

## ***Critical review***

# **Teachers of young children (3-5 years old) and their interaction with pupils: approaching positive classroom management**

by **Frini Paraskevopoulou** (paraskevopoulou@phl.uoc.gr)

## **Contextualisation**

In this research note, I will explore the positive elements that can be revealed from a flexible way of teaching and particularly from a positive approach to pupils. I discuss three main parameters: how nursery teachers communicate with their pupils; how the messages that need to be conveyed are conveyed and how nursery teachers' social, mental and psychological background affects them when dealing with their pupils. At the same time, I will also seek to explore the impact of children's social and emotional development on their school behaviour.

Emphasis will be also placed upon the self-perception of educators when confronted with dilemmas and contradictions which affect their behaviour in their teaching process. Furthermore, the interaction between teachers and pupils throughout the educational process will be considered.

I suggest that when educational communication adopts a dialogical character, it enables teaching to overcome difficulties arising from the general teaching structure, the use of particular teaching schemes and from pupils' and teachers' social and inner needs.

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the social and emotional development of children between three to five years old, the factors that affect their in-school behaviour and strategies for positive teacher classroom management. It is suggested that teachers need to reflect upon children's development in order for an effective classroom management to be achieved. Aspects of teachers' expectations about interaction between children and teachers will also be exemplified. Literature research was employed as a method to explore the relevant issues.*

## **Introduction**

Most teachers, educational psychologists and educational advisers: those who devote their lives and time to the vocation of teaching, try to approach pupils in a positive way. However, trying to approach pupils in this way requires a lot of reflective and flexible interaction. The behaviour of three to five year olds can take a variety of forms as promoted by factors such as different backgrounds, psychological situations and their social context. If learning is to be enhanced, teachers must pay attention to, and take into account, each pupil's individuality and unique character. Thus, a successful teacher is expected to have a variety of skills necessary to promote changes in pupil behaviour and motivation.

In this paper, I focus upon the benefits of a flexible approach in teaching; an approach where teachers explore two kinds of processes. First, looking at how the pupils may perceive them, and second, how teachers' own background may affect their understandings and dealings with their pupils. I begin with examining the social and emotional growth of three to five year

olds. Then, I look at the factors affecting in-school behaviour. Following this, I examine the difficulties teachers may face in trying to achieve classroom behaviour.

One could argue that a child's personality is influenced to a great extent by her/his parents or carers. At this point I should mention that this paper focuses on teachers and their relationships with their pupils, rather than that of parents/carers and their children. This does not reduce the significance of the latter but a full consideration of parent/carer and child interaction lies beyond the scope of this paper. I focus attention on the teachers' role and their interaction with children, because being a teacher myself, I am aware of the complexity of the teacher-pupil relationship. During my research I came across many accounts which influenced and affected my views on relevant issues and that is the reason for seeking to explore this relationship further.

## **The social and emotional growth of 3-5 year olds**

The focus of this study is on the social and emotional development of three to five years old children attending nursery classes<sup>1</sup>. This 'child-life' period was chosen for exploration since at this age children present specific characteristics and, thus, they need to be treated differently (Koutsouvanou, 1998). Moreover, these experiences in these early years can affect children's personality development (Papoudi, 1995). Children at this age progressively explore their environment by beginning to understand and sense human feelings and attitudes. This is of great importance as children grow up to be treated as persons, who will interact with others. Their experiences are interpreted in such a way that the knowledge that they gain "...is dependent upon repetition of sense-impressions combined with memory" (Aristotelis, in Hamlyn, 1978). These experiences are fundamental; they help children develop their own capabilities and structures of personality through relations with others and through the social roles that they will gradually play in these contexts.

The characteristics that make three to five year olds need particular treatment is that they have needs such as love, security, praise and recognition, and new experiences (Pringle, 1975). Of course, this may sound like a simple truism, since everybody needs love, security, praise and recognition. But one of the main characteristics of children's personality and behaviour is, as mentioned above, the fact that during these early years they structure their environment as an expression of their inner tendencies and emotional situation. Since knowledge is "repetition", at that age, they "emerge and consolidate" their ideas by repeating and/or interpreting what they are told (by adults). Children at this age have the ability to imitate other people's concepts and "perspectives" (Borke, in Donaldson, 1983, p 255). Kamii (1998) writes in concrete words: "Children 'bring out' and 'show' their ideas, by interpreting what adults tell them." (p 17)

Children should be surrounded by adults who will think of them as important human beings, as individuals who have needs, but with 'mental thoughts', as well. Children should be treated as "persons to be" (Hamlyn, 1978, p 102) and not feel fear, or pressure. As Koutsouvanou (1998) claims it would hurt them because if children are forbidden to express themselves freely about their beliefs and their wishes, they will inevitably suffer from a psychological "gap" that may never be filled with the wanted psychological "ingredients" that can cover a child's well-being and balanced emotional and personality structure, in general.

Through this process children will lose self-confidence; this should not be construed as unimportant, as self-confidence is required for development within socialisation processes that occur at an early age, we have to remember that socialisation begins at this age

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on literature relevant to educational provision for three to five year olds in Greece, but implications could have relevance to other educational contexts. It should be noted that the term 'schools', used to describe educational provision for three to five year olds, refers to nursery schools.

(Donaldson, *et al.*, 1983). The fact that children are able to conceive mental perceptions and reproduce them ("knowledge") plays an important role in cognition and "metacognition";

*"...it is a critical contributor to successful social interaction, where to understand other people's mental states may enhance the possibility of making sense of their behaviour"* (Meadows, 1993, p 147).

Therefore, it would be helpful if teachers would not see themselves as judges who have come to show young children correct things. We can guide, but not put pressure on them; it seems important for them to explore their environment by their experiences and not feel restricted. As they explore the environment surrounding them, they end up needing no support from others (Meadows, 1993). Through interaction with others they learn to embody basic elements of 'other-regulation', after they transmit and interpret them. This is very important as interaction offers the possibility for the children to express themselves and be an essential part of the interaction. Children then progress gradually and develop an individual way of managing and thinking about the resulting issues. What is of importance is to bear in mind that the person (adult, parent, teacher) who structures interaction should do so in a way that enables child participation (Vygotsky, in, Meadows, 1993).

Nasiakou, (1998) has argued that young children are connected to their emotional "inner" situation and therefore their psychological world needs to be taken care of. This harks back to ideas highlighted by Rousseau (1762 / 2001), who stated that children are amenable to others only because of their needs. They have to know their negative points in their character and feel familiar with them, not to suffer from them (Rousseau). Therefore children's capabilities, which include their sensitivity and curiosity should be developed or enhanced in a way that promotes their self-esteem. These words are written many years ago, but their implications can find a high degree of applicability in our days. According to Rousseau's (1762 / 2001) argument it becomes clear how unavoidably a child's world is interlinked and influenced by their emotional characteristics. Therefore, and granted all the above, the persons with whom children interact should pay attention to children's emotional characteristics and their personality structure (Hamlyn, 1978).

Knowledge takes place within the frame of cognition, emotion and action, being interlinked with a person (Bruner, 1986). There always exists a cultural system behind emotions, cognitions and actions which is why none of them should be dealt with in isolation. Emotion is connected to knowledge of the situation that caused it, cognition represents the knowing to which emotion is added and action can be seen as the development of knowing and feeling.

Arguably, emotions, cognitions and actions influence human interaction, as well as interaction between children and their teachers. Due to this process, as well as emotional development, children's social development also plays a key role in education. Social factors are connected to children's character during growing up (Hines, *et al.*, 2000). Bandura and Walters (1963) have stated that "social learning" for children results from their observation and imitation. The attitudes that a particular community has, concerning all matters of life, are the social inheritance that is passed down to the individual through social interaction and co-existence (Gkizeli, 1998). Children learn their community's norms from the beginning of their life and the whole procedure influences them. We can distinguish this through many factors; as long as it concerns the under five year olds, their social relationships and the first step that they take in socialisation, we can easily understand that they are guided by their own impulses.

Children, through interaction, try to comprehend "other-regulation" and turn it to "self-regulation" (in the context of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, in Meadows, 1993, p 344); it is as though they import others' conceptions into their own understanding making

them equal-analogical to their own thoughts. Children's social development consists of learning about, and how, to discover communication "codes" that they will need in order to form and build better relationships. It is these learning processes that help the children to become more socialised and able to express themselves. Children learn from every activity happening in their social environment (whatever form this may take: school, family, home or playgrounds). Teachers, as well as parents, adults and every person connected to children, can thus be seen as playing a central role in encouraging children's capacities to position and understand themselves within the context of relationship formation and development.

Douglas (1989) writes that, in order for the children to learn how relationships function and develop socially, it is fundamental to express themselves freely; as frustrated children display behaviour whereby "social skills develop slowly and they snatch instead of asking for what they want." (p 7). Thus, when managing "inappropriate" pupil behaviour it is important that teachers do not inadvertently impose their own ideas of what is either "good" or "bad" but rather seek an explanation from children themselves (Nasiakou, 1998). This involves exploring specific aspects of children's lives and thoughts while children are expressing themselves (Vosniadou, 1992). What emerges from this argument is the significant need for a flexible teaching approach (Douglas, 1989) that will be discussed below.

## **Factors affecting in-school behaviour**

In the following section, I will explore the aspects of children's lives that need to be taken into consideration when developing a flexible teaching approach; an approach which can change, or be changed so as to be suitable and appropriate for the children's needs. Two of the most important factors emerging from the relevant literature in respect to children's in-school behaviour are those involving the child's environmental and emotional circumstances. A failure to take emotional and environmental factors into full account might lead to difficulties in understanding child's behaviour.

Behavioural problems featuring in the school lives of children need to be understood from a holistic point of view (Douglas, 1989). This is because the causes of behavioural problems are often difficult to locate precisely, with specific incidences often being interlinked. Furthermore, when attempting to understand children's emotions as they are related to their surrounding environment, it can be argued that much analysis of the complexities between the two is required, as it is important not to complicate matters through oversimplification.

Stress will form a part of the environmental factors to be analysed in this paper, since it has potential for negatively influencing children's school lives (Douglas, 1989). Stress can arise from low economic family situations and from bad housing conditions (Douglas, 1989). Housing and poverty are two environmental factors which may affect the development of children's behavioural problems (Richman, 1978). Feelings of deprivation and distress are likely to arise if children grow up in unhealthy and difficult living conditions (Douglas, 1989). If children are to be able to deal effectively with potentially distressing environments, they are likely to require sources of positive psychological energy and patience. As suggested by Pound (1985) "maternal depression" is another environmental variant that may have a serious detrimental impact upon children's behaviour. Techniques of parenting differ from household to household, having various potential outcomes in relation to children's educational development. And concluding, teachers should be aware of them, in order to interact effectively with their pupils.

When the child feels stressed, s/he begins to feel inadequate and may use negative methods of displaying her/himself and her/his capabilities. It would be of substantial help to try to be careful with children. For example, Douglas (1989) writes that:

*"If the stressed child can be presented with an important task that meets the needs of others, it can add a counter force of predictability and controllability that may not be present in any other part of the child's life and so strengthens the child's resilience to the stress." (p 14)*

As it has been mentioned above, the factors of emotions, cognitions, actions, conceptualisation and environment are interlinked and the one reflects its power on the other. That is why although stress may come from the environment, it may influence the emotional life of children (Douglas, 1989) and vice versa.

Another factor affecting in-school behaviour is that pupils may carry with them previous "negative" experiences from outside the classroom that they have not yet recovered from. These may work to restrict their present opportunities and possibilities for positive interaction. For example, where a child has previously received little encouragement for "positive" interaction, or her/his questions as to how to proceed with "positive" interaction have not been responded to, the child's inner self in terms of confidence and esteem is likely to have been constrained (Patterson, 1982). In turn, this may then affect the child's social development and thus impact upon other children, leading to a negative spiral in the classroom atmosphere and disempowerment (Rowlands, 1997).

Children may be unable to deal with these self-esteem and communication problems (Douglas, 1989). The encouragement of children's self-esteem so as to promote "positive" social behaviour needs to be understood as existing in an individual as a process that is specific to each child. This is because low self-esteem and its accompanying traits of anxiety and fear have many manifestations as determined by individual personality, background and experiences. Therefore, their fear should be confronted in a direct way so as to prevent the continuation and consequent escalation of anxiety. This would work to constrain both the children's inner psychological development and outer social interaction within the classroom. This might be apparent in their distracted behaviour, problematic relationships with other children and /or their non-participation. Throughout the "dynamic" process of interaction (Endler and Edwards, in Rogoff, p 27) it is necessary, as I have said before, to always "consider the mutual involvement of children and the social world" (Rogoff, 1990, p 27). But children do not face only easy situations in a classroom or a school.

At this point I re-iterate some points made above: it is important for children to be treated as "persons in a real sense" (Hamlyn, 1978, p 102), because at some point they will become persons in a society. Wider society's role at this period of time is "played" by the classroom and the conductors of the performance are teachers (Dreeben, 1968). That is why teachers can be so helpful and need to act positively. For example, pupils are likely to find themselves in situations of unpopularity and friendlessness which are difficult to respond to and negotiate. In such contexts, the teachers are the ones who have to intervene. In order to be effective agents in such interventions, teachers would require an understanding of children as individuals.

Teachers also need to consider the socio-economic backgrounds and circumstances which may form the boundaries within which children form their own interests and understandings, and from which capabilities are then developed (Koutsouvanou, 1999). It is in this way that educational and social development should occur within a basis of understanding of the social context of the child (Koutsouvanou, 1999). Teachers may then encourage capabilities already developed as well as fill any gaps by offering new challenges and experiences. This procedure requires a dialogic process and "bridge-building" between teachers and their pupils. Each child may come to be understood in terms of her/his own life world and

individual traits. This subject is closely linked to the issue of teachers' management approaches which I will discuss in the next section.

## Strategies for Positive Classroom Management

This section is divided in two sub-sections: teachers' expectations from their pupils and the challenges arising for the teachers when working in the classroom and trying to manage the interaction with their pupils in a positive way.

### Teachers' expectations

The teacher-pupil relationship essentially needs to be creative and helpful for the children. Thus teachers' expectations, in respect of the process of classroom management, need to be analysed further. What teachers expect from their pupils can cause many difficulties in a classroom, especially in their attempt to make the procedure of classroom management meaningful. Smith and Laslett (1993) have written that there is a balance in the relationship between pupils and teachers that "can easily be upset" (p. 15), while teachers try to manage their classrooms. Teachers are aware of their responsibility towards their pupils (Broadfoot, *et al.*, 2000), as well as of their pupils' responsibility towards them.

Teachers may expect their job to require them to think further upon issues such as the personality, the experiences, the preferences, the talents, skills, ideas and attitudes of each individual with which they interact in the classroom (Nias, 1990). As we mentioned above a classroom is a place where the teacher and the pupils function as a group. That means that teachers trying to teach in a better way have to reflect upon themselves and the way they perform in the classroom, and upon co-operation with their pupils (Baird, in Russell and Munby, 1995). Interaction will not happen otherwise and teachers' expectations and enquiries should function in terms of producing effective teaching. In other words, it is important for teachers to pay attention to children's points of view, as well. This is because the attitudes that children will take away with them after their involvement with their teachers are likely to be of significance in terms of shaping their future judgements and behaviour, either in a negative or positive way (Kalantzi-Azizi, 1993).

Dreikurs (1984) states that our intentions as teachers are not always positive. This is because of a tendency to exercise bias towards children in terms of believing that we are in a better position to preconceive what they are intending to say or demonstrate. Although this may not happen regularly, it still needs to be seen as being of significance in terms of acting as a disincentive to such a style of classroom management. Dreikur suggests:

*"It is part of our general prejudice against children that we are inclined to assume that we know what they mean without really listening to them."* (Dreikurs, 1984, p 225).

Teachers' expectations are likely to influence, to a certain extent, pupils' improvement, performance, behaviour and progress (Carr and Kemmis, 1997). We mentioned above that teachers have to always bear in mind the environmental and emotional background of pupils, in order not to judge in a discriminatory manner and in order for an effective interaction to take place. This is likely to damage the relationship between teachers and pupils which may lead the teachers having lower expectations. This subsequently may lead pupils into unconsciously performing at a lower level and decreasing the extent of their response in the classroom (Carr and Kemmis, 1997). Pupils may start feeling that since they do not meet their teachers' expectations, they do not have to perform in the classroom in an effective way. Teachers' expectations play an important role in the way they conceptualise and carry out their work. Their personal values, when incorporated in children's individualities, may

influence the relationship they have with the children (Nias, 1990). In order for co-operation to exist, expectations have to be as accurate as possible for, and from, both sides.

### ***Interaction between teachers' feelings and children's' characters; classroom challenges and using rewards for encouragement***

Firstly I will be looking at the situations and challenges that teachers confront in the classroom. Whilst teachers are necessarily the “guides” in the context of a classroom environment, this does not mean that children can be seen as totally powerless. Children have room to choose both in terms of accepting or rejecting teaching plans and strategies and in relation to the usage and manoeuvring of emotions and meaning in the teacher-pupil relationship. As Moyles (2001) states teachers may tend to feel responsible when a child does not achieve specific educational goals. This can be damaging for teachers. Their role ends up becoming ambiguous, complex and stressful. When this occurs teachers will unavoidably have such feelings of inadequacy (See also Lortie, 1975 and Lieberman and Miller, 1984). Children sometimes have contradictory expectations from their teachers and challenges arise in the classroom all the time. That is a reason that should make us think that teachers also need to be given the same respect and sensitivity as children since they are also human beings with personalities, emotions and many perspectives on the situations they encounter.

Taking these factors into consideration, we need to understand their feelings when they are unable to solve problematic behaviour that may cause stress to them. And if we consider that they “tacitly believe that their personal relationship is with the whole class, not just one child” (Nias, 1990, p 15), we can easily sympathise with the fact that when they convey a message to the whole class, and one pupil does not understand it, they feel unfulfilled and exposed (to their pupils and themselves). Thus teachers need support and should not be left feeling vulnerable when dealing with problematic situations in a classroom, from one, or more pupils.

As Taylor and Mulhall (2001) write, it is important to explore the ways in which teachers can be supported, both materially and psychologically. Let's think for a minute of how essential helping teachers may be. The classroom is effectively a team. When one part of this team does not function effectively, the other part(s) may perform/react in either a neutral or a negative way. There are the roles for each member of the team, but these roles have to relate to one another. There is a bond between teachers and their pupils, which maintains educational functioning and process. It would be beneficial if teachers developed new strategies and approaches, without loosing energy or self-esteem.

The teachers' role is significant: teachers have to implement personal values and efforts in order to encourage the development of their pupils' character and educational life. They also need to counter and discourage the negative aspects that may appear, either from the pupils' attitude, or from the teachers' own feelings of inadequacy.

Furthermore, a strategy or pattern needs to be developed that may provide a reference point for solving any potential future difficulties. A main point that has been mentioned above, but needs to be further highlighted, has been stated by Suschitzky and Chapman (1998): what forms the relationship between teachers and children is the different social contexts which work to influence the formation of individuals' lives and realities. As Smith and Laslett (1993) point out, where teachers do not encourage pupils participation, the pupils:

*“Not only ...perceive themselves as unworthy and unsuccessful, they also tend to perceive adults in authority as potentially uncaring and hostile.”* (p 57)

To counter the effects of these instances, children should therefore be encouraged to take up important roles in the classroom so as to further develop their confidence and self-esteem.

What will be analysed next is that through accepting what children bring, teachers further develop their character. Within the context of children's differing social worlds we have to consider both their negative thoughts as being important as well as the positive ones. Children may have different aims from adults. They have different habits and means that rely on different fundamental starting points. What remains the same is the procedure and functioning through which both adults and children are socialised (Kougioumoutzakis, 1995).

In discussing communication and management in the classroom, Rayna (2001) further highlights the importance of focusing on the encouragement of the psychological and inner welfare of the children as a route to successful communication and ultimately educational development. Apart from that, there are, also, some challenges that appear in relationship building. Teachers may not know how to react in specific occasions when they do not want to be strict, or unfair. At these moments, teachers could take into consideration the specific situations that they come across.

Teachers' reactions include negative thinking and acting and they may not want to conclude by punishing their pupils or by making them feel powerless. The teachers' role emerges as a significant "balancing" role to either act as a counter to any negative effects of parenting whilst encouraging and expanding upon the positive effects of parenting. It might be countered through positive interactions between children and adults and above all through paying attention to the child's reactions with flexibility and love.

Teachers may already be aware of the negative affects of punishments and their consequent ineffectiveness in terms of solving communication problems. When supporting punishments, teachers are frequently unable to achieve an understanding of the meaning of pupils' behaviour and once that happens they may be prevented from analysing the behaviour further. This may then lead to a situation where the pupils' individual rights are disregarded. To sum up, as long as Dewey's words identify challenges, they remain of significance; teachers and adults, when interacting with children who are displaying problematic behaviour, have attempted to understand their situation in depth and need to think about the socio-economic and personality variants influencing the children (Dewey, in Kougioumoutzakis, 1995). These variants then need to be re-interpreted positively in terms of offering a route towards realising children's capabilities and promises that can be developed and fulfilled through respecting children's individuality.

Teachers need to consider all these factors when they enter into the classroom and are consequently faced with the problematic behaviour of children. It can be argued that the basis of effective teaching strategies is the ability to think positively. But even when the problem seems to be unsolvable, teachers have to be guided from their teaching instinct. By the word instinct is explicitly meant the observant way teachers use their pupils' actions and reactions in the classroom as information; this information helps them make further decisions about their pupils' behaviour. Teachers are always in a position to strategize and manipulate difficulties, in the context of classroom management.

Rewarding children is very important in facilitating their educational development even in terms of preventing or discouraging negative behaviour. As Molnar and Lidquist (in Klantzi-Azizi, 1993) emphasise: the pupil has to learn from the teacher that the repetition of "negative" behaviour is not a normal and acceptable part of a learning curve. Within such an approach negative attitudes and behaviour may be avoided, if pupils are encouraged by the giving of rewards.

Merrett and Wheldall (1990), in expressing another aspect of the positive teaching approach, write that the giving of rewards to children forms the basis of the encouragement of achievement and the positive influencing of children's responses. The giving of rewards thus needs to be included in classroom strategies. This allows for the children's striving for achievement to become part of an everyday process of learning that reinforces their self-esteem, rather than being a coping response that is performed in order to avoid punishment in the classroom that is therefore seen as being more "for" the teacher than "for" the self. This understanding of children presupposes that the guides are the teachers and have to be positive and good at communication matters and relationships. Merrett and Wheldall (1990) also write:

*"What we are advocating here is that teachers can be both firm and positive. Neither harsh, authoritarian repression nor cloying, patronising sentimentality are congruent with the goals of real education. Our research has shown that teachers can learn to be more effective managers of pupils behaviour by following the principles and procedures of Positive Teaching."* (p 95)

## Conclusions

This paper has examined the appropriateness of teachers' reactions when interacting with children and the possibility of creating positive classroom environments for children between three to five years old.

It was first argued that emotional growth raises specific issues for three to five year olds, and it is linked to environmental factors; secondly I sought to refer to the factors which affect in-school behaviour and finally to the strategies that could be used in order for positive classroom management to be enhanced. In that context I referred to teachers' expectations, to interactions between feelings and children's characters and how the use of rewards can affect positive classroom management.

It is argued that within the consideration of these issues, teachers' interactions with their pupils could be enhanced by being dialogic in approach. This might further apply to the formulation of expectations, teachers' body language and strategies. In light of this, the unifying thread of argument in this paper is that firstly teachers should aim to understand young children as individuals. It would be also advantageous if teachers considered the context of children's socio-economic backgrounds and be aware of its linking bond to the emotional, psychological growth of the children. Simultaneously teachers need to examine their own life worlds as impacting upon teaching methods and understandings, then, classroom environments and young children's actions within them.

Communication that is aimed towards understanding identity development helps each child manoeuvre and work with her/his different backgrounds in individual ways in the classroom environment. A communication that is intended to be dialogic should above all offer the child respect as well as aiming to encourage the child to identify and develop its abilities. This may then work to build up the children's self-esteem and inner-psychological links. After all, classrooms mirror society and there is always in existence a corresponding relationship between social scheming and educational procedures (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Regarding the arguments referring to the complexity of teachers' work; they may sound tense when working with pupils, but sometimes they have to appear to be harsh so as to support acceptable social standards.

Finally, as a result of this review in connection with teaching under-fives, I realised the complexity of the work of their teachers. I hope that the points I have tried to clarify are, to a

greater or lesser extent, helpful for teachers; children have a world which is magical and special.

## References

**Note:** A number of the references cited below are given in English and then transliterated into the Greek equivalent. For further details, readers should contact the author using the email address at the beginning of the paper.

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