energize their team, encouraging them to participate in the programs voluntarily, unifying the forces and the desire to achieve common goals. Creating and promoting social networks and being able to keep a group together fighting for common goals are characteristics of a good leader and essential for any social educator (Eslava et al. 2018a; Fullana et al. 2011; Torres et al. 2001).

c. The Social Educator as a sociocultural animator and dynamizer

According to Torres et al. (2001), it is practically impossible to separate the field of social education from socio-cultural animation since the latter is an implicit part of the social educator's profession. In this sense, the social educator becomes a group facilitator who tries to develop the individual capacities of each subject and encourages the participation of each of the members of the group while allowing them to play an active role in evolution and improvement (Ruiz et al. 2015; Torres et al. 2001).

As proposed by Eslava et al. (2018a), this is one of the strengths of the teaching profession, as a good professional has developed the ability to empathize and diagnose the characteristics of the individuals with whom they work and therefore foster social relations.

To be a good socio-cultural facilitator or animator, the professional must display certain attitudes. These include the ability to identify social relations between different people or groups (i.e., identify possible disputes and reduce tensions) or leadership skills that include the capacity to enthuse the group while recognizing valuable proposals from others. They must

also be physically and mentally active due to the variety of tasks involved in their work. Consequently, they must have considerable organization skills (Torres et al. 2001).

Personal characteristics such as the person's attitude or personality are aspects to be considered in the performance of this profession. In this sense, a lack of interest, a feeling of demotivation, a lack of patience, or being an introverted person can be quite negative aspects when it comes to carrying out their professional duties, particularly the role of facilitator (Eslava et al. 2018a).

Discussion and Conclusions

This systematic review of the literature aimed to provide an in-depth analysis of the most recently published studies on the processes of construction and development of the professional Identity of the social educator. Following the search and the application of the various inclusion/exclusion criteria, a total of 15 articles were selected and subjected to both an analysis of their main characteristics and a thematic analysis of their content. In the following discussion, we describe several key ideas as well as future lines of research.

All the articles included in our review emphasize that numerous factors influence the construction and development of the professional identity of the social educator. These aspects include prior perception of the profession, initial training, expectations of the profession, professional experiences, personal experiences, personal values about the profession, and experiences in the labor market, among many others (Beloki et al. 2011; Eslava et al. 2018a; García et al. 2015; García et al. 2016; Rodrigo and Lozano 2018). This variety of factors coincides with the contributions of other authors who indicate that professional identity is a multifactorial construct, i.e., it is influenced by multiple aspects (Clarke et al. 2013; Kreber 2010; Alonso et al. 2015; Lankveld et al. 2017). Along these lines, the studies in this review emphasize the extraordinary impact of training and experiences in the labor market on the construction and development of the professional identity of social educators.

Concerning the first aspect, many studies highlight the numerous shortcomings in the initial training of social educators (Eslava et al. 2018a; Rodrigo and Lozano 2018; Torres et al. 2001; Varela 2017). According to Amador et al. (2014) and Fullana et al. (2011), this is due, at least in part, to the enormous difficulty in defining their competencies due to the varied and broad field of action of these professionals. The social educator is considered a multi-purpose professional who carries out their socio-educational action in different scenarios, groups, and at different stages (e.g., adulthood, childhood, and old age). This broad range of factors makes the task of defining this profession complex, making it difficult to define its professional competencies (Morales 2012; Ruiz et al. 2015; Scarpa and Corrente 2007; Torres et al. 2001). This is also why this systematic review presents the different professional identities that a social educator can develop depending on their field of action or specialization, which is in line with the work of Juliá (2011). In this case, the author specified three possible areas of action and specialization of a social educator: educational, cultural, and social.

Despite these contributions, other authors describe other areas of action for this group, such as employment, community, judicial, and health sectors (Eslava et al. 2018a, 2018b; Melendro et al. 2014). For these reasons, numerous studies argue for the need to restructure the curricula of social educators in order to clearly define the competencies of interest. Along these lines, Valero and Tejedor (2006) even propose the creation of specific specializations for the degree in Social Education.

Concerning the second aspect, i.e., professional experiences, the authors highlight how the job insecurity associated with this figure has a major impact on their professional identity. Therefore, authors such as Calderón and Gotor (2013) and Scarpa and Corrente (2007) propose

the creation of a common curriculum throughout Europe with well-defined competencies and functions that would facilitate the expansion of job opportunities in this professional sector.

Further studies are needed on the development of the professional identity of the social educator. Such studies would allow us to learn more about the profile of these professionals and thus obtain knowledge that will contribute to the improvement of this profession. To this end, we propose developing research from a biographical-narrative approach, as this is understood to be the best method for studying identities (Bolívar and Domingo 2019).

Finally, from this study we must also draw a key idea which is the need to change the educational training of social educators. In this sense, there are studies that show and analyse different training methods applied to this sector, as in the case of Veiga et al. (2015). Therefore, we also encourage the development of this type of research to promote the full personal, social and professional development of future social educators and thus contribute to the construction and development of an optimal professional identity that favours a correct work as a social educator.

Limitations

Some filters used for this Systematic Review may have caused a significant bias in the selected studies, leading to the exclusion of documents that could be of interest to the topic studied. In this sense, for example, the use of only Spanish and English may have led to the exclusion of other relevant studies written in other languages. Likewise, the selection of the databases may have led to the non-consideration of studies that could be of interest, such as some documents which have not been subjected to peer review processes. Despite all this, the decisions were taken with the aim of achieving maximum scientific rigor. Therefore, it is encouraged as a future line of research to extend this review to include other languages and different databases.

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