

## HOW ARE WE GROUPING?

What goes on in today's schools in terms of grouping procedures? In order to get a partial answer to this question we asked individuals who are working in school situations to describe briefly some of the methods which were used in their schools. The accounts which follow illustrate the answers which were received. No one is set up as a perfect method. It is possible that you will question some of the procedures used. Others, you will find desirable. Still others, you may disagree with altogether. You are asked to read these accounts as examples of what schools are doing and then to weigh them carefully in regard to the issues presented in the discussion beginning on page 365.

And it may be well to remember, also, the statement of an elementary principal in Ohio, who writes, "The techniques of grouping do not constitute the most important problem. The critical question is how the children, teachers, and parents feel about it. Grouping must be acceptable to parents and teachers, known and understood by them. It must be administered by a high sensitiveness to how people, little and big, feel about any and all aspects of the program. It must be developed slowly and through cooperative planning with the pupils, moving toward the democratic ideals of respect for persons, faith in intelligence, and cooperative solution of common problems."

*From a suburban school in the Middle West:* It is obvious that the term GRADE is a misnomer, that the phrase a "fourth grade" or a "fifth grade" means little, when research studies have shown that within any classroom there is a spread of at least five years in achievement, as well as a wide variation in mental age, physical size, and emotional and social development.

In order to eliminate this fixed grade concept, to reduce size of groups, and to take care of individual differences more effectively, we have grouped children throughout the first five years of the elementary school on the basis of several factors: chronological age, mental age, physical size, and emotional and social maturity.

Letters to parents explaining reasons for and advantages of such a plan have been sent home in June each year. Parents have had an opportunity also for questions and discussion at teas and conferences.

We find that this more flexible type of grouping helps teachers to become

more sensitive to individual differences in all areas and to meet the children's interests and needs with a wide variety of experiences and materials. Under this plan we are able to reclassify children as the need arises, making it possible for a child to be placed in another group at any time during the school year. Thus through this greater flexibility, we are striving to place each individual where he can live and work more effectively and achieve *his maximum* of success and security.

*From a California city:* Since some children acquire mental, physical, emotional, or social skills a little more slowly than others, our city has developed a junior primary program to allow for varying growth rates. It has been proven that learning to read is dependent upon the time when a child has reached normal development in more than one of the above-mentioned factors.

Since the ability to begin reading is a primary concern of children entering the first grade, our groupings in this

grade are made on a very fluid basis. In May of each year a conference group sits down together to analyze the development of each kindergarten child. Included in the group are the principal, the teacher, the school nurse, the counselor, and the director of child guidance. Test records, reports of medical examinations, and attendance records are evaluated in the light of the teacher's experience with each child. Children who, in the judgment of the conference group, have not reached the maturity necessary for beginning reading are placed in a transition group called the Junior Primary group.

Every caution is exercised to have Junior Primary teaching include a thoughtful program of activities that build the skills that each child may need so that he can approach reading with a liking for, and an interest in it. The immature normal children in our schools who have had the extra time to mature have proved to be good students.

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A sixth grade class in the Wilson Elementary School organized for the teaching of citizenship—democratic citizenship—has the children arranged heterogeneously seven to nine in a group. These groups are made up by the teacher after some study of the individuals involved. They are planned so as to bring into interaction individuals having characteristics of a complementary nature. Each group is balanced so as to have no preponderance of either sex, of intelligence, or of adaptability. Each group has its behavior problems; each one has its purposeful members; each one has its leaders. Each group approximates a real life

group in its heterogeneity. This grouping is used as the basic unit within the class. Each group is responsible to elect a leader once a month. It is the leader's job to help his group in all ways—he must encourage group members in their work, try to secure the cooperation of all members. Each member of the group has a definite job in the care of the classroom; each one has a monthly assignment in reporting world affairs. The group in general and the leader specifically are responsible to see that these jobs are done on time. The groups also work as committees in various activities in social studies.

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Grouping for a sports program for a sixth grade class follows the old sandlot custom of "choosing up sides." Captains selected by the class take turns in choosing members of the teams which play together for a period of one month before a new grouping takes place. This grouping secures teams very close in ability and it serves the purpose very well of equalizing competition—a purpose all too ill-served in most interscholastic and intercollegiate athletic competition. The method also has the advantage of presenting excellent opportunities for the development of democratic citizenship. Having members of all grades of ability from highest to lowest, the successful team is one that develops the greatest degree of cooperation and responsibility among its members. The team that razzes and hazes its poor players soon perceives that the players get worse which is to the team's detriment. The better players see that they can give more aid to their team by helping and encouraging the weaker members.

*A variety of grouping means for academic and social purposes from a California county:* Many means of grouping children for purposes of personality development and instruction are in use in this county. Groupings within a room for instruction in the skills of reading and arithmetic are in general use in grades one through eight.

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It has been found that grouping for reading purposes in the upper elementary grades has been very helpful in the solution of reading problems. The usual procedure is to have three reading groups, one of which will be reading at grade level or above; the middle group reading somewhat easier books; and the less able readers using material at whatever level they can handle easily. Great care is taken to provide stories which these children can read with *interest* as well as with *ease*. For upper grade children who need to read at primary level, the Aviation Series, published by Macmillan, *Straight Up*, *Straight Down*, and *Planes for Bob and Andy* have proved very popular. Their content appeals to older children who really don't care what happens to the usual primary quartette of boy, girl, kitten, and puppy. The more advanced groups are also challenged by stimulating material suitable for their needs. Occasional sharing periods when groups report their reading experiences to each other have been valuable.

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Such groupings of children for instructional purposes are led by the teacher, but there has been some success with pupil-led groups. During the fourth grade the children frequently

make a study of the days of the ranchos in California, and of present day Mexico. In both areas of experience the children need to know some Spanish words. Few classes in Riverside County do not have at least one child of Mexican-American background who speaks Spanish at home. These children lead groups of their playmates in learning and pronouncing the Spanish words they need to know. It has been found that this is an excellent way to give status to the individual and also to the general Mexican cultural background.

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It has been found that reluctance of children to participate in games has frequently come from a lack of knowledge of the basic game skills. Pupil-led groups who learn how to throw a ball or wield a bat have dual value. They help the physically unskilled children become more adept, and they may be used to give status to a good athlete who may be handicapped in academic fields.

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In one-teacher schools under able leadership, age and grade can almost be forgotten, as all children share in the activities of the group. Language and evaluation periods in such situations are especially interesting and present certain possibilities for use in the graded schools. The social studies work period is ideally adapted to working out groupings which utilize the skills of the children.

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An example of grouping children to avoid possible tension was illustrated in one situation last fall when ninety Negro and Mexican children transferred into a school of about three hun-

dred which previously had had only Anglo-American children. The newcomers were assigned to rooms throughout the school, and no more than three or four were in any one room. After the first few days there were no complaints from Anglo-American parents, and the children new to school have made happy adjustments. This is evident by the fact that the Mexican and Negro-American children participate freely in all activities and have been selected for elective office.

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Teams of children working at specific jobs, learning a skill or performing a special task may often be used to help children form friendships, and become integrated gradually into the group. This technique has been very useful in helping newcomers become adjusted to the new situation.

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Skillful and flexible manipulation of groups of children can aid the instructional program and can also be used to build the security and feeling of status which are essential for wholesome personality growth.

*From an elementary principal in a California city:* In an attempt to group children for an educational program which would enable each child to make the maximum growth of which he was capable, four elementary schools put aside all grade designations and organized classes on the basis of social maturity grouping for a period of five years.

In forming the class groups a serious effort was made to consider the factors which seemed important and practical. Chief among these were chronological age, reading ability, and social maturity.

Our first step was to gather from our health and permanent record cards such objective data as the chronological age, mental age, anatomical and physiological development, academic achievement, and past school experience in the field of social living. Then began the more difficult task of pooling, through conferences, the subjective data which teachers, counselor, and principal could furnish. Consideration was given to out-of-school environment, maturational development, emotional and social reactions, and individual interests. These conferences were not limited to so called "misfits." Every child was considered and assigned to a group in which it was felt he could work happily and successfully.

The assignment was never considered final. At any time during the school year a pupil was reassigned if additional data, or changed conditions, made a transfer seem advisable.

*From a Florida elementary principal:* Some activities are wide enough in scope to provide for participation by all members of a class and frequently by all sections of the grade if not by the whole school. In writing and producing a play there is work for all. Perhaps most of the research and writing may be done by the brighter members of the class, but many discerning criticisms and valuable suggestions will come from the "not-so-bright" members if they have self-respect and the respect of their fellows. There is a job for even the dullest child, and he will do it joyously and with pride if he has not given up as result of frustrations, humiliations, and failures which have resulted from unfair academic situations. The school newspaper can make

important persons out of those who are on the mimeograph staff as well as stimulating creative writing and leadership in business management. The opportunities for growth are endless, but the child must have developed a feeling of adequacy and security if he is to take advantage of them.

*Examples from a Louisiana school of cross-sectional groups which take children from different age groups to make an effective learning situation:*

1. Junior Council for grades two through six. Each age group has two representatives, one being elected each month. Meeting with a teacher sponsor, they bring suggestions from their grades which might make for more pleasant working or playing conditions. After due consideration plans and recommendations are made and carried back to the respective groups. In addition to the above responsibilities the Council plans certain traditional school events such as the annual Halloween Treasure Hunt, Kite Day, and the Lower School party for the graduating class. A most important feature of these parties is the custom of older children "adopting" younger ones as partners for games, contests, and kite flying.

Although a grade usually chooses the more stable children for Council representatives, it is not unusual for others to have the opportunity to see if they can carry this responsibility.

2. Club meetings Monday afternoons for an hour. Children from grades three through six have the opportunity three times a year to list three club choices in order of preference. The clubs offered are determined by children's interests and availability of leadership from staff and high school pupils. Ef-

forts are made to give each child his first choice as long as this does not interfere with a good working situation. The clubs at present are: Archery, Handcrafts, Experimentation in Art, Junior Red Cross, Rhythms, Science and Nature Study, Folk Tales and Music, and Puppets. Often the more mature children have opportunity to help younger ones, but it is also true that the creative ability of the younger children is appreciated for its contribution to the pleasure of the group. Many of the most popular school assemblies are outgrowths of club activities.

An extension of the club idea is carried on in the high school grades in special interest periods whereby pupils may spend several hours a week with other pupils of all ages working on a chosen interest.

3. Luncheon. The dining room accommodates children and staff of five grades at a time. A family-type meal is served with a teacher or responsible older child acting as host or hostess to six or seven children. One child acts as server for a week, going to the kitchen for food and refills, removing the main course dishes, and bringing in the dessert. The groupings are changed weekly, sometimes consisting of children of different ages or sex, sometimes of the same age and sex. When the weather permits, a picnic lunch is served out-of-doors once a week.

*From a classroom teacher in a Pennsylvania city elementary school:* In my classroom I find a place for two types of groups—those planned and assigned by the teacher, and those planned and selected by the children.

My class is an ungraded group of children ranging in age from 9.0 to

11.10. All are retarded in reading and some have difficulties with arithmetic and spelling.

Grouping the children for instructional purposes means more than assignment on the basis of level of achievement. In order to place each child where he will find the environment most conducive to his development, it is necessary to consider also his physical and social maturity and his degree of emotional stability. I try to place the child with his friends so that he may be happy in his group. In cases of decided emotional block, I work with the child alone until he has enough success to feel comfortable with other children. Groupings are flexible and changes are made whenever they will help the child.

There are five groups formed by the children themselves on the basis of special interests—the classroom library, bulletin boards, work corner, science corner, and class newspaper. Our social studies unit also provides many opportunities for children to work together in small groups for different purposes. Through the cooperative social interaction in these various groups, and through opportunities for different children to serve as group leaders, the children learn as they practice effective living in a democracy.

*From the director of elementary education in a Texas city:* To place each child in an environment providing the best opportunity for self-realization in a democratic society is the aim of the grouping plan in all of our nine elementary schools. The principles basic to the plan are (1) harmonious adjustment of each child in all phases of his development, (2) sufficient differences

in groups to insure group complexities, (3) enough likenesses to have similarity in needs, (4) opportunities to live in mutual satisfaction with his neighbors and to live happily with himself, (5) success on the part of every child and yet opportunities to be excelled, (6) opportunities for academic and mental development, (7) similarities in chronological age, physical development, and social maturity, (8) discouragement of the idea of “low” or “high” ability ratings, and (9) flexibility to permit needed changes.

Immediately following enrollment, temporary groups are set up. Criteria for assigning a child to a temporary group come from recorded data and the enrollment interview. Actual grouping occurs as the teachers become familiar with each child and apply the nine-point criteria summarized above. Not many changes are found necessary, but those advisable are made with the consent of all parties concerned. The final determinant is: “Is this the group most individually challenging and stimulating to him, the one in which he can work best, and the one to which he can make the most worthwhile contribution?”

*From a California county:* In our public school system as it is now set up, chronological age determines class groups. This is a practical and almost necessary arrangement in providing for the care of such large numbers of children. However, in any school organization, provision should be made for group committees composed of varying age groups to work together. One of the schools in this county has a plan whereby a committee of children representing all classes meets early in the year with

the faculty group to discuss school responsibilities that should be the concern of the total school membership. The list contains such items as:

1. Checking lunch trays.
  2. Keeping lunch tables clean.
  3. Keeping fresh flowers and beauty corners in hallways and offices.
  4. Traffic safety.
  5. Washroom check-ups.
  6. Playground equipment check-up.
- And numerous similar things.

Groups are then formed to be composed of children of various ages and representing various class groups to discharge these responsibilities.

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In classroom organization in this county, grouping for instructional purposes is done in various skill areas. The diagnostic parts of reading tests are studied in individual conferences with children, and they understand that grouping is done for their own convenience and benefit, since they are working with others who need to gain in similar specific abilities. Reading classes are divided in most cases into three groups. Sometimes a child wishes to work with two groups, or questions his placing in a group. When this happens, his problems are discussed frankly with him, and he is given an opportunity to carry out his desires. Often, after a trial, he voluntarily returns to his previous group, or, in some cases, proves that his judgment of his needs has been accurate. Frequent informal checking to see if mastery of techniques is accomplished makes possible frequent shifting of group personnel, avoiding the feeling in children that they are "grooved" with the

superior, the average, or the below-average group. Avoidance of giving designating names, such as A- B- C-, "first," "second," "third," or "high," "low," and "middle," is also a means of minimizing this feeling.

*From a Wisconsin one-room rural school where children are enrolled for eight years of elementary work:* Arbitrary grade lines are broken down and children are grouped according to ability in classes where skills are taught. However, children of 13 and 14 years of age and reading on second or third grade level do not read with primary children. Usually a special class is organized for them. They meet with their age groups for discussion purposes. Programs are blocked out and if an integrated unit of work is in progress all reading, discussion, written expression, and sometimes art activities are determined by the problem. Daily schedules are flexible and allow for radio programs. These programs with the teachers' manuals (WHA-Wisconsin) often constitute the centers of interest in science and social studies for the year. Radio music and art instruction have brought excellent results and have eliminated the feeling of isolation so commonly associated with rural schools.

*From a principal in a Pennsylvania city school on the advantage of having the same group of children work with a teacher over a two-year period:* Under the two-year plan teachers of grades 1, 3, and 5 advance with their respective classes to grades 2, 4, and 6. It was hoped that if teachers assumed responsibility for the same children for two years, more continuous progress would be insured.

This and much more has been

achieved. Since a child lives two years with the same teacher, there is less compulsion to learn this or that here and now, in the lower grades especially. As a result, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed. Not all children begin to read at the same time, and there is more opportunity for expression through a variety of materials.

Over a two-year period, the teachers' observations of children become more meaningful. Teachers report also a saving of time; at the beginning of the second year, they need not begin over again, since they have learned much about their children, where they are, and what they should attempt next.

In the middle grades additional advantages became evident. With a two-year span it has been possible to make desirable changes for certain groups in grade placement of curricular materials. Thus portions of grade three arithmetic were postponed for some children until grade four, with good results. The whole program in social studies has become more flexible. Finally, there are tremendous possibilities for social development when teacher and pupils live together for two years.

*From a Virginia director of instruction who uses teachers' statements as evidence of the value of administration and organization in grouping procedures that allow a group of children to remain with one teacher over a two- or three-year period:*

1. Effects on the child and his learning experiences.

Frequently students never have an opportunity to plan constructively without being interfered with or otherwise disturbed and so have not been able to learn how to plan for

the maintenance of work on any sustained long range purposeful activity. If given time and encouraged by appropriate transitional experiences, the child can and will accept tasks calling for persistence and skills as an extension of their planning and living together.

2. Effects on the teacher and her professional growth.

The following are evaluative statements made by the teachers participating in this study:

"It tends to eliminate prejudices of grade levels, that is, by saying that such and such work was supposed to be taught by the teacher below or above a particular grade level."

"I have become more objective in my observations of children's behavior. I see behavior as not something put on to please or annoy the teacher but as something which is caused. It often differs from one grade level to another."

"Observations which I have recorded over a shorter period of time are very often inaccurate, prejudiced, or superficial."

"I have learned to withhold my judgment for longer periods of time. Example: I have seen a child who couldn't read at the close of the first grade begin reading the second month in the second grade."

"Knowledge of a child's progress over a period of time gives teacher better understanding of individual development. Example: speech difficulty disappeared in the third grade."

"Provides a chance to carry out a flexible promotion policy. Child may be placed in more advanced group when maturity with its accompany-

ing growth and learning patterns indicates it."

"Provides opportunity for continuous evaluations."

"Provides a challenge because of the emphasis on study and continuous exploration of the potentialities of the child."

"As a teacher my expectancies have shifted from heavy subject content to be covered to how and what is the individual learning."

"Provides an opportunity to become aware of and to gain some knowledge of the factors influencing child development and growth such as changes in physical growth and accompanying emotional behavior, interest and attitudes; change of values; efforts of children to assert their independence and to break away from the adult world."

*From a first grade demonstration teacher in a Florida county:* In recent years experience has proven the value of grouping within the average classroom for greater efficiency in actual instruction. For example we agree that reading instruction is more effective if individual differences are provided for by organizing the class into three or more groups based on levels of ability. However there is also a by-product of this technique which is of the utmost importance to the development of the child's personality, his efficiency in thinking, and his ability to work independently.

Often, provision for individual differences by grouping has meant to us mainly a possible solution to the problem of the slow learners. It may also mean an opportunity to provide valuable and challenging experiences for the

rapid learners. Too often seatwork is assigned merely with the purpose of keeping children busy. When the technique of grouping is used, assigned busy-work as such need not be employed. Free periods are used to develop individual or group interests. The activities which grow out of these interests may be adjusted to the capacity of the group.

An example of this is a group activity which developed in a first grade room and continued over a period of several weeks. Posters advertising a coming circus brought to light a very real interest in animals. This interest was particularly strong in the group of which John was a member. John was an alert, gifted child, an excellent thinker, and a natural leader. He and several of his friends came to the teacher with various questions, such as:

"Where does an elephant sleep at night?"

"Why does a tiger have stripes?"

Many sources were consulted to answer these questions and soon a full-fledged activity was in progress with John in charge and involving six or eight children. The life, habits, and habitat of many animals were studied. Purposeful activities took the place of the usual seatwork assignments and contributed much to breadth of concept, good work habits, and scientific thinking.

However, John had much to learn in order to become a successful leader. Several times the "committee" came to grief. Once John complained that they all "quit on him." It was suggested that perhaps he hadn't managed his committee wisely. He was advised to talk it over with them. When he did so John

found that the rebels considered him "too bossy." A compromise was reached, harmony was restored and John learned one of the great lessons of leadership.

Several such groups can function simultaneously with provision for varying degrees of ability. When an activity grows out of a real interest and when plenty of material for working at the activity is available, discipline problems are reduced to a minimum. Children become increasingly independent in the profitable use of their leisure time and the teacher is able to give more attention to direct instruction of the different groups in their turn.

*From a California junior high school:* Segregation according to mental age or other numerical coefficients is impartial and reasonably exact but gives no consideration to a child's personality needs. One of the junior high schools receives pupils from a district which contains a large proportion of underprivileged children. It has been the practice to assign those of 60 I.Q. or below to two special rooms, segregated as to sex. Some of these pupils, and others of greater ability, need and deserve individual counseling in a friendly atmosphere where the pressure is not too great. Others need to associate with normal pupils, and may be given a hopeless outlook on life by enforced assignment to a group which, whatever name it be given, is known to every child as retarded.

*From an Arkansas high school and elementary school:* Grouping of students to attack problems growing out of the experiences of the curriculum has been practiced effectively in various situations on the secondary level. This

teaching procedure should be based, as accurately as possible, upon the interests of pupils in a given unit problem, together with the possession of skills and abilities necessary to plan, execute, and evaluate its solution. General intelligence tests, interest inventories, and standardized tests in subject fields, supplemented by the seasoned observation and judgment of the teacher, will help to determine the basis upon which grouping may proceed. The scope and importance of the unit problem to be studied also influence such procedure. Learning experiences should be planned so that each student can make a contribution dependent upon his interest and ability to achieve.

Experimentation with grouping involves the selection of students who can plan and work with others and who possess a tolerant, constructive attitude toward the goals to be accomplished. Such students may work with the teacher to draw the shy, uncooperative person into the activities of the group.

Those students who do not possess for adequate use such skills as reading, speaking, writing, or listening should be grouped for remedial instruction or for further assistance to enable them to meet the standards of their grade level.

Under careful supervision, the procedures described may lead to more efficient classroom organization, to broader opportunities for desirable social adjustments, and to the growth of attitudes characteristic of alert citizens in a democratic community.

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In our school where it is necessary to have two groups within one grade, many factors are considered before the division is made. The teachers bring all

available data on the children to a conference with the supervisor. After the I.Q., chronological age, and recommendations of the teachers are studied and discussed, the grouping is made. Children, regardless of achievement, are placed in the group where they will be happy and can adjust to social living with others their own age. Usually such a division results in a group which works together in harmony.

Within the fourth age level, made up of nine- and ten-year-olds, the children are grouped for social studies, reading and arithmetic.

In social studies, committees work on socially significant problems. A committee is an interest group made up of individuals of a wide range of abilities but who want to work together. At the beginning of each problem, the committees are formed again, thus giving each child a chance to work with different people. The low I.Q. child as well as the superior child, contributes to committee work, gives and takes criticism, and is a respected member of the group.

*From a Missouri city elementary school:* How to group children in an economically underprivileged neighborhood with all the problems which that entails, gives us continual concern if we are to give each child all the opportunities he needs for his growth and development. In our environment with its insecurity for the many—first the depression, then the war, and now the readjustment period—our children need to have some place and some one in that place from whom they can get the feeling of belonging, no matter what is happening in the world.

The plan evolving which seems to us most successful and most satisfying in trying to help the children meet their many problems of growing up, is to have a group stay on with their teacher for a period of two, three, and sometimes four years. The time element depends upon the children's interests and needs. The grouping is flexible so that when it is best for the child, he may be with another group in a new environment. The results seem to be the same, whether we observe the children of the "Kindergarten-Primary" level or the "Middle of Upper Grade" groups. There is a spirit of cooperation which the group builds together as they plan, work, and play over a period of time; an understanding and appreciation of each one's strengths; and a great willingness to help each other when a difficulty or need arises. There is no feeling of failure, for each one works and contributes his best on his level.

The teacher has the opportunity to know her children and their families. And as she plans with the children she adapts the curriculum in terms of individual or group needs for she is not hurried or limited by "promotions." Thus content develops naturally and meaningfully and drills and skills are developed with whatever is the content.

In just living together unhurriedly over a period of time the teacher helps her children gather meaningful knowledge, build desirable habits and skills, grow in their understanding of one another as they work and play together, and develop appreciations of the importance of lasting attitudes and values that are for the good of all.

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