They Don't See the Real Me!" Student Voices on Behaviour and Belonging

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Abstract

Students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) are often viewed through a deficit-based lens of disruption and non-compliance; their inner experiences remain largely unexamined in educational discourse [1, 2]. This study addresses a critical gap by foregrounding the voices of secondary school students in Malta who have been identified as exhibiting SEBD, exploring their lived experiences of behaviour, belonging, and support. Drawing on a qualitative design that included focus groups, journaling, and ethnographic classroom observations, this study examined how these students perceive their challenges and what strategies they consider most helpful for engagement. Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected themes: emotional distress misinterpreted as defiance; anxiety and overwhelm; mistrust and withdrawal; autonomy-seeking behaviours; and internalised failure linked to disconnection. Students identified significant strategies that supported their participation, such as emotionally safe spaces, interactive and flexible lessons, movement breaks, and relational trust, reinforcing findings from recent trauma-informed and student-centred research [3-5]. These strategies align with the core principles of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the psychosocial model, emphasising the foundational role of emotional safety, autonomy, and belonging in educational engagement [6]. Rather than interpreting SEBD as inherent pathology, this study reframes behaviour as relational communication and inclusion as a practice of connection. In doing so, it contributes to growing calls for participatory and trauma-informed responses to behaviour that centre student agency and dignity [7]. This research offers practical implications for educators and policymakers seeking to shift from compliance to compassion and from control to meaningful engagement.

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Keywords: SEBD, Student Voice, Behaviour, Engagement, Inclusion, Trauma-Informed, Malta, Ethnography.

Introduction

Students who exhibit social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) are often defined by the challenges they pose rather than the needs they express. Dominant narratives within education tend to characterise these students through disruption, oppositionality, or non-compliance, frequently resulting in responses centred on control and discipline. Yet such perspectives overlook the emotional and relational dimensions that underpin their behaviour. Although inclusive education policies across many systems, including Malta's, promote access and equity, students with SEBD remain among the most marginalised, experiencing disproportionate rates of exclusion, academic underachievement, and social isolation.

Many of these students contend with complex adversities, including trauma, instability, and unresolved emotional needs, which can manifest as dysregulation or disengagement within the classroom. However, these behaviours are often misinterpreted as defiance or apathy rather than understood as expressions of emotional distress. As argued in recent research, behaviour should be recognised not merely as an action to be managed but as communication to be understood [8]. Despite increasing awareness of trauma-informed and relational approaches, prevailing school practices often continue to emphasise compliance over connection.

We argue that meaningful inclusion for students with SEBD must extend beyond physical integration into mainstream classrooms; it requires an adapted, student-informed, and relationship-centred approach to engagement and support. This perspective is in line with the ecological view presented in work, which emphasises the dynamic interplay between students' inner experiences, school culture, and educator attitudes. This paper contributes to the growing body of research that foregrounds students' voices in understanding and responding to SEBD. Through a qualitative methodology combining focus groups, reflective journaling, and ethnographic observation, we explore how students themselves make sense of their school experiences and what conditions they believe support their ability to learn and belong. Our findings reaffirm the need to position behaviour within a relational, trauma-informed, and participatory framework. In doing so, we invite a reframing of behavioural support, one that moves from punishment to presence and from exclusion to understanding.

The scope of this study is focused on understanding how secondary school students in Malta who have been identified as exhibiting social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experience school life. By foregrounding their own stories, this study seeks to uncover the emotional, relational, and pedagogical factors that affect their sense of belonging and engagement. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: how do students with SEBD interpret their own behaviour and what do they perceive a being helpful or harmful in supporting their inclusion and engagement in school?

Review of Relevant Literature

Social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) encompass a spectrum of behaviours, such as defiance, withdrawal, aggression, and emotional dysregulation, that interfere with a student's ability to engage meaningfully in school. These behaviours are not typically rooted in deliberate disruption but often arise from underlying emotional distress, trauma, or neurodevelopmental conditions. Students with SEBD are disproportionately affected by school exclusion, academic underachievement, and long-term social marginalization [10]. In Malta, approximately 5–6% of students experience significant behavioural or emotional challenges, but their access to support remains inconsistent across educational contexts.

Traditionally, SEBD has been approached through a deficit model, framing behavioural issues as problems within the child that must be corrected through control and compliance measures. However, this perspective overlooks the emotional, relational, and environmental contexts in which behaviours emerge. Despite their limited long-term efficacy, punitive strategies such as detentions and suspensions are still widely used, potentially exacerbating students' feelings of disconnection. Contemporary literature increasingly challenges this model, advocating for a relational and ecological approach to behaviour instead. In this framework, students are situated within a system of interacting influences, including family dynamics, school culture, peer interactions, and teacher-student relationships. Rather than being seen as inherently problematic, behaviour is understood as a communication of unmet needs.

A significant gap in existing research concerns the lack of student voice in shaping educational responses to SEBD. Traditionally, the views of educators, administrators, and clinicians have dominated the discourse, while the perspectives of students—especially those deemed disruptive—remain marginalised [10]. This exclusion risks the implementation of strategies that fail to resonate with students lived realities. In contrast, participatory research has demonstrated that students with SEBD possess valuable insights into their own emotional triggers, social needs, and learning preferences. Their reflections challenge deficit-based and behaviourist interpretations and promote the adoption of more inclusive, context-sensitive practices.

Several theoretical frameworks inform this relational and student-informed perspective on SEBD. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, for example, asserts that learning is contingent upon the satisfaction of foundational human needs, including safety, belonging, and esteem [11]. Students whose basic emotional or physiological needs are unmet may struggle to regulate behaviour or engage cognitively in the classroom. Therefore, emotional safety and relational trust are prerequisites for academic engagement, especially for students who have experienced instability or trauma [12].

Trauma-informed education builds upon this foundation by recognising the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on behaviour and learning. Trauma can manifest as hypervigilance, impulsivity, defiance, or withdrawal symptoms often mistaken for deliberate misbehaviour. Effective trauma-informed practices emphasise co-regulation, predictability, and emotional sensitivity. Frameworks such as the Pyramid Model provide educators with concrete strategies such as morning check-ins, calming spaces, and relational repair conversations to foster resilience and inclusion [13].

In addition, mentalisation theory offers insight into how students make sense of their own thoughts and those of others. Traumatic

experiences can impair a child's ability to reflect on mental states, leading to misinterpretations of social cues and difficulties with emotional regulation [14]. Educators who support mentalisation by encouraging perspective-taking and emotional literacy contribute to more stable classroom dynamics [15]. These relational practices help students develop a coherent self-concept and foster trust in others, both of which are crucial for students navigating social and behavioural challenges. The psychosocial model complements these theories by integrating individual, relational, and systemic dimensions of behaviour. Rather than pathologising students, it considers behaviour in light of personal history, environmental stressors, and structural inequalities. In educational settings, this approach requires a shift from behaviour management to behaviour understanding, recognising that disengagement, resistance, or aggression may reflect deeper needs for autonomy, fairness, and belonging.

These theoretical perspectives converge in support of inclusive, student-informed strategies for addressing SEBD. A key shift involves moving from control to co-regulation. Instead of punitive measures, students benefit from access to calming tools, sensory breaks, and relational cues that help regulate emotions and prevent escalation [16]. Another shift calls for moving from teacher-directed instruction to student-centred learning. Flexible lesson design, multimodal tasks, and student input reduce resistance and promote ownership over learning [17]. Finally, shifting from passive reception to active participation is essential. Reflective journaling, peer-led discussions, and feedback sessions give students voice and agency, building trust, motivation, and inclusion [18]. Although theory and policy have evolved, practice often lags behind. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding the lived experiences of students with SEBD, exploring how they perceive their challenges and what conditions they believe best support their sense of engagement, safety, and belonging.

Methodology
Research Design
We adopted a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore the lived experiences of secondary school students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). The main aim was to understand how these students interpret their own behaviour and identify what supports or hinders their sense of engagement and belonging in school. Rather than seeking generalisable patterns, our research prioritised depth, context, and meaning, situating students as knowers of their own experience. An interpretivist paradigm was chosen to position student perspectives as valid and complex sources of knowledge rather than data to be measured against adult-defined norms. This approach allowed for a richer, more nuanced understanding of behaviour as socially and emotionally constructed [19]. This study was exploratory and inductive, grounded in the conviction that those most affected by educational policy, students, must be central to any conversation on inclusion.

Researcher Positionalities
This research was shaped by the authors' professional experiences and relational commitments to students exhibiting social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). For Farrugia, the impetus emerged during his early years of teaching when he encountered a student who routinely arrived at school without lunch and exhibited signs of profound emotional distress.

Believing that the educator's role extends beyond academic instruction, he provided the student with a daily meal over a 5-year period and coordinated pastoral care with guidance personnel. As trust gradually developed, the student moved from social withdrawal to relational connection; an experience that underscored how consistent and compassionate presence can serve as a foundation for engagement and inclusion. Pizzuto, with over 12 years of experience as a learning support educator, developed her interest in this field through daily encounters with students whose behaviours were often misinterpreted as defiance. Her own personal experiences of having little understanding or support for emotional challenges during schooling further motivated her to explore the inner lives of students with SEBD. This personal and professional trajectory fostered a deep interest in trauma-informed and relational approaches to education, grounded in the belief that students' behaviours are often expressions of unmet emotional needs. Together, these positionalities shaped the interpretive stance of the study, embedding empathy, reflexivity, and care into both the research design and the analysis of student narratives. This alignment with interpretivist and participatory paradigms reflects the authors' commitment to understanding behaviour not as a disruption to be managed but as a message to be heard [20].

Participants and Sampling
The study focused on six Year 11 students (aged 15–16) enrolled in an inclusive secondary school in Malta. Each had been identified by their educators as exhibiting SEBD, often co-occurring with ADHD, prior trauma, or disconnection from traditional classroom settings. The school context was characterised by small class sizes (approximately 15 students per cohort) and access to a multidisciplinary team including learning support educators (LSEs), counsellors, and therapists. We employed a convenience sampling approach which, while limiting the potential for broad generalisability, enabled the lead researcher, already a familiar and trusted adult within the school, to develop authentic rapport with participants.

The selected students represented a range of behavioural and emotional profiles, thereby providing a rich cross-section of experiences within the small sample. In qualitative research, especially when working within an interpretivist framework and exploring vulnerable populations such as students with SEBD, depth and richness of data are prioritised over breadth [21]. The use of a small purposefully selected sample enabled the collection of detailed, context-sensitive insights while maintaining ethical sensitivity and emotional safety. Furthermore, triangulation across multiple data sources through focus groups, journals, and ethnographic observation enhanced the robustness of findings, compensating for the limited number of participants and supporting thematic saturation within this specific school context.

Data Collection Methods
We used a multi-method approach to collect qualitative data, combining focus groups, student journaling, and ethnographic observation.

Focus Group
A semi-structured focus group was conducted with all six students. The group format encouraged collaborative reflection,

prompting participants to build on each other's perspectives and generate shared meaning. The discussion, lasting approximately 1 hour, centred on school experiences, emotional triggers, perceptions of behavioural responses, and classroom relationships. It was audio-recorded with full informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Reflective Journaling
Following the focus group, students were invited to keep weekly reflective journals over a period of 3 months. These journals included written reflections, illustrations, and free-form expressions relating to their daily experiences of school, emotions, and interpersonal encounters. Journaling was chosen for its accessibility to students who may find verbal communication challenging [22]. Entries were anonymised and incorporated into the thematic analysis.

Ethnographic Observation
The ethnographic dimension of the research was carried out by Farrugia who has taught music from early years through to secondary education for over a decade. With a background in ethnomusicology and a broader interest in anthropological approaches to education, his professional experience informed a series of classroom observations conducted across multiple secondary schools in Malta. These observations, which extended over several weeks, involved sustained presence within classrooms, informal conversations with students and staff, and the compilation of detailed field notes documenting student behaviour, teacher responses, and the relational and contextual dynamics influencing engagement. The triangulation of focus group dialogue, student journaling, and observational data allowed us to capture multiple dimensions of student experience while also cross-validating emergent themes.

Ethical Considerations
This study was conducted in full compliance with ethical research protocols and received formal approval from the Malta Leadership Institute and the school's senior leadership team. Written informed consent was obtained from both participants and their guardians. All participants were provided with clear, accessible information outlining the voluntary nature of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage, and assurances of data confidentiality.

To ensure emotional safety, a school counsellor was available throughout the research process and no questions were designed to elicit disclosure of trauma. All students were assigned a pseudonym. Data was securely stored on password-protected devices and destroyed following the completion of analysis, in line with data protection regulations.

Data Analysis
We adopted a reflexive thematic analysis approach to examine and synthesise the data. This method supported an iterative and reflective engagement with the material, allowing us to identify and interpret underlying patterns of meaning across the dataset. The six stages of analysis included: (a) familiarisation with the data; (b) generation of initial codes; (c) search for themes; (d) review of themes; (e) definition and naming of themes; and (f) production of a final analytic narrative. Manual coding was conducted independently and collaboratively, with regular peer debriefing to challenge assumptions and mitigate interpretative drift. Themes were developed inductively and refined through comparison across data sources. Particular attention was paid to emotional tone, metaphor, and recurring expressions of distress, exclusion, or support.

Researcher Reflexivity
Our research team brought complementary perspectives to the study. Farrugia's professional and ethnographic background provided insider insight into classroom dynamics, while Pizzuto's academic grounding in trauma-informed and relational pedagogies supported interpretative depth. We maintained reflexive journals throughout the process, documenting shifts in interpretation, ethical tensions, and emerging questions. This practice helped ensure transparency, critical distance, and emotional sensitivity in analysing data generated from vulnerable student populations.

Thematic Insights
This section presents the key themes that emerged from the analysis of student focus group discussions, reflective journals, and ethnographic observations. The aim was to explore how students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) experience school, interpret their own behaviour, and identify the classroom practices that either support or hinder their engagement. Thematic analysis revealed five dominant and interrelated themes: emotional distress misinterpreted as defiance; anxiety and overwhelm; mistrust and withdrawal; autonomy-seeking behaviours; and internalised failure linked to disconnection. These findings reflect growing research that conceptualises SEBD as relational and contextual rather than merely individual pathology [23].

Emotional Distress Misunderstood as Defiance
Students consistently expressed frustration at being misunderstood. Their behaviour, often perceived by adults as oppositional, was rooted in emotional dysregulation or internal distress—frequently invisible to others.

"Sometimes I just can't sit still. It's not because I want to annoy the teacher. It's because I feel trapped in my own body." (Student 2) "People think I like getting into fights, but it's the only way I know to get my feelings out." (Field interview) These accounts reinforce trauma-informed perspectives which frame such behaviours as expressions of psychological survival rather than deliberate disobedience.

Anxiety and Overwhelm Undermine Participation
Persistent anxiety, often originating from home or past experiences, was a prominent theme. Students reported difficulties concentrating and participating due to constant emotional overload. "My stomach hurts every morning before school. I'm just always nervous, even if nothing's wrong." (Student journal) "I try to pay attention, but my brain won't stop thinking about all the things that could go wrong." (Student interview) These findings align with literature on hypervigilance and trauma responses which highlight how emotional strain disrupts cognitive and behavioural functioning in the classroom [24].

Mistrust and Withdrawal as Protective Strategies
Students described deep-seated mistrust of adults and peers,

often shaped by inconsistent caregiving or previous relational harms. Withdrawal was used as a means to avoid emotional risk. "I don't trust adults. They either leave or let you down." (Student) "It's easier to keep to myself. If I don't talk, I won't get hurt." (Journal entry) "When people try to be nice, I wonder what they really want." (Field note) These insights resonate with mentalisation theory which suggests that early trauma can impair relational trust and lead to defensive social withdrawal [25, 26].

Seeking Autonomy Through Opposition

Oppositional behaviour was frequently described as an assertion of control in emotionally unsafe environments rather than as defiance. Students resisted instructions they perceived as authoritarian or disconnected from their lived experiences. "Why should I listen to people who don't even try to understand me?" (Student) "I say no just to feel like I have a bit of power." (Journal entry) "I'm tired of being told what to do all the time … I already have that at home." (Field conversation) The psychosocial model helps explain these dynamics, viewing autonomy and fairness as core psychological needs, especially for students exposed to unpredictability or invalidation [26].

Internalized Failure and Disconnection Undermine Engagement Many students described persistent feelings of inadequacy often compounded by social isolation. Whether due to exclusion, school transfers, or relational trauma, these experiences contributed to a lack of belonging and reduced motivation.

"Everyone else seems to get it. I just feel dumb." (Student) "I've already failed so many times — what's the point in trying again?" (Journal entry) "I sit alone because I don't fit in with anyone." (Student) "I've moved schools so many times, I stopped trying to make friends." (Student) These reflections underscore the role of emotional and social belonging in learning. Without a sense of connectedness, students disengage both academically and relationally. As Maslow and others suggest, esteem and belonging are not optional; they are fundamental to development and participation [27-29].

Summary of Themes

Table 1: Summary of themes.

Theme	Core Insight
Emotional distress misread as defiance	Behaviour often reflects emotional suffering not deliberate disruption.
Anxiety and overwhelm	Persistent fear and vigilance impair classroom focus and participation.
Mistrust and withdrawal	Traumatic experiences that harm trust in others often cause students to shut down emotionally
Autonomy-seeking opposition	Resistance reflects the need for voice and fairness in disempowering settings.
Internalised failure and disconnection	Feelings of inferiority and exclusion reduce motivation and belonging.

Interpretation and Implications

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), focusing on what they believe supports their learning, wellbeing, and sense of belonging in school. The findings not only validate existing research but expand upon it, offering rich student-informed insights into the nuanced realities often obscured by the label "challenging behaviour".

We argue that behaviour must be reframed as a form of communication rather than a deliberate disruption, often signalling emotional overload, social distress, or an unmet need for connection. This interpretation aligns with the psychosocial model and trauma-informed frameworks and resonates with Cooper's (2003) critique of control-based disciplinary models. Students in our study frequently described feelings of being overwhelmed, unheard, or misunderstood, conditions which, they explained, triggered behavioural responses misread as defiance or disengagement.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides a useful lens for understanding these accounts. Consistent with this framework, students who felt emotionally unsafe or socially excluded were unable to regulate or participate effectively in class. Our findings reinforce Pizzuto's (2023) argument that emotional safety must precede learning and inclusion. For these students, predictability, consistency, and relational trust emerged as non-negotiable prerequisites for engagement.

We also highlight the importance of autonomy and student agency in reducing resistance. Students repeatedly emphasised their need for choice and voice in their educational experience, confirming earlier research by Sellman findings on the impact of participatory practice in behaviour support. When students are active contributors to their learning environment, their sense of ownership and regulation tends to increase.

Trauma-informed approaches surfaced as particularly salient across both our data and the wider literature. Small but consistent interventions such as movement breaks, quiet spaces, and relational check-ins proved effective in supporting emotional regulation. These practices align with emphasis on co-regulation as a foundational principle for behaviour support. A central thread running through the data was the role of teachers not only in managing behaviour but in shaping students' emotional landscapes. Students perceived calmness, fairness, and relational consistency as signs of safety while sarcasm, shouting, or punitive measures often led to withdrawal or escalation. This affirms the value of relational pedagogy, positioning teaching as a practice rooted in trust, not control [30].

Farrugia's ethnographic observations provided a vital layer of contextual understanding. Drawing on his background in music education and anthropological approaches to schooling, these extended observations documented how withdrawal, humour, and resistance often functioned as protective strategies in unpredictable environments. These insights reinforce Pizzuto's (2023) findings regarding the emotional labour students perform in maintaining safety, particularly in settings that lack relational continuity.

This study contributes to educational theory and practice in several ways. Firstly, it offers a nuanced and reflexively analysed account of SEBD rooted in student voice. Secondly, it validates the integration of trauma-informed and relational approaches as essential to inclusive practice. Thirdly, it challenges deficit-based interpretations of behaviour, positioning students not as passive subjects of intervention but as co-constructors of meaning. Finally, it affirms that inclusive education is not merely a matter of access or policy compliance; it is a daily practice of presence, dialogue, and mutual recognition.

We hope this study encourages educators to reconsider student behaviour through a trauma-informed lens, one that centres student voice, fosters trust, and holds space for the complexity of each learner's story. When behaviour is seen as a relationship to be understood rather than as a problem to be solved, schools can become sites of restoration rather than exclusion.

Concluding Reflections and Practical Implications

This study set out to explore how students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) make sense of their own behaviour and what they believe helps them feel supported, safe, and engaged in school. Through focus groups, reflective journaling, and ethnographic observation, we gathered a nuanced understanding of how emotional distress, anxiety, mistrust, and social disconnection shape students' experiences of education. Their accounts confirmed that what is often labelled as defiance is, in many cases, a communicative expression of unmet needs or a protective strategy developed in response to relational and environmental adversity [31, 32].

Our findings affirm that effective support for students with SEBD must move beyond behavioural management and instead prioritise relational, trauma-informed, and student-centred approaches. Students did not ask for fewer rules or lower expectations; rather, they asked to be treated with fairness, consistency, and respect. They articulated a clear desire to be active participants in their learning environments and to be understood within the broader context of their emotional and social lives. In this sense, inclusion must be enacted not only through policy and placement but through everyday practices that communicate care, value, and trust. As Pizzuto (2023) argues, true inclusion rests on emotional safety, sustained adult presence, and authentic listening. Farrugia's ethnographic observations similarly revealed that simple acts such as sharing meals, acknowledging student work, or allowing space for regulation can profoundly shape a student's ability to remain connected and engaged. When teachers embrace these principles, classrooms can become places of co-regulation rather than conflict, dialogue rather than discipline, and belonging rather than alienation [33]. Inclusion, then, must be more than a procedural aim; it must be grounded in a commitment to human dignity and the recognition of each student's inherent worth. We hope this study contributes to an ongoing shift in how behaviour is understood and addressed, placing student voice at the centre of educational response and viewing behaviour not as a problem to be fixed but as a story to be heard.

Recommendations

Informed by the study's findings and supported by the wider literature, the following recommendations are intended to guide educators, school leaders, and policymakers in developing more inclusive, student-informed approaches to behaviour and belonging.

Empower Student Voice and Agency

1. Centre student voice in behavioural policy and classroom practice. Schools may benefit from involving students in shaping behavioural expectations and restorative processes. Tools such as reflective journaling, class dialogue circles, and student-led feedback sessions can foster agency and accountability. When students feel genuinely heard, their sense of ownership and motivation tends to increase.

2. Design lessons that prioritise engagement and flexibility. Teaching strategies could reflect students' interests, strengths, and preferred learning styles. Incorporating multimodal tasks, movement-based activities, and opportunities for creative expression, such as through music or media, has the potential to improve focus, participation, and intrinsic motivation, particularly among learners with SEBD.

Apply Trauma-Informed and Relational Approaches

3. Adopt trauma-informed, needs-responsive strategies. Classrooms should be structured around consistent routines, predictable boundaries, and access to regulation tools such as quiet zones, sensory support, and movement breaks. In instances of behavioural escalation, co-regulation strategies may be more effective than punitive measures.

4. Invest in relational pedagogy and professional development. Teachers play a key role in fostering emotional safety. Professional development in areas such as trauma-informed education, de-escalation techniques, and relational communication should be collaborative and ongoing. Reflection on tone, body language, and relational dynamics is also essential for sustaining inclusive environments.

Rethink Inclusion as Emotional and Relational Presence

5. Foster a classroom culture of belonging. Inclusive education is strengthened when student contributions are celebrated, peer collaboration is encouraged, and emotional check-ins are embedded into daily practice. Small gestures of connection, such as personal greetings, acknowledgement, and consistency, can profoundly impact students' sense of being valued.

6. Redefine how inclusion is evaluated. Attendance or physical placement alone does not equate to meaningful inclusion. Schools should consider additional indicators such as student agency, emotional wellbeing, and relational connectedness used in tandem with academic metrics to evaluate inclusive success more holistically.

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