

## **Teachers Watching Teachers: exploring the influence of films on emergent teacher identities**

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**ABSTRACT** This paper presents a case study into the use of film, through the provision of a film festival for student teachers, to help them to explore their developing professional identities. Concepts of reflection and professional identity are explored through current literature and a case study approach used to illustrate the impact the films had on the student teachers. Findings show that students engaged fully with the films and valued the experience as a powerful way of exploring their professional identity. Watching and reflecting on a selection of films during the festival prompted an appreciation of teachers as role models and of the film festival experience which students agreed was a valuable strategy for exploring professional identity for students enrolled on any professional higher education programme.

*Keywords:* teacher education; professional identity; reflection; film; teaching methods; action research

### **Introduction**

The concept of professional identity is an important feature of educational programmes leading to a teaching qualification. Mitchell and Weber (1999) examined the importance of popular culture and its influence of professional growth and as 'conduits to examining professional identity' (p. 171), and explored the professional identity of teachers through how teachers are portrayed in film.

This article presents the implementation and evaluation of a film festival for students undertaking the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme at one university. The aim of the festival was to explore in what ways viewing and discussing films featuring teachers and teaching as their central theme can influence the emerging identities of trainee teachers. Findings may be applicable to students on any professional programme where developing professional identity is important.

### **Context of the present research and the problem of "Reflection"**

The cultural ethos of Further Education Colleges in England is in considerable flux. The changing landscape created by legislation, reorganisation, funding steers and the demands of quality assurance have combined to transform the working lives of lecturers.

A result of these changes is that lecturers have lost much of their control over their working practices (Randall and Brady 2006). The well documented tensions created by management edicts which seek to satisfy externally imposed performance indicators with lecturers own conceptions of what it means to be a teacher has led to a questioning of what constitutes 'professionalism'. The removal of the need to obtain teaching qualifications (Lingfield 2012) and

the dismantling of the Institute for Learning may also be seen as a further development of neo-liberal managerialism, resting on the claim that the public sector should adopt employment practices from the private sector the neo-liberal approach effectively divorces “*professionalism ... from the social and political context in which it is practised... (being)... defined by top down regulation and compliance*” Taubman (in Daley, M et al 2015:109). Hyland (1992) argued that a target driven culture may produce compliant lecturers who uncritically perform the tasks and duties required of them by college managers.

It is the belief of the current authors that this sentiment can also apply to current teacher training courses. Although these formally engage with reflection as a means to professionalism the reflection that takes place is essentially technical and pragmatic and in our experience looks at ‘what works’ in the classroom to produce results rather than why or how teaching and learning may be said to ‘work’. The problem is that teachers are not encouraged to engage with “*power, politics and difference*” (Avis 1994) or the socio-economic debates which surround education. It has been suggested that new teachers can “choose not to reflect on their practice constructively and critically, preferring to fall back on preconceived understandings of how they and their pupils should conduct themselves in the classroom” (Moore and Ash in Hobbs 2007:406). The compulsory nature of the reflection that takes place also raises issues as students may feel that they have to describe their experiences in a particular permitted way. When reflective thought about classroom decisions becomes linked to assessment outcomes, honest and critical self-examination may become discouraged. Indeed, Hobbs claims that “*reflection and assessment are simply incompatible*” (2007:413). Feeling compelled to write what is required to, ‘tick the box’ maybe a tendency that mitigates against the spirit of reflection. Studies also note that some students grow to resent reflective assignments which they regard as meaningless and adopt a minimalist approach doing just enough to pass, or even writing fictional accounts of idealised practices (Wellard and Bethune 1996; Hobbs 2007).

Quinn (in Davies et al 2000) also makes the point that reflective practice can also be a means by which organisations divest themselves of responsibility. The requirement to develop good practice becomes the role of the individual rather than the organisation. For example, a teacher may focus exclusively on their own part in dealing with a problematic situation thereby failing to question college policies which may have contributed to that situation.

As long ago as 1993 Day and Pennington advised that lecturers own understanding and experience of their working practices should be the basis for a new conceptualisation of their role. Using reflection as a critical and shared practice brings to the fore consideration of personal decisions about teaching and learning and allows teachers to think about these as aspects of moral choice. This challenge has been taken up in many ways by teachers. Daley (2015) argues that reflection is a sufficiently loose concept that “*all teachers construct their own (or their teaching team’s) notion of what it means to be a reflective practitioner and that this be done within a context of collaboration. Reflection on practice is, I suggest, activism.*” (2015:19).

Seen in this way, reflection has the potential to challenge a dominant model of teacher training which conceives of the lecturer as a passive “deliverer” of curriculum knowledge and skills divorced from historical and social processes which inform the world of the classroom. Reflective practise has the potential also to forge new types of professional identity. Positive moves toward a less performative notion of reflection are arguably being initiated by the newest professional standards outlined by The Education and Training Foundation and discussed below.

### **Defining ‘Professional Identity’**

Teachers appear to struggle to develop professional identity during their first year following graduation (Thomas and Beauchamp 2006). Notions of professional identity appear to influence people’s choice to train as teachers (Ifanti and Fotopoulou 2011). Chong and Low (2008)

found that perceptions of newly qualified Singaporean teachers' professional identity became less positive by the end of year 1 as a teacher. This is supported by findings from Thomas and Beauchamp (2006). Professional identity of teachers includes how professional identity may be developed after qualification as a teacher (e.g. Devos 2010; Hobson et al 2009; Nickel 2013) and how students develop professional identity pre-qualifying (e.g. Hammerness 2006; Sachs 2005).

Research into teachers' professional identity has focused on three key elements: formation of teachers' professional identity, characteristics of teachers' professional identity and teachers' perceptions of professional identity (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop 2004). In spite of the abundance of studies in the general area, there remains a paucity of definitive statements on what constitutes professional identity. Indeed, the definitions offered have differed, one from another, and in some cases, definitions have not been offered at all. Concepts such as self, culture, context and what counts as professionalism are often not explored (Rodgers and Scott 2008). Many beliefs teachers hold about teaching originate from experiences as students, from family values as well as from dreams and goals (Newman 2000). There is little in the literature that examines the effect of culture on professional identity in teaching. In contrast there is evidence of a more explicit engagement with the definition of professionalism in other professions such as nursing and accountancy. These definitions have focussed on 'identity and the cultural factors that shape their professional identity' (e.g., Hallam 2000; Beard 1994).

### **The Value of Film in Relation to Developing Professional Identity**

There is ample literature which analyses the way teachers are portrayed in film and the values and ethos they embody. This study seeks to ascertain whether shared reflection of films might be a valuable vehicle for developing the professional identity of trainees.

Film has been used to teach intercultural communication which has been illustrated in studies in a number of contexts (Gandana and Parr, 2013) organisational behaviour and management theory (Champoux 2007) accountancy (Beard 1994) and tourism (Goldenberg et al 2010)

While Beard (1994) suggests that films are the most visible and accessible artefacts of modern popular culture and reflect and generate social values, Baudrillard (1983) and Scanlon (2006) argued that constant repetition of images through the media has blurred the distinction between reality and fiction. Michell and Weber (1999) and Harris (2009) suggest that the popular image of teachers is created over time through novels, film, music (Mitchell and Weber, 1999; Fisher et al 2008).

Others (e.g. Raimo et al 2002; Bruner 1994) have suggested that film is a memorable way to explore students' preconceived assumptions about the role of the teacher. Scanlon (2006) believes that film is a very powerful medium in which depictions of teachers are more real than those presented in professional literature.

The impact of using film as a vehicle for trainees to reflect and develop their own perceptions of professionalism and the degree to which film influences trainee teachers' professional identity has been examined only superficially in the literature.

This may be because as Fisher et al (2008) suggests the real world of teaching standards, competence and accountability which dominated teacher education and professional discourse is at odds with the depiction of 'teachers who appear as beautiful as dreams, as energetic as storms and often as imposing as mountains' (Gregory 2007 p13).

In using film as a means to develop professional identity we wanted to harness these properties to enable students to engage in, 'an ongoing and dynamic process which entails making sense and (re) interpretation of one's own values and experiences' (Flores and Day (2006 p220). The perception of professional identity as being concerned with more than atomised compe-

tences mirrors the Education and Training Foundations view that: professional standards they have identified focus more on these dynamic qualities such as equality, creativity, social justice.

Dan Taubman (2014) concurs stating that professionalism depends on deep reflection to realise own values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses etc. and an acceptance of dilemmas and complexity and inevitable mistakes which are a feature of all human relations. Film reflects these complexities and those shown at the film festival show teachers grappling with events that give an insight into their values and perceptions.

*The Film Festival: a pilot study*

This is a pilot study on one cohort of student teachers at one university in south London, England. The aim of the study was capture students' perceptions of the film festival in relation to their views about professional identity.

*Questions guiding the research*

*Main question:* What impact do representations of teachers and their roles have on the development of professional identity?

*Subsidiary questions:* What themes do students identify as arising from the films?

How do they relate these to their own concerns about teachers and teaching?

How did they engage with the films in general?

At the end of the festival do trainees see film in general as a valuable source material for reflection?

*Ethical issues*

As this was seen as an evaluation of teaching and learning formal ethical review was not required by the university. However, students were given an information sheet about the film festival and the evaluation study and consent was obtained from participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Students were also informed that they were under no obligation to participate and any non-participation would have no bearing on the successful completion of their PGCE programme

Inspiration for the film festival was a result of a teaching session that was provided to the full-time PGCE (further education) students where they were invited to identify a film about a teacher that was significant to them. From this session, the idea for a film festival was born. It took place at the university on a Saturday from 10.00 – 15.00 with lunch provided to contribute to the social event atmosphere. Attendance at the film festival was voluntary. Of a total of 46 students who were invited 15 attended the festival, 9 were female and 6 were male. The age range was between 21 and 50. Students were given an information sheet about the film festival and the evaluation study and written consent was obtained. Four films were shown and students could choose between *Dangerous Minds* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* in the morning and *The Class* and *Half Nelson* shown in the afternoon. These were selected for their contrasting portrayal of teachers and teaching, and were paired so that the students would experience one film featuring a male teacher and one with a female. A brief description of each film can be found in the table below:

Dangerous Minds (1995)	Ex marine, Michelle Pfeiffer struggles to work with urban youngsters in the USA
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1969)	Set in 1930s Edinburgh this film is about Jean Brodie and her adolescent female students
The Class (2008)	A film set in Paris that explores a dramatized account of the real relationships between a teacher and his students over the course of an academic year.
Half Nelson (2006)	This explores the unconventional teaching methods and relationships fostered by a drug using teacher in contemporary USA

### Methodology

The film festival enabled a case study approach to be taken. In terms of an exploratory case study the festival provided a bounded unit (Burns 1997:364) with participants representing a group from which insights could be drawn. The case study method was chosen as it offers a holistic understanding of the impact of film on trainees, the fact that the group was composed of volunteers and was small was also not in itself a difficulty as the aim was to gather information from all available sources to understand it in its entirety. The size of the sample also allowed for the identification of multiple mini case studies within the larger case study. This is reminiscent of Yin's description of the single revelatory case study. (2003:43). In this instance the researchers access single situations enabling deep descriptive information, Whilst single case studies are limited in their generalizability, they do enable close scrutiny of individual responses. In the context of a qualitative case study it may be argued that the established rapport between the researchers and the participants was a positive feature.

The films were introduced collectively at the start of the day after which students selected which pairing they would view and were given a prompt sheet to record observations/ comments as they watched the films. Following each film, a lecturer led a discussion and contemporaneous notes were taken on flip chart paper and checked with the students for accuracy. Themes that emerged were analysed alongside the personal notes students gave to the lecturers at the end of the festival.

As they watched the films, students were encouraged to make notes. These notes were to act as an aide memoire encouraging students to comment in the post film discussion. Discussion took place immediately after watching the films and was recorded on posters. Contemporaneous notes were checked for accuracy with the students present.

### *Insights*

The following themes were identified through examination of written records of group and individual responses:

- Bureaucracy and rules
- Safeguarding pupils and boundaries
- Comparing the setting of education as portrayed in the film with today's British educational setting
- Teacher as role model/ hero/charismatic

Researchers independently analysed the documents for themes which were then cross referenced to ensure validity and reliability. As Kumar (2014:220) remarks, “the degree of respondent concordance with the findings” establishes credibility within qualitative research. Thematic analysis of the prompt sheets and the points raised in the post-film discussions showed significant concurrence about how teachers and teaching are portrayed in films. It was clear in the post film discussions that trainees had a strong emotional response to the films and some of the issues portrayed.

Findings showed a range of emotions. In three of the films, students watching felt anger and some of the things they saw. In *Dangerous Minds* for example, students expressed anger at the petty rules of the school which they say as, “*getting in the way.*” In *Half Nelson* the students who watched the film felt anger with the teacher for bringing his personal life into the classroom which they saw as “*letting the students down.*” Students expressed that they were “*fed up with him*” for being weak. However, they had some sympathy for him as well as they admitted that “*sometimes it is difficult to keep everything in control.*” In “*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*” students focused on Miss Brodie’s emotions in the film. One student reflected,

“*The way Miss Brodie kept her emotions hidden was very professional. I wish to be able to do the same.*”

However, one student also comments, with reference to Miss Brodie, that “*teachers can fulfil their own needs through their students.*”

Finally, the discussions held after each film was shown also provided students with an opportunity to examine connections between the films they watched with their PGCE programme. One theme that arose from this was the issue of safeguarding – it was clear to many students that due to the setting or time period of the film, safeguarding was not an issue. However, for them as PGCE students, safeguarding is a major concern. Those students who watched *Dangerous Minds* commented that they observed issues of safeguarding and appropriate relationships that they would not have noticed before. In *Half Nelson* students commented at the absence of any concern on the part of the teacher for safeguarding children.

A second theme with regard to the connection between the films and their PGCE programme was being a role model including setting and maintaining boundaries between students and teacher. Students who watched *Dangerous Minds* and *Half Nelson* commented on role modelling – in the former, it was about being a good role model and in the latter, being poor role models. In *Dangerous Minds* the teacher was perceived as a good role model for a number of reasons.

“*I identified with her. She gave more to her students. She really cared about them.*”

“*I can make a difference and be a role model.*”

“*I recalled the main reason I joined the profession.*”

In *Half Nelson*, students found the character of the teacher “*unattractive.*” Students acknowledge that although the teacher was good at teaching his subject, his “*chaotic personal life impacts on his role.*” The teacher portrayed here is seen as a poor role model who brought his personal troubles into the classroom. In the post-film discussion one student questioned:

“*How can you be a good teacher when you have issues?*”

A third theme that arose from the post-film discussion was working under pressure/facing challenges. Pressure came from different sources in the films. For example, in *The Class* students identified the “*pressures and challenges*” of working in an inner city school which was something to which many of them could relate. In *Dangerous Minds*, *The Class* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* challenges and pressures arose from the bureaucracy and rules of the school and of society dur-

ing the time the films represented. In *The Class* students described “*the weight of bureaucracy*” viewing it as “*a major annoyance.*” For Miss Brodie, the challenge was described as changing the lives of women and challenging the social rules of the day about the place of women.

One student commented about the impact of watching one film (*The Class*) thus:

*“This [film] makes me think about what I have learned on the PGCE. I would not have seen this film in this light before.*”

#### *The Post-Film Festival Findings*

Four weeks after the film festival students were contacted via email and asked to reflect on their experience of the festival. Ten of the students responded with emails of varying lengths. From the comments received it was generally clear that students valued the post film discussions and that these lead to more elaborated understandings of the relevance of themes in the films to their professional lives. It was also clear that they valued the process of involvement in a “community of practice” discussing important issues. Specifically students were asked to comment on their engagement with the films, and their value and impact. Through this the researchers hoped to establish which, if any, of the original emerging themes still seemed important to individual students. This would indicate a personal and perhaps enduring significance of this theme in relation to their identities.

Two themes were recalled

The need to establish professional boundaries with students:

*“The importance of keeping a professional relationship with students.”*

*“The way to handle personal relationships and the way to relate to students.”*

A second and related theme that students mentioned was professionalism:

*“As a teacher I need to act professionally...and prevent my private life from affecting my work. I realise that a teacher’s job is more than teaching.”*

*“It can be difficult to balance being a caring teacher and remaining professional.”*

One student commented that the film festival made her/him realise that,

*“as teachers we can make change. [Watching the film] helped me to recognise that we should give students chances. We should understand that there might be factors outside of school that could lead to disruptive behaviour.”*

All of those who responded via email mentioned that attending the film festival had given them the ‘space’, ‘time’ to think about wider perhaps ‘more emotive issues’ that they had experienced in placement. Even though some of the films were not contemporary students felt they depicted themes that were relevant to them as trainee teachers. In fact identifying how aspects of the teaching role had changed clarified some aspects of the role:

*“The idea of taking students out for a meal to discuss classroom behaviour for instance was something that wouldn’t happen now.”*

Two open-ended questions were asked. The first was about how the film festival clarified/changed their ideas about what it means to be a professional teacher. Two themes emerged:

defining professional versus unprofessional and professional versus unprofessional behaviours. In defining professional versus unprofessional examples of student comments included:

*“Being a professional teacher means making difficult decisions.”*

*“As professional teachers we have a duty of care to make sure we abide by the college’s rules and regulations and to ensure students are safe.”*

Professional behaviours formed the majority of comments made.

*“The teacher brought his private life to work. This is unprofessional.”*

*“...you need to be firm but fair with students.”*

Students commented that watching the films reaffirmed their desire to teach:

*“The film reinforced my passion for teaching.”*

*“Watching the two films only strengthened my decisions and reasons.”*

Two statements from students identified challenges that arose for them in terms of their original ideas about why they chose teaching:

*“Through the film ‘Dangerous Minds’ I was challenged not to give upon any student.”*

*“Watching the films helped me to understand that sometimes it is difficult to teach when there are factors that get in the way. For example, as a teacher it is a challenge for us not to make judgements on students’ behaviour because there could be other factors that affect their behaviour, e.g., social class background, ethnicity and gender.”*

In summary, the immediate post film discussion and the follow up email responses indicate that in this pilot students actively analysed the themes, compared their own situation with the characters in the films and extrapolated some messages about the concept of ‘professionalism’.

## **Discussion**

The film festival enabled students to examine the concept of professional identity and the students clearly valued the opportunity to explore professional identity through the medium of film, supporting Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) who concluded that exploration of professional identity needs to have a greater emphasis in teacher training programmes suggesting that film might be of considerable use in developing the professional identity of teachers.

### *Student Engagement*

The film festival itself was valued highly by the students who demonstrated strong engagement with the films and with the discussions arising from the films viewed. Findings show that students found this way of exploring professional identity a useful way for trainee teachers to examine professional identity, supporting Robertson (1997). Fisher et al described three ways that teachers are portrayed in film: good, bad and sexy. Of the four films shown in the film festival, each film portrayed teachers in different ways. In *Dangerous Minds* the teacher, Ms Johnson, was attractive and is presented as a temporary teacher with no training but who appears to be a natural teacher who compares favourably with the other more experienced teachers because she appears to understand her students better. She uses no lesson plans, disregards the curriculum and decides to teach interesting topics. In some respects she represents the kind of teacher in film described in the literature by Fisher et al (2008) who is ‘sexy.’ Fisher et al (2008) refer to



the difference between ‘reel’ and ‘real’ teachers arguing that ‘reel’ teachers are not weighed down by having to write lesson plans, meet standards and do not have to demonstrate good exam results in students. This seems to characterise the way Ms Johnson is portrayed in *Dangerous Minds*,

In *The Class*, which is set in an inner city school in Paris, the teacher, Francois Marin, is perceived by students in this study with a degree of ambivalence. On the one hand, they perceive him as liberal but assertive; sometimes he appears very good with students and other times he appears not so good. However, like Ms Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*, he is perceived as a charismatic teacher and a good role model for the profession working under challenging conditions with difficult students. Students appear to relate to the tension between being charismatic and assertive and the challenges of working with difficult students.

In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* Miss Brodie is perceived by the students in this study as inspirational but rebellious and dangerous. They perceive her as charismatic but suggested that the danger is that they can inspire blind loyalty. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Mr Dunne the teacher portrayed in *Half Nelson*. The students in this study perceived him to be good at teaching his subject (although there is very little teaching shown in the film) but because he has a drug habit which he brings with him into the classroom, he does not safeguard the student and in fact has an inappropriate relationship with a student. He is described by the trainee teachers in this study as an anti-hero who cannot differentiate between his chaotic person life and his professional role and his loss of control lets his students and the teaching profession down. Fisher et al (2008) would class Mr Dunne as a bad teacher. The students who watched this film appeared to appreciate the difference between a teacher’s person life and professional role.

In summary, it appears that although the students in this film festival study identified good and bad role models, they appreciated that these roles were film portrayals and were ‘reel’ rather than ‘real’. The films did, however, offer these trainee teachers a useful opportunity through reflective discussion after the films, to explore issues of professional identity those they had not previously experienced. This appears to support Scanlon (2006) who suggested that films can play an important role in teacher education and teacher development. They can act as a starting point to enable teachers to reflect on their practice (Raimo et al 2002)

### Impact and Value

The opportunity the film festival gave to look at films about teaching was valued as a way of exploring professionalism, professional behaviours of teachers and professional identity. The films and post-film discussion had a positive impact on students understanding of the teacher as a role model, on the importance of maintaining boundaries/keeping students safe, keeping and breaking bureaucratic rules and how the film festival experience connected with the PGCE programme they were undertaking. The majority of students indicated that the film festival had a positive impact on them as future teachers, one of whom said,

*“It changed my life forever.”*

The issue of the teacher as a role model is one of the most important features that students appeared to take from the film festival. Many of them had indicated in the discussion that they were influenced to become teachers as a result of experiencing good teaching role models themselves. However, being a good role model for the PGCE students in this study also appears to be related to maintaining professional boundaries in the classroom and to safeguarding the students. These two issues featured extensively in the data in this study. Mr Dunne in *Half Nelson* did not maintain boundaries or safeguard his students. Safeguarding was also identified by the students who watched *Dangerous Minds*, which also raised issues for the PGCE students about

school rules and the extent to which it is acceptable, or even necessary, for a teacher to interfere (break the boundaries) in the lives of students. To a lesser extent, Miss Brodie also was perceived to overstep professional boundaries by giving students too much information about her personal life and developing inappropriate relationships with her students.

For the PGCE students being a good role model appeared to be expressed in the films as understanding the backgrounds of their students, finding creative ways of teaching when faced with a classroom of students who are not interested in learning, does not bring personal issues into the classroom, safeguards the students, maintains a fair but firm relationship with students and maintains boundaries in the teacher-student relationship.

Having the opportunity to reflect on the films through the discussions following each film was also a powerful learning experience for some of the students. For one PGCE student, for example, the experience of the film festival made him determined never to give up on a student. For another, it changed her/his notion of teaching from being primarily passionate about his subject to the importance of understanding the students and where they are coming from. This notion of the value of reflection in the development of teacher identity supports previous work from Nickel (2013).

The standards developed by the ETF (2014) note the need for professionals to 'Develop judgement of what works and does not work; critically examine personal and professional attitudes and beliefs; value all learners; behave in ways that encourage a culture of respect and the need to be creative in response to the complex demands of the teacher / trainer's role. These correspond to aspects of the films that prompted most discussion and comment from the students showing that they were engaging with the professional standards through the analysis of films presented at the festival. Students found it easier to identify key themes and issues through the characters and issues portrayed in the films which were meaningful to them in identifying their own values.

## **Conclusion**

This case study yielded some rich data and insights into the role that film can play in enabling students teachers to explore professional identity of teachers. Students engaged with the film festival and it appears to have had a positive impact on their understanding of professional identity. Films, as representations of aspects of the complexity of the world of education can help student teachers to analyse the values and beliefs they have about teachers, teaching and professional identity, and, therefore can contribute to the richness and diversity of thinking about professionalism in teaching. The element of unease identified by Ade-Ojo (2014) in the standards driven compartmentalised professional development element of teacher training courses and the feeling that students have to jump through hoops and subscribe to sanctioned values in order to meet this element of teacher training courses is one which many teacher trainers and students would recognise. In contrast, the analysis of fictional teachers in films seems to allow trainee teacher the freedom to consider the values and attributes which might form the identity of professional teachers without feeling threatened by the need to exhibit particular 'personal attributes' which subscribe to the 'performativity' described by Ball.

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