

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### The State of Childcare: Exploring Childcare Center Directors' Perceptions on the Past, Present, and Future

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine childcare directors' perceptions of the state of childcare centers throughout southwest Ohio. Seventeen directors were surveyed regarding the changes they have witnessed over the past decade, and how they envision the future of childcare. The results indicated that the childcare field has experienced many challenging issues such as, teacher retention, a lack of professionalism, and an increase in children's behavior problems. In addition, directors discussed the need for higher pay and incentives to attract (and keep) qualified teachers. With added requirements from Ohio's Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), program directors were feeling overwhelmed and stressed. The COVID-19 pandemic also put a significant financial strain on programs, however, some directors believed that the pandemic also helped to recognize the importance of childcare. The article concludes with recommendations for the future, and possible strategies to address the concerns discussed by the directors.

*Keywords:* childcare, directors, early childhood, preschool

#### INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, early childhood education for children birth to age five has received increased attention due to expanded research on the importance of high-quality care on children's development and learning (World Health Organization, 2014). Providing intellectually stimulating and emotionally supportive environments often results in positive outcomes during the early years of children's lives (Shonkoff, et al., 2012). The National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC) has described the work of early childhood professionals, including childcares, as critical to our society and children's wellbeing (2006). The role of the childcare director is crucial to this work and encompasses a variety of responsibilities including supervising staff, designing program plans, overseeing daily activities, and preparing budgets (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Over the past decade, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, childcare directors have experienced significant changes in state requirements and policies which have impacted every facet of caregiving. The pandemic not only caused substantial stress and financial

strain, but also demonstrated the importance of childcare centers for essential workers and those on the front line of the pandemic (Bigras et al., 2021).

Quality childcare practices occur when programs receive support and resources to implement best practices to care for children. The purpose of a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) is to set explicit standards and rules in place to improve the quality of care children receive by using a tiered system. For directors working in centers that receive public funding or participate in quality rating and improvement systems, their teachers are required to complete additional assessments and screenings to document child progress. These added requirements can take time away from teaching and director responsibilities, and often require extra training. Over the past decade, the federal government has created funding opportunities for the improvement and access to high quality care for families, including the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG; Administration for Children and Families, 2022). Some of the CCDBG funds have also been used for states to create quality rating and improvement systems.

With increased attention on the importance of high-quality childcare, directors are serving a more diverse population of children. A variety of childcare programs exist to serve diverse communities such as, public preschool programs, federally funded programs, and traditional private pay childcare centers. Early Head Start and Head Start are federally funded programs that serve low income families and provide early care and education. Head Start programs have a strong focus on early learning, health and wellness, and family engagement (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022). Furthermore, some childcare programs operate as a non-profit and may be run by an individual, religious organization, or public school.

## Professionalism in the Childcare Field

Professionalism in the childcare field has historically been an issue throughout the United States. As a result, childcare directors are faced with challenges when recruiting and retaining high quality staff. In the past, childcare has largely been viewed as an informal babysitting service, but over the last decade there has been a movement to formalize the childcare field. Due to the complexity of the systems involved, the process has been difficult due to many barriers. However, an increasing recognition of the importance and necessity for high quality childcare has driven more standardized practices and systems to be developed (Fuller et al., 2004). A professional status is often linked to four elements (1) a systematic base of knowledge; (2) a professional association; (3) a code of professional ethics; and (4) regulations with a career ladder (Morgaine, 1999). The establishment of a QRIS system in Ohio has been the first step in implementing a more professional status, but the added requirements can be cumbersome for directors and teachers. In addition, with high stakes testing taking place in schools, childcare directors are asking their teachers to focus on early academic skills (e.g. literacy, math, science, etc.) to help prepare children to enter kindergarten (Bullough, 2014).

Due to a wide variety of types of childcare programs (e.g. federally funded, private), it can be challenging to meet the professional development requirements for each type of program. Directors typically identify the goals and objectives of their programs, and then tailor the professional development accordingly. Therefore, the development of a universal professional

development system should consider the unique needs of each program individually (Buysse et al., 2009). For example, if a director has a large percentage of teachers in a Head Start program who have had no experience or training in children's challenging behaviors, it may be useful to focus on topics related to social emotional teaching strategies. However, some QRIS require specific professional development topics, which leaves little time for supplementary training. In a survey asking childcare providers to prioritize professional development topics they would like to attend during the pandemic they chose (a) training to support children with social emotional and behavior problems; (b) health and safety practices; and (c) stress reduction strategies for teachers (Daro et al., 2020).

## Director Challenges Over the Past Decade

Over the past decade, childcare directors have faced a variety of challenges related to hiring and maintaining staff. Teacher turnover rates appear to be much higher for childcares compared to other types of education programs. For example, center-based childcare has an estimated 33% to 50% turnover rate in the United States (Wells, 2015). This rate is four times higher than the rate of elementary school teachers (Rhodes & Houston, 2012). Furthermore, high teacher turnover rates can negatively impact the quality of instruction, which can result in children's decreased cognitive, language, and social emotional skills (Markowitz & Bassok, 2018). Staff retention has also been a challenging issue for directors in the childcare field, and COVID-19 appeared to exacerbate the problem even more. Pay rates for schools are sometimes double what childcare teachers bring home each week (Grant et al., 2019a). When childcare teachers have families to support, they are often forced to seek employment opportunities with higher pay. The retail and hospitality industry offer a wealth of opportunities for higher pay with less demanding responsibilities (Phillips et al., 2016). Many of the teachers who work in childcare programs (outside of school districts) make such low salaries they often qualify for public benefits, such as food stamps (Whitebook, et al., 2016).

A study conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research found that the rates of social-emotional problems reported by parents have continued to rise (Jung & Barnett, 2021). Childcares directors report experiencing more behavior problems exhibited by children at younger ages. Children as young as three years old are being suspended or expelled from childcare centers or preschool programs across the U.S. There are 6.7 suspensions per every 1,000 preschoolers, which is three times greater than the rate of expulsions for K-12 students (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006). Children who spend more time in a childcare center tended to be less cooperative, more aggressive, and more disobedient at ages two, 4 ½, and in kindergarten (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2006). It is unknown whether childcare programs are contributing to children's behavior problems or failing to adequately address children's behavior. More research is warranted to better understand how behavior problems come about and how they are addressed in childcare settings. The purpose of this exploratory research was to learn more about childcare directors' perceptions of the state of childcare. In an effort to better understand some of the unique challenges that directors faced, this study was created to learn first-hand how childcare directors viewed the last decade, and how they envision the future. This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What are some specific changes that directors have witnessed over the last decade in the childcare field?
2. What will the field of early childhood (birth- age 5) and childcare look like over the next five years and in the future?

## METHOD

### Participants and Data Collection

Participants in this study were childcare directors in southwest Ohio. Contact information was gathered from a list of childcare programs associated with a Prekindergarten associate degree program at a southwest Ohio university. Online surveys were sent to a total of 57 program directors, and 17 of those individuals completed the survey through Qualtrics. The participants varied in age, level of education, and length of time in the field of childcare (see Table 1). Participants had a wide range of experience in their positions, ranging from ten years to over 25 years. Regarding level of education, the lowest level was a high school diploma while one participant had a Doctoral degree. The ages of the directors ranged from 30-60 years old.

Table 1

<u>Childcare Center Directors' Demographic Information (n=17)</u>		
Characteristic	N	%
Participants	17	100
<i>Length in Position</i>		
10-15 years	11	65
16-20 years	2	12
21-25 years	1	6
25+ years	3	17
<i>Highest Level of Education</i>		
High School Diploma or Associate's Degree	4	24
Bachelor's Degree	8	47
Master's or Doctorate Degree	5	29
<i>Age in Years</i>		
30-40	5	29.5
41-50	5	29.5
51+	7	41

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Participants were asked four survey questions which were all approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB). The survey questions were the following:

1. What are some specific changes you have witnessed over the last decade since you have been working in the childcare field?
2. What do you believe the field of childcare will look like over the next five years?
3. What would you like to see changed or improved in the childcare field?
4. Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of childcare?

The survey instrument was developed based on a thorough literature review and the authors' professional experiences working with preservice teachers in childcare programs throughout Ohio. In addition, many of McCoach et al.'s (2013) principles of survey design applied to the process used for the development of the survey used in this study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time. The survey was open and available for participants to complete for a two-week period in early August, 2022. The online survey took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete, depending on the length of responses.

When analyzing the survey data, the investigator searched for patterns (common themes) in the survey responses using a content analysis approach. Specifically, the data was analyzed using the following process (a) prepare the data for analysis; (b) become familiar with the data; (c) identify units of analysis; (d) define tentative categories for coding the responses; (e) refine categories; (f) establish category integrity (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993). The director responses were organized by survey question and then grouped into narrative units so that tentative themes could be identified. The themes were further analyzed to search for commonalities between survey responses. This process continued until the investigator was confident that the identified themes best represented the data. The following section provides the results of this analysis.

## RESULTS

**Survey Question 1: What are some specific changes you have witnessed over the last decade since you have been working in the childcare field?**

All directors who participated in the survey had over a decade of experience in the childcare field, and voiced their thoughts about trends they have witnessed. One prevalent theme was the changes in the state requirements, and several directors discussed Step Up to Quality—Ohio's Child Care Quality Rating System (SUTQ). One person explained her opinions about the changes:

The biggest change has been the addition of SUTQ rules. Before the pandemic the childcare sector seemed to gain some credibility and during the pandemic we were deemed essential. It seems as that momentum to make us "professionals" has been tossed to the side.

Another person shared that "licensing rule changes and Step Up to Quality requirements" were challenging, while another director felt that a "higher demand for affordable, quality programs, and SUTQ regulations" was needed. Licensing changes were also a topic of discussion since COVID-19 disrupted the day-to-day functioning of classrooms and programs. Adjusting to the changes was a challenge because they all seemed to come at once. One director said:

Licensing rules went from 42 to 25. Publicly funded childcare (PFCC) went from paper invoices, to swipe card, to a tablet-based time and attendance system. Overall the state has automated and integrated more systems, making specific changes to license/capacity easier to track from the program side (although learning those changes in process has been a challenge).

One participant voiced her frustration that the state was requiring “more rules” than ever before, making it more difficult to focus on the curriculum and meet the needs of the children.

Staff shortages and a decrease in qualified applicants has always been a significant issue in the field of childcare, but COVID-19 seemed to exacerbate the issue. A common theme in the survey responses was overcoming staff shortages and finding qualified teachers. Some participants shared their concern over a lack of work ethic they have been witnessing over the past few years. “Work ethic and worker dedication has decreased. Increase of pay for teachers needs to take place. Overall, hiring has decreased.” In addition, there seemed to be a general lack of interest in childcare positions since people can find higher paying jobs in the retail or restaurant industry. Therefore, it is difficult to find suitable applicants. One director stated, “I have found that the interest in working in childcare has decreased.” Another director said, “Candidates for employment are difficult to find as many ghost (don’t show up) for the interviews. New candidates are often very transient.” Another director said that her center was seeing “staffing shortages of major proportions,” which caused a great deal of stress to all of her staff. One director mentioned, “I have witnessed great people leave the field because of stress.”

High turnover was also a common theme and discussed by many of the directors. Some participants felt that the low pay was the reason, while others pointed to a lack of professionalism and work ethic. One director stated, “Increased political/liberal ideologies are inappropriately being enmeshed into preschool curriculum. It is getting more and more difficult to hire quality individuals for early childhood settings.”

Families and children have been deeply impacted by the pandemic, and continue to struggle with locating high quality childcare programs for their children. Over the past decade, the number of children with social emotional problems has risen significantly (Coley et al. 2013). The increase in behavior problems was a theme commonly discussed by many of the directors. Some mentioned an alarming increase in behavior problems being exhibited by children attending their centers. One director noted, “Children with more social emotional dysregulation, trauma, foster and kinship/grandparents raising children are enrolled in our program.” In addition, children’s social emotional skills seemed to be suffering, perhaps as a result of limited socialization during the pandemic. One director felt that she was seeing many more children with behavior and mental health diagnoses and said, “I have seen increased challenging behaviors, especially in the area of mental health.” In one particular case, a director talked about some parents waiting to send their child to preschool and stated, “Parents were choosing not to send their three-year old children to preschool; but waiting until their children turned four.”

## Survey Question 2: What do you believe that the field of childcare will look like over the next five years?

Discussions about the future seemed to be a difficult and emotional topic for some of the directors. Several went so far as to say they were fearful that they would have to close their doors permanently:

It is very scary to think of and overwhelming at times. I know several places that have closed and I have close Director friends at other centers that are now talking about how they can keep their doors open. Our main problem is hiring qualified staff. We are in a position that we are hiring many new staff and having to train them on how to be a teacher. We are starting all over.

The need for additional funding and support was a prevalent theme and frequently brought up by most of the directors. However, where the money and support would come from was still a question and a concern:

Childcare will need to be federally funded to survive. Middle income families are struggling to afford childcare while providers are faced with the necessity to pay higher wages, along with increased expenses to supply chain shortages. Many families will need to turn to family childcare for affordability reasons.

New legislation and more rules and requirements were also discussed as barriers that programs had to adjust to. Most centers shared their frustration over having too much paperwork and “red tape” to complete, which in turn took away from quality time spent with the children. Directors felt overwhelmed about spending valuable time on tasks related to state rules and requirements. One person stated, “I think more changes will be made in legislation to (hopefully) provide more funding to early learning centers. I am hopeful that more teachers will come back to the field as many have left since the pandemic.”

High quality staff who were invested in the program’s mission and teaching philosophy seemed to be harder to find. One person said, “We are hopefully stabilizing since the pandemic! And hopefully, there is increased interest and investment in the first five years for all programs; for profit and not-for-profit, faith based and secular.” Many of the directors simply wanted their staff to stay once they were hired, and felt that “additional requirements (from the state) would make finding quality employees even more difficult.” Some directors voiced a concern over having to close simply due to not being able to find teachers to hire, or due to their current staff leaving for higher paid opportunities. One director said that childcare centers will have to “reevaluate their business model if they plan to keep their doors open.”

One theme mentioned by several of the directors was that they felt that childcare centers did not always get the appreciation and acknowledgement that they should, especially during the pandemic. Some of the centers provided care for children and families during the height of the pandemic, despite their fears of contracting COVID-19 themselves. However, one director had a more optimistic view about the next five years by stating, “I would like to think that the field of

childcare will be portrayed in a more positive light when it comes to working in the industry and how the professionals are viewed in the public.”

### Survey Question 3: What would you like to see changed or improved in the childcare field?

Low teacher pay was a common issue stated in survey question three. Most directors who were surveyed brought up the low pay rate that teachers receive, and their concern that this would keep quality people from teaching in the childcare field. One director shared their point of view:

Our workforce is desperate for change, we have for too long paid low wages thereby keeping primarily women, and in the urban centers’ minority women in low wage, low benefit jobs. Now that people can work at Walmart, Aldi, and Target starting at \$15-18 per hour, our workforce is no longer accepting positions at childcare programs for \$12.50-14 per hour, which is our starting wage for an individual with no experience. Each month I look at my budget to find ways to increase my overall wages, but there is no margin. Unless the state of Ohio, and the congress/senate/president infuse additional resources into this field there will be limited number of spaces for care and a whole generation of women will not be able to work because of lack of childcare available. We are hemorrhaging teachers and replacing them is taking 2 to 3 times longer than any other time in my tenure in this field.

One director compared the childcare sector to public schools, and felt that the pay and benefits should be similar. She went on to say, “The rate of pay is an issue and we should be compensated just like public schools. Put us on the same system.” Another suggestion was to house childcares within public school buildings to make the transition easier for children entering kindergarten.

Teacher benefits were also mentioned since many programs cannot afford benefits for their staff. One person stated, “I would like to see better benefits for teachers working in childcare. The work that they do is proven to be essential and important, and I believe that they should be recognized as professionals.” Providing high quality insurance was also an important incentive to attract those candidates who had families to support. A director made the following statement, “State or federal insurance plans for childcare teachers is imperative to entice teachers. Small business owners are priced out of medical insurance benefits. Financial support upfront is needed for necessary resources to increase.”

Some of the directors went so far as to describing their centers as “babysitters” for families, and felt that teachers were not always treated as professionals. Multiple people discussed the need for more funding from the state for families to access high quality care, even for those families who don’t receive publicly funded childcare. “My personal center has a majority of children receiving publicly funded childcare. It would be nice to see the private pay families receive discounts and benefits from the state.” Many directors basically wanted all children to have the highest quality of care possible, and felt that teachers needed to receive higher compensation for this to take place.



Teachers simply wanted to be perceived as valued members of society who were also professionals.

The constant changes in state and licensing rules was also a prevalent theme. Some directors felt that the frequent changes in rules and regulations made it challenging to focus on all of the issues involved in running a childcare center. One director stated:

Rule changes (should be) limited to once every two years. More insight is needed from people working in the field to oversee new form changes; I think some of our wonderful Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) folks have been out of center work long enough they have perhaps forgotten what it is like to implement the rules in the chaotic busy-ness of the day. Also, I wish that new hires could work with another staff member, not in ratio, until background checks come back. Sometimes glitches make for long waits to be able to assign staff. We are so short staffed - we want to be safe, but it would be great to be able to begin training staff earlier.

High quality professional development was a consistent theme discussed by directors. For example, one person had teachers with different levels of experiences and shared, “I would like to see an improvement in the quality of professional development that is offered. I have veteran teachers who have been in the field for more than a decade and most of the trainings are geared towards entry level positions.” With the rise in social emotional issues in children, one director felt it was imperative for professional development training to focus on teaching caregivers how to work with children who have experienced some type of trauma. The same director also felt that teachers needed to be highly trained, which will require additional financial support:

Teachers are ill-equipped to deal with trauma and the expectation that they do so is leading to increased turnover and burnout. There is a need for outside assistance to come into centers to observe and provide constructive feedback and best practices. The field of ECE could benefit from requiring degreed teachers. A Child Development Associate credential (CDA) is not sufficient to meet the needs of the children or SUTQ standards. Financial support will need to be provided to centers in the form of subsidies to pay teachers more. Recruiting more teachers into colleges needs to be accomplished but will not occur without increased pay and benefits.

#### Survey Question 4: Do you feel optimistic or pessimistic about the future of childcare?

Responses were mixed when it came to the future. Some felt strongly that the future looked bleak without more funding sources, while others held out hope that childcares would survive and thrive in the future. Obtaining more resources was one of the most common themes for this survey question. One person made the following statement, “I am generally an optimistic person, but without additional resources, our field will continue to decline.” Those who were pessimistic

typically mentioned money and resources as barriers to the improvement of childcare services. One director made the following statement:

I am not sure what the future holds for childcare. How can we rebuild something that is not supported by our representatives in our state? They think anyone can watch these children. Unfortunately, many parents have to make that decision of who is going to watch their children because they can't find a center with open spots, due to staffing.

Another barrier brought up was the teacher shortage and lack of qualified candidates:

I think that the expectations of employees have changed and it has become drastically harder to attract new applicants to the field. I think that the field in general is going to struggle if we can't find a happy medium between the price of tuition and wages.

Directors and teachers are having to work longer hours to fill in for fewer employees. This leads to higher burnout rates and exhausted staff. Other directors mentioned the low pay rate and the fact that they simply could not compete with higher paid job opportunities (e.g. retail and restaurants):

Hiring staff has been almost impossible. As an owner/administrator, I am working from open to close, 5 days a week. If people do not start going back to work, we will not be able to increase our enrollment and we will slowly drain all of our resources. Stabilization grants have helped but it doesn't bring staffing in the door.

There were also several optimistic directors who felt that the future would be bright, and positive changes were on the horizon. A couple of directors felt that the pandemic brought some positive recognition regarding the importance of childcare:

I feel optimistic about the future, just because a lot of attention has been put on childcare since the pandemic. I think that people are truly seeing the need for childcare and how important it is for the economy as families need quality childcare in order for them to work. They also realize how important early education is for the children to be ready to enter Kindergarten and then develop the important skills necessary to be successful!

Another director mentioned, "I feel optimistic from the standpoint of the COVID pandemic moving to the endemic stage. The number of families seeking care has increased." Several people stated that the value of childcare is now being recognized due to the pandemic so childcares need to use this momentum to push for more support, resources, and funding from the state and government.

Some directors had mixed reactions about the future of childcare. Some felt that positive changes were possible, but a lack of funding continued to be a consistent topic. One person brought up some concerns she had about cultural topics:

I feel optimistic because I think our society is learning the value of preschool and quality childcare. I feel pessimistic because there is too much cultural pressure to include topics like LGBT and identity choosing to children as young as three. Three-year-olds should be learning to be kind to everyone, but any kind of gender/sexual ideologies are inappropriate at this age. I am also concerned that funding or perks may not be offered to faith-based programs, and in my area, most of the people interested in early childhood education are hired by the public schools and Head Start, who can afford to offer the improved benefits.

One director elaborated on her funding concerns and stated, “Rates will need to go up significantly to offset increased expenses creating a Catch-22. Universal government supported childcare may be the only answer, but it appears it is not a priority of Congress.”

## DISCUSSION

The childcare field has seen many peaks and valleys over the last decade, which has produced resilient directors and teachers. The pandemic certainly brought on an unexpected set of stressors, which impacted programs in a variety of ways. Some directors felt the pandemic brought a new sense of appreciation and recognition for the important role that childcare centers play in supporting children and families (including essential workers). On the other hand, the pandemic brought on financial burdens and extreme teacher shortages.

Finding and keeping qualified teachers was a significant concern discussed by many of the directors in this study. Thorpe et al., (2020) researched retention rates in childcares and found that those who were pursuing higher qualifications were more likely to leave the field within twelve months. This data is concerning since our ultimate goal is to produce highly qualified teachers while keeping them in the field longer (to reduce the turnover rate). As a result, it is crucial for childcare directors to examine how to encourage childcare teachers to pursue more education without losing them altogether. In regard to low pay and poor work conditions, teachers’ satisfaction with their jobs do matter (Grant et al., 2019b). Therefore, work satisfaction should be the focus of childcare centers’ retention efforts. Staff morale, administrative support, and recognition are just a few areas that directors can explore to help motivate teachers and staff. For example, directors might look for unique ways to recognize teachers for their high-quality teaching. Developing some type of mentoring program might also be an effective strategy to encourage relationships between teachers and provide support. Lastly, directors can support their teachers simply by being physically present in classrooms on a regular basis, which may be desirable for newer teachers.

Increased requirements and regulations were mentioned by many of the directors in this study. They felt their teachers had to jump through hoops to meet state requirements and obtain more education credentials. Despite the importance of hearing from childcare providers to establish early education policies, they are often not included in the conversation at the state or federal level (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017). Several mentioned that they felt those who make the policies for childcare centers are out of touch with the real issues directors are experiencing. Most childcare

research has traditionally focused on children's experiences (Shpancer, 2002), but perhaps research should broaden its focus to include childcare directors' and teachers' wellbeing and viewpoints. Furthermore, directors should have a voice in the type of training and professional development their teachers are required to complete. Arndt et al. (2021) suggested that perhaps there should be a discussion on how to individualize job training rather than having general requirements that are the same for everyone. For example, if directors or teachers felt they needed more training and support to work with children who have behavior problems, then they should receive professional development on this topic. This might allow for higher job satisfaction if they are learning skills and information that relates specifically to each person.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this exploratory study was to learn more about childcare directors' views about the state of childcare, and how the field has changed over the last decade. The future of childcare was also addressed, based on the changes that have occurred. With more children being cared for outside the home, it is imperative for childcare centers to prevail and thrive. However, it is clear that changes need to happen at the community, state, and federal level. It is critical that we seek out feedback from those working in the childcare field when policies and laws are being created. Future research should aim to focus on identifying and retaining qualified teachers, professionalizing the childcare field, and providing resources and funding to support high quality childcare programs.

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