

SECTION I

# How Special Educational Needs are Understood

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# Reimagining Special Education: Why New Approaches are Needed

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... it is arguable that while Special Educational Needs are often located on the fringes of education, it is in this location at the boundary that Special Educational Needs acts to define and ensure the continuity of education's normative centre. (Youdell, 2006, p. 22)

## INTRODUCTION

As a parallel system of education to that which is provided to the majority of children, special education occupies contested terrain. In countries without a system of special needs education, little educational provision is available to disabled children (Peters, 2007). Yet where systems of special education do exist, there are problems. For example, in many parts of the world, students from minority groups are more likely to be identified as having special educational needs than are others (e.g. Blanchett, Klinger, & Harry, 2009; Fredman, Kriglerová, Kubánová, & Slosiarik, 2009). This leads to a situation where placement in special education offers access to education for some, but perpetuates discrimination for others. Special education's policy framework, which is intended to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education.

Yet, without a policy framework to guide provision of specialist support and resource allocation, many people with disabilities would be denied an opportunity for meaningful participation in the activities that typify everyday life,

because impairment, by definition, is something that limits functioning, unless it is mediated in some way. This dilemma has been acknowledged in the special education literature (Artiles, 1998; Dyson, 2001; Norwich, 2008) and has been the subject of intense debate about whether special education itself is a problem of, or the solution to, issues of social justice in education.

This chapter, and indeed this book, focuses on the role that special education can play in disrupting education's normative centre in support of improving education for all. The central argument is that those who work in, on, or at the boundaries of special education, whether they identify themselves as special educators, disability advocates, inclusionists, critical special educators or disability studies scholars, can do more to address its core problems and dilemmas, but doing so will require some shifts in thinking. As the chapters in this book discuss, the many contributions that special education has made to the broader context of education are not disputed, but the problems and unintended consequences associated with it, including difficulties with identification and classification of disability, differential schooling outcomes, differential treatment based on social class, remain deeply disquieting.

This chapter presents an overview of current international understandings of special education, and special educational needs, along with two key policies that specify the context for these understandings. Each section identifies a problem that points to why new approaches to future work in the field are needed. The second part of the chapter outlines one of the shifts in thinking believed to open up new possibilities for future work and presents one such possibility. Other chapters in the book highlight further shifts in thinking and practice both inside and outside of schooling that collectively have the potential to move the field forward.

### ***Definition of special (needs) education***

In 1997, the International Standard Classification of Education replaced the term special education with *special needs education* in order to differentiate it from earlier international definitions of special education as that which took place in special schools or institutions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005). This was an important change in terminology that differentiated the provision of special education services, which can occur in a variety of settings, from the placement of children in special education schools or classrooms and enabled more accurate data to be collected.

Special needs education is defined as 'educational intervention and support designed to address special educational needs', wherever that intervention takes place. Whether the term special education, special needs education or something else is used (e.g. Scotland uses the term 'additional support for learning'), there is a common understanding that it involves something 'different from' or 'additional to' that which is generally available to others of similar age in schools. This is the first problem. That is, definitions of special education and

special needs education throughout the world, including Scotland's definition of 'additional support', are based on the notion that what schooling systems ordinarily provide, will meet the needs of most learners, while a few, *at the tail ends of a normal distribution*, may require something additional or different. In this way, special education is positioned alongside the *ideal* place where schooling occurs – its normative centre – and it is in this location that it affirms the 'bell-curve thinking' (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008; Hart, 1998; Thomas & Loxley, 2001) that both gives rise to it and defines it as an entity. 'Bell-curve thinking' is the term used by Fendler and Muzaffar to refer to the widespread acceptance in education of the assumption that most phenomena (e.g. intelligence, ability, performance) can be distributed according to the statistical principles of the normal curve.

### ***Defining special educational needs***

The concept of special educational needs is broad, extending beyond categories of disability, to include all children who are in need of additional support. However, many countries use categorical descriptions of disability to determine eligibility for special education provision, though these categories vary across time and between jurisdictions. Even in countries that do not use categorical descriptors, some process of classification remains in place because in providing for all children, some way of determining 'all' has to be established. Specifying particular groups of learners as a way of determining 'all' is problematic because the many sources of variation within and between any identified groups raise questions about their educational relevance. The 'triad of impairments' associated with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), for example, describes a condition that covers many different individuals, levels of functioning and skill, despite the common feature of impairments affecting social interaction, communication and imagination. In addition, when students are classified as needing something different or additional to others of similar age, they can become marginalized within education by virtue of these 'additional needs'. The second problem is how to make educational provision available to 'all' without the stigma of marking 'some' children as different.

### ***Education for all?***

Through the auspices of the United Nations (UN) agencies, countries are urged to provide for the basic learning needs of all people, both children and adults, because education is seen as a human right with intrinsic value, as well as a means of achieving other important rights, such as development rights which are intended to reduce poverty and promote prosperity. Concern for the education of students with disabilities has been linked with these efforts through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) 'Education for All' (EFA) movement. Following the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain, which recognized that all

children should be educated within an inclusive education system, the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994) stipulated that: 'a child with a disability should attend the neighbourhood school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability' (p. 17). This was a significant development because the legislative framework in many countries continues to exclude or restrict access for children with disabilities to the general education system even where education is compulsory and free.

More recently, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has affirmed the rights-based nature of inclusive education by specifying that States shall ensure 'an inclusive education system at all levels' so that 'persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education' (United Nations [UN], 2006, Article 24 §1). Clearly, the availability of specialized support is seen as an important aspect of inclusive education. But there are questions about how this support can be provided without positioning special education at the boundary of education's normative centre. While these are important questions, they also shift the gaze away from the failure of the 'mainstream', the ideal place, the normative centre, to provide for everyone. This is the third problem.

## WHY NEW APPROACHES ARE NEEDED

Is the paradoxical nature of special education an inevitable feature of its location at the boundary of education's normative centre, or can the work of schooling children who have disabilities, or experience difficulties in learning, be reconsidered in ways that make new approaches possible? The three problems identified above: special education as something 'different from' or 'additional to' that which is provided to others of similar age; questions about how to make educational provision available to *all* learners, without marking some learners as different; and the failure of the mainstream to provide for everyone, are further complicated by two intersecting constructs that make it difficult to answer this question. These are difference discourse and the idea of normal.

### *Difference discourse*

Difference discourse is a term used by Ford (2005) to describe a set of interconnected beliefs, conversations and practices that are mutually reinforcing and socially pervasive. Though he uses the term in an analysis of the concept of racial culture, he points out that it is applicable to other social classifications and identities. For example, many disabled activists and scholars argue for a concept of disability culture, a kind of identity politics that seeks to challenge representations of disability as deviant, grotesque or otherwise impoverished (e.g. Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). This is important work that serves to uncover and expose the deeply held belief that disability is tragic, because it is abnormal. The problem is that although this discourse helpfully brings questions about what is normal to

the fore, it also unwittingly affirms the concept of normalcy. While those who argue for a positive concept of disability culture seek to change the difference discourse, Ford's work suggests that by virtue of engaging with what it sets out to critique, difference discourse inevitably serves as a form of collusion with the status quo. As a result, it might alter, but will not resolve, the problems of marginalization and discrimination faced by those who are marked out in some way as different. In other words, changing the language of special education, long thought to be an important strategy in changing special education (e.g. Corbett, 1996) is insufficient for changing practice.

### *The idea of normal*

It has been noted (Nussbaum, 2004) that with respect to disability, the idea of normal is linked to two very different notions: statistical frequency (usual and unusual) and a normative conception of good or bad (proper and improper, or appropriate and inappropriate). Nussbaum questioned why these ideas were linked when there are so many examples of things that are common and typical that may not be good, and things that are unusual that are good. Her answer was that normal is a construction that permits people to protect themselves from the imperfections about which they feel the deepest shame. If this is the case, then no matter what educational rights special education protects, or what it achieves for individuals, it can never really be 'good' because as long as it remains focused on what is different, 'normal' can be defended as an appropriate standard, just as the critique of difference discourse suggests.

If this is the case, can the work of special education ever be more than a Faustian pact with education's normative centre? How can special education become an integral rather than marginal part of a school's response when students experience difficulties? These are not new questions. They are of longstanding concern to all who have been disturbed by the injustices of schooling and they are addressed by many of the contributors to this book. But the intractable nature of the problems of special education implies that new approaches to solving these problems are needed. In the previous edition, I suggested that:

... three things, clearer thinking about the fulfilment of the right to education, the challenge to deterministic beliefs about ability, and a shift in focus from differences among learners, to learning for all, set an agenda for special needs education that can change the nature of what special education is and might become in the future. (Florian, 2007, p. 18)

The sections that follow extend this speculation and suggest that addressing these directly can mitigate some of the negative effects of the structural problems associated with special education as form of provision.

### ***What do we mean when we talk about educational rights?***

Education is defined as a universal right by Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). As such, it is commonly

invoked for the purposes of establishing standards for the right to education and for human rights in education. Thus education is both a human right and a means of achieving human rights. As the concept of human rights has evolved, education has also come to be seen as a development right (Gearon, 2003), and as an economic, social and cultural right (Tomasevski, 2001).

Though there is great philosophical promise in a rights-based concept of education, it is important to note that the right to education is situated within its broader purposes, notably economic prosperity and development, as well as citizenship and the exercise of various freedoms. In today's world, the curriculum is driven by international competition that places a premium on the skills thought to produce economic advantage. The principles of the marketplace have produced an emphasis in education on high standards and competition. While the stated aim of these policies is to improve standards for everyone, competition between students, schools and jurisdictions produce league tables that rank order, the top students (standardized achievement tests), the best schools (school inspections), and the highest performing jurisdictions (international comparison tests of student performance by country). Student performance assessments, based on the statistical assumptions of a normal distribution (bell-curve) affirm education's normative centre as its ideal place where most students do well. But to maintain this centre, boundaries are needed to define performance standards, which in turn determine curricular offerings and organize learning opportunities.

Outside of these boundaries, special education offers something different to that which is more generally available in the normative centre, but the idea that rights-based special education policies would serve to fulfil educational rights for those with disabilities and others outside of the normative centre has been only partially realized. In an education system dominated by bell-curve thinking, identification of 'special educational needs' has been shown to lower a teacher's expectations about what is possible for a student to achieve (e.g. Hart, 1996). Here, the right *to* education may be achieved, but rights *in* education are limited by the inequities imposed by bell-curve thinking and the subsequent restricted opportunities to learn. This distinction makes it possible to see how special education can be both a strategy to achieve educational rights by securing access, and at the same time, one that denies educational rights by placing limits on the possibilities for learning that are inherent in systems of schooling organized in terms of a normative centre underpinned by deterministic beliefs about ability which are assumed to be normally distributed.

***The challenge of deterministic beliefs about ability:  
the problem with 'normal' is 'most and some'***

As noted above, schools are organized by grouping students in education's normative centre based on a utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number (e.g. according to bell-shaped statistical norms of ability, where what is average is normal) and other commonly agreed categories such as age. In this



way, what is ordinarily provided will meet the needs of most learners, while a few at the tail ends of the bell-shaped distribution, may require something additional to or different from that which is ordinarily available.

This is not to suggest that individual differences are unimportant. Two students may be experiencing what appear to be similar difficulties in learning but differences between the students (e.g. a learner with English as a second language and a learner with Down Syndrome) means that the nature of the misunderstanding is different in each case, necessitating different responses to the difficulty. Indeed, knowledge about many kinds of human difference is important. However, just as a student who is an English-language learner is different from a student with Down Syndrome; a 6-year-old is different from a 16-year-old, and so forth. In many ways, teachers are responding constantly to individual differences between learners. They know that every classroom contains diverse student groups and they take account of all kinds of difference in their daily practice. The point is, they do this work in the normative centre for 'most' students, but not for everybody. Some students, often those with disabilities or learning difficulties, continue to be marginalized within the classroom by interventions that are determined for them by others on the basis of a judgement about what they cannot do.

### ***The shift in focus from differences among learners to learning for all: A problem of individualization***

The presumption that certain individuals need something different or additional to that which is provided to others of similar age has had profound implications for the development of special education interventions. The idea that individual interventions and individualized education plans can and should be matched to individual needs remains popular in policy and practice in many countries. Individualized education is a hallmark of special needs education and it is a central feature of rights-based education.

In practice however, the focus of the teaching is on learning as a shared activity within the classroom community. Class teachers often use strategies that are matched to the purposes of learning for groups, and as noted above, they respond to differences on the basis of their knowledge of individuals within their classrooms. However, when a student is identified as having a disability, or a special educational need, the presumption of individual need means that many class teachers feel unprepared to meet the additional needs of 'some' students. Indeed, teachers often resist the placement of students identified as having special educational needs in their classrooms on the grounds that they are not qualified to teach them. Moreover, many specialists agree that this is the case. The conventional wisdom that different kinds of difficulties in learning require specific responses based upon knowledge of the difficulty remains popular despite the lack of evidence for this position. The following example from a colleague with dyslexia shows how this can be a barrier to learning.

*Text to speech software is often recommended by experts as useful for pupils diagnosed with dyslexia and having struggled for many years with reading and writing, I was advised that text to speech software would help me . . . I found the main difficulty with text to speech software was its adaptability to context specific tasks, particularly tasks involving collaboration with others. In a shared office headphones are a must in order to not disturb colleagues. Also, having the text on the screen read aloud did not help me to understand the text any better. With the text being highlighted on the screen, I found myself following the words and not the dialogue. By the end of a paragraph, I was able to recall what words had been spoken, but not the message being conveyed.*

*Furthermore, it was in working collaboratively with colleagues where such tools provided the greatest challenge because of the way the tool determines how reading and writing tasks should be carried out. I was not able to participate in writing activities that involved creating a piece of writing together in meetings to talk about reports. Whilst I would say the tool sometimes helped me to learn and verbalize specialized vocabulary, it did not help my reading and writing. Consequently, I do not use such tools.*

This is an important example that demonstrates how an assistive technology device served as a barrier to participation rather than an enhancement. In considering this example, a number of issues are raised. One is that the device did not serve its intended purpose. It did not become the ‘cognitive prosthesis’ promised by the technology. Not only was the device unhelpful, it actually functioned to exclude my colleague further from working collaboratively within his team. It is easy to see how such examples can occur in school settings where the focus is on planning for individual needs.

A second issue is raised by the assumptions that are made about learners and individual when individualized interventions are recommended. Often the idea of matching a specific difficulty in learning to a strategy drives the decision-making. However, when an intervention is based solely on an individualized (or personalized) response to impairment, or a specific difficulty in learning, important contextual requirements may be overlooked, exacerbating the problem of ‘most’ and ‘some’ discussed above. As was seen in the case example, a text to speech assistive technology device intended to support individuals with dyslexia interfered with, rather than supported, my colleague in completing professional reading and writing tasks. As his story shows, focusing on individual difficulty (*having struggled for many years with reading and writing, I was advised that text to speech software would help me*), rather than the demands of the task (*creating a piece of writing together*) did not lead to meaningful engagement with the professional task. If this case were approached from the requirement of writing a report together rather than on generalized assumptions about the difficulty of one of the individual’s undertaking it, a different and ultimately more productive course of action may have been possible.

Thinking about learning as a shared activity, where a single lesson is a different experience for each participant, encourages a shift in thinking away from teaching approaches that work for *most* learners existing alongside something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for those (*some*) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves providing rich learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for *everyone*, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life. It is the ways that teachers respond to individual differences during whole-class teaching, the choices they make about group work and how they utilize specialist knowledge that matters. The shift in thinking is about how to extend what is generally available to ensure that everyone has the opportunity for meaningful engagement in the learning community of the classroom. This is discussed more fully below.

### **A SHIFT IN THINKING FROM ‘MOST AND SOME’ TO EVERYBODY**

A shift in thinking away from the idea of special education as a specialized response to individual difficulty, towards one that focuses on extending what is ordinarily available to everyone in the learning community of the classroom, while acknowledging there will be individual differences, represents a subtle difference with profound implications for special education practice. Supporting class teachers to extend what is generally available to *everybody* rather than including *all* students by differentiating for *some*, is an important shift in thinking that can avoid the negative effects of treating some students as different. While it is not the only shift in thinking required to change special education’s relationship with education’s normative centre, it is an important addition that opens up new possibilities for the development of inclusive practice that can help to reduce variability in provision. If taken seriously, it can transform the role that special education can play, in aligning its practices more closely to its core values of equal opportunity, respect for human dignity, and a belief in the capacity of all people to learn. These values are consistent with the international EFA movement, and a social justice agenda for education.

Focusing on how class teachers extend what is ordinarily available in a classroom lesson or activity, offers an alternative perspective that has emerged from the study of the craft knowledge of classroom teachers committed to the principles of inclusive education that tried to capture the complexity and demands of their practice (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Spratt, 2013). It has been shown that teachers who are adept at embedding responsiveness to individual need within the process of whole-class teaching are able to sustain inclusive practice (Jordan, Schwartz & McGhee-Richmond, 2009; Jordan & Stanovich, 1998). Following Huberman (1992), we were interested learning more about how classroom teachers go about ‘tinkering’ in their classrooms to expand their repertoire of responses to the difficulties students encounter in learning. We found that embedding responsiveness to

**Table 1.1 Evidencing inclusive pedagogy**

Assumptions	Associated Concepts/Actions	Key Challenges	Evidence (What to look for in practice)
<p>1. Difference is accounted for as an essential aspect of human development in any conceptualisation of learning</p>	<p>Replacing deterministic views of ability with those that view learning potential as open-ended</p> <p>Acceptance that differences are part of human condition</p> <p>Rejecting idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others</p> <p>Believing that all children can make progress</p>	<p>'Bell-curve thinking' and notions of fixed ability still underpin the structure of schooling</p>	<p>Teaching practices which include <i>all</i> children (everybody)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating environments for learning with opportunities that are sufficiently made available for <i>everyone</i>, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life;</li> <li>• Extending what is ordinarily available for <i>all</i> learners (creating a rich learning community) rather than using teaching and learning strategies that are suitable for <i>most</i> alongside something 'additional' or 'different' for <i>some</i> who experience difficulties;</li> <li>• Differentiation achieved through choice of activity for everyone.</li> </ul> <p>Rejection of ability grouping as main or sole organisation of working groups</p> <p>Use of language which expresses the value of all children</p> <p>Focusing teaching and learning on what children can do rather than what they cannot</p> <p>Social constructivist approaches, e.g. providing opportunities for children to co-construct knowledge (participation)</p> <p>Interdependence between teachers and learners to create new knowledge, which in turn links to notions of participation</p> <p>Use of formative assessment to support learning</p>

**Table 1.1 (Continued)**

Assumptions	Associated Concepts/Actions	Key Challenges	Evidence (What to look for in practice)
2. Teachers must believe they are qualified/capable of teaching all children	<p>Demonstrating how the difficulties students experience in learning can be considered dilemmas for teaching rather than problems within students</p> <p>Commitment to the support of all learners</p> <p>Belief in own capacity to promote learning for all children</p>	<p>The identification of difficulties in learning and the associated focus on what the learner cannot do often puts a ceiling on learning and achievement</p> <p>Many teachers believe some learners are not their responsibility</p>	<p>Focus on <i>what</i> is to be taught (and <i>how</i>) rather than <i>who</i> is to learn it</p> <p>Providing opportunities for children to choose (rather than pre-determine) the level at which they engage with lessons</p> <p>Strategic/reflective responses to support difficulties which children encounter in their learning</p> <p>Quality of relationships between teacher and learner</p> <p>Interest in the welfare of the 'whole child' not simply the acquisition of knowledge and skills</p> <p>Flexible approach – driven by needs of learners rather than 'coverage' of material</p> <p>Seeing difficulties in learning as professional challenges for teachers, rather than deficits in learners</p>
3. Teachers continually develop creative ways of working with others	<p>Willingness to work (creatively) with and through others</p> <p>Modelling (creative new) ways of working</p>	<p>Changing thinking about inclusion from 'most' and 'some' to everybody</p>	<p>Interplay between personal/professional stance and the stance of the school – creating spaces for inclusion wherever possible</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking and trying out new ways of working to support the learning of all children;</li> <li>• Working with and through other adults in ways that respect the dignity of learners as full members of the community of the classroom;</li> <li>• Being committed to continuing professional development as a way of developing more inclusive practices.</li> </ul> <p>In partnerships formed with teachers or other adults who work alongside them in the classroom</p> <p>Through discussions with other teachers / other professionals outside the classroom</p>

Source: adapted from Florian & Spratt, 2013

individual need within the process of whole-class teaching foregrounded the importance of participation in classroom activities in terms of choice and relationships to others. For example, rather than setting work for students based on teacher judgement, a teacher might make a range of differentiated lesson options, based on knowledge of the range of interests, previous experiences, needs and abilities of everyone, available to the whole class. By giving everyone a choice, individual needs were met without pre-determining who could or would do what. We have described this as inclusive pedagogy, or the inclusive pedagogical approach. While it is broadly similar to universal design for learning (UDL), it varies in the extent to which it engages students in directing the course of their own learning and encourages teachers to abandon practices that pre-determine what students can achieve.

### RESEARCHING THE INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

The interest in how learners differ and the ways in which they can be helped to overcome the difficulties they experience drives much research in special education. But, when the work is done in collusion with a difference discourse that dichotomizes learners on the basis of 'impairment' or some other classification, it cannot help to resolve the dilemmas of difference. Nor can it help with improving what is generally available to everyone in schools.

The focus of research that seeks to understand how teachers extend what is generally available to others taking account that there are always individual differences between them offers a new direction for enquiry that can help disrupt education's normative centre. Table 1.1 presents a framework through which the study of the shift in thinking from most and some, to everybody, can be located. Initially developed as a lens to guide research on developing the inclusive practices of primary and secondary classroom teachers (Florian & Spratt, 2013), the framework provides a structure within which practice can be studied in context.

As shown in Table 1.1, shifting the gaze from 'most' and 'some' to 'everybody', as suggested by the inclusive pedagogical approach is underpinned by three assumptions and associated actions for practice. Key challenges that impinge on the associated actions are presented in the third column. The hope is that by engaging with the challenges described in the table, more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of how to support the participation and learning of everyone can be developed.

### CONCLUSION

Supporting a culture shift in education's normative centre is necessary work for the field of special needs education. This chapter has argued that while special education has made an important contribution to the education for all, the

limitations and unintended consequences associated with it require a shift in focus away from its problems and limitations towards more equitable educational provision for everyone. Clear thinking about the fulfilment of the right to education, a challenge to deterministic beliefs about ability, and a shift in focus from differences between learners, to learning for all, were suggested as providing opportunities to open up new possibilities for addressing the longstanding problems and unintended consequences of special education. The inclusive pedagogical approach to classroom teaching is presented as an example of how practice might develop as a result of calls for a shift in thinking. In time these new possibilities may also help challenge the exclusionary concept of the 'normative centre'. It may help to change the organization of educational provision and prevailing concepts of schooling, so that the reimagining of special education can become a reimagining of diversity in education. The future task for special education is not to defend what is 'special' about additional provision, but to challenge complacency about what is generally available in schools.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The epigraph that opens this chapter is from Deborah Youdell's 2006 book, *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusion and student subjectivities* (p. 22). It is used here with kind permission from Springer Science+Business Media B.V.

I am grateful to my colleague, Nigel Becham for permission to use the example of his experience with text to speech software to illustrate the point that matching interventions to individual difficulties cannot be assumed to be productive. Other considerations are also important.

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