Are We Ignoring Youths with Disabilities in Foster Care? An Examination of Their School Performance

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This study examined the extent to which the academic achievement of adolescents receiving both foster care and special education services differs from the performance of youths involved in only foster care, special education, or general education. Extant school data were collected on 327 students, ages 13 through 21, who attended school in a large urban school district in Oregon. The study also collected information about students' general foster care experiences, such as length of time in care and type and number of placements. Analyses revealed that foster care youths in special education typically demonstrated lower performance on academic variables in contrast to one or more of the comparison groups. These youths also appeared to experience more restrictive special education placements than youths in special education only. Although foster care or special education status alone appears to place a student at risk of academic difficulties, the negative impact of interfacing with both systems appears multiplicative. Greater attention, commitment, and time must be given to the educational needs of foster care youths with disabilities by both education and child welfare professionals.

KEY WORDS: *adolescents; disabilities; education; foster care*

The number of youths in foster care has nearly doubled in almost 20 years, from 276,000 in 1985 to approximately 523,000 currently (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System, 2005). An additional 15,000 youths are in foster care through the juvenile justice system (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 2000). Statistics further indicate that 30 percent to 40 percent of foster care youths receive special education services (Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, 1999; Goerge, Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992; McIntyre & Keesler, 1986; Richardson, West, Day, & Stuart, 1989). Despite the substantial number of foster care youths with disabilities (that is, those receiving special education services), little is known about their educational performance.

The scant information that is available suggests that the needs of foster care youths with disabilities are too often ignored or ineffectively addressed within the educational system. For example, a survey conducted in Oregon found that although 39 percent of youths in foster care had an individualized education plan (IEP), only 16 percent actually received services (White, Carrington, & Freeman, as cited in Ayasse, 1995). The special education system emphasizes, and is compelled to a large extent, by parental advocacy and participation. Although the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 101-476) requires that an educational surrogate must be appointed in a timely fashion when a biological parent is unavailable, evidence indicates that for foster youths in special education, a consistent, involved advocate typically does not exist. For example, although foster parents often serve as educational surrogates, a study by the Advocates for Children of New York (2000) found that 90 percent of foster parents reported that they had no involvement in the special education process. The educational experiences of foster youths in special education are also affected by their high mobility. A change in foster placement frequently means a change in schools and when paperwork does not follow the student promptly (as is often the case), staff members of the new school have little or no information about the special education needs of the transferring foster student (Advocates for Children of New York; Ayasse). This lag often results in students being placed in

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inappropriate settings or programs and their IEPs not being implemented.

The education of foster care youths with disabilities may frequently be overlooked in child welfare as well. One study revealed, for example, that caseworkers underestimated the number of foster children who receive special education by sixfold (Goerge et al., 1992). The lack of awareness that caseworkers have regarding the special education needs of foster youths may reflect a pervasive lack of focus on the education of foster youths in general, regardless of disability. In a British study investigating the considerations of social workers when planning for foster youths, education was listed as a priority only 2 percent of the time (Aldgate, Heath, Colton, & Simm, 1993). Likewise, literature from the United States seems to confirm that caseworkers in the U.S. child welfare system, who typically have caseloads twice the recommended levels (GAO 2003), must focus on immediate child protection issues for foster youths, leaving little time for educational priorities (Goerge et al., 1992; Goren, 1996; National Association of Social Workers, 1997; Timbers, 2001).

The educational performance of foster care youths in general has been substantially investigated, and research indicates that this group of students is struggling in school. For example, Joiner (2001) found that foster youths have a high rate of absenteeism; Burley and Halpern (2001) demonstrated that foster youths score 15 percent to 20 percent below their peers on statewide achievement tests. Blome (1997) found that foster youths dropped out of school at twice the rate of youths not in care, and in a Maine survey, 40 percent of foster youths had repeated at least one grade (Edmund S. Muskie School of Public Service, 1999).

In contrast, little is known about the educational performance of foster care youths in special education, and the few studies that have investigated this area have been limited by small samples. Weinberg (1997) conducted a case study of 12 foster care youths using interviews and records review to investigate the way agencies—school, child welfare, mental health—affect the education of youths in both foster care and special education. The author found that foster youths experienced the routine lack of compliance with special education laws that affect all students with disabilities; however, youths in care were more likely to experience these routine violations because they lacked the protection and oversight of a parental advocate. Smucker and colleagues (1996) compared the school-related problems of foster care students receiving special education services for emotional disturbance ($n = 8$) with the behavioral and academic problems of three comparison groups: students in foster care only ($n = 8$), students in special education only ($n = 8$), and students in neither special education nor foster care ($n = 8$). Their findings showed that foster care youths labeled as an having emotional disturbance experienced more school problems than the comparison groups, as indicated by interviews with school staff and a review of school records.

Although school success is a critical factor for all students in achieving positive adult outcomes, educational accomplishment may be particularly important for youths in foster care, who when transitioning to adulthood may have little else to draw upon. Every year, approximately 20,000 youths are emancipated from the child welfare system when they reach the age of majority (typically age 18), and frequently they enter adult life with little to no financial resources, community connections, or help from family (Carroll, 2002; GAO, 1999). The odds for successful transition into adulthood are often stacked against foster youths, and research investigating the outcomes of these youths is troubling. A national study of former foster youths, ages 18 to 24, who had aged out of the child welfare system found that $2^1/_2$ to four years after leaving care, 30 percent were receiving public assistance, 50 percent had used illegal drugs, and 25 percent had been homeless at least one night (Westat, 1991). Furthermore, foster youths with disabilities (emotional, chronic health, physical, or developmental disabilities) demonstrated significantly poorer outcomes than their peers in foster care who did not have identified disabilities (Westat). Perhaps most important, research investigating resilience among foster care youths has demonstrated that educational achievement (for example, high school completion) is one of the best predictors of positive adult outcomes, such as employment and postsecondary education (Jackson, 1994; Westat).

Although education may be the most important bridge that foster youths have to successful adult life, many foster youths who also experience disability are stumbling before they get across, as the whipsaw effect of both foster care and special education may place them at even further risk of

academic failure. The purpose of this study was to investigate the educational performance of foster youths in special education. Specifically, the study examined the extent to which the educational achievement of foster youths in special education differs from the academic performance of youths in foster care alone, youths in special education alone, and youths in general education (not foster care or special education).

METHOD

The Oregon Division of Human Services (DHS) Child Welfare (the state foster care program) and the Oregon Youth Authority (OYA, which has a separate foster care program for youths involved in the juvenile justice system) identified all foster care youths, ages 13 to 21, whose zip codes fell within a large urban school district in Oregon that serves approximately 57,000 students; using this selection process, 256 foster care youths were identified by DHS and 22 youths were identified by OYA. All youths were currently in foster care on the day the list was formed. The names and birth dates of each youth were forwarded by the agencies to the school district. In addition, DHS provided information about each youth's foster care experience, including the number of foster care placements the youth had, the type of foster care placement (for example, nonrelative or kinship care), and length of time in foster care. Using names and dates of birth, school staff attempted to match each youth with his or her school student identification number and determine which youths received special education services. Among the 278 youth identified by DHS and OYA, the school district was able to locate identification numbers for 267 students, of which 222 were enrolled at the time. Sixty-four of these students attended an alternative school, and no academic data were available for these youths. Among the remaining 158 students, 88 of these foster youths were not enrolled in special education and made up the foster-care-only group. Approximately 44 percent ($n = 70$) of the 158 foster care youths were enrolled in special education and assigned to the special education and foster care group. According to the school district, 29 percent of these youths had a primary disability of emotional disturbance; 19 percent had a physical disability (that is, orthopedic, hearing or vision impairment or both, or other health impaired); 44 percent had a learning disability; 4 percent had a cognitive disability (mental retardation, autism); and 4 percent had a communication disorder.

A comparison group of 81 students, ages 13 to 21, who were in special education only (not in foster care) was also selected. The goal was to have the special-education-only group resemble the special education and foster care group in terms of disability so that this could be ruled out as a factor if the analyses revealed any between-group differences. Thus, stratified sampling was used to select the comparison group, ensuring that the two special education groups had equal proportions of students with emotional, physical, learning, cognitive, and communication disabilities. Specifically, students in the special-education-only comparison group were randomly selected from all special education students (ages 13 to 21, not in foster care) in each disability group.

A final comparison group of 88 students in general education only (that is, youths who were in neither special education nor foster care) was randomly selected. Thus, the study included four groups: foster care and special education (group 1, $n = 70$); foster care only (group 2, $n = 88$); special education only (group 3, $n = 81$); and general education only (group 4, $n = 88$), with a total sample size of 327.

For each study participant, data were gathered by school staff on the following seven academic variables: (1) cumulative grade point average (0.00 to 4.00 grading system); (2) number of days absent (year to date); (3) cumulative earned credits toward graduation (22 required); (4) number of schools attended in student's career; (5) number of grades retained; (6) performance on standardized state testing in math and reading (based on a proficiency level assigned by the school district where a 1 = high performance, exceeds standards, and 5 = fails to meet standard, very low performance); and (7) exemption rates on state testing. In addition, the school district provided basic demographic information for each student (that is, race and ethnicity, gender, age, grade, and name of student's school). For study participants enrolled in special education, data were gathered on the type and level of restrictiveness of the student's special education placement.

PARTICIPANTS

Among the 327 students participating in the study, 59.6 percent were boys. The study's groups varied somewhat by gender; the special education groups

(special education only and foster care and special education) had a larger percentage of males (Table 1). This reflects national statistics, which indicate that boys receive special education services at twice the rate of girls (Rousso & Wehmeyer, 2002). In terms of race and ethnicity, 176 participants were white, 109 were African American, 16 were Hispanic, 16 were Asian, and 10 were Native American. The foster care groups (foster care only and foster care and special education) had a larger percentage of African American students; this difference is consistent with the over-representation of African American youths in foster care on a national level (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System, 2005). The average age of participants was 14.9, and the average grade level was 9.67. Although detailed information on the socioeconomic status of participants was not available, the school district indicated which students received free or reduced lunch at school. This included all youths in the foster care groups (foster care only and foster care and special education), 22 youths in special education only, and eight youths in general education only. Among foster care youths, the median length of time in care was 133 weeks, with most youths (72 percent) experiencing one to four placements. The majority of these youths (79 percent) were in a nonrelative foster care placement.

RESULTS

Differences Among Study Groups on Academic Indicators

To investigate whether the study groups varied in terms of educational achievement, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each academic variable. In each ANOVA, the independent variable was group status (foster care and special education, foster care only, special education only, or general education only), and the dependent variable was the group performance on a particular academic indicator. When an ANOVA revealed a significant difference between the study groups on a particular variable, a post hoc analysis was conducted to discover where that difference rested among the four groups. Post hoc analyses were conducted using *t* tests, with *p* values adjusted to control for multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni method.

Significant omnibus differences were obtained (Table 2) for cumulative grade point average [$F(3, 323) = 3.77, p \leq .01$]; number of schools attended [$F(3,323) = 7.52, p \leq .0001$]; and cumulative earned credits [$F(3,323) = 3.24, p \leq .05$]; performance on standardized state testing in reading [$F(3,190) = 15.19, p \leq .0001$]; performance on standardized state testing in math [$F(3,182) = 13.55, p \leq .0001$]; and exemption rates on standardized state testing [$F(3,323) = 6.55, p \leq .0001$]. Follow-up analyses ($p \leq .05$) revealed that youths who were in the foster care and special education group had significantly lower grade point averages (GPAs) than youths in general education only (group 4). Additionally, youths in the foster care and special education group changed schools more frequently than did youths in the special-education-only group or the general-education-only group (group 4). Youths in the foster care and special education group also earned significantly fewer credits toward graduation compared with youths in the general-education-only group. In terms of performance on state testing, the foster care and special education group and the special-education-only group had significantly lower state testing scores in reading and math. Specifically, youths in the foster care and special education group had greater difficulty than youths in the foster-care-only and general-education-only groups

Table 1: Ethnicity and Gender for Youths with Disabilities

	Foster Care and Special Education			Foster Care Only			Special Education Only			General Education Only		
Race / Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Asian	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	3	6	4	4	8
Native American	1	0	1	2	0	2	4	1	5	0	2	2
African American	17	12	29	23	20	43	12	7	19	9	9	18
White	27	11	38	21	17	38	30	14	44	32	24	56
Hispanic	0	2	2	1	2	3	5	2	7	4	0	4
Total	45	25	70	47	41	88	54	27	81	49	39	88

Table 2: Summary Statistics of Academic Variables for All Study Groups

	Foster Care and Special Education			Foster Care Only			Special Education Only			General Education Only			
Academic Variable	***M***	***SD***	***n***	***M***	***SD***	***n***	***M***	***SD***	***n***	***M***	***SD***	***n***	***F***
Grade point average	1.34	1.11	70	1.49	1.27	88	1.50	1.17	81	1.96	1.44	88	3.77**
Number of days absent	8.49	8.48	70	5.35	5.83	88	8.93	13.19	81	6.97	9.20	88	2.41
Cumulative earned credits	5.35	6.83	70	7.76	8.70	88	7.73	7.60	81	9.29	8.20	88	3.24*
Number of schools attended	4.06	2.04	70	3.43	1.67	88	3.02	1.26	81	2.94	1.45	88	7.52****
Number of grades retained	.26	.47	70	.16	.55	86	.27	.57	81	.13	.40	88	.174
Exemption rate on state testing	.40	.84	70	.07	.30	88	.28	.76	81	.06	.28	88	6.55****
Performance on state testing: math[a]	3.64	1.32	33	2.74	1.19	57	3.67	1.11	45	2.39	1.11	51	13.55****
Performance on state testing: reading[a]	3.80	.90	35	2.84	.91	58	3.39	1.04	49	2.44	1.16	52	15.19****

[a]Items are reversed scored, where a 1 = exceeds standards and a 5 = fails to meet standards.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ****$p < .0001$.

in both reading and math. Students in the special-education-only group demonstrated poorer performance than those in the general-education-only group in reading, and poorer performance than youths in the foster-care-only group and general-education-only group in math. Finally, youths in the foster care and special education group were significantly more likely to be exempted from standardized state testing than youths in either the foster-care-only or general-education-only groups. No other significant differences between the study groups were revealed. Thus, on all but one variable, when a significant group difference was found, the difference rested between the foster care and special education group (group 1) and one or more of the other groups. The only exception was on standardized testing, where the special-education-only group (group 3) demonstrated significantly lower performance than group 4 in reading and groups 2 and 4 on math.

Because study groups varied on important demographic characteristics, analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted to control for possible covariates that may be contributing to the group differences described earlier. Specifically, an ANCOVA was conducted for each of the seven academic variables, where study group was the independent variable and gender, race–ethnicity (minority compared with nonminority), and free-lunch status were entered as covariates. Race–ethnicity appeared to be a significant covariate for number of schools attended. However, even when it was statistically controlled for, significant group differences persisted. Thus, when race–ethnicity was held constant statistically, youths in the foster care and special education group still changed schools significantly more than did youths in the special-education-only group or the general-education-only group.

Restrictiveness of Special Education Placement

Restrictiveness of special education placement was investigated using a series of codes used by the school district for federal reporting purposes. The school district sorts each student's special education placement into one of five categories: (1) regular class or resource room, (2) separate class (self-contained classroom), (3) public separate (separate public school), (4) private separate (separate private school), and (5) hospital (residential treatment center, inpatient hospitalization). We rank ordered these five placement codes or categories according to restrictiveness of placement: regular class or resource room was rated as least restrictive (1); separate class was rated as moderately restrictive (2); and public separate, private separate, and hospital were rated as most restrictive (3). Pearson chi-square was used to evaluate whether the placements of youths in the foster care and special education and special-education-only groups varied by level of restrictiveness, and a significant difference was obtained [$\chi^2(2, N = 323) = 10.20, p \leq .01$]. Thirty percent of foster care youths in the foster care and special education group had

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a special education placement that fell within the most restrictive range, compared with 15 percent of youths in the special-education-only group. In contrast, 65 percent of youths in the special-education-only group had a placement that fell within the least restrictive range, compared with 44 percent of youths in the foster care and special education group.

Relationship Between Foster Care Experience and Academic Performance

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to evaluate whether performance on the seven academic indicators varied by length of time in foster care (days) and number of foster care placements. The results indicated that number of foster care placements was negatively correlated with GPA ($r = -.14$, $p \leq .05$) and positively correlated with proficiency level on state testing in math ($r = .23$, $p \leq .05$). Thus, as the number of foster placements went up, GPA decreased. This was also the case with math. Because this item was reverse scored (where a 1 = high performance and 5 = fails to meet standards), the positive correlation indicates that actual performance on state testing in math decreased as number of placements increased. No other significant results were found.

A two-tailed *t* test was used to assess whether the foster care and special education group had a greater number of placements than the foster-care-only group, and a significant difference was found ($p \leq .05$). The average number of placements for youths in both foster care and special education was 4.45 ($SD = 4.58$) compared with 3.35 ($SD = 2.80$) for youths in foster care only.

A series of *t* tests were calculated to evaluate whether academic performance varied by type of foster care placement (relative or kinship foster care vs. nonrelative foster care). A *t* test was conducted for each academic variable; the results indicated that students placed in nonrelative care had significantly higher GPAs ($p \leq .05$) and a greater number of credits towards graduation ($p \leq .05$). No other differences were found for type of placement.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the academic achievement of youths involved in foster care **and** special education, both in absolute terms and in comparison with their peers who experienced **only** foster care, special education, or general education. Consistent with other research (for example, Goerge et al., 1992), we found that a large percentage of youths in foster care were receiving special education services (44 percent). The results also indicated that foster care youths with disabilities performed poorly in school, lagged behind their peers in a number of important indices of academic achievement, and experienced significant challenges to educational success. For example, youths in foster care with disabilities had lower GPAs than youths in general education, changed schools more frequently than youths in general education and special education only, earned fewer credits toward graduation than youths in general education, had lower scores on state testing, and were more likely to be exempted from testing than youths in general education and foster care only. In comparison with other students with disabilities, foster youths experienced more restrictive special education placements. In contrast to other youths in care, foster youths with disabilities had more foster home placements. With regard to foster care experience, the findings indicated that as the number of youth foster placements increases, GPA and performance on state testing in math decreases. The results also suggested that youths placed in nonrelative care (compared with kinship) had higher GPAs and a greater number of credits towards graduation.

Limitations

Several limitations exist in the interpretation of the study's results. First, it is quite possible that some youths in the foster-care-only group experienced a disability but were not identified for special education services, or their disability was undiagnosed or undocumented. Indeed, this likelihood may be high as the experiences of youths in foster care (for example, lack a consistent educational advocate; frequent school changes) often result in their special education needs going unnoticed and unmet. Second, our sample involved students from one urban school district, which limits the generalizability of

the findings. Third, it is important to note that the special education groups may have differed by severity of disability. For example, youths identified through the juvenile justice system may have had more severe behavioral disabilities than youths selected from the general special education population. Although the study used stratified sampling to assure that youths in the foster care and special education group and youths in the special-education-only group resembled one another in terms of disability type, unfortunately, no information about severity of disability was available from the school district. Finally, this study was not able to qualitatively explore what experiences in foster care and special education contributed to the poor educational performance of foster youths with disabilities. For example, before their placement in foster care, many youths lived in families overwhelmed by poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, illness, and poor education, and this study was not able to evaluate the impact of those experiences on a youth's current educational functioning. In addition, youths have been exposed to neglect, abuse, and separation from family, and this study did not investigate the effect of this trauma on the academic achievement of youths. It also is likely that issues related to disability—such as a foster parent's ability and training to support the unique needs of a youth with significant emotional or behavioral challenges—further contributes to the school performance, but that was not explored in this study. Like the current study, earlier research on the educational performance of foster youths (for example, Blome, 1997; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Joiner, 2001) has not explored the impact of potentially significant variables such as poverty, quality of foster home placement, and nature of abuse, and this is an area for future research.

Implications for Future Research

These research findings demonstrate that foster youths with disabilities lag behind their peers, including foster youths who do not receive special education services, on a number of important academic variables. Therefore, researchers who are examining the educational performance of youths in foster care should work to identify which youths are also in special education. In general, earlier research on the school performance of foster care youths has failed to do this, and it is likely that foster youths with disabilities may contribute disproportionately to the lower academic scores of foster youths in general. Given that a sizable percentage of foster care youths receive special education and that these youths appear to experience greater educational difficulties than foster youths in general, it may not be appropriate to treat them as a homogenous group.

In addition, future research should investigate the relationship between kinship care and educational achievement for foster youths with disabilities. Our findings suggest that foster youths in special education who are placed with relatives had lower GPAs and fewer credits compared with youths placed in nonrelative care. Earlier research has suggested the opposite to be true. For example, using data from a Los Angeles county, Iglehart (1994) found that adolescents in kinship care demonstrated greater placement stability and better mental health functioning. Brooks and Barth (1998) found no relationship between relative foster home placement and grades or retention based on the reports of foster parents. Thus, the relationship between academic performance and kinship care revealed in this study should be interpreted cautiously, and more research is needed. As mentioned earlier, future research should also investigate the role of other important life experiences (such as poverty, nature of abuse, relationship with birth family and foster parents) in the educational achievement of youths in care.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest serious cause for concern regarding the academic performance of foster care youths in general, and foster youths with disabilities in particular. Although foster care or special education status alone appears to place a student at greater risk for academic difficulties, the negative impact of interfacing with both systems is multiplicative. These youths appear to be experiencing a whipsaw effect as they simultaneously face challenges related to special education and foster care separately, as well as the interaction between the two. An example of this multiplicative effect can be found in the higher rate of foster placement turnover among foster youths with disabilities. Instability in foster care, which is typically associated with a change in schools, creates educational challenges for all foster youths, but adjusting to a new educational setting may be especially difficult for a foster youth with a disability. The new school may be unaware of his or her special education needs and

fail to provide necessary educational supports as stipulated in the student's IEP. Such problems in providing appropriate special education support may become compounded over time as foster youths with disabilities are more likely to experience multiple care placements. In turn, they may be more likely to experience instability in care because their foster parents lack the training, support, and resources necessary to address their special needs.

As stated by Heath and colleagues (1994), "Average inputs are not enough for children with above-average educational needs. Clearly, the educational needs of separated (foster) children must be given much higher priority" (p. 258). This statement could not be truer for foster care youths with disabilities. Greater attention, commitment, and time must be given to the educational needs of foster care youths with disabilities in general education, special education, and child welfare. At a very basic level, there is a need for timely exchange of information between systems. Our sampling methodology—the child welfare agencies first identifying youths in care and transmitting this information to the school district for determination of special education status—was used because the school district and child welfare could not identify this group from their own records. Educators need to know which students are in foster care, and child welfare professionals need to have information about a youth's disability needs and involvement in special education. Legislative barriers (such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, P.L. 93-380) that make this exchange of information difficult must be addressed. Limited opportunities for schools and child protection agencies to collaborate are emerging, but educators and child welfare professionals must be proactive and work to engage one another if partnerships are to form. For example, as mentioned earlier, the transition planning and services that are offered through foster care independent living programs are rarely connected to the transition planning and services that occur through special education. Furthermore, there is a strong need to train educators on how to support the specific education and transition needs of foster youths. As Noble (1997) pointed out, "Foster children exhibit behavior problems that are not unlike those of children living with their biological or adoptive families…. Although these problems are also found among children not in foster care, the reasons behind them are different. Therefore, intervention must be different" (p. 26). Similarly, professionals in child welfare require education and training on the disability-related needs of youths. This information is critical for caseworkers' effective planning and support for youths in care, such as in selecting the best foster care placement and in appropriately interpreting and responding to problems that arise. Training should also be offered to foster parents and educational surrogates regarding how to advocate effectively for foster youths in the special education process. Foster parents and surrogates must be informed that youths are eligible for special education services and of how the system works if they are to have any chance to be an ally for the youths. SW

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