Inclusive Education and Social Justice
Queer, Feminist, and Decolonial Studies to Combat Violence and Discrimination in Schools

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To educate as the practice of freedom
is a way of teaching that anyone can learn.
bell hooks

Abstract

In an era of heightened global awareness around diversity and inclusion, the role of education as a transformative tool in addressing systemic inequalities cannot be overstated. This article explores an innovative pedagogical framework that integrates queer, feminist, and decolonial studies, offering a unique lens to combat the pervasive violence and discrimination present in educational environments. Schools, as microcosms of society, often mirror the deep-seated prejudices and exclusionary practices seen in the broader world, particularly around issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation. These dynamics significantly hinder the educational opportunities and well-being of marginalized students.

Building upon the foundational works of Freire, hooks and Crenshaw, this article delves into the intersectionality of discrimination, recognizing how overlapping systems of oppression based on gender, race, sexuality, or socio-economic status, compound the challenges students face. Through the application of queer, feminist, and decolonial perspectives, this article emphasizes the importance of creating educational spaces that acknowledge diversity and actively engage with it, fostering environments of inclusivity, equity, and critical dialogue.

Keywords: *diversity and educational inclusion; intersectionality; queer and gender Studies; critical and transformative pedagogy; decolonial studies.*

1. Educational Disparities and Discrimination: Forms of Violence in School Environments, Between Sexism and Racism

In recent years, the debate on school inclusion and equal educational opportunities has highlighted the need to address, in a targeted manner, the

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inequalities that affect LGBTIQ+ students and those belonging to ethnic minorities. According to the Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe report (Eurydice, 2023), students from these groups continue to experience disadvantages compared to their peers, reporting lower academic performance and higher exposure to discrimination:

> People with certain characteristics may face more barriers to accessing resources, such as quality mainstream education, and they may be discriminated against. Discrimination can be structural (e.g., segregation policies or a lack of resources to meet specific needs); it can be compounded by prejudice (both intentional and unintentional), and it can be multifaceted (e.g., bullying of LGBTIQ+ students in schools, which might be compounded if teachers are not adequately trained on how to react) (Ibid.: 10).

The aim of this article is not only to understand the structural roots of exclusion but to propose concrete pedagogical strategies that transform schools into spaces where all students can thrive, regardless of their background. In doing so, the paper makes a novel contribution to the field by situating intersectional and decolonial frameworks within the context of educational practices, offering new insights into how these approaches can actively reshape teaching methodologies and curricula. By advocating for the deconstruction of dominant epistemologies and the rejection of one-size-fits-all models of education, this work calls for a radical rethinking of educational norms, ensuring that they reflect the lived realities and aspirations of marginalized adolescents. Through this intersectional approach, the article contributes to a broader conversation on social justice in education, challenging traditional paradigms and advocating for a more inclusive and transformative educational landscape.

In many European schools, the lack of specific training for teaching staff perpetuates a climate of exclusion. In Italy, the report from the Authority for Children and Adolescents (AGIA, 2023) emphasizes how girls of immigrant origin face complex obstacles related to gender stereotypes and language barriers. Thirty-seven percent of these girls report having experienced discrimination at school, while many feel unrepresented in the educational materials used in class. Moreover, the report calls for the implementation of educational strategies that respect diversity and foster a sense of belonging. These data reinforce the urgency of adopting targeted educational policies, including teacher training, the development of inclusive curricula, and the implementation of strategies to promote cultural and social integration. An equitable and sensitive educational approach is essential to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, can access the same opportunities for learning and development. The lack of adequate school policies contributes to maintaining a climate of intolerance and inequality within schools, as highlighted by the Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in Schools in Europe report (Eurydice, 2023). The report emphasizes

that migrant-background students, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and ethnic minorities remain among the most vulnerable groups, with scarce targeted strategies at the national level. Despite Italy's adoption of the National LGBT+ Strategy for the Prevention and Combating of Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity 2022–2025 (Dipartimento Pari Opportunità & UNAR, 2022), for instance, the need for concrete measures to ensure safe and inclusive school environments remains evident. The report urges educational authorities to develop teacher training programs and strategies that promote respect for diversity and counter discrimination. These findings underscore the need for more inclusive and sensitive educational approaches, both at the institutional system level and in daily teaching methodologies and practices (Eurydice, 2023). This is why queer, feminist, and decolonial studies today represent essential approaches for rethinking the role of educational institutions, fostering greater social justice and authentic integration for those living in vulnerable conditions. These studies not only challenge the mainstream value system—rooted in an idea of normality disconnected from lived realities—but also provide tools to analyze and understand the interconnections between various forms of oppression, as demonstrated by Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). They can offer insights into educational strategies and policies.

Gender-based violence and discrimination exert a profoundly negative impact on girls' educational trajectories, limiting their learning opportunities and personal development. Gender-based violence, which can manifest in various forms—from verbal harassment to degrees of physical aggression—undermines girls' confidence and their motivation to actively participate in the educational process. Feminist authors such as bell hooks (hooks, 1994) suggest that a safe and inclusive school environment is essential for human potential development (Nussbaum, 2010), as it fosters a culture where students can grow free from judgment or discrimination. The prevalence of harassment in educational settings and discrimination reduces girls' school engagement, particularly for those already living in vulnerable conditions.

Racialization processes also act as an invisible barrier, influencing the self-esteem and self-perception of migrant and/or minority girls and boys. Racial prejudice can emerge both in daily interactions with peers and teachers, as well as in implicit institutional practices that relegate these students to marginal roles or underestimate their abilities (Macias *et al.*, 2020). As illustrated by the works of Said (1978) and Spivak (1988), such processes of racialization reinforce the boundaries between "dominant" and "subaltern" identities, limiting access to quality educational and professional resources. Recent studies highlight that girls from ethnic minorities or with a migrant background often face experiences of discrimination that make their educational journey challenging, exacerbating isolation and social exclusion. For instance, Evans-Winters' (2021) work on racialization and educational in-

equalities, focusing on Black girls, emphasizes how the intersections of race, class, and gender determine different experiences of oppression and privilege in schools. The World Yearbook of Education, edited by Janelle Scott (2023), analyzes in detail how racialization and exclusionary logics in areas of citizenship and social justice affect access to educational and professional resources, especially for ethnic minorities in global contexts. As outlined by Crenshaw's (1989) young people from marginalized groups thus experience a unique combination of oppressions based on gender and race, understood as a social rather than biological category, which dramatically impacts their well-being and school participation.

2. The Importance of Queer and Feminist Studies in Educational Practices

Addressing these issues requires adopting educational approaches that incorporate a sensitivity to gender violence and racial discrimination, along with active school policies against harassment. Teacher training on these topics and the implementation of decolonial, queer, and feminist educational practices can help create learning environments where marginalized students feel safe and valued, finding the space they need to fully express their potential. Following Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of "conscientização" and in symmetrical opposition to Bourdieu's (1970) theory of reproduction, the educational process can become a tool for liberation. It can challenge hegemonic social structures while supporting the construction of active and conscious citizenship. This approach aligns deeply with feminist and queer pedagogies, which promote a critical understanding of power dynamics and social inequalities.

Feminist pedagogies, for example, highlight how gender norms and patriarchal structures influence education, encouraging students to recognize and challenge these forms of oppression (Tong, 2009). Similarly, queer pedagogies disrupt traditional conventions of identity and sexuality, fostering inclusive learning spaces where adolescents can freely explore their identities (Bakhtin, 1984). Within this framework, it is crucial that all adolescents, regardless of their cultural background or gender identity, feel represented and valued (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). The intersectional approach becomes a key concept in analyzing how various forms of oppression intersect and affect the educational experience. This perspective emphasizes how educational practices must be sensitive to these complexities to ensure authentic inclusion. Queer and feminist studies have demonstrated how gender hierarchies and sexual norms influence not only curricular content but also the ways in which knowledge is transmitted and validated. Queer approaches, as stated by López-Pereyra and Merse (López-Pereyra & Merse, 2023), aim to deconstruct patriarchal and cisnormative power structures, promoting dialogical and collaborative learning that challenges predefined gender norms.

Education should, therefore, become a critical and self-reflective process, one that questions normative categories that regulate power relations. This approach is essential to create inclusive educational spaces where adolescents can explore their identities without fear of judgment or exclusion. Viewed through the lens of feminism and queer theory, education becomes a space of transformation, encouraging all adolescents to develop critical awareness of gender, racial, and sexual inequalities (hooks, 1994; Burgio, 2022). In particular, queer theory emphasizes the fluidity of identities and experiences, recognizing that categories of gender and sexuality are not fixed but are socially constructed and constantly evolving (Butler, 1990). The multifaceted dimensions of personal identities and their shifts must be considered and incorporated into educational practices to promote genuine inclusion. Consequently, it is essential to adopt pedagogical approaches that encourage critical reflection and open discussion, fostering an education that not only informs but also shapes citizens aware of the complexities of their identities (Burgio & Lopez, 2023). Promoting inclusive education that integrates queer and feminist theories allows for addressing the oppressions and injustices faced by adolescents, particularly those from ethnic or sexual minorities, thereby creating a fairer and more equitable learning environment (Lopez, 2018).

Educational practices must also consider increasingly diverse classrooms, populated by students from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. This context requires a rethinking of teaching methodologies, content, and approaches to effectively respond to all students' needs (Fujino *et al.*, 2018). For instance, racialized students often experience dynamics of exclusion not only based on their ethnic origin but also on intersections with gender, social class, or ableism. These experiences determine who exists "above or below" the line of power (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Dominant narratives often feminize or racialize these students, projecting stereotypes of vulnerability onto them that further marginalize them within educational settings (Morris, 2016). As Rios (2011: 77) asserts, "Schools become a stage where racialized and feminized students must negotiate their identities in response to norms that perceive them as 'others'". Implementing intersectional pedagogical methodologies that consider the diverse dimensions of students' identities and experiences is crucial to ensuring that all adolescents feel seen, recognized, welcomed, and valued in the educational context. In this way, education becomes a powerful tool of emancipation, capable of challenging oppressive social norms and promoting a more just and inclusive society (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Implementing approaches that recognize and value students' diversity not only improves their well-being but also fosters a richer and more stimulating learning environment, preparing adolescents to live in a complex and interconnected society (López, 2018).

3. Decolonial Studies and Critique of Dominant Epistemologies

Decolonial studies, represented by authors such as Walter Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano, offer a crucial theoretical framework for questioning the Eurocentric epistemologies that dominate contemporary educational systems. Mignolo (2007) emphasizes how knowledge and educational practices are intrinsically linked to the historical and cultural contexts from which they emerge, highlighting the need to decolonize knowledge in order to overcome the limitations imposed by a monolithic and Westernized view of knowledge. In this regard, Quijano (2000) introduced the concept of "coloniality of knowledge," pointing out that colonial domination did not end with the formal abolition of colonialism but continues to influence the epistemological and social structures of contemporary societies.

Various important Latin American authors, such as María Lugones and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, offer crucial perspectives for understanding the intersections between gender, race, and coloniality. Lugones (2008) analyzes how gender hierarchies are intertwined with colonial dynamics, proposing a feminist critique of coloniality that highlights the double oppression of non-white women. Several studies emphasize the importance of indigenous knowledge (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2012), arguing that for the creation of a more just and inclusive society, it is essential to integrate the practices and epistemologies of indigenous communities into educational processes. In these postmodern contexts, transforming learning and, in turn, the transformative power it can generate (Mezirow, 1991), requires initiating a reflective process that enables students to question and challenge deeply rooted beliefs and acquired cultural norms. Such reflection is essential to develop critical consciousness, which not only acknowledges structural inequalities but also promotes active engagement for social change.

Adopting a decolonial approach in educational processes and teaching interventions allows for the promotion of a more inclusive and pluralistic education, one where alternative knowledge systems, not just those recognized as "Western," are embraced. This is not simply about adding diverse cultural content, but rather about restructuring pedagogical practices that take into account the diverse epistemologies and lived experiences of students (Bhambra, 2014). For instance, integrating methodologies based on indigenous knowledge or from other cultural traditions can enrich the learning environment: by offering a different perspective, they can challenge dominant narratives, and connect with themes important to younger generations, as indicated by the UNESCO Agenda 2030 goals, such as respect for pacha mama, which is rooted in an ecological vision of relationships between living beings and the Earth that is fundamental to the philosophy of life of various Latin American native peoples. Decolonial education thus contributes to building a multicultural and pluralistic identity, allowing students to recognize and appreciate diversity as a fundamental resource for societies, especially by providing examples of alternative

perspectives to the mainstream and the power structures that both cause and result from it (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This approach not only promotes a more equitable learning environment but also helps prepare students to live in a globally interconnected world, facing new challenges by drawing on multiple cultural models. In the end, critiquing dominant epistemologies, combined with integrating decolonial educational practices, is a crucial step toward creating educational spaces where every student feels represented and valued, contributing to a more just and respectful society.

4. Critical Pedagogy, Dialogical Approach, and Participatory Practices

In this diverse school context, dialogical methodologies play a crucial role in creating an inclusive environment where every voice can be heard and respected. Educational practices such as "Dialogic Literary Gatherings" (Flecha & Gutiérrez, 2017) or the "Dialogic Model of Prevention and Resolution of Conflicts" (Villarejo-Carballido *et al.*, 2019) offer tools to address racial and gender-based discrimination, creating safe spaces where students can explore and discuss their experiences and perceptions. These methods encourage shared and participatory understanding, where each individual is invited to contribute their unique and irreplaceable narrative, thus facilitating an open and authentic dialogue on various aspects. The dialogical approach is inspired by various pedagogical traditions, including those of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, who emphasize the importance of students' active participation in the learning process. Freire argued that "education must be an act of dialogue, in which teachers and students engage in a mutual learning process" (Giroux, 1970: 92). At the same time, according to Giroux, "[critical pedagogy] sees power as a relationship that produces conditions allowing students to engage in a culture of critique, raise and address urgent societal issues, and partly define the problems to be explored and the disciplinary boundaries that can be crossed" (Giroux, 2014: 49). This pedagogical vision, which requires the contribution of all for the construction of knowledge, is fundamental for developing critical consciousness among adolescents, enabling them to identify the power structures and social norms that perpetuate oppression and inequality.

At the core of these "learning communities" is the emphasis on the multiplicity of voices and perspectives, recalling Bakhtin's notion of "polyphony" (1984). This ongoing dialogue among all participants in the learning community not only promotes an inclusive educational environment but also allows adolescents to develop empathy and critical skills, enriching themselves through the experiences and perspectives of their peers, including those from marginalized and/or racialized backgrounds. As Flecha and Gutiérrez (2017: 45) note, "dialogue is a powerful tool for emancipation, allowing students to express their opinions and feel like active participants in the educational process". The participatory approach, in particular, is

based on the idea that every student, regardless of their identity or background, has something meaningful to contribute. As Dewey (1916: 71) stated, "education must be a form of social life in which the individual learns to live in community". Through collaborative and dialogical learning practices, students not only acquire knowledge but also develop essential social and relational skills necessary to navigate a complex and interconnected world. Dialogical practices provide an opportunity to directly address issues of gender and race, challenging stereotypical and discriminatory views of social roles that marginalize individuals and entire social groups, silencing their voices. Through open and respectful discussions, students can recognize and confront injustices, promoting a sense of collective responsibility and commitment to social change (Burgio, 2022). Education, thus, is not just a process of transmitting knowledge but becomes a powerful tool for the co-construction of social transformation: "Critical pedagogy becomes a challenge in the present historical moment because it emphasizes critical reflection, bridging the gap between learning and daily life, understanding the relationship between power and uncomfortable knowledge, and extending democratic prerogatives and the right to identity through the resources of history" (Giroux, 2014: 48). The aforementioned practices of "Dialogic Literary Gatherings" (DLGs) allow, for example, students to engage with classic literary texts, fostering a shared and participatory understanding of the study material. This method enables students to develop empathy and critical skills, enriching their learning through the diverse perspectives of their peers. Research projects such as *INCLUD-ED: Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education* (2006–2011), *REFUGE-ED: Effective Practices in Education and Mental Health for the Integration of Refugee Children* (2020–2023), and *REVERS-ED: Trends on Educational Inequalities Over Time and Successful Interventions that Contribute to Reverse Them* (2024-2027) demonstrate with scientific evidence, for instance, that the inclusion of dialogical and participatory teaching practices is particularly effective for the well-being and academic success of students, including those from marginalized and/or socio-culturally disadvantaged backgrounds. These practices facilitate genuine integration into the school community, offering safe and welcoming spaces where the diversity of viewpoints and experiences of all students is acknowledged and respected.

5. The Impact of Gender Violence and Discrimination on Educational Pathways

Feminist and decolonial studies place a strong emphasis on equity and inclusion, highlighting how structural inequalities intersect with racial and gendered conditions. This intersectional approach is crucial for understanding the complexity of experiences faced by vulnerable adolescents, as "identities are not fixed but rather intersect in ways that affect their experi-

ences of oppression" (Crenshaw, 1989: 139). An equity-oriented educational system can provide real support for vulnerable adolescents, helping them overcome language and cultural barriers. According to López (2018), educational practices must recognize and value diversity, not just as something to tolerate, but as a fundamental resource for learning. This means "creating environments where differences are celebrated and where students feel empowered to express their identities" (Ibid: 205). Creating learning environments where differences are not only tolerated but recognized and valued is essential for promoting true inclusion. Pedagogical practices must also be informed by a decolonial perspective that challenges the Eurocentric norms present in curricula. Mignolo (2011: 47) argues that "decolonizing knowledge is a crucial step toward educational equity, as it allows the inclusion of diverse epistemologies and the valuing of non-Western knowledge". This approach not only enriches the educational landscape but also gives vulnerable adolescents the chance to see themselves in the narratives and content of their learning. Gender violence and discrimination, coupled with racialization and harassment, have a profoundly negative impact on adolescents' education, particularly those from ethnic or sexual minorities. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory suggests that these young people experience a unique combination of oppressions based on both gender and race, dramatically influencing their well-being and school participation. This concept is crucial for understanding how experiences of violence and discrimination overlap and amplify, creating systemic barriers to learning. To address discrimination and promote an inclusive educational environment, it is essential to also combat the authoritarian dynamics that may pervade the school system. Scholars from the Frankfurt School, such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, have analyzed how authoritarianism is a political phenomenon that is constructed and reinforced even in educational settings, where it acts as a severe limitation to students' freedom of expression and the development of critical thinking (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). As Horkheimer and Adorno assert, "education should promote freedom and rationality, not perpetuate authoritarianism" (Ibid.: 178). In this sense, education must serve as a tool to develop critical consciousness among students, enabling them to recognize and resist forms of authoritarianism and discrimination around them.

hooks (1994: 10) stresses that "education is an act of freedom and a practice of resistance against oppression", suggesting that pedagogical practices should always aim to emancipate and support marginalized groups, including those who are racialized and/or discriminated against based on gender.

Experiences of gender violence, discrimination, and processes of racialization profoundly influence the educational path of girls, particularly those with a migrant background or belonging to minority groups. Educational institutions—including schools and universities—are not immune to incidents of sexism and harassment, which can limit the educational and professional opportunities for young women (Biemmi, Chiappelli, & Guirado,

2023). In many schools and universities, girls face forms of intersectional violence that overlap with their already complex vulnerability due to gender. These dynamics not only harm the psychosocial well-being of female students but also place them at a disadvantage, undermining their ability to participate actively and confidently in school and academic life. Gender violence and discrimination can include verbal and physical harassment, sexual assaults, and pressures related to age, job position, or migratory status (Calloni, 2009; Romito & Feresin, 2019). These acts not only violate the fundamental human rights of girls and young women, but they also contribute to an educational culture in which inequalities are normalized and rarely addressed openly. They are rooted in established power relations that continue to perpetuate stereotypes and sustain a hierarchical and sexist social structure (Connell, 2005; MacKinnon, 2017). Gender-based violence and discrimination are, in fact, reproduced and reinforced by social norms, laws, and institutional practices that maintain power inequalities between genders (Walby, 2023). The prevention of sexism and harassment must be integrated into school policies as a strategic goal, with programs that promote critical reflection and awareness from the early years of schooling. The transformative approach demonstrates that education can be a powerful tool for challenging structural inequalities, creating safer and more inclusive learning environments for all. In this regard, focusing on the intersections between gender, race, and social class, with special attention to the educational pathways of girls with a migrant background, shows how integrating intersectional pedagogical practices can significantly reduce the barriers that hinder the learning and well-being of vulnerable students (AGIA, 2019; Lorenzini, Cardellini, 2018; Chiappelli & Bernacchi, 2024). For example, workshops based on dialogue and self-narration allow participants to share their experiences of discrimination, building awareness and solidarity.

6. Promoting Respect for Differences and Equity: Recommendations for Effective Intervention Policies

The integration of queer, feminist, and decolonial approaches into the educational system represents one of the most innovative and necessary strategies to address the forms of oppression that manifest in schools. These approaches, combining a profound critical analysis of social structures with attention to individual experiences, allow for the creation of educational environments that foster inclusion, respect, and social justice. By adopting dialogical practices, participatory methodologies, and active school policies, it is possible to transform schools into spaces of empowerment where all students, regardless of their background or identity, can feel welcomed, valued, and protected. These practices require continuous commitment from educational institutions to rethink not only content but also methods and structures within the educational system.

Teacher Training and the Building of an Educating Community: It is essential to implement structured training programs for teaching staff, integrating queer, feminist, and decolonial pedagogies with practical tools to address discrimination, harassment, and violence. However, schools cannot act in isolation: it is vital to promote the concept of an educating community, involving all social actors. Families, local associations, public bodies, and private social organizations must collaborate to address discrimination in a systemic and shared manner. This synergy helps to build support networks that strengthen the school's educational efforts.

Decolonized Curricula and Ongoing Awareness: Redefining curricula to include a plurality of knowledge and perspectives is a crucial step, but it must be accompanied by continuous awareness-raising activities. Educating students, teachers, and the wider community about cultural diversity, gender identities, and equal opportunities, and developing critical awareness about stereotypes and discriminatory dynamics, is essential. This process requires constant effort to train citizens capable of recognizing and combating injustices.

*Comprehensive Intervention Strategies and Tool*s: To effectively address incidents of violence, harassment, and discrimination, it is fundamental to develop integrated strategies and operational tools that work at multiple levels. These interventions must include:

– The implementation of anti-harassment policies and anonymous reporting systems.

– The organization of workshops and seminars for students, teachers, and families, providing tools to recognize and address problematic situations.

– The promotion of best practices within and outside the school, in collaboration with public and private entities, creating a positive impact on the surrounding community.

Influence on the Educational and Social Environment: Efforts to combat discrimination must extend beyond the boundaries of the school, positively influencing the broader social environment. Awareness campaigns targeting the community, collaborative projects with the local area, and intergenerational dialogue can contribute to creating a more welcoming and inclusive context for adolescents. In this vision, schools become the center of a transformative action that involves the entire society.

Focus on Adolescents and Peer Socialization: Adolescence is a particularly delicate period for the construction of sexual and gender identities, as well as for peer socialization processes. Schools must adopt approaches that encourage dialogue and empathy, creating safe spaces where adolescents can explore and assert their identities without fear of judgment or discrimination. Participatory practices, such as storytelling workshops or

"Dialogic Literary Gatherings," can be effective tools for addressing complex issues in an environment of mutual listening and respect.

Promoting a Culture of Respect and Inclusion: Every educational institution must commit to building a culture where differences are embraced and considered a resource. Achieving this goal requires not only training and targeted interventions but also a cultural shift that encompasses the entire school and social community, minimizing barriers to adolescent participation and well-being.

Promoting a school that acts in synergy with the surrounding area, sensitive to the needs of adolescents, and constantly reflecting on inclusion issues means creating an educational model that shapes aware and responsible individuals. The school, as part of an educating community, becomes the engine for social change, preparing young people to face the complexities of a constantly evolving world with solid cultural, ethical, and relational tools.

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