

Perspectives and Imperatives

IMAGINATION, RIGOR, AND CARING: ONE FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

RENÉE M. B. BRIMFIELD, *Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools*

The rush to respond to the many reports on educational reform may be based on good intentions, but thoughtful consideration of a philosophical framework must precede action. All too often, recommendations are implemented based primarily on their ease, their cost-effectiveness, public pressure, or financial considerations. Educators find themselves acting as dialecticians trying to satisfy the wishes of the public, the pressures of the legislature, and personal views of the purposes of schooling. Although we must consider political and financial issues, we must base our policy decisions primarily on a reflected-on philosophy about the purposes of schooling. This article proposes one philosophical framework to guide educational reform efforts. This framework will help educators justify curricular decisions in a way that resolves the seemingly antithetical pulls into a meaningful synthesis.

The three elements of this framework—imagination, rigor, and caring—reflect my assumptions about schooling and imply a certain view of the role of the learner, the teacher, and the environment. Based on the notion that the perspective any person brings to a situation shapes the possibilities that can be envisioned, this article represents an important preliminary step in the process of educational reform.

IMAGINATION

Imagination is first characterized by liberation. By exercising imagination, we are freed from the ordinary, allowing new meaning and new possibilities to emerge. By exercising imagination, we are freed from mechanical responses, daring to trust the intuitive. Thus, imagination is beginning, "it is the potentiality of a future."¹ Bachelard has said, "By the imagination we abandon the

¹Joseph N. Riddell, "Stevens on Imagination—The Point of Departure," *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Cleveland Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 56

ordinary course of things. . . . [To imagine] is to start out toward a new life."² Imagination, therefore, is optimistic; it is rife with the nascent. A sense of innocence pervades the imaginative environment. We are detached from the world, unencumbered by prior expectations, "timeless, selfless, outside of space, of society, of history."³ We are open, ready to receive what the environment may offer.

Linked to this openness is the idea of play. The importance of play in the creative process has been the focus of much research.⁴ Kant speaks of play as "the spontaneous freedom of creative imagination."⁵ For Schiller, "play connotes the liberation of imagination,"⁶ highlighting the "lack of formal limits."⁷ In play, there may be no time limits, no rigid rules. Participants are free to invent, deviate, transform completely. Play, says Berman, "has within it notions of toying with ideas, of gaining self-mastery, of disciplining one's self to carry out a crucial task, of transcending the what-is to reach for what might be."⁸ Play is an art serving

as a liberating experience which "expands" and "strengthens" the mind. The mere exercise of creative imagination, the sense of what Kant calls "play," is a way of asserting our humanity, or of capturing the humanity we lose in mechanized mental processes.⁹

Mechanized mental processes are clearly antithetical to an imaginative environment. In fact, emotion is central to the imagination. Warnock notes that "the imagination has emerged . . . as necessarily connected with our emotions."¹⁰ Hume considers "a powerful imagination [as] the ability to turn ideas into living impressions, to arouse actual passions."¹¹ Imagination creates a sense that there is always *more* to experience, and *more in* what we experience than we can predict. . . . [Without such a sense,] it becomes boring . . . It is the main purpose

²Neil Forsyth, "Gaston Bachelard's Theory of the Poetic Imagination: Psychoanalysis to Phenomenology," *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Cleveland Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 231

³Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 59.

⁴See, for example, Leila Berg, *Look at Kids* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972); J. Nina Lieberman, *Playfulness: Its Relationship to Imagination and Creativity* (New York: Academic Press, 1977)

⁵Kevin Kerrane, "Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds of Modern Aesthetic Criticism," *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Cleveland Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 11.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Louise M. Berman, "Curriculum Leadership: That All May Feel, Value, and Grow," *Feeling, Valuing, and the Art of Growing: Insights into the Affective*, ed. Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1977), p. 255

⁹Kevin Kerrane, "Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds of Modern Aesthetic Criticism," *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Cleveland Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 6

¹⁰Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 202

¹¹Ibid., p. 200.

of education to give people the opportunity of not ever being bored; of not ever succumbing to a feeling of futility, or to the belief that they have come to an end of what is worth having.¹²

Joy, excitement, and anticipation are integral aspects of the imaginative environment. Coleridge believes that the imagination adds "the sudden charm"¹³ and includes "all that was creative, all that was shaping, all that created incantation, all that created magic."¹⁴

Like a good joke, imagination depends on surprise.¹⁵ To set off predictable associations, a certain amount of the expected must be present. However, the flash of originality, the dissonant twist, disrupts the predictable and creates a new experience. The possibility of the unpredictable makes for an imaginative environment.

The imagination is more often the faculty of *unmaking* the images furnished by the perception. It is above all the faculty of freeing us from the initial images, of *changing* images. If there is no changing of the images, an unexpected union of images, there is no imagination.¹⁶

Another concept immanent in humor and imagination is economy. Economy, according to Koestler, demands that not everything be made explicit. Thus, we are drawn into the creative effort.¹⁷ "[Economy] spaces out the stepping stones at intervals just wide enough to require a significant effort from the receiver of the message; it controls his course not by fixed rails but by focusing his attention on a task which he has to complete by his own exertions."¹⁸

Bachelard writes that the imagination has seductive power,¹⁹ and he sees it as a healthful influence. "A being deprived of the function of the unreal is a neurotic just as much as one deprived of the function of the real."²⁰ By seducing people into becoming participants in the imaginative, we demonstrate that we value them as unique and necessary shapers of the environment, and we expand the realm of the possible. The importance of omission over inclusion is apparent here.

¹²Ibid., pp. 202-203.

¹³James Volant Baker, *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 124.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 125.

¹⁵Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1949).

¹⁶Neil Forsyth, "Gaston Bachelard's Theory of the Poetic Imagination: Psychoanalysis of Phenomenology," *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 234.

¹⁷Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1949), p. 33.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁹Neil Forsyth, "Gaston Bachelard's Theory of the Poetic Imagination: Psychoanalysis of Phenomenology," *The Quest for Imagination*, ed. O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 229.

²⁰Ibid., p. 231.

Finally, Coleridge offers several interesting thoughts on imagination.²¹ According to him, "The imagination is the distinguishing characteristic of man as a progressive being."²² Man's inability to be content, to be satisfied with the status quo, has given rise to "the restless faculty of Imagination."²³ Imagination acts as "a vital power that fuses diverse materials into one."²⁴ Imagination is proactive in the sense that it "reaches out" to objects in the universe and modifies and transforms them. Imagination selects out and unifies at the same time. Out of the overwhelming universe of sensory information, Coleridge's primary imagination creates a world of phenomena open to interpretation and transformation. The secondary imagination takes these intuitions and transmutes them. "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; . . . it struggles to idealize and to unify."²⁵ Thus, there is the element of reconciling opposites to create new meaning.

Educators committed to the role of imagination in the classroom will encourage students to work both individually and collaboratively to create meaning. Students will be given the time, space, and resources to reflect on their knowledge and on the process of coming to know. Teachers will encourage students to use the creative process but will also provide an overlay of a critical perspective so that students understand that criteria are necessary in all activities. Students will be given the tools to set their own standards and will be moved toward intrinsic motivation instead of relying on externally provided rewards. Egan maintains that our curriculums and teaching methods ignore and exclude "the most powerful and energetic intellectual tools children bring to school"²⁶—their imagination. Greene believes that the power of imagination in learning lies in its capacity to draw "toward the unexplored, toward the possible. It opens windows in the actual and the taken-for-granted toward what might be and is not yet."²⁷

An environment that values imagination will always look toward the creation of new meanings. In her discussion of "the need to reach for the unprecedented,"²⁸ Berman includes the importance of playing with ideas and the inevitability of error. Ambiguity must be seen not as a constraint but as an

²¹James Volant Baker, *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), Kathleen Coburn, ed., *Coleridge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

²²J. R. de J. Jackson, *Method and Imagination in Coleridge's Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 99.

²³Ibid.

²⁴James Volant Baker, *The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), p. 123.

²⁵Ibid., p. 115.

²⁶Kieran Egan, "Imagination and Learning," *Teachers College Record* 87 (Winter 1985): 165.

²⁷Maxine Greene, "Imagination and Learning. A Reply to Kieran Egan," *Teachers College Record* 87 (Winter 1985): 170.

²⁸Louise M. Berman, *New Priorities in the Curriculum* (Columbus, Oh.: Charles E. Merrill, 1968), pp. 137–152.

opportunity. Turning the ordinary into the extraordinary should be a primary goal of those involved in creating the imaginative environment

RIGOR

Bateson has warned that "we shall know a little more by dint of rigor and imagination, the two great contraries of mental process, either of which by itself is lethal. Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity."²⁹ Bateson's admonition is especially pointed in the wake of the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.³⁰ The seemingly plummeting levels of achievement among students and teachers have occasioned an eloquent entreaty among some of the nation's best educational minds to direct energies toward re-establishing excellence in education. The commission defines excellence on several levels.

At the level of the *individual learner*, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a *school or college* that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a *society* that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.³¹

We cannot quibble with the definition. How we translate this definition of excellence into settings and standards is the crucial issue. The concept of rigor proposed here is also predicated on "expect[ing] and assist[ing] all students to work to the limits of their capabilities . . . [and on] expect[ing] schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones."³² This concept of rigor also commits itself to affording "all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity."³³ Moreover, many of the commission's recommendations are also consonant with this concept of rigor. The potential danger lies in adopting only the recommendations that we can easily incorporate into or attach onto an existing program. The essence of this view of education is to resist the comfortable known in favor of a disquieting unknown. Therefore, this view of rigor demands more than more time on task and higher objective standards.

Rigor as presented here reflects the dedication of a well-executed *pas de deux*, the intricacy of a Faberge egg, the elegance of the theory of relativity, and the provocativeness of a blank page. Rigor demands "the indispensable habits of attention, concentration, patience, exactness, courage, and intellec-

²⁹Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature* (New York: Dutton, 1979), p. 219.

³⁰National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, April 1983)

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 12

³²*Ibid.*, p. 13

³³*Ibid.*

tual honesty . . . [through which] the learner comes to recognize that difficulties are to be surmounted, not evaded."³⁴ Rigor, therefore, cannot be imposed; it is not a quality that can be assigned to a setting. Viewed from the proposed perspective, rigor becomes a decision to engage in an activity with a certain degree of involvement. It is an agreement to care enough about the quality of our work so that extrinsic motivation becomes superfluous. Rigor is the inner competition that impels the marathoner to each subsequent landmark. It is discipline, and it is challenge.

L'Engle, arguing for memorization and its role as a creative force, says:

The greater and deeper our memory of the past, the wider our vision of the future. The more full our [Memory Treasure House], the more integrated we are as human beings, and the more free. This takes structure, enormous, disciplined structure. . . . But if you want to climb to the roof of a house, you need a ladder; you can't just float up. If you want to be free to dance and make love, you have to have the structure of your skeleton; without this structure you'd be an amorphous blob. There is a structure which is rigid and imprisoning, but there is also the structure which liberates, which sets us free.³⁵

By stopping only at the rigid structure, we miss the liberating structure. We miss the inner force that compels us to surpass our finest achievements. We are deprived of the feelings of competence and self-efficacy that should be hallmarks of any educational experience. Rigor is the commitment that we each find in our lives. Rigor thus reflects the choices we each make in our movement toward understanding ourselves and the world. "A human life is composed of performance, and each performance is a disclosure of a man's belief about himself and the world and an exploit in self-enactment."³⁶

Educators committed to rigor in the classroom will create and maintain the expectations of achievement, of intellectual engagement, and of thoughtful contributions. Students will be expected to use knowledge to create knowledge using clearly delineated criteria. Teachers will not be satisfied with students' acquisition of discrete bits of information but will require students to make connections and to apply that knowledge in meaningful ways.

An environment characterized by rigor acknowledges its obligation to encourage us to define our own concept of excellence and provides the elements that aid in its attainment. The environment is structured enough to avoid chaos without precluding opportunities to follow interests and inquiries beyond the schoolroom. This environment assumes minimum basic competencies and builds on them with imagination and sensitivity.

³⁴Michael Oakshott, "Education. The Engagement and Its Frustration," *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* 5 (January 1971), 48.

³⁵Madeline L'Engle, "Ousia and MTH. A Writer Speaks," *Feeling, Valuing, and the Art of Growing: Insights into the Affective*, ed. Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1977), p. 85.

³⁶Michael Oakshott, "Education. The Engagement and Its Frustration," *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* 5 (January 1971), 43.

CARING

Caring is often an ineffable quality that may be sorely missed yet too abstract to be pinpointed as the missing element in one's life. Van Manen explores how caring is transmitted "in our everyday concrete situations as teachers, in speaking with students."³⁷ He says that "speaking is not just the verbal transmission but what stands behind the words, the speaking, and the language that we communicate through gestures and expressive looks as well."³⁸ Caring has an implicit dimension of having more meaning than is apparent on the surface. It demands that we drop our objective, analytical stance toward an educational experience and be willing to understand it differently. It "requires striking a responsive chord among people in dialogue situations by clarifying motives, authentic experiences, and common meaning."³⁹ It asks that we enter into another's "first-order experience" and respond to the understanding that we develop.

Mayeroff has outlined eight major ingredients of caring.⁴⁰ First, caring requires many different kinds of knowledge. "I must know . . . who the other is, what his powers and limitations are, what his needs are, and what is conducive to his growth, I must know how to respond to his needs, and what my own powers and limitations are."⁴¹ Knowledge is both implicit and explicit, direct and indirect. To ignore what is not obvious is to deny ourselves access to certain kinds of information that will help others to grow.

Understanding others' needs, strengths, and weaknesses requires a variety of strategies for interpreting events, for understanding behavior, or for calling forth the appropriate response. Mayeroff refers to this aspect of caring as "the rhythm of moving back and forth between a narrower and wider framework."⁴² Van Manen uses the term *pedagogic thoughtfulness*. He explains it as "a peculiar quality that has as much to do with what we are as with what we do. It is a knowledge that issues from the heart as well as from the head . . . [It] is sustained by a certain kind of seeing, of listening, of responding"⁴³

³⁷Max van Manen, "Hermeneutic Reflections on Pedagogic Competence" (paper presented at Pennsylvania State University Conference on Competence, May 1980), cited in Francine Hultgren, *Reflecting on the Meaning of Curriculum through a Hermeneutic Interpretation of Student Teaching Experience in Home Economics* (doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1982), p. 58.

³⁸Paraphrased in Francine Hultgren, *Reflecting on the Meaning of Curriculum through a Hermeneutic Interpretation of Student Teaching Experience in Home Economics* (doctoral dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1982), p. 58.

³⁹Ted T. Aoki, "Toward Curriculum Inquiry in a New Key" (paper presented at the Conference on Phenomenological Description. Potential for Research in Art Education, Concordia University, April 1978), p. 12.

⁴⁰Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971)

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴³Max van Manen, *The Tone of Teaching* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), p. 12.

Berman and Roderick's notion of "peopling" also conveys the need for a sensitivity to the context of giving.⁴⁴ At times the ability not to intervene speaks extraordinarily eloquently of our capacity for caring.

Sensing the appropriate moment takes patience.⁴⁵ Growth takes time and cannot be significantly sped up or slowed down. Patience is being there for others, it is having confidence in others' capacity to grow and the willingness to wait for that growth. "Patience includes tolerance of a certain amount of confusion and floundering."⁴⁶ Patience implies respect for various modes of coming to know and to be.

Honesty, Mayeroff's fourth ingredient, is an acceptance of knowledge.⁴⁷ Uncovering certain things about others then demands an honesty in the face of this knowledge. What we decide to do with the knowledge is an important issue demanding honesty and reflection. Caring requires respecting the facts about others and about ourselves to help others' growth. Honesty demands recognizing the difference between shaping and guiding, between exploiting and reciprocating.

"Caring involves trusting the other to grow in its own time and in its own way."⁴⁸ Trust involves letting go, standing by while others make mistakes, and tolerating a lack of closure. Trust develops out of a relationship characterized by "assistance, encouragement, and exposure to relevant and stimulating experiences."⁴⁹ Trusting ourselves to grow and to make judgments enables us to allow others to grow.

Caring is a dynamic process, it must respond to the changes we experience in growth. An awareness of the newness of each situation and of the inappropriateness of past responses occasions a sense of humility.⁵⁰ Caring people confront their feelings of inadequacy, not with a sense of shame, but with an appreciation of the multiplicity of paths that we can follow. Humility allows us to situate our gifts and abilities in appropriate perspective.

Hope and caring are inextricably entwined. We hope that others will grow through our caring.⁵¹ It is a hope bathed in optimism. "Such hope is not an expression of the insufficiency of the present in comparison with the sufficiency of a hoped-for future, it is rather an expression of the plenitude of the present, a present alive with a sense of the possible."⁵² Hope in the present sense does not postpone possibilities until the future, rather, it animates each

⁴⁴Louise M. Berman and Jessie A. Roderick, *Curriculum Teaching the What, How, and Why of Living* (Columbus, Oh., Charles E. Merrill, 1977), pp 88-114

⁴⁵Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971)

⁴⁶Ibid., p 18.

⁴⁷Ibid

⁴⁸Ibid., p 20

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p 25.

⁵²Ibid., p 26

moment as an occasion for growth. Hope allows us to respond to each child as an individual with potential. It requires patience, commitment, belief, and a sense of humor. It implies expectation and a view toward the possible. "Hope is our experience of the child's possibilities. It is our experience of confidence that a child will show us how life is to be lived."⁵³

Finally, Mayeroff discusses courage as an ingredient of caring.⁵⁴ Involvement, vulnerability, and indefiniteness requires courage. Caring encourages challenges and examination by others. We must have the courage to absorb these challenges in the quest for growth. We must have the courage to acknowledge error and ignorance, to rejoice in others' growth, and to move toward the unknown.

For Noddings, pedagogical caring has three essential aspects—dialogue, practice, and confirmation.⁵⁵ Starting from a position of respect, Buber's "I Thou" relationship, the student and teacher exist in a state of connectedness. The teacher, as the "one caring," communicates to the student, the "one cared for," that he matters, that what he says matters. It is the teacher's responsibility to engage the students in conversation, to "[probe] gently for clarification, interpretation, contribution."⁵⁶ Through dialogue, the teacher "stretches the student's world"⁵⁷ and enables the student to develop competence. The cooperative relationship and the student's responsiveness to this caring are essential for growth and joy. Mayeroff's "rhythm of moving back and forth" captures this aspect of caring.

Practice, for Noddings, is key to developing competence in caring. Noddings proposes a service component in which students involve themselves in activities as the "one-caring." Students who participate in activities at which they are not expert will have the added benefit of developing "a genuine respect for the multiplicity of human talents and abilities," thus encouraging them "to risk themselves in new and difficult situations."⁵⁸ A genuine caring relationship accepts successes and failures as part of the process of living. Confirmation allows the teacher to acknowledge and rejoice in each student's growth. This act of confirmation can only occur in an open, responsive environment. The teacher must "see and receive the other—see clearly what he has actually done."⁵⁹ It involves an honest cooperative evaluation where the teacher expresses her concern for the student's growth and helps the student move toward the ability to evaluate his own work. The teacher "points [the student] toward his best possible self."⁶⁰

⁵³Max van Manen, *The Tone of Teaching* (Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann Educational Books, 1986), pp. 27–28.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 176

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 178

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 189

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 196

⁶⁰Ibid.

A caring environment celebrates each person's unique characteristics by accommodating differences while stimulating and challenging each person. The environment is designed with the goal of responding to each person in a flexible, non-punitive way. Cooperative learning is not only encouraged; it is taught and expected. Students expand their horizons of caring by sharing responsibility for the learning of their fellow students. There is less concern for hierarchical movement and isolation of peer groups; rather, a fluidity to content, process, and product reaches out to all students and invites them in. Time to develop caring is considered a priority in the organization of the caring classroom. Biography, as a way of heightening sensitivity to the person, is emphasized. The focus of education is not on accumulating red marks on papers but on developing "receptivity and relatedness."⁶¹ As we each are being awed, stretched, and encouraged, our vulnerabilities are acknowledged and slowly minimized as strengths predominate in our interactions with the process of schooling.

The characteristics—imagination, rigor, and caring—overlap and complement each other to produce a framework for the purposes of schooling that responds to this definition of education. "Education is not acquiring a stock of ready-made ideas, images, sentiments, beliefs, etc., it is learning to look, to listen, to think, to feel, to imagine, to believe, to understand, to choose, and to wish."⁶²

This article presents a possible vision for educational reform. Based on certain assumptions about the person and environment, it is offered as a touchstone to use in examining curriculums for coherence and consistency. Although educators cannot make educational decisions in a political or economic vacuum, educators who can articulate their vision of what should characterize schooling can more easily and effectively function as leaders. Teachers, students, parents, administrators—all those touched by the educational enterprise—will be more willing to accept changes and more likely to contribute their professional expertise during the planning and implementation stages. Decisions will be considered within a broader context that reflects the reason we become educators—to positively affect the lives of our students.

RENÉE M. B. BRIMFIELD is Coordinator, New Program Development, Office of Instruction and Program Development, Montgomery County Public Schools, 850 Hungerford Drive, Rockville, Maryland 20850.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 192.

⁶²Michael Oakshott, Education. The Engagement and Its Frustration, *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* 5 (January 1971) 46-47

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