

**Curriculum-as-lived in an early childhood education classroom:  
How does dialogue with young children shape teacher's everyday  
practice?**

*Kwang Dae (Mitsy) Chung*

*Affiliation: Capilano University & University of British Columbia*

*E-mail: mitsy0406@gmail.com*

***Abstract***

*This study illustrates the importance of being and setting ourselves the in-between space of children and educators in early childhood education. The author discusses two dialogues with children from a reconceptualist viewpoint and critically analyses the words and attitudes that took place during the dialogues. The author explores three theoretical frameworks: lived curriculum, dwelling in the zone of in-between, and humiliation (Aoki, 2004).*

***Keywords:*** *curriculum as lived, dwelling, pedagogy of listening, dialogue, humiliation, early childhood education*

## ***Beginning***

The education model with which I was familiar from my own experience as a kindergartener and well into the first few years of my career as an early childhood educator, was that of a structured curriculum, which Aoki (2004) describes as “curriculum-as-plan” (p. 202). In this model, goals for educators and children are set, based on assumptions about what children and educators *should* do (Aoki, 2004; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). From this perspective, there is no pedagogical space in which the children and educators think, wonder, study, create, or make their learning process together (van Manen, 2015). Therefore, the learning space, especially in early childhood education, was about achieving certain tasks that had been set in accordance with Immanuel Kant’s universal and normative perspectives (Dahlberg&Moss,2005).

Thus, when I was a young child, I believed that teachers were always right and that there was no space for children’s voices to be heard (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Teachers must know everything and must have the power to control students who had to obey them. For these reasons, when I first became an early childhood educator 15 years ago, I believed my style of teaching had to be authoritarian. Furthermore, I was under the illusion that teachers *should* know everything (Aoki, 2004; Jardine, Friesen & Clifford, 2011).

However, when I was concluding my first year of teaching, I started realizing that the authoritarian teaching style did not work for me in the context in which I found myself. This might have been because I was a small adult, of the category that is commonly called “dwarfism.” Thus, it seemed that the children often found it difficult to see me as an adult or as a teacher who had authority over them. I therefore asked myself:

*“What can I do if the children cannot see me as an adult or an educator?”*

*“How can I build a strong bond or relationship with these young children who are confused?”*

In the same way that van Manen (2015) provokes the question “How does a person become a teacher?” (p. 24), I kept asking myself, “How do I want to live with children and act as an early childhood educator?”

As the years went by and I became a more experienced educator, I increasingly questioned whether the authoritarian approach was appropriate, not only for myself but also for all children and educators. The main question that I asked myself was, “Why do we often need to push an agenda that does not appeal to the children?” For example, when children do not pay attention in class, they are often blamed by educators for their

behaviour, rather than educators critically reflecting on their ways of being and teaching. Jardine et al. (2011) states that “we then end up producing, in turn, fading attention spans both in our children and in ourselves. And such a loss of attention is most frequently then blamed on our children” (p. 325). Even these days, 15 years since my first day as an early childhood educator, I often hear colleagues saying, “Today the children are not listening” or “The children are going wild and crazy today.” Each time I hear such complaints, I ask these educators whether they have considered what might be wrong with the circle or story time, or themselves on the day. If the children start moving around while we read a book and cannot listen to the story, I believe it is okay to move around because each child’s physical condition is different. It could be that the problem lies in how the educator conducts the story time. If we educators always ask children to *listen*, why don’t we listen to them? However, some educators often say, “No! I am not wrong. Something is wrong with the children today! Yesterday, they loved the story” to which, I say, “The children are not the same today as they were yesterday and tomorrow, and they will probably be different in the future!”

Unfortunately, no matter which age group we take care of, in my experience, educators often blame the children rather than reflecting on their teaching style. In my view, this could be because the core practices of these educators are structured according to developmental paradigms (Burman, 2008; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). Thus, they still believe teachers are the leaders (subjects) and the students are the followers (objects).

Therefore, these educators tend do not listen to the children or try to understand their thinking by asking questions. By genuinely listening to children would create a level playing field for the children and teachers (Dahberg & Moss, 2005; Rinaldi, 2006). However, reconceptualist<sup>1</sup>early childhood scholars assert that, to create a pedagogical space, both the educators and children need to listen to each other, ask questions, and compose dialogues together (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Kind & Neve, 2016; Kind, 2018). My own understanding of children, my communication with them, and my own self-awareness have changed significantly as a consequence of continuing to question authoritarian and pre-planned curricula as part of my unfolding *living inquiry* (Jardine et al., 2011;Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017).

Through my own experiences with young children, my perspective has become more oriented within postcolonial and reconceptualist thinking that continually question and resist the dominance of developmental theories (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher,

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<sup>1</sup> Reconceptualists are concerned about the dominance of psychology and child developmental theory. They critically think about and explore alternative ways of learning and teaching from the critical *feminist*, *postcolonial*, and *postmodern* perspectives (Moss, 2018).

Elliot & Sanchez, 2015). In my work as an educator, I critically think and explore alternative ways of being, thinking, learning, and teaching from critical, feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern perspectives (Moss, 2018; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015). In this paper, I will explore three main theoretical frameworks that I take up in practice daily: *lived curriculum*, *dwelling in the zone of in-between*, and *humiliation* (Aoki, 2004). I will then describe how these theories frame my work with children by introducing two vignettes of dialogue between myself and a group of children.

### ***Literature Review/Theoretical Framework***

#### ***Lived Curriculum***

Children and educator's *lived experiences* (van Manen, 1997) exist within the curriculum-as-lived or lived curriculum (Aoki, 2004). The latter is cultivated by means of multiple ways of doing, thinking, understanding, and applying each item of knowledge and experience (Government of B.C., 2019). It is opposed to "the memorizing and recalling [of] facts, which was central to much of education around the globe for many decades" (Government of B.C., 2019, p. 40). Aoki (2004), van Manen (1997), and Heidegger (1954) highlight the potential value of lived experiences and curriculum-as-lived, placing an emphasis on teacher–student relationships, as well as on an open-minded attitude on the part of the teacher. In this relationship, the educator is required to "act responsively and responsibly to the child" (van Manen, 2017, p. 97). Aoki (2004) indicates that the curriculum-as-lived experience is "living within this swirl of busyness (sic)" (p. 161) where the educator's personal and professional life gradually change into each other. In this curriculum framework, educators decenter their positions. They thereby provide a space in which both children and educators are lively and questioning, sharing their opinions, and encountering each other in conversations (Aoki, 2004; van Manen, 1997; 2015).

Aoki (2004) expands on the idea of curriculum-as-lived by stating, "There are many lived curricula, as many as there are selves and students" (p. 204). Therefore, Aoki (2004) and van Manen (1997) encourage educators and children to view each other with fresh eyes every day, as if they do not know each other yet. This means both educators and children are inspired to consider their identities as essentially different everyday, rather than something that has already existed and stagnated (Aoki, 2004; Rinaldi, 2006).

This manner of regarding each other, leads to a non-hierarchical scenario in which

the teachers and children view each other as equals and relate to each other on a level playing field (Aoki, 2004). Aoki further explains that “[i]mplicit in such an understanding of face is the question of our understanding of ‘self/other,’ the question of how we should understand the pedagogical relationship of the teaching self and the other, the student” (p. 212). On the question of how educators need to understand the pedagogical relationship, the educator’s immediate action of “grasping what is going on with this child” (van Manen, 2015, p. 97) refers to a “sympathetic understanding” (van Manen, 2015, p. 98) that lives within both the educators and children. Furthermore, Aoki (2004) claims that, in order to grasp what is going on with each child, educators need to carefully watch them with thoughtful minds, and attentively, responsibly, and responsively listen to each child’s multiple voices and thoughts.

### ***Dwelling in the Zone of in-between Thinking and Dialoging***

According to Aoki (2004), there are multiple ways of being, thinking and doing in the zone of in-between. Deleuze and Parnet (1988) state that “in a multiplicity, what counts are not the elements, but what there is ‘between’, the between, a set of relations which are not separable from each other. Every multiplicity grows in the middle” (p. viii). Thus, when we  *dwell* , we are living in-between past and present, you and I, or here and there. We are also participating in the process of thinking and becoming a part of “the emergent processes of bringing something into being” (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017, p. 9). Dwelling enables educators to be immersed in the mode of listening, thinking, questioning, slowing down, struggling, engaging, changing, and becoming (Aoki, 2004; Kind, 2018; 2020; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017). Aoki further (2004) describes this act of dwelling as follows:

Indwelling dialectically is a living in tensionality, a mode of being that knows not only that living a school life means living simultaneously with limitations and with openness, but also that this openness harbors within it risks and possibilities as we quest for a change from the is to the not yet. (p. 164)

While dwelling, pedagogical relationships between children and educators will start becoming. Dwelling, this in-between space, will offer time and space for dialogue to emerge. According to Freire (2000), dialogue is an encounter and act of creation, recreation, commitment to others, courage, and a task of learning and acting with others who respond to, care for, and love each other. In this space, educators slow down their own pace and, rather than looking for or providing immediate, closed answers, dwell in what they observe

or hear in a study of their own sense of pleasure (Kind, 2018). Manning and Massumi (2014) describe this idea as follows:

An intertwining of fields of emergent experience not yet defined as this or that. (...) yet their qualities already interact. The fields, their immediacy, play off each other, lending their qualities to each other, composing a single field of mutual action, of co-fusion and changing contrast: co-motion. An immediate commotion of qualitative texturing. A generative holding pattern already moving qualitatively toward an experience in the making. (pp. 4–5)

As children deliberate on their questions, they learn from and with their educators, peers, and environment (Aoki, 2004; Freire, 2000). This necessitates living, thinking, and corresponding with children. As well as dwelling in-between, children invite their educators to experience multiple “ways of knowing, not just knowledge itself” (Kind, 2020, p. 54).

### ***The notion of humiliation in the space of lived experiences***

Aoki et al. (2004) invite us to think of experiencing humiliations in educational spaces as the laughter following a joke, or intentions of two different sites. Aoki (2004) also advises us to linger “in this space of lived tensionality of difference, [where we are] able to hear the rhythmic measure of the earth, our place of dwelling, where its earthy humus provides nurturance to new meanings of humiliation that are springing forth” (p. 300).

My understanding of Aoki’s teaching is that if educators live with children in a pedagogical space in-between differences and difficulties, the humiliation will facilitate both the educators’ and children’s own becoming. In this case, the humiliation is no longer laughter following a joke, or an embarrassment. To me, it is more a celebration of knowing, learning, and teaching each other from multiple ways of being. In this way of being, both the educators and children respect each other’s uniqueness and differences, rather than looking for sameness. Aoki et al. (2004) further explains the sense of *humiliation*:

The human-centered meaning of humiliation moves in tension with a different meaning of humiliation—one where the human is no mere ego, no mere subjective ‘I’ that thinks it thinks: Here, *humiliating* shifts its meaning, admittedly ambiguously, to one that is concerned with lived space where people dwell communally, where dwelling is a dwelling with other on earth under the sky, where we find *humus* that nurtures *humans*, where *humans*

caught up in binds sometimes chuckle, where we can hear laughter at the thought of humans thinking they can master the world. (p.300)

Freire (2000) also states that dialogue cannot exist without encounters with others' voices, dispositioning ourselves from our own egos, acts of creation and re-creation, and acts of both love and humiliation. This is because, as people experience moment(s) of humility, they attempt to learn more than what they now know or are (Freire, 2000).

Both Aoki's and Freire's insights are extremely eye-opening and valuable to me. They offer me an understanding of humiliation that has more than one dimension, as well as offering the potential for dialogue with strangers and a greater understanding of each other. The notion of humiliation offers me the possibility of thinking there might be some sort of happiness and love that we have not experienced before if we open ourselves to others, and dwell with wonder at the unknown through dialogue (Aoki, 2004; Freire, 2000).

The idea of multiple ways of knowing but not applying knowledge itself is my lived practice with young children. Because I am a small early childhood educator, I have had tremendously provocative, honest, thoughtful, curious, and welcoming dialogues with young children. Thus, I now invite you to my lived dialogues to illustrate these ideas of *lived curriculum*, *dwelling in-between* and *humiliation* (Aoki, 2004) in my practices.

### ***Dialogue 1: "Are you standing on a stool?"***

One lunchtime on a sunny summer afternoon, at my workplace, I was washing children's dishes. It was my first workday at the center. Being very small, I always need a stool to reach something high up. Therefore, on that day, I took a stool, brought it to the kitchen, stood on it to reach the kitchen sink and started washing dishes. A five-year-old girl who was soon to be a kindergartener stopped eating her lunch, looked up at me full of wonder, and said, "Mitsy, how can you reach the sink when you are so small? Are you standing on a stool?" I said, "Yes, I am!" The girl, still exploring her wonder about me, announced, "Teachers never stand on a stool when they clean dishes." This is generally true, but I am an exception, so I told her, "Most teachers do not need this stool when they wash dishes but Mitsy is small; not just small, but very small, so *I* need it." I looked at the girl and she was smirking at me slightly. I then said, "I think it is okay to use the stool because there is no rule that says we cannot use one when we cannot reach the kitchen sink. You might not have seen any other teachers who need a

stool at this kitchen sink, but I think it is okay because everyone is different.” The girl did not say anything else, but she was still smirking, which left me feeling humiliated. I therefore asked her “Do you think this is funny? Tell me what you are thinking?” The girl said, “It’s still silly and funny.” I accepted her understanding and feelings, and with that, the day’s conversation was over. The next day, a similar situation occurred. The girl looked at me again and made a comment with a big smile but this time her attitude differed from the previous day. “Are you standing on a stool again?” I said, “Yes!” Then the girl said, “Okay! Because you need it, right? But be careful, Mitsy!” My response was an enthusiastic “Thank you!”

***Dialogue 2: “We need your help!”***

About a week after the kitchen conversation, the girl asked me for help when we were outside. She and some friends had found the last two string beans in their garden. However, they were way up high, out of the children’s reach. I had been watching the situation unfold and I was wondering how they would resolve the problem. While I was pondering this, I heard my name being called. The girl was calling me. “Mitsy!! We need your help!” I replied, “I am not sure if I can help you or not, but what do you need?” The girl responded, “Can you see the string beans at the top? We can’t reach the top, even if we use a stick. So, can you pick them for us?” I burst out laughing, much to their surprise. I asked them, “Do you remember that Mitsy is a super small teacher who is about the same height as you? So, I am not sure if I can help you get the string beans. Would you like to ask another teacher for help?” Then, the girl paused for a moment. She was clearly thinking. Finally, she said, “Yeah, right. But do you remember you used a stool when you could not reach something high? So maybe you can go and find a stool, stand on it, and then you can get those string beans for us!”



## *Discussion*

### *A moment of dwelling*

When children see me as different to other adults, they often stop, look, and either run away, laugh, or ask questions. It might be tempting to try to figure out what the children are seeing in front of them. Some of them try to humiliate me. An act of humiliation usually has negative connotations. However, I believe children's seeming attempts to humiliate me simply come from their curiosity and wonder as to why Mitsy looks different to some adults. I am often asked, "What happened to Mitsy's body and can it possibly grow bigger?" After that I have a conversation with the children.

When I encounter these children's curious questions, I try to attentively engage their wonder without thinking, "Here we go again!" or "Why do they always ask these questions again and again?" van Manen (2002) asserts that "good teaching is determined by the how (teaching methods or style) rather than the what (content), or so the thinking goes" (p. 62; parentheses in original).

When children start laughing at me, I often ask, "Am I funny?" Needless to say, the children's answer is, "Yes, funny!!" Then I slowly start entering their wonderous minds by attentively listening to their thinking and provocatively asking questions (Rinaldi, 2006). Such conversation, in which I engage the children's curious minds and questions, creates a lived space in which the children and I dwell communally (Aoki, 2004; van Manen, 2002). If the children laugh at me, I can accept their laughter, or I laugh at myself with the children, and both the children and I create a *lived space* and a moment of *dwelling*.

I strongly believe that the process of listening, thinking, and questioning in the mode of dwelling will become a part of "the emergent processes of bringing something into being" (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017, p. 9). If I ignore the moment or refuse to answer their questions because I feel humiliated, we will all lose learning opportunities. Each child's question matters to me because I respectfully care for children's curious minds and wonder. van Manen (2002) supports my intention. He advocates that

this listening attentiveness to things is often an interpretive act of meaning. And once we accept that every act of interpretation is a relational act of attentiveness and caring, then we admit to a surprising conclusion: that we should be just as accountable for what we know as for what we do. (p. 62)

Furthermore, the human-centered meaning of *humiliation* moves in tension with a different meaning of humiliation (Aoki, 2004). The sense of humiliation becomes an attitude of

concern. When the girl gave me slightly different feedback on the day following the initial conversation, I felt the initial conversation that I had had with the girl had not been inappropriate. However, immediately following the first conversation, I had been unsure whether my response had been appropriate and relevant; yet I was hoping that she had learned something about me from our dialogue.

These days, I am able to create such a space for these open conversations. It was not easy to do so when I was a new teacher with no experience with young children. However, by continually practicing “dwelling with others” without judging others’ attitudes and comments, I am becoming more open-minded, and am pedagogically listening to children’s thinking and voices as if they are *strangers* (Aoki, 2004; Greene, 2001).

When the girl asked me why I was using the stool and mentioned my height, another teacher almost intervened by trying to stop the girl’s questioning. I stopped the teacher from dismissing the conversation. I knew she was trying to help me and did not want my feelings to be hurt, so I respectfully told her it was okay for the child to ask questions regarding my bodily appearance, because these were valid questions. I am now curious to know what the subsequent conversation between the girl and me would have been like if my colleague had been successful in her attempt to put an end to the initial conversation. We would have missed a valuable learning moment of dwelling in the in-between space of *curriculum-as-lived* and *curriculum as plan* (Aoki, 2004).

When other educators are faced with situations in which children address my appearance in a potentially humiliating way, they often either deny or problematize the situation. This is probably because they are concerned about my feelings and because some children’s way of asking might not fit their ideal image of politeness. Paulo Freire (2000) argues that “for the naïve thinker, the important thing is accommodation to this normalized ‘today.’ For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality on behalf of the continuing humanization of men” (p. 92). I think the truth of this statement is seen in the aforementioned encounter between myself, my colleague, and the child. When children react to my bodily appearance, I do not think it is generally a problem; moreover, I do not want to problematize every such situation. I rather want to create a dialogue with the children so that I can understand and respect their questions.

Furthermore, if the other educator had stopped the child’s questioning and “normalized” the situation as if nothing had happened or denied the space for the child to ask questions, then I could potentially have become more of a problem for the girl. Joseph (2007) explores Maxine Greene’s metaphor of the “teacher as stranger” as a guide for lived curriculum. Then states that “becoming critically consciousness requires teachers to engage

with the world in an expansive yet disciplined way, to question their sense of reality as well as the forces that influence their lives and work “(p. 283). Thus, becoming aware of the cultures in which both children and educators live together, gives us some senses of being in a process of learning, knowing, and understanding our questions.

On the night of the initial encounter with the girl, I reflected on my use of language and my attitude towards her. What else could I have done in that moment? I wondered what the ideal answer would have been to help her to understand the situation and me. Or is there a right answer? That night, I had many questions regarding my attitude and my handling of the situation, but I was unable to come up with satisfactory answers.

One thing, however, was clear to me; namely, that creating an open space for questions and dialogue was more important than deeming her comment as inappropriate. The reason for this is that if I had quashed her wonder, I would have deprived her of a learning opportunity in that moment. This thinking is consistent with Freire’s (2000) argument:

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is an encounter in which the united reflections and actions of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person “depositing” an idea into another; nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants. (Freire, 2000, p. 88-89; emphasis in original)

When the child and I encountered each other in dialogue, neither of us rushed to answer the questions that were put to us. I tried to give her time and space to think about what she saw and what I had answered. Furthermore, I believe the child also gave me space to act upon her actions and questions. I believe this dynamic was a result of respecting each other. Significantly, another event with the girl soon followed, which gave me the answer I sought.

### *Living with pedagogy*

It had been only a short time since the conversation between myself and the child about why I needed a stool. I realized in that moment that the girl had learned both to accept me as a small person and to see me as a teacher. During the initial dialogue with the child, I did not rush to immediately produce an answer regarding the situation. I dwelled with my questions and the child’s wonder. It seemed the child also had time to wonder about who Mitsy was. By allowing for wonder and caring for each other, both the child and I created

a pedagogical and dialogical space. As Vintimila (2017) states, pedagogy is a body of active knowledge that looks for new and unfolding conditions (As cited by the Early Childhood Pedagogy Collaboratory, 2020). Freire (2000) argues that pedagogical dialogue, as “an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love. Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (p. 89).

I care about what children say and about the questions they ask me, no matter how challenging the subject or how many times they ask me the same questions. I love the moment of being in wonder and dwelling with children, trying to figure out the issues that they and I face together. I want to keep listening to what they say, answering their questions, and remaining open to dialogue with them. I believe this openness to dialogue and questions will pave the way for both the children and I to learn many things, and also keep the children’s curiosity and wonder alive (Rinaldi, 2006). Furthermore, to make meaningful dialogue with young children, I do believe educators must listen to what they have to say. Rinaldi (2006) emphasizes that the “context of multiple listening, involving the teachers but also the group of children and each child, all of whom can listen to others and listen to themselves, overturns the teaching–learning relationship” (p. 67). My own experience with young children confirms for me that when children know I listen to them and I open myself to listening to their words and noting their thoughts, they in turn become more open and tell me more about themselves. This then allows children to truly be themselves.

Peter Moss (2018) argues that the pedagogy of relationships and the pedagogy of listening is “enacted, first and foremost, through strategy and projects, not programs. A program, with its focus on premeditation and prediction, creates a ‘caged-in’ experience, stifles creativity and originality, and leads to closure rather than keeping meaning open” (p. 72). It is unfortunate that still these days, many early childhood education systems rely on the practice of *curriculum-as-planned* and *structured curriculum* that inevitably put the schools’ or educators’ own interests and assumptions about how educators and children need to be. In this scenario, the practices of pedagogy of listening are often neglected. This might be because they often believe teaching and learning is a one-way conversation in which the child’s role is merely to listen. Therefore, by sharing my own experiences and the dialogues I have had with young children, I hope to invite other educators to reconsider their positions as collaborators, co-contractors, co-investigators and co-learners and to ask themselves, “Who am I, then?” (Moss, 2018, p. 2).

## *Learning so far*

As an early childhood educator who is physically different from others, I will keep using this condition as an advantage. I will also keep asking the question, “Who am I then?” I would like to think about what my experiences with children might mean for other educators; in particular, how my stories and lived experiences might reframe educators’ practices and help to reconceptualize curriculum in early childhood education.

In my daily practice, I pedagogically create and recreate my lived curriculum and dialogue with children and others. Aoki (2004) also encourages us to see ourselves as “[thrown] into a realm of open possibilities with much uncertainty and ambiguity” (p. 259). Admittedly, this is easier said than done. However, our dialogue “cannot be reduced to the act of one person ‘depositing’ ideas into another” (Freire, 2000, p. 89, emphasis in original) in the name of curriculum-as-plan and recreate my lived curriculum and dialogue with children and others. Indeed, I have learned that every uncertainty and ambiguity that bides in the curriculum-as-lived will open up many learning possibilities for both the children and me.

As an early childhood educator who holds a reconceptualist perspective, I encourage early childhood educators to contemplate on how children and educators pedagogically co-construct their learning, teaching, and knowledge (Government of B.C., 2019; Moss, 2018; Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017). It is important to be critically, thoughtfully, attentively and responsibly questioning ourselves as opposed to rejecting alternative stories, knowledge, cultures and identities (Moss, 2018). Finally, I would like to declare that being a small educator and a stranger for young children, as well as becoming a learner with the children, are a pleasure for me. I find the experience captivating. Thus, I hope my open, creative, and ongoing learning journey will inspire both educators and children to adopt new ways of being, listening, thinking, engaging, and questioning in their classrooms.

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