Episode 27 - Soobin Oh & Elena Rivera

Rafael: [00:00:00] Welcome everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm your host, Rafael Otto. I want to thank all of our listeners for tuning in and as usual you can catch us on the airwaves on 99.1 FM on Sundays at 4:30 PM or subscribe and listen wherever you find your podcasts. Today, I'm talking with two of my colleagues at Children's Institute.

Elena Rivera is our senior health policy and program advisor. and Soobin Oh is our senior early education advisor. We'll talk about why a focus on racial equity is essential when thinking about the needs and hopes for kids, for all children, but particularly for young children in the early childhood space.

And we'll talk about how Children's Institute is working on centering racial equity in its work. Elena and Soobin, how are you both doing today?

Soobin Oh: [00:00:46] Really great Rafael. It's great to be with you and Elena today.

Elena Rivera: [00:00:50] Yeah, I'm doing well, too. Excited for this conversation.

Rafael: [00:00:54] Glad to have you both. I know we've had some opportunities to talk about this in person, of course. And I'm glad to have you both on the podcast and to get this conversation out to a broader audience. When we're talking about racial equity it means that we're also talking about racism and its impact on young children.

Soobin I thought we could start with you, if you could describe some of the ways you're thinking about how racism impacts the learning experiences for young children and then, Elena, I'll give you an opportunity to talk about this as well.

Soobin Oh: [00:01:27] Yeah, you're not starting with the easy questions are you Rafael?

Rafael: [00:01:32] We're going to go right into the big picture.

Soobin Oh: [00:01:34] I love it. I love it. I mean, where do we even start in terms of how racism impacts the learning experiences of young children? I think we could think about it in different levels. What I mean by that is, on some level, we can look at data and outcomes and understand that people's life trajectories are being impacted by racist systems or racist policy decisions or different races. Different people are having different experiences just based on the categories that they're being put into.

 And then I think you can also describe how racism impacts learning experiences for young children on a more intimate level in terms of the classroom experience of a child. For example, just receiving a lot of negative attention from a teacher, more than usual, and that could perhaps be impacted by the teachers uninterrogated biases.

 We know that can be the case based off of new research on how implicit bias works. So, I think it could anywhere from there to there in terms of intimate experiences all the way to broad trend data across populations. We can see a variety of ways that racism is having an impact on people.

Rafael: [00:02:51] Thanks Soobin! Elena, What are your thoughts on that?

Elena Rivera: [00:02:53] Yeah, I really appreciate that framework Soobin offers, kind of the data approach and then the experiential approach. I just want to interject another potential setting. You know, children are in classrooms and even before they're in classrooms, children are interacting with these other systems and services be it healthcare - starting even with the prenatal care that their mothers receive when they're pregnant- and including family support services as well. And in these kinds of programs and settings, kids and families are experiencing everything from bias at an individual level to the kind of systemic impacts like neighborhood poverty, crime rates, poor housing conditions and so on, you know, lack of access to food as well.

These are conditions that are created by structural racism that we have built into our institutions and our policies. And so this all adds up. You can think of the kind of compounding nature of racism. Such that by the time a child enters a classroom, they already have a host of experiences that have shaped the kinds of opportunities they've been exposed to, how their families are doing and how those children perceive both their own skills and identity, as well as how they fit into the picture of their community.

Rafael: [00:04:26] I know you both have personal early childhood stories related to racial bias or inequity in early childhood when you were younger. Would you be willing to share one or two of those?

Soobin Oh: [00:04:41] I like to tell this one particular story, because I think it highlights how some seemingly innocent choices that an educator or a parent or any adult is making actually is having a huge impact on children's perception and their experiences.

So, I'll just dive in. My first day of kindergarten - and I remember being very excited about the first day of kindergarten - Korean was my first language at home. I knew a little bit of English, but I was really excited to go to a school that happened to be a predominantly white school. And one of the things I was really excited about was bringing my lunch box. And in my lunch box - I never had a lunch box before - I had my favorite lunch, which at the time was rice, kimchi, salted fish. I knew for a fact that all the kids were going to love what I brought to lunch and they were going to be jealous. So, I was waiting for lunchtime. I opened up my lunch box and the reaction that I got from all the kids was, "Eww! Yuck! Disgusting!" And so I closed the lunch box. I put it away. I did not eat lunch. I was instantly ashamed. And that experience cascaded with a series of other incidences and experiences where I was making a series of decisions about myself to push away my language, my culture, my heritage, my background, my ethnicity. I was pushing it away and creating a wedge between my background and myself. And, through that I lost my language, and I've distanced myself from my culture.

In fact, my name was David starting in kindergarten. I chose to be called David until about four years ago when I became a doctoral student and I started to understand how racism operates and works in schools. And, I learned that I can take charge and enter into a journey of reclaiming my heritage and so I chose to do that, and now people know me as Soobin. But if you had met me five years ago, you would have called me David. So these experiences, the

way these kinds of systems are set up, they're having profound impacts on people. And oftentimes, I don't know if the adults are aware of the impact.

Rafael: [00:07:04] I appreciate you sharing that story. Thank you. And Elena, is there a story that you'd be willing to share as well?

Elena Rivera: [00:07:11] Yeah, absolutely. Well, I can just share that, I am personally mixed race and I have a really rich cultural background. But I grew up quite ignorant about my racial and cultural identity. My grandparents all immigrated to the US. My father's parents immigrated from Mexico and my mother's parents immigrated from Japan and from Germany.

So when I think about the rich culture and tradition that is a part of my family history, it gives me a big sense of pride. And yet at the same time, when my parents were growing up, there was such a huge societal emphasis on assimilation and erasure of culture and of language and of tradition.

And so my parents grew up actually quite distant from their culture and their race. And what that means is that as I was growing up, I didn't have a lot of opportunity to learn about my family background. I remember first talking about concepts of race, not really until middle and high school, and just feeling this big sense of discomfort and like, I didn't know exactly where I fit in, and having to go home and talk to my parents and bring up these questions that they weren't even quite comfortable with or used to talking about. And I think this just shows the generational impact that a lot of these practices are having in early childhood.

So while it wasn't me experiencing discrimination or judgment in my early childhood classrooms, that was absolutely my parents' experience - being shamed for speaking languages other than English. My grandparents were told that they were putting my parents at a disadvantage. You know, my parents having really low expectations for themselves as a result of the judgment that they received from others and thinking really deeply about how that gets passed on generationally.

I think that's so important because we need to know that what's happening with young children now is impacting not just them, but generations to come.

Rafael: [00:09:20] I really appreciate you both sharing those personal experiences and that those are.. I think they're examples that really help us better understand the broader concept of systemic racism, racism that is really built into our systems, our programs, our policies, and our thinking. What are your thoughts on that? And do you think about that connection in any other way?

Soobin Oh: [00:09:41] So for example, when we look at schools - I'll talk about it from the education perspective - when we look at schools, how do we know that a school is successful? Right? What are the metrics that we tend to look at? And what do we describe about the school that shows that it's successful?

Typically I have not seen standardized measures or measures that are widely accepted around cultural pluralism or sustaining language, sustaining culture and heritage, right?

Those aren't the types of things that typically show up in measurements. So that's an example of how, even though people may not have an assumption or an idea that the metric itself has a racist tendency, that, effectively, it is having an impact on the erasure of language and culture. Which, if you look at trend data, the number of languages and the number of people speaking a variety of languages is shrinking across the globe. So, people are wanting to know why and this is the theory that I'm putting out there. Not me, myself, but I'm building off of others who have put that theory out there.

Elena Rivera: [00:10:47] I have to agree, Soobin. I think what you're speaking to is how we start to understand and interrogate issues of quality and inclusion in early childhood. So we often think about metrics that might just look at, you know, access or the reach of certain programs and services. But what we're really missing out on is, for kids of color, for kids with really diverse cultural backgrounds, what is their experience?

Do they feel included? Are their and their family's values reflected by and valued by the systems in which they're spending time in. Yeah I think that this is a really important conversation to have in the early childhood spaces. Soobin pointed out there's a lot of room for improvement here to have more inclusive measures that really take into consideration how we're making all children feel welcome and giving them the kinds of opportunities that are going to, not just help them be academically successful, but help them grow into adults who are thriving and who have a sense of fulfillment and identity and all of the things we hope for this future generation.

Rafael: [00:12:04] I wanted to ask you both to kind of unpack and explore a little bit about what can do and what organizations can do. Particularly, now, there's been so much attention drawn to issues around racial equity or inequity or racial justice. And I think people are trying to figure out they can move forward, how they can make progress.

And I like thinking about it. You know, you've both talked about this, and some other leaders around diversity, equity, and inclusion have talked about this idea of working on the issue at four different levels. There's sort of the personal level, there's the interpersonal level, there's what organizations can do, and then what those organizations do externally and how they interface with the communities that they work with. Can you talk about those four levels and maybe Soobin, do you want to start?

Soobin Oh: [00:12:53] Yeah, so Elena and I were deeply inspired by Vanessa Peterson from the Northwest Evaluation Association. And she kind of presented the idea that that's how she had organized a lot of her DEI plans and strategies. So that's one thing about like, how do you take a lot of concepts, or talk, or discussions around race and racism and turn it into a strategy - an actual plan.

And this was what she had presented to us and I think we found a lot of inspiration in it. And One of the things that she said was that it all starts with the personal level. Part of doing the DEI work within an organization is that no one escapes the burden of responsibility of learning about systemic racism, historical injustice, colonization, how this has played an impact and a role in shaping who we are as a country and our thought processes. I think one of the dangers about what some people call "new racism" is that it's hidden, it's embedded.

It's not just the explicit racists that we're talking about; we're all complicit in some way, including myself. Right? The other three areas that she's talking about in the interpersonal is how, within teams, are we actually raising conversations about race and racism and does that lead to changes in protocols, meeting structures, how we call each other in if a microaggression is observed, for example. Those are the types of things that would. show up there.

Then there is organizational change around like hiring, outreach, meeting structures when you're talking about meetings across the organization, pay and compensation issues. So those types of things show up at the organizational level. Then external work, which is where I think a lot of people, when they do DEI work, they go straight to the external work. Like, what's the statement that we need to put out? Or what's the Instagram photo that we need to make? And that's typically where all the energy goes in and usually stops there unfortunately. External work is the forward-facing materials and interactions that we have with our communities, partners, donors, anything outside of the organization.

Elena Rivera: [00:15:12] What I think is so important about these four levels is just how nested they are. As Soobin mentioned, really starting with the personal and the interpersonal work. I mean, first, I want to acknowledge that many of us, most of us, did not grow up having these conversations about race and about racism and our own identities.

And knowing how to talk to others about this topic can take a lot of time and it takes a lot of practice as well. We have to start there, and then what's great about that is as you do that work, and as you get more comfortable having those conversations and being in a learning and an open-minded space, then that starts to show up in other ways.

In the ways that you think about your organizational practices and what kind of internal culture you're building, as well as the ways that you're interacting with partners. So for Children's Institute, we work quite a bit with external partners - be they schools or school districts or community-based organizations, or even our partners at state agencies - we have to be comfortable bringing these topics into those conversations if we really want to make progress toward our goal, which is of course eliminating the disparities in opportunity that exists for kids in Oregon. It's going to take a real concerted and a real long-term effort.

Rafael: [00:16:37] Elena, I like the way you connected that to this long term effort, to the systemic view. Could you just talk a little bit more about what it really means to think about deconstructing the systems that we have and working toward a place where we no longer have the systemic inequity? What's it going to take?

Elena Rivera: [00:16:57] Absolutely. It's going to take a lot of work. What I think about is: if we care about ensuring that all children have the same kinds of access to opportunity and the same ability to really achieve their potential and achieve their hopes and their dreams for their lives, then we have to ask ourselves and hold ourselves accountable to our current reality, which is really far from that.

When we look at our data, we see that there are disparate outcomes. No matter what indicator you're looking at - if we're just looking at children's letter names and letter sounds

recognition on the kindergarten assessment, or if we're looking at how many children receive all of the recommended well-child visits in the first five years of their life, or if we're looking at who are the children who have access to preschool experiences - we see disparities across race and across income. And these demographics really layer on to each other, especially for children of color who are living in families with low incomes. We are often seeing the poorest outcomes for those populations.

And that's a result of the systemic challenges and the institutional racism that Soobin and I have been talking about. When we see that data, we have to ask ourselves: "What are we going to do about it?" Because the reality is we can continue to have programs, we can continue to expand programs that serve children and families, but if we're not changing the structure of those programs, then we'll likely continue to see the disparate outcomes that we've had.

I think of the example of one federal program: Medicaid. Medicaid was developed as a program to provide health insurance to low income individuals, so children and adults. And what's incredible is when you look at the program nationwide, it's achieved great outcomes. It's improved healthcare coverage, access to care has improved, and so have health outcomes.

And yet, when we look at who faces the greatest barriers to even enrolling in Medicaid, who's covered by the program but least likely to access care, least likely to go to a doctor's visit and who still experiences higher rates of poor health outcomes, that's Black, Indigenous and people of color. And so while we have a program serving an entire population that's getting good outcomes for that whole population iIf we do not interrogate the ways that those programs are operating and start to dismantle some of the inequitable structures within our programs, then we're just going to keep perpetuating those disparate outcomes. And that's just unacceptable. We know that the work to address the systemic and these institutional factors it's going to be long-term.

And we also know it's going to take real deep partnership and collaboration with the people who are most directly impacted. So I think that's another big area for growth that we have as an organization and as a community and as a society. How do we envision new ways of working in partnership, so that we can co-create solutions that will actually address the challenges we see?

Rafael: [00:20:50] Thanks, Elena. Soobin, do you have comments on this question around deconstructing the systems that are currently in place?

Soobin Oh: [00:20:56] Elena spoke to it so eloquently. I just want to build on that last point that she was building on- that she mentioned- around co-constructing and working in deep partnership with people who are most impacted. CI has, like I'm not gonna stand up on a podcast and or in front of anyone and say like, CI has it all figured out or we're totally perfect on all these. We have aspirations and goals and ideas around what it is that we want to become and how we want to develop into an anti-racist organization. I think that one of the things that feels really clear is that idea of co-construction. That feels really clear to us.

That's what's going to help the deconstruction that you're talking about actually hearing from the people who are most impacted and letting them be the problem solvers around the problems that are most in front of them. As opposed to a kind of traditional problem solving where someone else, who's distant from the situation and the experience, is solving the problem for them.

Rafael: [00:21:59] You mentioned anti-racism, and you touched on that, and part of what I wanted to talk about a little bit with you is the idea of the definitions in the work around equity, diversity, inclusion, anti-racism - what those things mean. In order to work on it you have to have a common understanding about what these are, what they mean. And so, could we just spend a minute to break down the concept of equity a bit further? What are some of the key concepts to consider when trying to define equity specifically?

Soobin Oh: [00:22:28] Sure. Yeah. And I think we can even talk a little bit about why it's important to have these shared definitions.

Rafael: [00:22:35] Yeah, absolutely.

Soobin Oh: [00:22:36] The very kind of loose defining that we've been doing thus far, we still have more work to do. Diversity, equity, and inclusion sometimes get conflated with each other and talked about as if they're the same thing, but they're actually different layers of the same piece, the same puzzle. So diversity, typically if I'm talking a broad strokes here, has to do with population and representation; so, who's represented, who's able to participate, how does that break out in terms of diversity. And then there's equity, which is, what are the barriers to participation and how can they be removed? That would be working on equity. Then there's working on inclusion, which is once people are able to participate, how are they feeling? What is the manner in which they are participating? So it's one thing to say, "Hey, we want participation into a preschool program." But if that preschool program is having - for example in my story -having an impact on the child's life where they're experiencing microaggressions or overt racism or explicit hateful racism, then that child is likely not to feel very included. And anti-racism, I think, is a really easy example in terms of the importance of why we need to define these things.

So if we are using, for example, Ibram Kendi's definition of anti-racism and when he talks about anti-racism he mentions that racism is policies and decisions that are racist in nature. And anti-racism is acting against that. And one key distinction about his definition is that it's not how most people talk about racism. The way most people talk about racism is that racism is an identity. You either are racist or you are not racist. The way he's defining it is they are decisions that people are making. So hence, I could be making a racist decision. I could be acting in a racist way. I could have a racist report or document. And so if I'm using that definition, then someone can tell me that that was a racist decision or that was a racist talking point. And I wouldn't be offended. I would say, "You know what? I want to be anti-racist; I'm not going to make that decision again." And so, I think these definitions are really helpful in terms of making progress, because what we really want to see is change.

Rafael: [00:25:00] Elena, comments on the definitions or anything that you want to add to that?

Elena Rivera: [00:25:05] Yeah, I would just draw back the tie to what we were speaking to a little bit earlier about data and how we're really just holding ourselves accountable to outcomes that are meaningful. I think this is a big area of conversation for us at Children's Institute and just for the early childhood field at large, but we really do need to take some time thinking about, "Do the measures that we're looking at, the data that we put value and power behind, the data that we privilege, is that giving us an accurate picture of diversity, equity and inclusion?" What are the gaps? And then how do we fill those gaps so that we have a more holistic understanding of what's really happening for children in our state and then the country.

Rafael: [00:25:57] I wanted to ask specifically, there were a couple of examples that I want you both to talk about. And Elena, I know you talked about health outcomes in the Medicaid system, but talk a little bit about what that looks like for young kids around infant mortality.

Elena Rivera: [00:26:12] Yeah, this is a really, a heartbreaking topic, Rafael. A few months ago a research study was published where researchers analyzed about 2 million births in Florida over a 20 year period. A really incredible, thorough longitudinal research study. They found that when cared for by white doctors, Black babies were about three times more likely to die in the hospital compared to white babies.

That is a huge disparity in infant mortality.

Rafael: [00:26:48] Yeah... just heartbreaking.

Elena Rivera: [00:26:50] It really is. And so we know that there are a lot of different reasons for this and that this is structural racism at play within our healthcare system. It's showing up at an individual and an interpersonal level. That might look like provider bias and judgements that healthcare providers have about Black children and families and mothers.

It's also showing up at a policy and a community level. So, if we think about just the prevalence of white doctors and the lack of having a diverse healthcare workforce, what are we doing about recruitment and retention of students of color in medical school, for example? And even something like neighborhood segregation, which allows for the reality that some hospitals, 98% of the births they attend are white families and some hospitals are serving a vast majority of black individuals. That kind of neighborhood segregation that creates these conditions in which we can see these kinds of disparate outcomes for infants; We need to be attuned to all of it.

Rafael: [00:28:04] Thank you. Soobin, I wanted to ask you about suspension and expulsion and if you wanted to touch on some of the research that's been done about that, but can you talk about the disparities there?

Soobin Oh: [00:28:15] Yeah, and I think you know, when we're talking about definitions, this hits on a few different areas - whether it's diversity, equity or inclusion - but I think we're

mostly talking about inclusion here. When you're talking about suspension and expulsion rates, I think you're referring to the research about Walter Gilliam?

Rafael: Yeah.

Soobin Oh: So Walter Gilliam founded through his research that when you're studying teachers and where they place their attention and you're looking at different children across gender and race, teachers have an over tendency to spend a lot of their gaze on Black boys in particular.

And he further explored that phenomenon and found that suspension and expulsion rates for Black boys are disproportionately high. You'll find that phenomenon of disproportionately high rates of either suspension and expulsion, but you'll also find that in special education as well, in terms of being referred to special education. And so we look at that and the first thing that just shocked people is "I didn't know that kids in preschool were getting suspended and expelled." That should be the first shock that we all feel.

Rafael: [00:29:24] Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Soobin Oh: [00:29:26] The second shock that we should feel is, why is there a difference across these different races? One of the implications, just one of the implications of his findings, is that this implicit bias that teachers have, it's there, we all have it. And part of the change that we would like to see is better support and understanding how to disrupt that, how to change those biases, but also in terms of understanding when a suspension or expulsion is likely to happen.

If a teacher is feeling like that's the thing that they need to do, what can they do instead? What should they do? And what are the better ways of handling... Maybe there is something very challenging happening around challenging behaviors or something concerning that the teacher has observed.

So I think on one level we have to change like the teacher disposition in general, just the general disposition that teachers might have. But I think also it's about building supports around the teachers so that they never have to feel like they have to suspend or expel a child. This is just an example of an area where when we're foregrounding racial equity, this is the kind of work that we would address.

Rafael: [00:30:40] The other piece I wanted to talk to you about is this common concept of the achievement gap when we were talking about student achievement in early learning and in K-12, kind of all over in the education space. But there's an issue with that. Can you talk about that, Soobin?

Soobin Oh: [00:30:57] Yeah, in terms of the achievement gap, first of all, I just want to say that some people have built entire careers, organizations, national movements around addressing the achievement gap. I'm not going to stand here and deny the existence of the achievement gap. But I will say that there are researchers, in addition to the ones that I just mentioned, who have questioned or critiqued the achievement gap in terms of what is it actually describing? And in the way that it's being described, are we presenting new

problems? So one person that I'm thinking of in particular is Gloria Ladson-Billings, who can be attributed to culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy.

There's also Geneva Gay. There are critical race theorists who have looked and questioned the achievement gap and how it's being used to describe what they call a deficit narrative. When we're saying that these kids are doing well, and these kids are not, it immediately positions some kids as "lacking" or "deficient," which organizes schools and improvement efforts and policies around fixing kids. As opposed to, understanding historical injustice and understanding oppression and housing policy... all the other things that we've been talking about. When you take those things into account, we recognize that the people aren't deficient, the systems have been designed to oppress them or fail them, or however we want to describe it.

It's working for a few and it's not working for others. So, the achievement gap is misleading. So, what we want to do instead is think about how we can actually address the material conditions of people's lives so that an achievement gap wouldn't ever be there. So, organizing ourselves around the concept of an achievement gap is, while noble, could be misguided.

Rafael: [00:32:50] Talking today, it's clear to me that drawing attention to these issues is one thing, changing inequities is an entirely different thing. You've both pointed to great ideas, practical tools, things that individuals can work on and do, things that organizations can work on and do, but before we close out, I just wanted to see if you had remaining thoughts on what it will take to really see true change. And maybe this is looking too far ahead, but how will we know when it's arrived? Elena, do you want to take a shot at that question?

Elena Rivera: [00:33:25] Yeah, one thing that's resonating for me right now is just a point we were making earlier about collaboration and partnership and having real collective work towards this end of eliminating racism in our policies and systems in the early childhood space. I know that this is what it will take to see true change.

And that's also one helpful indicator of when we're on the right track, when our families who are most directly impacted by systemic racism, when they are the ones who are in the decision making seats. Whether that be providing testimony to legislators and talking about what's most important to their kids and their families and advocating for those policies or those programs and funding streams, or whether that's sitting on a statewide decision-making committee that's made up almost entirely of families who are directly impacted by services.

So, I think that we have a long way to go to get there, but that is one really important indicator to pay attention to: how are we as an advocacy organization doing our part to partner with, lift up, and even give up some of our power - some of our seat at the table - to make space for family voice and community voice to be really centered and held in focus?

Rafael: [00:35:00] That's great. Soobin, do you have comments on that?

Soobin Oh: [00:35:02] Yeah, I would agree with Elena that we have so much work to do as an organization in terms of growth and change and it's hard for me to be able to say like,

"Here's the blueprint, here's the roadmap, here's the playbook." I'm taking my cues from other people who have organized and been activists in the area of racial justice and other social injustices and tried to learn as much as I can. I think we, as an organization, are on our way in doing that. But I feel like, like I said before, the one thing that feels really clear to me, is about really deeply engaging with community partners, culturally specific organizations, educators, professionals in multiple domains, families, and making sure that their voices are helping to shape the change. That feels really clear to me. In terms of like, when will we know? When will we know we've solved it? I think of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, when she was asked, "How will you know that we've achieved gender equality?" And her response was, "When we see nine female Supreme court justices."

Rafael: [00:36:05] There you go.

Soobin Oh: [00:36:05] The interviewer said, "Oh well, that's not equal, right?" And she says, "Well, we've seen nine male, Supreme court justices and no one batted an eye." Right? Like I think we will need to see something radical before we're able to say: "All right, we're beyond the issues that plague us today."

Rafael: [00:36:25] Elena and Soobin, I really appreciate you taking some time to speak with me today. I'm glad we could get this recorded.

Elena Rivera: [00:36:31] This is great. Thank you both.

Soobin Oh: [00:36:33] Yeah, really appreciate it. Thanks y'all.

Rafael: [00:36:35] Thanks for listening to The Early Link Podcast. I'm your host, Rafael Otto. This show is brought to you by Children's Institute, at work transforming early learning and healthy development for young children and their families in Oregon. Tune in to 99.1 FM on the second and fourth Sunday of every month at 4:30 PM. Or stream these segments wherever you find your podcasts.

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