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5. Building Schools Where Literacy Thrives

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In response to recent reports highlighting the serious levels of underachievement in literacy amongst pupils in schools of designated disadvantaged status compared to their peers nationally, the Literacy Initiative Project (LIP) was established in 2005 at St. Patrick's College. This paper outlines the philosophy underpinning the first phase of an intervention implemented in one of the designated disadvantaged schools participating in the project, the various components of the programme, the methodology used to evaluate it, and preliminary findings. It begins by summarising the current Irish context and provides a synthesis of the international research which informed the design of the project. It concludes with a description of the writing component of the programme, including pre- and post-intervention samples of children's writing, and indicates future directions for the project.

THE IRISH CONTEXT

Literacy standards in Ireland

The national assessments of reading achievement, which occur at five yearly intervals and assess the three reading domains of prose, narrative and documents, indicate that reading standards have not changed in Ireland since 1980. This is in spite of significant government investment in schools in terms of resources, staffing, increases in the numbers of special needs teachers, the introduction of a revised English Curriculum in

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1999 and a national in-service programme to support its implementation. In fact, significant proportions of pupils – approximately 10% – leave primary school without acquiring satisfactory levels of literacy (Cosgrove et al., 2000; Eivers et al., 2005). The picture in schools of designated disadvantaged status is much grimmer. Between 27-30% of pupils in these schools are performing at or below the 10th percentile on standardised tests of reading achievement compared to 10% of their peers nationally, while 3% perform above the 90th percentile compared to 10% nationally (Eivers et al., 2004). The Literacy and Numeracy in Disadvantaged Schools study (LANDS) (DES, 2005a) – a small scale in-depth study of twelve designated disadvantaged schools – corroborates the findings of the Eivers et al report and states that, on average, almost half of the children in these schools are performing in the bottom quintile on standardised tests of reading achievement, with as many as 60% performing below that benchmark in some schools. It also found that achievement scores actually decline as children progress through the school.

Across the reports, gender differences are apparent with girls consistently out-performing boys on all three domains of reading and at each class level. High rates of absenteeism are also noted as contributing to low standards of achievement in designated disadvantaged schools National Education Welfare Board (NEWB), 2006. In the Eivers et al. study (2004), average rates of attendance were as high as 90%, though some children's attendance was recorded at less than 50%. In the LANDS study (DES, 2005a) between 25% and 50% of children were absent for 20 or more days of the school year. As schools only have to report the number of children absent for 20 or more days there are no data available on the percentage of children who significantly exceed the 20 day cut-off or exactly how many days of the school year that they miss.

Large class sizes are one of the reasons cited by school principals in non-designated schools as contributing to difficulties in the teaching of reading (Eivers et al., 2005). Interestingly, smaller class sizes have been in place in designated disadvantaged schools since the introduction of schemes such as Breaking the Cycle and Giving Children an Even Break

(with as few as 15 children in some Junior Infant classes) and do not seem to have contributed to increased achievement on standardised tests of reading achievement. Other factors impacting negatively on achievement in designated disadvantaged schools include high teacher turnover and poor parental involvement.

In addition to reporting standards, the literacy studies also collect data on the views of pupils, teachers, principals, learning support teachers and, more recently, the Inspectorate in relation to the teaching of English. Other sources of data on the teaching of English in Ireland are the reviews of curriculum implementation by the Department of Education and Science and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. These are discussed in the next section.

The quality of literacy teaching in Ireland

In the LANDS study (DES, 2005a), observation data of actual classroom teaching was included, providing for the first time a picture of the reality of classroom practice in literacy instruction in schools of designated disadvantage. While acknowledging the challenging environment in which teachers in designated disadvantaged schools work, and the contextual factors impinging on their work, the report highlighted significant gaps and weaknesses around the integration of assessment, planning and teaching of literacy. While teachers were using several assessment measures, there was limited analysis and use of the resulting data to inform teaching and to differentiate instruction for the range of learning needs in the classroom. Almost 90% of teachers needed guidance with using formative assessment to inform teaching. There was little evidence of collaboration around planning and teaching between learning support and class teachers and in differentiating instruction for individual children. Significantly, the quality of classroom planning for literacy was weak in the majority of classes surveyed, with no evidence of a systematic programme for literacy in place.

Schools in general are also experiencing difficulties in teaching literacy. Teachers were perceived by more than half of the inspectors who were surveyed as part of the National Assessments of Reading (Eivers et al., 2005), to have a limited knowledge of a range of methods for teaching

English. In the same study, one-third of inspectors indicated that teachers had a poor understanding of the 1999 English curriculum. The evaluation of curriculum implementation by the DES Inspectorate (DES, 2005b), which involved 26 schools and 59 classroom settings, also provides interesting insights into the teaching of literacy in Ireland. It identified a quarter of teachers as having difficulty teaching literacy. In line with the LANDS study outlined above, it found that up to three-fifths of schools needed support with the development of appropriate detailed whole school plans, co-ordination between the learning support and classroom teaching programmes and the use of a range of assessment tools linked to instruction. Other gaps and weaknesses highlighted included the differentiation of instruction for the range of abilities presenting in the classroom, the teaching of skills in a meaningful context, the development of higher order thinking skills, the critique of texts, and the emotional and imaginative development of the child.

All of these studies combined present convincing evidence that across school settings schools are having difficulty with the teaching of literacy. The studies accentuate the need for the immediate implementation of the recommendations contained in the Eivers et al. (2004) and LANDS study (DES, 2005a). These recommendations include the appointment of literacy experts to provide sustained on-site professional development for teachers and the introduction of a 90 minute literacy block in schools of designated disadvantaged status.

With a clear picture of the national context for literacy established, the LIP project turned its attention to international research to see how other jurisdictions had coped with literacy difficulties and effected change.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Some schools are more successful in raising literacy achievement than others, even when their socio-economic profiles are broadly similar. This is due to a range of school- and classroom-level factors as well as differences between individual teachers. Across a number of large-scale studies conducted in the USA between 1997 and 1999, which focussed on narrowing the achievement gap in schools in areas of high to

moderate poverty, a range of school and teacher variables emerged as important factors in promoting reading achievement in schools with large numbers of children with low literacy levels (Knapp, 1995; Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor & Pearson, 2001; Taylor et al., 1995, 2003).

School level variables

Firstly, a stable staff allied with strong internal leadership, provided by either the principal or a teacher with a special interest in literacy, was deemed vital in the first steps towards change. Secondly, supports for change were put in place. These included the provision of a sustained customised on-site professional development programme which built a sense of ownership of the change process amongst the teachers. This, in turn, created a climate conducive to change and led to the development of a whole school commitment to excellence, a shared vision of what was possible and a culture of high expectations for all children. Another critical factor was the introduction of a systematic programme including a range of formative and summative assessment measures which were used to set targets and inform planning, teaching and learning. Successful schools also worked hard to improve home school communication and reached out in creative ways to reach parents. Finally, specific instructional practices in literacy informed by research on best practice were implemented school-wide, whilst also respecting teacher autonomy and ownership of the literacy programmes.

Teacher variables

Effective teachers provide a balanced literacy framework, are expert at balancing whole class, small group and individual instruction, emphasise higher order thinking activities and have excellent classroom management (Knapp, 1995; Pressley et al., 2001). Other factors such as student engagement, time for independent reading and writing, and a focus on a variety of approaches to word recognition and comprehension instruction are associated with higher than expected gains in literacy achievement (Taylor et al., 2003). The most effective teachers teach many more skills per hour and do so in meaningful contexts. Other characteristics include explicit modelling of word-identification and comprehension strategies, followed by extensive scaffolding and

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coaching and opportunities for children to practise and apply the strategies in challenging and stimulating independent reading and writing activities. As children develop in their range of skills, teachers steadily increase expectations in relation to reading and writing. Finally, expert teachers are also more likely to have knowledge of a variety of methodologies and to understand the rationale and philosophy underpinning them, and they have knowledge of a variety of assessment tools and the ability to know when and how to use them.

When one considers the Irish context, it must be acknowledged that several of these features of effective schools and characteristics of exemplary teachers have been raised as causes of concern in the recent research reports already outlined. With this in mind, the LIP project commenced and partnership schools were sought in areas of designated disadvantage to collaborate on investigating how best to meet the challenges identified in the research and to raise literacy achievement in these contexts. Phase one of the intervention in one of the partnership schools is outlined in the next section.

LITERACY INITIATIVE PROJECT: YEAR 1

Introduction

Current government policy on addressing educational disadvantage has been on extending the Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) and First Steps (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994) programmes to more schools in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools Strategy (DEIS) (DES, 2005c). The Reading Recovery programme is an individualised early intervention targeted at children most at risk of reading failure who are between the ages of 6 and 6.7 years of age. Because of its individualised nature, its focus on a particular age group and the expense involved in training teachers, it only reaches a small percentage of the number of children who need integrated, intensive and expert teaching. The First Steps programme focuses on literacy assessment, content and methodologies and relies on teacher manuals and professional development to ensure fidelity to the programme. In contrast to these two programmes, the first phase of LIP sought to

work with teachers to develop a literacy framework which was informed by national and international research on best practice but which was also home-grown and culturally relevant to the Irish context. Rather than training teachers to implement a highly prescribed programme, the LIP project sought to empower classroom teachers with whom children spend most of the school day, by helping them further develop their professional knowledge base and expertise in literacy and to use it to differentiate teaching for all children in the classroom.

School profile

A large urban mixed junior national school, identified as being in the top fifty of disadvantaged schools nationally, agreed to participate in the project. There were sixteen classroom teachers in the school, a Special Education Team (SET) consisting of one Reading Recovery teacher, two learning support teachers new to the position but with many years of teaching experience, an additional third of a support teacher's time shared with the senior school also located on-site, one full resource teacher, a home school community liaison teacher, and another teacher allocated to early intervention for a number of hours each day. The school was in the Breaking the Cycle programme and as such class sizes were typically below 16 pupils per class. Like many designated schools, there had been a high staff turnover in the recent past, though a number of staff had been teaching at the school for ten or more years. While there was a well-equipped computer room and a reasonably-stocked whole-school library, individual classes were not that well resourced in terms of literacy equipment and materials.

Baseline data

A whole school survey was administered to the staff to collect information on a range of issues in relation to literacy including: methodologies used for instruction, assessment procedures, resources and materials, grouping practices, time allocation and the extent of parental involvement. This provided an indication of how literacy was being planned for, taught and assessed and was further supplemented with a number of whole school meetings which served to clarify and

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expand on issues raised in the survey. The findings were broadly in line with the findings of the research outlined earlier (Eivers et al, 2004; DES 2005a; DES 2005b). Following consultation with the staff it was decided to focus efforts on the four First classes in the school and over the year to work with the children, classroom teachers, SET team and parents. The whole school would be kept informed through meetings and planning days.

In relation to children's achievement in literacy, a number of baseline assessments were administered. The Middle Infant Screening Test (Hannavy, 1993) had been administered at the end of Senior Infants and it revealed large numbers of children with difficulties in many of the skills assessed in the subtests on the screening instrument: listening, letter sounds, three phoneme words, written vocabulary and sentence dictation. These findings were largely corroborated by the initial writing samples completed by the children in October 2005, when they were asked to write for 20 minutes on the topic 'Myself'.

The Clay Observation Survey (Clay, 2002) was also administered and again indicated weaknesses in a range of areas including letter sounds, sentence dictation, written vocabulary and sight vocabulary. The Drumcondra Sentence Reading Test, a standardised test of reading achievement, revealed significant numbers of children reading below the tenth percentile and no pupils reading above the 80th percentile. Again, this largely mirrors the findings reported in the LANDS study (DES, 2005a) and the Study of Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Schools (Eivers et al., 2004).

The shape of the initiative

Getting started

Following the initial data collection and analysis, a series of meetings was held with the participating teachers and a plan of action agreed. In line with research, the action plan was directed by the teachers who set the agenda, identifying priorities and the specific areas where support was needed to help them further develop their expertise (Taylor et al., 2001). Rather than trying to bring a lot of change at once, a phased

approach was taken and it was agreed to implement change in one specific area of literacy and to do so in a manner that was realistic and achievable (Williams, 2007). Given that the writing workshop was largely absent as an approach to writing in this school and has been highlighted as being weak in reviews and evaluations of curriculum implementation (NCCA, 2005; DES, 2005b) and given that children were exhibiting significant difficulties with letter-sound knowledge, it was agreed to begin with the teaching of writing, while gradually working toward the implementation of an integrated balanced literacy framework (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) involving 90 minutes of instruction (Eivers et al., 2004).

The Writing Workshop

Helping teachers create the necessary 'conditions' (Graves, 1994) for a successful writing workshop formed the focus of the initial professional development sessions. Of critical importance was the allocation of sufficient time for writing and also allowing children control over the choice of writing topic. Graves' research (1994) illustrates that when these two conditions are consistently present, children enter into a 'constant state of composition'; they begin to invest thinking time in writing outside of school, thus leading to more thoughtful, engaging and original writing during class time. A third condition involves responding to the writer on a daily basis through conferencing during writing time, through providing an audience for the writing in daily share sessions, and also through commenting on children's work when reading it.

Another condition of successful writing workshops is the provision of several kinds of mini-lessons in which the skills of writing, the craft of writing, the strategies that good writers use and the procedures involved in a writing workshop can be taught (Avery, 1993). Graves also refers to the craft and skill of writing. He defines craft as the quality, clarity, and originality of the composition where the unique 'voice' of the writer shines through in the writing. He refers to the skills of writing as lower level skills such as grammar, spelling and punctuation and suggests that children need to be taught to see them as 'signposts' that inform the reader how to read a piece of text. When

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children understand the purpose of, for example, punctuation, they are more likely to internalise when and how to use punctuation marks in their own writing. The research on exemplary teachers of writing indicates that exemplary teachers tend to teach these lower level skills in the context of children's writing as they demonstrate a need for them rather than through skill and drill exercises in workbooks (Pressley et al., 2001). Finally, explicit demonstration of these crafts, skills, strategies and procedures is vital for success (Calkins, 1994).

A fifth condition is the climate of the classroom and the structure of the physical environment within it. A culture of high expectations characterises successful classrooms and children are encouraged to collaborate with peers, to take risks and 'have-a-go' at tasks. According to Cambourne (2002):

Expectations of those to whom learners are bonded are powerful coercers of learners' behaviour. We achieve if we expect to achieve and we fail if we expect to fail; we are more likely to engage with demonstrations of those we regard as significant and who hold high expectations for us.'

Therefore, it is critical that teachers understand the powerful messages they convey to students either consciously or unconsciously through tone, gesture or other form of response. Highly motivating classrooms encourage children to use their time in class to set personal challenges, to self-regulate and to take pride in their accomplishments (Turner & Paris, 1995) and they create a climate of mutual respect. The physical environment should accommodate a range of organisational groupings and should be attractive and display evidence of students' learning (Graves, 1994).

Implementation of the Writing Workshop

Using this research base as a guide, a structure was agreed with the teachers for the workshop. It was agreed to devote thirty minutes daily to the workshop and to give children the opportunity to self-select writing topics. Each session began with the whole class convening on the carpet in the meeting area of the classroom for a ten minute mini-

lesson. Teachers used this time to explicitly explain a craft, skill, strategy or procedure involved in writing. They demonstrated this through modelling and thinking aloud, using quality children's literature or examples of their own writing. Children were encouraged to actively engage with the lesson by trying out the new technique in their writing that day. When children returned to their desks, teachers circulated as the children worked and conferenced individually with them, nudging details from them, scaffolding and supporting learning and taking notes on what they observed. As the workshop drew to a close, children were encouraged to read back over their work and to proof-read. As the year went on teachers steadily 'upped the ante' (Pressley et al., 2001) and held children more accountable for self-correction and for demonstrating new techniques in their writing. The workshop concluded with a whole class share session back at the meeting area where children read their work aloud and peers responded respectfully. Children were also encouraged to develop metacognitive awareness by verbalising what they had learned that day and stating when and how the new skill, strategy or craft could be used in writing. Finally, teachers used the children's writing to inform the content of the daily mini-lessons, thus linking assessment, teaching and learning to the specific needs of children – an issue identified as needing support in the LANDS study (DES, 2005a). Evidence of the growth that took place in the children's writing is presented below in the section outlining changes in achievement in year one of the project. The work in the writing workshop was supported and strengthened by the other components of the programme.

Other components of the literacy programme

Other components were added to the programme over time. One component was a daily interactive read-aloud of quality children's literature. In these sessions, teachers emphasised understanding of the story by engaging children in response to open ended questions requiring them to use higher order thinking skills. Attention was also drawn to new vocabulary and sentence structures. Another component was a structured systematic daily word work programme which included work on sight vocabulary in context and a combination of analytic and synthetic phonics. A third component was a daily guided

reading workshop where children received strategy instruction and were matched to a range of texts at their instructional level (Fountas & Pinnell, 1995; McLaughlin & Allen, 2003). Each of the components of the programme was supported by extensive professional development.

Professional development

A multifaceted approach was taken to professional development in order to make it meaningful and to increase the likelihood that it would lead to sustained change. Research indicates that the professional development must be ongoing, on-site and specific to the needs of the teachers who must own the process and dictate the pace (Lipson, 2004). According to Hammond: ‘The most effective professional development focuses on teaching and learning through an investigation of personal practice and local teaching context. Sustained discussion on these aspects is critical to success.’ (Hammond, cited in Allington 2002). To this end, a versatile approach was put in place including: provision of professional readings to guide and further develop teacher understanding of the development of reading and writing; demonstrations involving the modelling of new techniques in each teacher’s classroom; observations of teachers implementing the new approaches; and regular meetings where teachers could reflect on changes and debate issues. Finding the time to meet and plan without compromising classroom instructional time was a challenge given that such time was not built into the school day. It was facilitated thanks to the good will of the Junior Infant and Senior Infant teachers, who provided substitution for the first class teachers at regular intervals for the last hour of the day, and by the teachers themselves who demonstrated incredible commitment, staying after school on many occasions. Another critical aspect of the professional development was the provision of a variety of resources and materials to enable teachers to implement the programme. These included writing folders, a range of texts and magnetic boards and letters.

Formative assessment

The whole school survey given at the outset of the project indicated limited use of formative assessment tools and limited utilisation of data to inform teaching. Again, this is in line with the findings of the

LANDS study (DES, 2005a), which indicated that 90% of teachers in that study needed assistance with the analysis and use of formative assessment data. Systematic use of assessment data is also a key feature of successful schools as outlined in the international research. Throughout the first phase, of the project teachers were taught to use a number of assessment tools and to integrate the findings into their teaching plans. In the writing workshop, for example, teachers were encouraged to: keep anecdotal records of conferences with individual children; regularly analyse samples of writing for evidence of the transfer of mini-lessons; monitor the need to further reinforce skills taught; and document changes over time. In the reading workshop, teachers were taught to: take running records and to use them to form and re-form reading groups; discover children's reading strategies, fluency and comprehension; and design mini-lessons to address the particular needs identified.

Cohesion

A key feature of successful schools identified in the international literature is the cohesion between learning support and classroom literacy programmes. Research literature also notes that lack of congruence between classroom and support programmes can make the process of learning to read confusing and complicated, particularly for lower achieving children (Santa & Hoiem, 1999). The NAER survey (Eivers et al., 2004) and the LANDS study (DES, 2005a) found little evidence of collaboration between learning support and classroom teachers and limited differentiation of teaching. This is not surprising in the Irish context, as there is no collaborative planning time built into the school day, thus making it exceedingly difficult for teachers to meet and plan comprehensively. In this study, the learning support teachers joined many of the regular meetings held with the classroom teachers and a portion of this professional development time was given over to joint planning. The learning support teachers came into the classroom three days a week to work alongside the classroom teachers during the guided reading workshop and this helped to provide for the range of learning needs within the classroom.

Parental involvement

A crucial feature of successful schools is their ability to reach out to parents in genuine ways and to involve them in their children's education. In this study, parents were involved from the beginning. They were informed about the initiative in a letter and at parent teacher meetings were shown aspects of the programme and shown how they could help their child's literacy development. Towards the end of the year, a celebration of the year's achievements was planned and parents were invited to visit their child's classroom to witness the growth that had taken place. In each classroom, children read sections of books and some of their writing aloud to their parents and showed them examples of their work from the start of the year. The session concluded with all parents coming together in the assembly hall for a talk on how they could help maintain their child's progress over the summer months and avoid the so-called 'summer slump'. There was an excellent turn out with more than three quarters of parents in attendance. Plans are in place to further build on this support in year two of the programme.

Achievement data end of year one

At the end of the school year children were re-tested on each of the baseline tests and statistically significant improvements were obtained across a range of measures. Results of the Drumcondra Sentence Reading Test showed a significant improvement in reading with the numbers performing below the 10th percentile reduced by three quarters. In addition, there were now 10% of children reading above the 80th percentile and half of these were reading above the 90th percentile. Significant improvements were also in evidence on the subtests of the Clay Observation Survey. Writing samples again indicated marked improvement in comparison to the initial samples, showing growth in a number of areas including: ability to sustain a topic; quality of expression; coherence; spelling; and punctuation. The baseline and end of year samples of two children are shown in Figures 1-4 below in order to illustrate the changes that took place in the children's writing.

Figure 1: Baseline Sample Child A.

~~I play with football~~
 I play. X
 I bob PLay.
 I bob PLay.
 I L. X s
 I PLay

Figure 2: End of Year Sample Child A

I got a new book to keep for ever, and the name of the
 book was Dennis the menace a master menace,
 It was funny and it took a long time to read,
 and it was a little bit too long, I got it on Monday
 I got it in a library and Dennis the menace, a
 naughty boy and his dog is naughty too but
 Dennis's mum was reading her book and Dennis's
 mum did not see the Dennis was messing them,
 Dennis was playing football with Gnasher,
 Dennis kicked the ball to Gnasher but Gnasher
 did not see the ball and the ball landed in the
 middle of mums freshly baked cake, and mum was
 angry at Dennis and Gnasher, and Gnasher and Dennis
 Gnasher and Dennis was bold and mum said go up to
 your room, and Dennis was messing in his room.

Figure 3: Baseline Sample Child B.

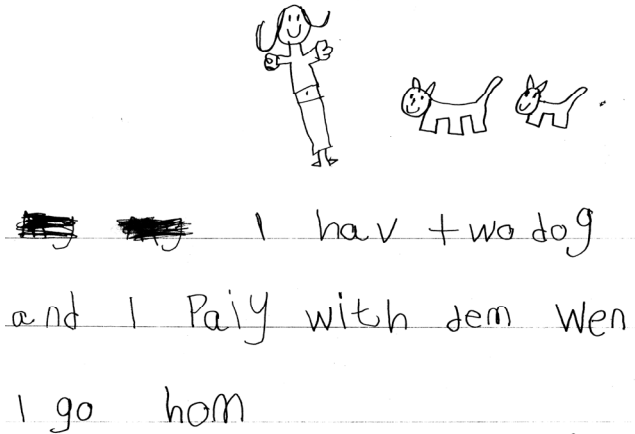


Figure 4: End of Year Sample Child B

~~Today is monday. We are~~
~~going to computeres at miss~~
~~Lawlor. Today is Tuesday. I am~~
~~going to the homework club.~~
~~I hope we have curry and~~
~~chicken and rice together.~~
~~When we go to the homework~~
~~club. First we get our~~
~~dinner. Then we do our homework.~~
~~After our homework we do~~
~~a activity. There is two~~
~~winers at the end of~~
~~the homework club.~~

CONCLUSION

Preliminary findings of this project indicate that when quality multifaceted sustained professional development is provided on-site to schools, in combination with the resources and support needed to implement best practice in the classroom, that much can be achieved. The initial success of the project generated huge enthusiasm throughout the school and gave teachers a feeling of control and empowerment that they could effect change in their school context despite the socio-economic status of the school. A sense of confidence emerged amongst the children and there were many signs that they were now more motivated and engaged in reading and writing both within and outside school. It led to renewed energy and commitment to extend the project within the school in year two. The challenge will be to maintain gains achieved and to continue to build on the success of year one.

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