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Education and Society: Socialisation, Inequality, Social Control, and Social Change

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ABSTRACT :

Education is commonly understood as a means of transmitting knowledge and preparing individuals for employment, yet its sociological significance extends considerably further. This article reappraises the role of education as a social institution through four interconnected dimensions: socialisation, social stratification, social control, and social change. An integrative literature-review approach was adopted to synthesise classical sociological theory and selected contemporary international evidence. The analysis draws particularly on the functionalist tradition associated with Émile Durkheim, the reproduction and cultural-capital perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, the correspondence thesis of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, and critical perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy. Contemporary evidence from UNESCO and the OECD is used to connect these theoretical arguments with current concerns regarding educational inequality, digitalisation, inclusion, and social transformation. The review identifies four principal findings. First, education socialises learners by transmitting cultural knowledge, behavioural norms, civic orientations, and shared identities. Second, education can facilitate social mobility while simultaneously reproducing inequalities through unequal resources, cultural capital, selection mechanisms, and institutional expectations. Third, schooling exercises social control through formal rules and the hidden curriculum, although its effects vary according to the degree of openness, participation, and critical dialogue. Fourth, education can become a significant catalyst for social change by developing knowledge, innovation, critical consciousness, and more inclusive social values. The article argues that education should therefore be understood neither as inherently emancipatory nor as merely reproductive. Its social consequences are shaped by institutional structures, curriculum choices, resource distribution, pedagogical practices, and wider political and economic conditions. A sociologically informed educational policy must consequently pursue both access and equity while protecting critical inquiry, cultural diversity, and human agency.

Keywords: education; sociology of education; socialisation; social stratification; social control; social mobility; social change; cultural capital; hidden curriculum; educational inequality

1. Introduction

Education is one of the most enduring institutions through which societies reproduce themselves, organise collective life, and imagine their future. Although education is frequently discussed in terms of learning outcomes, employability, curriculum effectiveness, and individual development, these perspectives do not fully capture its social significance. From a sociological standpoint, education is embedded in systems of culture, power, social class, institutions, and political authority. Durkheim (1956) treated education as a social process through which the younger generation is prepared for participation in collective life. This formulation shifted attention away from education as an exclusively individual or psychological process toward its relationship with social structures and shared norms.

The sociological study of education subsequently developed along several theoretical lines. Functionalist approaches emphasised social integration, role allocation, and the transmission of shared values. Conflict and reproduction perspectives questioned the neutrality of schooling, arguing that educational institutions may legitimise and reproduce existing inequalities through curriculum, assessment, cultural capital, and institutional selection (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Critical pedagogy, meanwhile, highlighted the possibility that education can cultivate critical consciousness and enable learners to challenge oppressive social arrangements (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1983). These perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they reveal different dimensions of the same institution.

The contemporary relevance of this debate is evident in persistent inequalities in educational participation and outcomes. The OECD (2024) reports that family background continues to exert a strong influence on educational attainment and achievement, while UNESCO's recent monitoring indicates that substantial numbers of children and young people remain outside school and that inequalities related to wealth, location, and digital access continue to shape educational opportunity (UNESCO, 2026). At the same time, digital technologies and artificial intelligence are changing how knowledge is

produced, accessed, evaluated, and distributed. These developments raise a central sociological question: does education primarily reproduce existing social arrangements, or can it become a mechanism for transforming them?

This article addresses that question through a conceptual reappraisal of education's social functions. The original manuscript provided a broad sociological discussion of four major roles: socialisation, stratification, social control, and social change. The present revision reorganises and strengthens that discussion as an integrative literature-review article. It introduces an explicit problem statement and methodology, develops a structured literature review, presents thematic findings, and connects the theoretical discussion with contemporary evidence. The purpose is not to claim an original empirical discovery but to synthesise established sociological perspectives into an integrated framework for understanding the contradictory social consequences of education.

2. Problem Statement

The central problem addressed in this article is the persistent tension between the normative promise of education and its unequal social consequences. Education is widely promoted as a pathway to personal development, meritocratic advancement, social cohesion, democratic citizenship, and economic opportunity. However, access to educational resources and the benefits associated with educational attainment are not distributed equally. Differences in family income, parental education, geographical location, cultural resources, school quality, language, and access to technology can influence learners' educational trajectories before formal assessment occurs. Recent OECD evidence confirms that family background remains strongly associated with participation, performance, and educational attainment (OECD, 2024).

At the same time, education performs functions that extend beyond the distribution of qualifications. Schools transmit cultural knowledge, establish behavioural expectations, define legitimate forms of knowledge, and shape students' relationships with authority and citizenship. Some of these processes are explicit, while others operate through the hidden curriculum. Consequently, education may contribute simultaneously to social integration and social differentiation. A narrow interpretation that regards schooling only as a vehicle for economic mobility therefore risks overlooking the ways in which educational institutions reproduce cultural and social hierarchies (Busemeyer & Guillaud, 2023).

A second problem concerns the fragmented treatment of these functions in educational discourse. Socialisation, stratification, social control, and social change are often examined separately. Yet, in practice, they are interdependent. The same curriculum that creates a shared national identity may marginalise minority histories; the same assessment system that recognises achievement may reproduce advantages associated with family resources; and the same classroom that teaches conformity to rules may also provide a space for critical questioning. A more comprehensive sociological framework is therefore required to explain these simultaneous and sometimes contradictory effects (Kumar et al., 2025).

The problem addressed by this review can consequently be stated as follows: how can education's integrative, reproductive, regulatory, and transformative functions be understood within a single sociological framework, and what implications does this understanding have for contemporary educational policy and practice?

3. Objectives of the Review

- To examine education as an agent of socialisation and cultural transmission.
- To analyse the relationship between education, social stratification, selection, and social mobility.
- To examine the role of formal schooling and the hidden curriculum in social control and political socialisation.
- To assess the potential of education to contribute to innovation, critical consciousness, and social change.
- To develop an integrated sociological interpretation of the contradictory functions of education in contemporary society.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Functionalist Perspectives: Education, Social Integration and Role Allocation

Functionalist sociology views education as an institution that contributes to the continuity and stability of society. Durkheim (1956) argued that education transmits the moral and intellectual dispositions required for collective life. From this perspective, schools do not merely teach academic knowledge; they introduce learners to shared norms, discipline, cooperation, and the obligations associated with membership in a social group. Parsons (1959) similarly examined the school class as a social system in which children move from the particularistic standards of the family to the universalistic standards of wider society. Educational assessment and achievement can therefore serve a role-allocation function by differentiating individuals according to demonstrated performance.

The strength of the functionalist perspective lies in its recognition that no complex society can survive without mechanisms for transmitting knowledge, norms, and expectations. Schools create common experiences and provide formal qualifications that facilitate coordination between education and employment. Nevertheless, functionalism has been criticised for underestimating power and inequality. The assumption that educational selection is essentially meritocratic becomes problematic when students enter school with unequal resources and when the criteria of merit reflect the culture of dominant groups (Taştı, 2023).

4.2 Cultural Capital and the Reproduction of Inequality

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) challenged the assumption that educational achievement can be explained primarily by individual ability and effort. Their theory of cultural reproduction emphasises the unequal distribution of cultural capital, including language practices, dispositions, knowledge, tastes, and familiarity with institutional expectations. Schools may treat these culturally specific resources as if they were universal indicators of ability. In this process, historically accumulated advantages can be converted into educational credentials while the social origins of those advantages remain less visible.

Bourdieu's (1986) broader formulation of cultural capital helps explain why equality of formal access does not necessarily produce equality of educational outcomes. Families differ in the economic, social, and cultural resources they can mobilise for children's education. These resources influence early learning opportunities, familiarity with academic language, access to enrichment, and confidence in navigating educational institutions. The relevance of this perspective is reinforced by contemporary evidence showing that family background remains strongly associated with educational outcomes (OECD, 2024).

4.3 Correspondence, Resistance and the Hidden Curriculum

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that aspects of school organisation can correspond to the social relations of capitalist production. Hierarchical authority, differentiated tasks, external evaluation, and unequal rewards may prepare learners for occupational structures characterised by similar patterns of hierarchy and control. Although subsequent scholarship has challenged a simple one-to-one correspondence between school and workplace, the argument remains important because it directs attention to institutional arrangements rather than curriculum content alone.

The concept of the hidden curriculum further expands this analysis. What students learn at school includes not only officially stated knowledge but also lessons about punctuality, competition, authority, gender, status, acceptable behaviour, and legitimate forms of participation. Apple (2004) and Giroux (1983) demonstrate that curriculum is connected to ideological and political questions. The hidden curriculum can contribute to social order, but it can also be contested. Students and teachers may reinterpret, negotiate, or resist institutional expectations, meaning that social reproduction is never completely automatic.

4.4 Critical Pedagogy and Education as Transformation

Critical approaches reject the idea that learners are passive recipients of predetermined knowledge. Freire (1970) argued that education can develop critical consciousness when learners are encouraged to interrogate the social conditions that shape their lives. Giroux (1983) similarly conceptualised schools as contested cultural sites in which dominant ideologies may be reproduced but can also be challenged. From this perspective, education becomes potentially transformative when it encourages dialogue, reflection, democratic participation, and critical engagement with inequality.

The transformative potential of education is particularly relevant in contemporary societies facing technological change, migration, environmental crisis, and changing patterns of work. UNESCO's recent reporting emphasises that technology can widen access but can also create new inequalities when connectivity, digital skills, and appropriate pedagogical support are unevenly distributed (UNESCO, 2024, 2026). Education therefore has to negotiate not only the transmission of existing knowledge but also the preparation of learners to participate critically in rapidly changing social environments (Kumar, 2025).

5. Methodology

This article adopts an integrative literature-review methodology. An integrative review is appropriate for a broad, theoretically diverse topic because it permits the synthesis of conceptual and empirical contributions from different traditions rather than restricting the analysis to studies using a single research design. Snyder (2019) notes that integrative and semi-systematic approaches are particularly useful when a topic has been conceptualised in different ways across disciplines and when the purpose is to identify themes, theoretical relationships, and gaps rather than estimate a single effect size.

5.1 Review Focus and Sources

The review was structured around four analytical dimensions derived from the original manuscript: (1) socialisation, (2) stratification, (3) social control, and (4) social change. Classical sociological works were used to establish the theoretical foundations, including Durkheim's functionalist account, Bourdieu and Passeron's reproduction perspective, Bowles and Gintis's correspondence thesis, and critical pedagogy associated with Freire and Giroux. Contemporary evidence was incorporated from major international education-monitoring sources, particularly OECD and UNESCO reports, to assess the continuing relevance of these theoretical arguments.

The review process followed four broad stages: defining the conceptual problem; identifying foundational and contemporary literature relevant to the four themes; organising evidence according to theoretical and substantive categories; and synthesising the literature into an integrated interpretation. This approach follows the general principles recommended for rigorous literature reviews, including explicit purpose, transparent organisation of the literature, thematic analysis, and clear distinction between evidence and interpretation (Snyder, 2019).

5.2 Analytical Procedure

The analysis was thematic rather than statistical. Literature was examined for recurring explanations of what education does in society, the mechanisms through which these functions operate, and the conditions under which educational effects become integrative, reproductive, regulatory, or transformative. The final synthesis therefore does not report primary survey, experimental, or interview data. The term 'results' in this article refers to findings emerging from the thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature.

5.3 Scope and Limitation of the Method

Because this is an integrative conceptual review rather than a systematic review with a fully reproducible database search and formal risk-of-bias assessment, the findings should be interpreted as a theoretically informed synthesis rather than a comprehensive estimate of the entire education literature.

The review also gives greater attention to sociological theory than to discipline-specific empirical research. Future research could strengthen the evidence base through a systematic review, bibliometric analysis, or empirical comparative study.

6. Results

The thematic synthesis produced four interrelated findings. These findings extend the four major functions identified in the original article while clarifying their relationships and their contemporary significance.

Theme	Principal function	Positive contribution	Potential contradiction
Socialisation	Transmits knowledge, norms, identity and social roles	Cultural continuity, civic competence, social cohesion	Marginalisation of minority cultures; conformity
Stratification	Selects, certifies and distributes educational opportunities	Recognition of achievement; mobility; occupational preparation	Reproduction of class inequality; unequal access to cultural capital
Social control	Regulates behaviour and communicates institutional values	Order, cooperation, civic responsibility	Excessive conformity; ideological control; reduced dissent
Social change	Develops knowledge, innovation and critical consciousness	Innovation, inclusion, democratic participation, social reform	Backlash, unequal access to innovation, new digital inequalities

6.1 Education Socialises Individuals into Collective Life

The first finding is that socialisation is not a secondary function of schooling but a constitutive one. Education provides learners with shared language, cultural narratives, behavioural expectations, civic knowledge, and interactional routines. Schools also expose students to people beyond the immediate family and therefore create opportunities for intergroup contact. This integrative role is particularly important in socially diverse societies where common institutions can provide a basis for communication and civic belonging.

However, the synthesis also shows that socialisation is never culturally neutral. Decisions about which language, history, literature, values, and forms of knowledge enter the curriculum necessarily involve selection. Education can therefore strengthen social cohesion while simultaneously producing debates about whose culture is represented and whose experiences are omitted. Socialisation should thus be understood as a process of negotiated cultural transmission rather than simple cultural reproduction.

6.2 Education Can Promote Mobility While Reproducing Inequality

The second finding is the strongest internal contradiction identified in the literature. Educational attainment is associated with improved employment and social outcomes, and educational expansion has opened opportunities for many groups. Nevertheless, the benefits of education are mediated by unequal starting conditions. OECD evidence indicates that family background remains strongly associated with participation and performance, while UNESCO reports continuing disparities related to wealth and location (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2026).

The reproduction perspective explains why formal equality of opportunity is insufficient. Learners may enter the same examination system with unequal access to early childhood education, books, tutoring, stable learning environments, technology, nutrition, and cultural resources. Selection mechanisms can therefore transform pre-existing differences into apparently legitimate educational distinctions. The result is a paradox: education can be a route out of inherited disadvantage for some individuals while also reproducing broader patterns of inequality at the population level.

6.3 Education Exercises Social Control Through Explicit and Hidden Processes

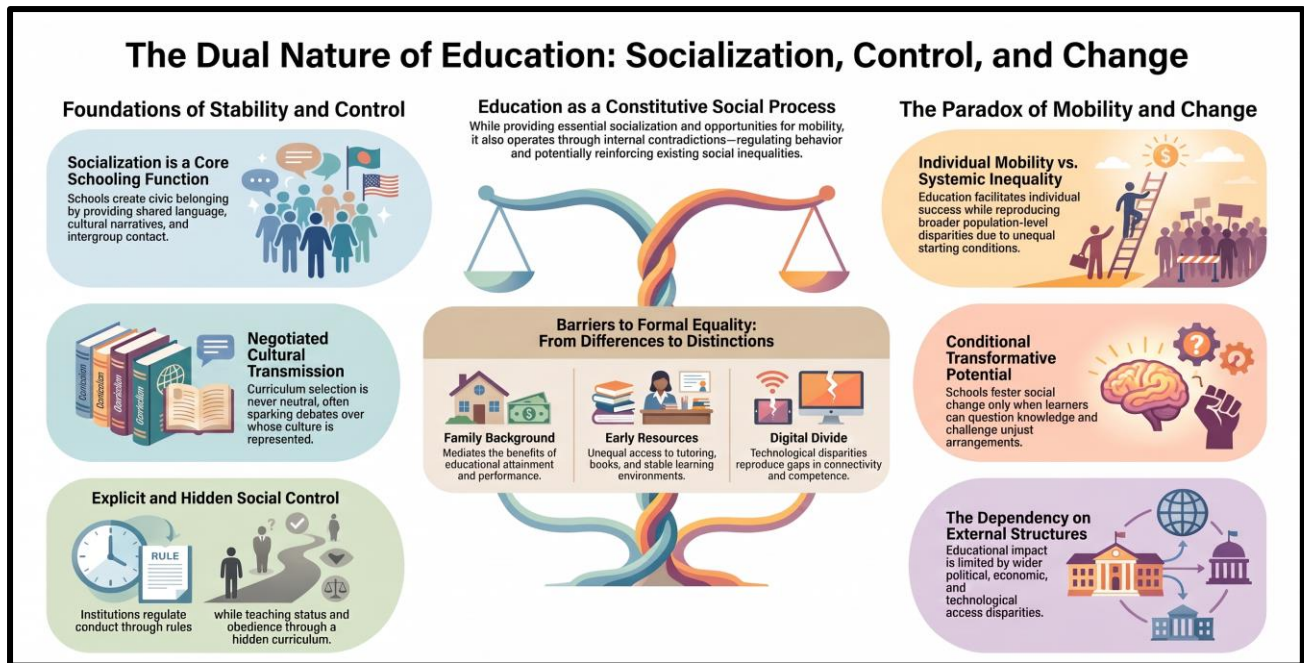
The third finding is that educational institutions regulate behaviour both explicitly and implicitly. Timetables, attendance requirements, examinations, disciplinary rules, uniforms, grading systems, and teacher authority establish expectations for acceptable conduct. At the same time, the hidden curriculum communicates messages about status, competition, obedience, gender, knowledge, and authority. These processes contribute to institutional stability and prepare learners for participation in organised social life.

Yet social control is not necessarily synonymous with authoritarianism. Schools can teach rule-governed participation while also creating opportunities for democratic decision-making, debate, student representation, and critical inquiry. The sociological significance of schooling therefore depends partly on how authority is exercised. Where learners can question assumptions and participate meaningfully in institutional life, socialisation into civic norms may strengthen democratic agency rather than merely produce compliance.

6.4 Education Has Significant but Conditional Transformative Potential

The fourth finding is that education can contribute to social change when learners are equipped to question existing knowledge, develop new ideas, and participate in collective problem-solving. Universities and schools can function as sites of innovation, knowledge production, civic engagement, and cultural change. Critical pedagogy adds an important dimension by arguing that learners can develop the capacity to recognise and challenge unjust social arrangements (Freire, 1970).

However, transformation is conditional. Educational institutions do not operate independently of wider political, economic, and cultural structures. Technological change illustrates this clearly. UNESCO's evidence shows that technology can expand access and digital skills while also reproducing disparities where connectivity and digital competence are uneven (UNESCO, 2024, 2026). Education can therefore create new opportunities for transformation only when access to those opportunities is socially and institutionally supported.



7. Discussion

The four findings suggest that the most useful sociological understanding of education is relational rather than functional in a narrow sense. Education does not possess one fixed social function. Instead, the same educational practice may have different consequences for different groups and under different institutional conditions. A standardised examination, for example, may provide a transparent credential for one student while disadvantaging another whose educational preparation has been shaped by unequal resources. Similarly, a common curriculum may strengthen civic identity while creating legitimate concerns about cultural representation (Singh, 2025).

This interpretation brings functionalist and conflict perspectives into productive dialogue. Functionalism correctly identifies the importance of education for social integration, cultural transmission, and role preparation. Conflict and reproduction theories correctly warn that these processes can be organised through unequal distributions of power and resources (Taştı, 2023). Critical pedagogy adds a third dimension by demonstrating that learners and teachers are not simply passive objects of socialisation. Educational institutions are contested spaces in which dominant meanings can be accepted, negotiated, or challenged (Chiang, 2021).

The review also suggests that social mobility should not be treated as an individual outcome alone. Educational attainment may improve an individual's life chances, but population-level inequality depends on the distribution of educational quality, labour-market structures, discrimination, housing, health, family resources, and public policy. Consequently, expanding enrolment without addressing unequal conditions may increase the number of credentials without producing proportional reductions in inequality (Marin et al., 2025). This point is consistent with contemporary international evidence showing that educational outcomes remain strongly related to family background (OECD, 2024).

The role of education in social control also deserves a more differentiated interpretation. Some forms of discipline are necessary for collective life: punctuality, responsibility, respect for others, and adherence to fair procedures are compatible with democratic citizenship. The concern arises when discipline becomes unquestioned obedience or when a particular political or cultural worldview is presented as the only legitimate interpretation. The distinction between education for responsible participation and education for passive conformity is therefore central to democratic educational policy (Standish, 2019).

Finally, the transformative function of education should be approached realistically. Education can contribute to social change by generating knowledge, strengthening critical thinking, widening social participation, and challenging prejudice (Yacek, 2020). Nevertheless, it cannot independently resolve structural inequality. Educational reform must be accompanied by policies concerning poverty, digital access, teacher quality, labour markets, health, and social protection. Education is therefore best understood as a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustainable social transformation (Iseni, 2025).

8. Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

- Equity must be addressed at the level of resources and conditions, not only formal access. Early childhood provision, school quality, teacher support, learning materials, nutrition, and digital connectivity should be distributed in ways that reduce accumulated disadvantage.
- Curriculum design should balance shared civic knowledge with cultural and linguistic diversity. National cohesion is strengthened when learners can see their communities and histories represented in educational knowledge.
- Assessment systems should recognise multiple forms of competence and avoid treating culturally specific forms of communication as universal measures of ability.
- Teacher education should include sociological awareness of cultural capital, implicit bias, the hidden curriculum, and the social consequences of expectations and grouping practices.
- Schools should provide meaningful opportunities for student voice, dialogue, debate, and democratic participation so that socialisation develops agency rather than simple conformity.
- Digital and AI-based educational innovations should be evaluated not only for efficiency but also for equity, accessibility, privacy, teacher autonomy, and their effects on learning relationships. UNESCO emphasises that technology should be used in ways that are appropriate,

equitable, evidence-based, and sustainable (UNESCO, 2024).

- Educational policy should recognise that social mobility depends partly on wider labour-market and social policies. Education cannot compensate fully for structural inequalities outside the school.

9. Summary and Conclusion

This article has reappraised the multifaceted role of education through an integrative sociological framework. The synthesis demonstrates that education performs at least four major and interconnected functions. It socialises individuals by transmitting knowledge, norms, identities, and social roles. It stratifies by selecting, ranking, and certifying learners, thereby creating opportunities for mobility while also potentially reproducing inherited inequalities. It exercises social control through formal rules, institutional routines, political socialisation, and the hidden curriculum. Finally, it can contribute to social change through innovation, critical consciousness, knowledge dissemination, and changing social values.

The central conclusion is that education should not be categorised as either a force for reproduction or a force for transformation. It is both. Its effects depend on the interaction between educational institutions and the wider social structures in which they are embedded (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2018). Where educational systems provide equitable resources, culturally responsive curricula, democratic participation, critical pedagogy, and meaningful opportunities for learning, education is more capable of contributing to social justice and human flourishing. Where access is unequal and institutional practices reward already advantaged forms of cultural capital, education can legitimise and reproduce inequality.

The contemporary educational environment makes this sociological reappraisal especially important. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence may expand educational possibilities, but they can also generate new inequalities. Migration and cultural diversity require educational systems to negotiate shared civic purposes alongside plural identities (Koceva & Mirasceva, 2025). Environmental and social crises require learners to develop not only technical competence but also ethical judgement and collective responsibility. The future of education therefore depends not simply on improving instructional efficiency but on deciding what kind of society education is intended to sustain and what kind of society it is capable of creating.

Education is ultimately a social institution whose purposes are continuously contested. A sociological perspective makes these tensions visible. It reminds policymakers, educators, and researchers that questions of curriculum, assessment, access, technology, discipline, and pedagogy are also questions about power, culture, identity, opportunity, and social justice (Renzulli, 2014). The challenge for contemporary education is therefore to preserve its legitimate integrative functions while reducing its reproductive and exclusionary effects and strengthening its capacity for critical, democratic, and socially responsible transformation.

10. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is a conceptual and integrative review and does not present original empirical data. Its conclusions are consequently interpretive and depend on the theoretical and contemporary sources selected for synthesis. The review also does not claim to provide a systematic or exhaustive coverage of every national education system or every sociological tradition. Future studies could test the proposed four-dimensional framework through comparative country studies, systematic reviews, bibliometric analyses, longitudinal studies of social mobility, or empirical investigations of hidden-curriculum practices. Particular attention should also be given to how artificial intelligence, platform-based learning, and digital inequality may reshape the traditional relationships among socialisation, stratification, control, and social change.

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