

Challenges of Managing Ill-discipline in the 21st Century Classroom: Teachers' Frustrations

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ABSTRACT Managing ill-discipline in the twenty-first century classroom has become a difficult and frustrating practice for teachers. Schools are vulnerable to increased incidents involving various sorts of ill-discipline. This paper seeks to investigate the degree to which ill-discipline in twenty-first-century classrooms affects teachers' emotional well-being. A qualitative approach and a case study design were adopted. Nine teachers were chosen from three primary schools in the Mopani East district through the purposive sampling technique. Data collected through interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The overall finding is that teachers were frustrated by handling unruly learners in their classes. The paper recommends that the Department of Education should recognise teachers' frustrations, create explicit policies, and provide strengthened support through regular seminars. The study concludes that teachers should not only possess the ability to manage ill-disciplined behaviour in the classroom but also resilience and support networks necessary to handle growing frustrations that occur.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, classroom dynamics have changed significantly due to a combination of changing principles of learning, cultural norms, overemphasis on learners' rights, and the rapid development of technology (Tiwari and Fahrudin 2024). Although maintaining order in the classroom has always been essential, the emergence of digital distractions, modifications to family structures, and overemphasis on learners' rights have added a new level of complexity to this persistent issue, which frustrates teachers (George 2024). These authors have addressed the difficulties encountered by teachers in a rapidly evolving learning atmosphere, providing perspectives on how factors such as familial relationships, digital distractions, and evolving perspectives on learners' rights have made classroom management more difficult.

Ill-discipline in schools, distinguished by disruptive behaviours like disobedience, distraction, and disregard for authority, has appeared as one of the most prevalent issues facing teachers today (Tshimilandou 2024). As a result, managing learner discipline has become a difficult and critical issue for teachers globally. Teachers' morale is affected by learners' lack of discipline, which makes them feel angry, frustrated, drained, weary,

bored, and ready to quit teaching. Bongila (2024) and Taylor (2024) concur, maintaining that teachers complain that they have trouble teaching unruly learners in their classrooms, leading to numerous cases of illness, high levels of stress, and resignations.

The emphasis on the rights of learners is confusing because it disregards their obligations and overrides teachers' apparent power to instil discipline in them (Lepheana 2024). As a result, school teachers are under tremendous strain to handle learner discipline without violating their rights. The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine the frustrations that teachers in Rakwadu 1 Circuit in Limpopo Province, South Africa, experience in dealing with a lack of discipline in the twenty-first century classroom, with emphasis on the power dynamics and systemic factors influencing disciplinary practices, the psychological impact on teachers, and the shortcomings of contemporary disciplinary measures and policies on learner discipline. Consequently, this background forms the basis of the paper.

Objectives

This paper seeks to explore the frustrations that teachers face in today's classrooms through the following objectives:

1. To investigate the degree to which ill-discipline in twenty-first century classrooms affects teachers' emotional well-being
2. To ascertain whether the Department of Basic Education provides teachers with adequate training and support to effectively manage ill-discipline in twenty-first century classrooms
3. To determine if government acts and policies fail to enforce learner discipline.

Problem Statement

Managing classroom behaviour has become more difficult for teachers in the twenty-first century. While technological advancements focus on learners' rights and shifting social norms have revolutionised teaching strategies and learners' participation, they have caused a rise in ill-disciplined behaviour as well. This tendency creates considerable frustration for teachers who are responsible for maintaining order and a positive learning atmosphere.

Even with the advent of new tools and techniques, many teachers face challenges like inadequate support and behavioural management training, and mounting demands from learners and educational institutions. In addition to impairing instructional efficacy, the issue of ill-discipline, which can range from disruptive behaviour to a lack of respect for authority, also has an impact on learners' general learning experiences and well-being. This paper examines the frustrations that teachers experience in their efforts to manage discipline in the twenty-first century classrooms.

Literature Review

Managing learner discipline in the twenty-first century requires a thorough analysis of the challenges that frustrate teachers. As highlighted below, the literature acknowledges these challenges.

Power Dynamics and Systemic Factors Influencing Disciplinary Practices

The South African Constitution (RSA 1996), together with national laws like SASA (RSA 1996), provides that everyone involved in the educational system, particularly teachers, should make sure that learners' rights are upheld. Conversely,

Gusfre et al. (2023) observed that there appears to be a growing number of complaints about instances of teachers abusing learners, which is a violation of their rights. Leriba (2024) concurs, stating that government acts and policies on learner discipline appear to have surpassed their applicability or relevance, and have not been revised to address disciplinary concerns that have arisen since 1994. Even more frustrating is the fact that the emphasis on learners' rights, in contrast with their responsibilities, takes precedence over the apparent power that teachers have to instil discipline in their learners (Lepheana 2024).

Although they may be aware of the rights of children, teachers believe that learners' rights come before their own (Burden 2025). To advance the claim, Kau (2024) found that teachers were challenged to preserve a teaching and learning environment in schools because they feel that their authority to discipline learners is being diminished (Lepheana 2024). This suggests that teachers who are entrusted with discipline in progressively challenging environments may become frustrated by this disparity.

Psychological Impact of Ill-discipline on Teachers

Ill-discipline may lead to psychological effects on teachers, influencing their psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and emotional stability (Moen et al. 2024). Despite the duty to maintain a cheerful mood at all times, disruptive behaviour lowers teacher morale. The psychological effects of a lack of learner discipline are complex and include stress, burnout, emotional distress, and a diminished sense of professional effectiveness (Di Mario et al. 2024; Joshi 2025). Joubert and Jacobs (2024) agree, asserting that teacher aggression stems from heightened frustration and may indicate that those who exhibit this behaviour are experiencing a high level of stress, helplessness, and despair.

Unruly learner behaviour may drastically affect teachers' health and trigger them to seek other employment opportunities (Kganya 2024). Sithole et al. (2024) concur that teachers' frustration may also emanate from the provision of the law that prohibits schools from dismissing learners for behavioural or academic misconduct. They expressed regret over the negative impact of this

provision on the overall atmosphere in schools (Sithole et al. 2024). Teachers expressed concern about the amount of time they spent in the classroom before the commencement of lessons, as well as the momentary interruptions throughout the classes brought on by learners' disruptive behaviour (Karasova and Nehyba 2025).

To effectively handle ill-discipline, teachers require assistance from communities, co-workers, and school administration (Masoka 2024). These psychological effects can be lessened, and the general atmosphere in the classroom can be improved for both teachers and learners by creating a supportive and valued environment. To enhance the claim, Azhar (2024) proposed that teachers should teach learners self-control and perseverance to reduce interruptions and resistance caused by their disruptive behaviour.

Shortcomings of Contemporary Disciplinary Measures and Policies Pertaining to Learner Discipline

Since policies have changed to emphasise safeguarding learners' rights and guaranteeing equitable treatment, there has been an increasing concern about striking a balance between learners' rights and managing their behaviour. Teachers who are entrusted with upholding discipline in progressively challenging environments may become frustrated by this disparity. To this end, it should be understood why teachers still resort to unlawful forms of punishment like corporal punishment. Teachers resort to harsh disciplinary methods because they lack both adequate training in managing learner discipline and a deep understanding of the mental status of learners (Muli 2024). Oberg (2025) supports the idea by asserting that teachers are given incredibly challenging tasks for which they are hardly equipped, and that lack of knowledge of current disciplinary measures exacerbates their frustration. This is because the absence of effective alternative methods of discipline makes them prone to aggressiveness (Deshpande et al. 2025). In such situations, teachers tend to use harsh disciplinary measures to discipline learners when they are in a challenging situation. For this reason, Kgan'ya (2024) supports frequent training sessions for teachers and School Management Teams (SMTs) on how to oversee disciplinary actions in schools.

The overemphasis on learners' rights to a fair, reasonable, and legally required administrative disciplinary hearing may make it more difficult for teachers to effectively execute discipline (SASA 1996). Teachers are expected to enforce rules without violating the rights of learners, which can cause friction and conflict between the need for teachers to maintain their power and regulations that restrict it. This makes it extremely difficult for them to maintain learner discipline without infringing on their rights. A study by Cullen and Murphy (2025) maintained that there are certain inconsistencies in the general preamble of these laws. In cases where learners deserved to be reprimanded, these inconsistencies made it not only challenging to apply discipline but also, to a considerable extent, hazardous.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was directed by two frameworks, namely, the push/pull theory's components in relation to teacher attrition, which provide the theoretical framework. Linda Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2023) study on teacher recruitment and retention served as the foundation for the conceptual framework. The two frameworks directed the study during the literature review, data collection and analysis phases.

In 1966, Everett Lee introduced the push/pull theory as a rationale for migration (Peralta et al. 2024). The theory explains why people leave their homeland and move elsewhere. In this context, it describes the psychological strains and frustrations teachers experience in the twenty-first century classroom, as they work through challenges in managing their classes when it comes to dealing with ill-discipline. These refer to the demands, tensions, and frustrations that teachers face as a result of poor discipline (Seyri and Ghiasvand 2025).

Teachers are forced to respond when learners misbehave, interrupt classes, or question authority, frequently in ways that are difficult and emotionally challenging. Attempting to control these behaviours while preserving a positive learning environment can leave teachers feeling frustrated, powerless or worn out. Teachers believe that they are powerless and have no other option (Mlangeni and Seyama-Mokhaneli 2024). To make matters even more challenging, the 'push factors' may also involve outside forces like the adminis-

tration of standardised tests, parental or administrative expectations, or other factors that put much demand on teachers.

Pull factors include favourable forces that maintain teachers in their current roles or influences from other professions that persuade them to change careers (Kraft and Lyon 2024). The ‘pull factors’ refer to the uplifting and inspiring elements that encourage them to continue in their line of work. In this study, the push factors refer to the challenges that teachers face in managing ill-discipline, whereas the pull factors refer to what makes the teachers retain their jobs irrespective of the challenges. For example, stress and frustration may cause a teacher who has ongoing behavioural problems to feel “pushed” out of the profession, but their innate drive and passion for teaching may also “pull” them back to keep trying to interact with and assist their learners.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) explain how teachers experience challenges in upholding discipline in their classes. These difficulties are linked to teacher burnout and a rise in resignations, claiming that disruptions in the classroom play an important role in teachers’ mental health issues, particularly when they do not have enough assistance or training in classroom management (Darling-Hammond et al. 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to examine the frustrations experienced by teachers in Rakwadu 1 Circuit in Limpopo Province, South Africa in dealing with a lack of discipline in the twenty-first century classroom. In an attempt to achieve this purpose, the qualitative research method under the interpretivist paradigm was employed. The researchers chose this method because it allowed them to interact with participants and to collect rich data from their (participants’) personal experiences (Dahal et al. 2024; Pregoner 2024).

The qualitative research method also provided a thorough grasp of first-hand data regarding the frustrations experienced by teachers while managing learner discipline in the twenty-first century classroom (Dahal et al. 2024). An exploratory case study design provided researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the frustrations faced by teachers when managing ill-discipline in their classrooms, and offered perspec-

tives from a real-world context. The population of this paper comprised primary school teachers based in Rakwadu 1 Circuit, Mopani East District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. To enhance the rigour of the paper and the trustworthiness of the data and results, the researchers used a purposive non-probability sampling strategy to select cases with loads of pertinent information (Samuel and Merkebu 2025).

The sample comprised nine teachers to better understand their frustrations when managing learner discipline. In this context, ‘teachers’ refers to class teachers, departmental heads (DHs), and school principals because they all spend some time teaching learners in the classroom. This means that from each of the three sampled schools, one class teacher, one DH, and one principal participated in the study. The participants comprised both male and female teachers aged between 40 and 60 years with more than 20 years of teaching experience. Additionally, they all held postgraduate diplomas in management and law, except one principal (PZ), who recently graduated with a master’s degree in education. The participants were chosen because they were eager to participate (Nyimbili and Nyimbili 2024) and because of their status as informed data holders who deal with ill-discipline issues on a regular basis. The schools were specifically picked because they were situated in remote areas where it was believed that a lack of discipline was a common practice.

Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews, which were conducted after contact time with the learners during the third school term. The following research questions served as the basis for the objectives of the paper:

1. Do teachers receive enough training and support from the Department of Basic Education to manage ill-discipline in the twenty-first century classrooms?
2. To what extent does ill-discipline in the twenty-first century classroom influence the emotional well-being of teachers?
3. Do government acts and policies on learner discipline fail to enforce learners’ discipline?

The interviews were conducted primarily in English. Open-ended, semi-structured interview questions enable researchers to interact with individuals and to delve more deeply into their responses (Johnston and Longhurst 2025; Saglam

2024). The opinions of the participants were captured on audio, transcribed (translated into English where necessary), and then thematically examined. The paper used the six-phase thematic analysis approach to make sense of the data. The procedure was guided by the six phases identified as familiarising the researcher with data, creating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally generating the report (Sandhiya and Bhuvaneswari 2025). To ensure the trustworthiness of the paper, the researchers addressed dependability and confirmability. To guarantee dependability, the researchers gave the reader a thorough description of the research sites, participants and methodology, enabling them to assess whether the results applied in their situation. The researchers further ensured confirmability by using the participants' real words to present the results, ensuring that the findings were derived from participants and not from the researchers' own thinking. Reading, rereading and analysing data against the participants' words guaranteed the credibility of the results.

Using qualitative data from interviews with teachers, the paper emphasised the psychological and professional impact that managing ill-discipline puts on teachers, focusing on their frustrations, depression, anxiety, and low morale. The paper is part of the first author's doctoral study, and therefore, ethical considerations were approved, and permission to conduct the study was granted by the University of Limpopo, Limpopo Department of Education, Mopani East District, Rakwadu 1 Circuit, and principals. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, the three schools were designated as School X, School Y, and School Z. The three teachers interviewed were named TX, TY, and TZ (class teachers), DHX, DHY, and DHZ (departmental heads), and PX, PY, and PZ (principals). Participants were given informed consent forms. Participation was completely voluntary, and ethical issues were observed throughout the study (Macnamara 2025).

RESULTS

This paper focused on the frustrations that teachers experience in their effort to manage discipline in twenty-first century classrooms. The data collected resulted in the creation of the findings, which are presented below.

Theme 1: Frustrations of Teachers, and a Decline in Teachers' Morale

The results highlight the strain that teachers experience on account of dealing with challenging learner behaviour, which can lead to mental and physical exhaustion, illness, and in some cases, early retirement from the profession. Data revealed that managing ill-disciplined classrooms was challenging due to the frustrations experienced by teachers. DHY from school Y had this to say, *"It is quite draining to deal with disruptive behaviour in the classroom. When pupils behave inappropriately, it is usually difficult to manage a class effectively."* Similarly, TZ from school Z clarified, *"I frequently feel as if I fail to maintain order in the classroom. Learners' disruptive behaviour makes teaching extremely challenging; I feel drained and think of resigning."*

Data suggest that, in addition to disruptive learner behaviour, teachers may be frustrated by systemic problems such as challenging learning environments. PZ from school Z commented with despair and said, *"As the school's principal, I've been trying for a while to get the department to provide us with classrooms, but absolutely nothing has been done as of yet. Managing a large class is extremely challenging because it is impossible to attend to each learner individually. It is discouraging and frustrating."* Research indicates that teachers become frustrated in overcrowded classrooms due to bad teaching and learning conditions, safety and health issues, inadequate learner-teacher interaction, disruptive behaviour, and psychological and emotional concerns.

Theme 2: Inadequate Professional Development Programs and Support

The data indicate that teachers believe the school administration is not adequately supporting them or offering ongoing training in classroom management. Data also showed that a lack of administrative support and insufficient professional development led to teacher frustration. TY explained, *"The fact that as teachers we have inadequate or unequal access to professional development and continuing training in managing ill-discipline hinders us from staying informed about current ways of managing our classrooms. It is frustrating to practice what we were never*

exposed to. PX added, *“I am concerned because teachers are subjected to “one-size-fits-all workshops”, which are scheduled at the beginning of each quarter and rarely address classroom realities. The workshops lack relevance to our daily responsibilities. In support of TY and PX, DHX mentioned, “I enjoy being a teacher, but when it seems like the department of education doesn’t care, it’s difficult to be optimistic. It seems to me that there is a discrepancy between their expectations of us and the realities of the classroom. That’s why some teachers resort to illegal ways of maintaining discipline in their classrooms when they are not supported”.* DHZ also commented with despair, *“Teachers are given alternatives to corporal punishment on paper by the department, but no training is provided on how to apply them in their classrooms. This frustrates teachers because they don’t know how to handle discipline in their classes.”* Drawing from participants, it is clear that the expectation placed on teachers to maintain discipline has increased, but a lack of support or effective solutions for managing misbehaviour makes it harder for them to address issues in the classroom.

Theme 3: The Inefficiency of Policies and Government Acts in Enforcing Learners’ Discipline

Data revealed that current policies and government acts on learner discipline frustrate teachers because they prioritise learners’ rights over their responsibilities, rendering them incapable of managing ill-discipline effectively. PZ stated, *“Policies that prioritise learners’ rights over their responsibilities simply encourage poor behaviour and place teachers in a never-ending struggle with the system”.* DHY remarked, *“Although learners’ rights are significant, when they take precedence over obligations, teachers become frustrated and lose the power they need to successfully regulate behaviour and strictly enforce discipline”.* PY remarked, *“The policies offered by the department of education lack clear procedural steps but focus heavily on learners’ rights with little assistance in dealing with repeat offenders, leaving teachers frustrated”.* TX added, *“Learners are not encouraged to act responsibly when it comes to school-related issues. The child’s rights are valued above every-*

thing else, despite the limitations stated in section 36 of the Bill of Rights”. This implies that emphasising rights alone may encourage ill-disciplined behaviour and result in tension between teachers and the rules that are supposed to guide them in maintaining order. Teachers are irritated by this policy imbalance because it makes it harder for them to exercise control and successfully manage their classrooms.

DISCUSSION

This paper was designed to answer the research questions: *“To what extent does ill-discipline in twenty-first century classrooms impact the emotional well-being of teachers?”* Also, *“Are teachers provided with sufficient training and support from the Department of Basic Education to manage ill-discipline?”* The overall finding is that teachers are frustrated with managing ill-discipline in the twenty-first century classrooms.

This paper emphasizes the frustrations that teachers experience while addressing ill-disciplined behaviour in their classroom, which implies that dealing with unruly learners can be stressful and have a detrimental effect on the classroom atmosphere as a whole. The finding also emphasises how difficult it is for teachers to keep discipline and conduct lessons successfully when learners behave in unacceptable ways. It also demonstrates how managing ill-discipline in the twenty-first century strips teachers of their energy, restricts their capacity to oversee the classroom, and has a detrimental effect on learning. As a result, teachers may get frustrated, feel burned out, experience health issues, and their morale may decline, all of which are commonly blamed for the rising number of teacher resignations (Cuervo and Vera-Toscano 2025). In essence, the finding highlights how challenging it is to strike a balance between effective teaching and learning and discipline in an unruly environment.

This finding is reiterated by Qasserras (2025), who highlights how teachers’ capacity to sustain instructional flow is severely hampered by widespread disruptive behaviours, cultural tensions, and a lack of enthusiasm, demonstrating how classroom management demands frequently overshadow teaching and learning in chaotic environments. Although research indicates that proactive and adaptive measures, such as positive

reinforcement, explicit expectations, and culturally sensitive management, can reduce disruptions, the inconsistent application of these strategies highlights the challenges of sustaining discipline and learning without ongoing support (Lumadi 2025). New research confirms that increased involvement and behaviour correlate with effective classroom management. However, the ongoing challenge that remains is to provide teachers with the necessary knowledge, training, and institutional support to implement these strategies in stressful and disruptive environments (Qasser-ras 2025). The findings also hint at more general systemic problems in education. Teachers often do not have support when it comes to handling unacceptable behaviour. The finding is consistent with that of Molekoa (2024) and Vakili et al. (2024), who similarly found that schools with overcrowded classrooms might lack the necessary personnel and resources to adequately handle behavioural issues.

It was also determined that there is a gap in professional development programs that provide teachers with the tools, techniques, and support networks they need to address problems like ill-discipline, which has become more complex due to societal, technological, and twenty-first-century challenges. This result highlights a significant issue regarding the effectiveness of teacher professional development. The finding revealed that the workshops provided to teachers ignore their different and actual needs. Scheduling of these workshops without adjusting the content to real classroom issues makes them seem pointless and unrelated to teachers' daily responsibilities. It implies that professional learning opportunities need to be more focused, adaptable, and context-specific (Nezhad and Stolz 2025; Rizqi and Syafika 2024). Basically, it was found that teachers are not given enough or the right kind of training to deal with learner behaviour, which makes it difficult for them to keep their classes disciplined (Lumadi 2024).

The paper revealed that policies and government acts on learner discipline prioritise safeguarding learners' rights over ensuring that they fulfil their obligations, which frustrates teachers and makes discipline management more challenging. Scholars confirm that a lack of discipline in schools may have its roots in learners' rights and freedoms, which are overemphasised (Zondo and Mncube 2024). The participants' belief that rights and responsibilities should be balanced is highlighted by the reference to Section 36 of the Bill

of Rights, which permits the limitation of rights under specific circumstances (such as to preserve order or defend the rights of others). To advance the finding, Burden (2025) attests that to provide a more comprehensive and orderly approach to education, schools must not only promote awareness of learners' rights but also inculcate a feeling of responsibility and consequence.

The findings further revealed that due to the greater emphasis on learners' rights than on clear and functional measures to help teachers manage ill-discipline effectively, there has been a noticeable rise in learners' disrespect in schools. In support of the finding, Tshimilandou (2024) maintains that learners participate in ill-disciplined activities as a result of their disregard for the rules. It suggests that adhering to such policies and acts is difficult for schools.

CONCLUSION

Teachers still face massive challenges in dealing with ill-discipline in the twenty-first century classrooms because of the varied demands of their learners, technology diversions, and shifting social influences. Even if there is a place for traditional disciplinary measures, these measures need to be supplemented by contemporary disciplinary measures that emphasise the identification of underlying reasons for disruptive conduct and the cultivation of positive relationships between learners and teachers in the twenty-first century classrooms. It has been established that there is a need for a holistic approach to behaviour control, which includes trauma-informed procedures, social and emotional development, and expanded teacher support networks. It is therefore imperative that teachers possess not just the ability to manage ill-disciplined behaviour in the classroom, but also the resilience and support networks necessary to handle the growing frustrations that occur. Establishing an atmosphere that fosters respect, responsibility, and academic achievement for every learner requires cooperation from teachers, parents, and policymakers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools and Educational Systems

Schools and educational systems need to make substantial investments in teachers' ongoing, pertinent, and individualised professional

development. They also need to ensure that there are adequate support structures in place to allow teachers to effectively manage their classes. This may assist in minimising frustrations.

Teachers' Mental Health

It is recommended that a comprehensive approach that takes into account teachers' emotional and educational requirements, professional growth, adequate support networks, and efficient classroom management techniques is needed.

Policymakers

Policymakers should create or revise detailed discipline guidelines that include appropriate learner conduct, sanctions and incentives. These rules ought to be transparent, equitable and uniformly applied in all schools.

Teachers

To curb frustrations, it is suggested that teachers should establish and convey behaviour expectations at the start of the term, and make sure that learners are aware of potential consequences for misbehaviour. In an effort to help resolve their conflicts and keep them from turning into disciplinary problems, teachers should encourage learners to participate in peer mediation and conflict resolution programmes.

LIMITATIONS

The paper focused on only three schools, and nine participants, all of whom resided in rural areas. The study could have been expanded to special schools to determine whether handling ill-discipline is difficult. Additionally, only schools from a single district in Limpopo Province were included in the sample. Consequently, the results cannot be extrapolated to a broader population. However, they can serve as a basis for subsequent research utilising bigger samples.

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The authors of this paper affirm that they have no conflicting interests.

AUTHORISATION AND DECLARATION

The researchers declare that the article has not been published or sent for publication elsewhere.

CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Moremi NS is the main author of this paper, which is extracted from her PhD thesis. She gathered and examined participant data. Themane MJ, who contributed to the development of the thesis which serves as the basis for this study, is the main author's supervisor. He also helped with the data analysis for the paper.

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