

# Global Nationalism, Curriculum, and Identities

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**Abstract:** This paper considers efforts in two different countries to connect curriculum to student identities, in the context of global nationalism. Global nationalism refers to contemporary efforts across the globe to construct the nation as unified, stable, and set apart through dehumanizing others outside the nation. We explore how these efforts, grounded in dynamic theories of identity, encountered challenges in different nationalist contexts, Catalonia in Spain and the United States, when seeking to counteract deficit views of others and re-center curriculum in community priorities. We call for sustained attention to global nationalism as a context that can potentially undermine efforts to link curriculum and identity and for continued attention to the dynamic, fluid character of identity when seeking to connect curriculum and identity.

## Introduction

We live in an era of rising and persistent *global nationalism*. By global nationalism, we refer to a complex of movements that have arisen partly in reaction to changes to the global economy and that are supported by networked digital infrastructure that allow nationalisms to develop, paradoxically, parallel ideologies marked by anti-immigration stances and a desire for the kind of social cohesion that national identity is thought to provide (Koch, 2016; Vila, Esteban-Guitart & Oller, 2010).

Although there is a diversity of forms nationalism takes, today, there is a global tendency to reproduce assimilation strategies based on some kind of national idea (superiority, unity) around the world. For this we refer here as *global nationalism*. Global nationalists contrast their position with that of “globalists” and “cosmopolitans”, linking together cultural and economic elites who do not necessarily share the same ideologies regarding political economy or social democracy (Lynch, 2019).

As our colleagues have argued (Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017), these times call for learning scientists to engage directly with this political moment, specifically, to engage with the ways that our designs are implicated in contemporary networks of *power*. Doing so requires that we attend to “national and local specificity” and maintain a “sensitivity to context” (Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017, p. 2). This is particularly important when studying how global nationalism shapes our design, because there are many forms of nationalism (see Ozkirimli 2017), and there are different ways that nationalisms are entangled with one another within cultural practices (Vaczi, 2016). Historically, nationalism has justified both anti-colonial struggle and genocide; and today, while global nationalisms may share a commitment to imagined shared cultural ideals (Anderson, 1983), their politics differ from nation to nation, as this paper comparing the US and Catalan context illustrates.

In parallel to the rise of nationalism are contemporary efforts to link curriculum, culture, and identity. We the authors of this paper are implicated in these efforts in our respective countries, and we seek here to interrogate our own implication in them. In so doing, we seek to affirm efforts to link curriculum more explicitly to students’ identity, while naming problematic notions of culture, identity, and the ways that our implication within networks of power can potentially undermine our own efforts. We seek to describe ways that national discourses are implicated in local work, thus attending both to differences across our context, as well as to the ways local actors can reshape discourses of nationalism and identity to different ends.

## The role of curriculum in nation building

In that context, curriculum can be conceived as a cultural artifact for “nation building”, that is, an instrument of a nationality to highlight and reproduce ideals of unity, stability, and integrity (Toulmin, 1990). Language is almost always an important site for nation-building, because of its central historical role in constructing the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983). But curriculum also can support a notion of unity in opposition to external threats and involves the dehumanizing of people deemed residing outside of the nation or non-citizens within the nation (e.g., Philip, Gupta, Elby, & Turpen, 2018). In addition, curriculum that aims to promote disciplinary ends can readily be subverted to promote militarism in defense of nation (e.g., Vossoughi, & Vakil, 2018). Whatever the form, nationalism involves a rejection of the difference, diversity, hybridity and multiplicity of identifications, languages, values, and sociocultural practices within a given place (Benhabib, 2002).

Some of the earliest curriculum theorizing in the United States by Dewey (1916/1966) inscribed the ideal of “unity” as a core principle, even as he embraced the ideal of connecting curriculum to student interests. For Dewey, the ideal was to educate *from* individual interests and experiences and *toward* the discovery of “common interests,” seeing difference as a source of societal fragmentation. He viewed White, western cultures as superior to others, that is more socially developed. Other cultures he termed “savage,” and for contemporaries around him, these included many contemporary societies within the US and beyond (Fallace, 2008; 2015). Strikingly, Dewey (1916/1966) wrote:

careful study has made it doubtful whether their native capacities are appreciably inferior to those of civilized man. It has made it certain that native differences are not sufficient to account for the difference in culture. In a sense the mind of savage peoples is an effect, rather than a cause, of their backward institutions. Their social activities are such as to restrict their objects of attention and interest, and hence to limit the stimuli to mental development. (p. 36)

From a contemporary, decolonizing and anti-oppression stance in education (Patel, 2016), it could be argued that it is important to challenge the ways that curriculum can act as an institutional instrument to “civilize” people judged to be less developed, in terms of their knowledge, capacities and sociocultural resources; what it reinforces the *deficit thinking* in education based on the assumption—grounded in racist ideologies and class bias—that students and families of racial/ethnic minority, low income, foreign origin (immigrant, undocumented, and second-generation) fail in school because their poor experiences in terms of inadequate home socialization, limited linguistically or any deficiencies that obstruct the learning process (Valencia, 2010).

Schools wittingly or unwittingly support nationalist agendas by adopting and implementing curricula or plans for learning that reinforce particular ideologies and views of the nation, with language and instruction serving as a key site of contestation. In the US context, for instance, much is centered on a settler-colonial logic of elimination (e.g., of Indigenous languages and legacies) that seek to displace, erase, and replace peoples and reshape land and culture-nature relationships (Tuck, 2011; Tuck, & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). Other logics promote assimilation to English and denigration of other languages and forms of communication (Valencia, 2010). In the case of Spain, it is reinforced the Spanish language as a projection of homogenous national identity, being in conflict with other minoritized identifications both from within (i.e., Basque, Galician, Catalan) and out of the National Spanish State (people from foreign origin that speaks other languages and identify with other ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds) (Vila, Esteban-Guitart, & Oller, 2010).

## **A sociocultural understanding of culture, nation and identity**

The idea of nationalism as something homogenous, static, and monolingual-monocultural is problematic. From a sociocultural perspective, it can be argued that culture (or any nation) is not a static characteristic of a group, rather a dynamic, hybrid, multiple and open process of “ways of life” (Rogoff, 2016), or “repertoires of practice” (Gutiérrez, & Rogoff, 2003). That is to say, a dynamic process of taking part of changing, hybrid, and disputed practices, where different voices and positions are possible, constituted through time and across settings (Esteban-Guitart, Coll, & Penuel, 2018). Identity, in this context, is better understood as heterogeneous, dynamic, and involving a wide range of semiotic means of expression.

Curriculum is a site where nationalism has often found expression, where curricular texts are used to promote particular narratives of national unity and to justify oppression (Wertsch, 1997). To us, the challenge is to attend to the networks of power in which curriculum is implicated and the practices that undergird it, but also to explore spaces of possibility for culturally sustaining pedagogies to thrive and contest global nationalism (Paris, & Alim, 2017). To do so, we need to conceptualize curriculum not just as a plan for learning from elsewhere, which represents subjects, languages, and peoples as homogeneous, and toward curriculum as dynamic, co-designed by teachers and students and shaped in a way that sustains students’ identities and the plurality and heterogeneity of cultural backgrounds (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015; Severance, Penuel, Sumner, & Leary, 2016).

One way to combat the national assimilation and honoring diversity and difference is the notion of *funds of identity*, a concept which arose in the framework of the *funds of knowledge* approach (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Moll, 2019). The aim is to promote inclusive curricula that allow educators to recognize and legitimize, but also sustain the various cultural ways of life that coexist in the territory by means of the voices, feelings and identities of the learners (Esteban-Guitart, Lalueza, Zhang-Yu, & Llopart, 2019).

In this context, identity is conceptualized as an active and dynamic process which is distributed among geographical spaces, cultural artifacts, significant people, social institutions or life practices that are subjectively perceived as relevant in terms of their own personal identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2016). The notion of “identity

artefact” has been suggested as a mediating device which could be used to epistemically create (rather than simply identify) meanings associated with the identity of the learner in question (Subero, Llopart, Siqués, & Esteban-Guitart, 2018). Examples of such artefacts include the *identity drawing*, or the *meaningful circle*; another is the *artist’s book* where students are given six pages in which to incorporate drawings, comics, collages, writings or any production that answers the questions: Who am I? What are the most important things in my life? What are the things that make the most sense, or have the most value, to me? (Esteban-Guitart, Lalueza, Zhang-Yu, & Llopart, 2019). The pedagogical challenge is to link these identity productions to the school programs on science, mathematics or language.

In any case, rather than being any expression of a fixed, static and essential group of people; culture, nation and identity are for us an ongoing lived experiences embedded in sociocultural and historical practices. The idea of a culture linked to nation in terms of a homogeneous and coherent identity constituted by a language and a territory is a reduction and false understanding of multiple, hybridity and contestable cultural processes.

In what follows, we critically analyze two examples of efforts to promote stronger links between dynamic cultural identities and curriculum in two different countries. The examples are a critical re-interpretation of previous empirical work, namely qualitative studies of identity experiences of immigrant students in Catalonia, Spain (Vila, Esteban-Guitart, & Oller, 2010) that had an action research component involving the design and implementation of units of study based on a funds of identity approach (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011), as well as an ongoing qualitative study of the co-design process of a high school biology curriculum in the United States (Penuel et al., 2018) that draws from research team meeting notes as a primary data source.

## **Sustaining students’ cultures and identities in the context of Catalonia, Spain**

International migration flows in Catalonia have radically changed the social geography (i.e., school population) and thereby challenged the national agenda as it is happening in many other areas of the world. In particular, it is an interesting sociocultural context to explore the relationships between different levels of nationality (Spanish identity and Catalan identity) connected to cultural diversity because of its condition as an officially bilingual territory (Spanish and Catalan), and the multiple languages and identities as a consequence of contemporary international migration movements. In 2000, in that regard, less than 2% of the Catalan school population were children of first or second generation immigrants; in 2019, the figure was 20% (INE, 2019), largely comprising people from Morocco, Romania and South America (Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela), but also from Europe and Asia (González, 2019). Therefore, over the last two decades, there has been a considerable increase in diversity in terms of culture, religion, identity and language. Consequently, the largely bilingual Catalan-Spanish society is becoming much more multilingual and multicultural, with more than two hundred different languages coexisting in the territory (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2018).

Specifically, from 1980s, the Catalan Government has tried to protect and develop Catalan language and identity as a response to a dictatorship in which Catalan had been violently repressed. In that regard, after the implementation of a 1983 law governing the use of official languages [the *Ley 7/1983 Normalización Lingüística*], Catalan became the standard language in the Catalan education system, and a symbol of national identity. More recently, this role was reformulated in terms of its function as a facilitator of integration and social cohesion in a multilingual society. In doing so, the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya (the Autonomous Government of Catalonia) recently presented a report entitled *Linguistic Model of the educational system of Catalonia. Learning and Use of Languages in a Multilingual and Multicultural Educational Context* (2018). The aim of this document was to ensure multilingual and intercultural competence based on a good command of the official languages, Catalan, Spanish (as well as Occitan, or Aranese, in the Aran region); satisfactory competence in one or two additional languages, which typically meant English; and the recognition of the languages used by students of foreign origin as an optional subject during school hours or as an extracurricular activity.

Despite the best intentions of this linguistic policy and the progress made thus far, certain contradictions persist between different national and linguistic practices and ideologies. For example, many Catalan speakers reproduce patterns of language use typical of minority ethnolinguistic groups such as using Catalan language with members of one’s own ethnocultural group, being Spanish more accessible for immigrant people (Pujolar, 2010; Viladot & Esteban-Guitart, 2011).

In order to foster, perpetuate and sustain cultural diversity and plurilingualism as part of schooling project for inclusive and social justice purposes (Paris, 2012; Paris and Alim, 2017), the term funds of identity was suggested and applied into the Catalan educational system (Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Joves, Siqués, & Esteban-Guitart, 2015; Ordoñez, Siqués, & Esteban-Guitart, 2019; Saubich and Esteban-Guitart, 2011). To this end, the approach is organized around study groups, acting as a community of practice (Esteban-Guitart, Serra & Llopart, 2018), which consist of teachers from the school, and researchers from the university, who jointly prepare and carry out visits to the homes of the learners’ families in order to identify their family history, skills and knowledge

(i.e. funds of knowledge), and to identify also the learner's funds of identity. Subsequently, particular funds of knowledge and/or identity can be adapted to specific teaching and curricular units.

For example, in one of the first applications of the funds of identity approach in Catalonia, several identity artifacts were used (i.e., self-portrait, self-definition task, assessment of the family artefacts, routines and educational routines through pictures, significant circle) for students aged 12 years in a multicultural class (mostly from Morocco). In particular, geographical knowledges, politics, society and religious beliefs; animals; climate and vegetation; food and body art ("henna") were identified as funds of knowledge and funds of identity resources. The teacher designed and implemented a total of six teaching units around Morocco. For example, the first one consisted of three sessions over a period of one week. The aim was to show pupils the location of Morocco, the distances between Morocco and their own home in Catalonia and help them understand the physical distance between the two places. Some academic objectives, in this regard, were to locate Catalonia on the world map, to locate Morocco on the world map, to learn what the capital of Morocco is called and to identify the name and the colors of the Moroccan flag (Saubich & Esteban-Guitart 2011).

Although the teacher incorporated students' home language (in a multi-language dictionary on Morocco) and cultural practices (e.g., using henna—temporary body art resulting from the staining of the skin from the dyes—for artistic purposes), it would be problematic to affirm that multiple, transnational identities were fostered. Moreover, a persistent tendency towards homogenization persists to integrate the different ethnic, linguistic and cultural realities of Morocco in a general unit that in a way instrumentalize the usage of culture. Both Moroccan identity culture just and Catalan identity and culture were treated by teacher as something more or less static, with some definitory dimensions such as language, nation and so on.

In that regard, some contradictions and tensions were identified between national identities, languages and curriculum as the following transcript illustrates in a context of a qualitative study on adolescents' learning experiences of foreign origin aged 15 years in Catalonia, Spain (Vila, Esteban-Guitart, & Oller, 2010). In particular, a focus group was conducted to seven participants from different sociocultural backgrounds (three from Morocco, two from Ecuador and one from Chile). The focus group addressed issues regarding their identities, languages, and the role of teachers and school on affirming, or not, their identities:

Participant1: My teacher, when he speaks, says that we come from underdeveloped countries and start talking about Morocco because we have teachers that are not racists, isn't it? Yes, yes, the underdeveloped countries and says "we have a high standard of living, a life expectancy of more than 85 years, Catalonia is a rich country, more developed that other countries."

Participant2: Yes, yes, yes... in my class there is a map that distinguished between developed countries and countries under development, more poor, and in my country according to this map it is considered poor, a developing country. And teacher said it means the countries of the third world. And they say that they are not racists...

Participant1: And they say that we are not interested on school... and ask themselves why.

Participant3: I don't really care, they don't know nothing about our countries.

Participant2: Morocco is very developed.

Participant4: It is not the third world, it is very developed, there are cities more awesome than here.

This brief conversation shows the resistance of participants to accept a unilateral and stereotypical view of their countries of origin, in particular Morocco, reinforced by a curriculum unit. In addition, they relate these visions with racial attitudes. Visions based on colonialism implicit attitudes and a deficit view on students' country of origin.

In other words, merely including cultural references and identities by means of, for example, incorporating the learners' mother tongues, does not automatically lead to the construction of multiple identities that are sensitive to social and cultural diversity (Esteban-Guitart, Lalueza, Zhang-Yu, & Llopart, 2019). For that, not only do we need active educational policies that normalize all of this diversity, or that make it more than an optional subject (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2018); we also need pedagogical action towards horizontal practices of reflection on the processes of identity construction among learners. That is to say, we need to convert identity construction into a curricular component by favoring spaces for reflection and identity creation. For example, dealing with issues related to the awareness of racist and xenophobic practices since, although they may not even be recognized as one's own practices or experiences, pedagogical reflection can facilitate their analysis and identification (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2019). Again, the mere artefact itself – although it is an epistemic, mediating instrument, and generates, in this case, sense and meaning about oneself – is not, on its own, enough, since

superficial visions about one's own reality and that of those around one can appear in these "identity artefacts". What is needed is shared pedagogical mediation capable of guiding learners' interests and identities towards non-reproaching attitudes and reflections on cultural diversity, multiple cultural belonging, environmental sustainability and social justice. On the other hand, teachers can also end up reproducing national ideologies that tend towards the exclusive, which suggest we should also consider the need to explain the teachers' own funds of identity in the formation and construction of the teacher's identity (Brown, & Heck, 2018; Charteris, Thomas, & Masters, 2018), as well as explicitly favoring inclusive and culturally-sustainable ideologies and practices (Paris, & Alim, 2017).

## **Supporting identification with science in developing standards-based curriculum units**

Over the past decade, US policy makers at the federal and state level, with the support of powerful professional associations of state leaders, private foundations, and teachers' association, have profoundly reshaped educational goals for students pursued by schools (McDonnell, & Weatherford, 2013). They have done so through a network of policies, inducements and coercive mechanisms designed to support adoption and implementation of common standards in language arts, mathematics, and science (Rothman, 2011). This represents a significant departure from previous waves of reform that emphasized local control of standards, and—not surprisingly—has faced significant headwinds politically, particularly from conservative groups (McDonnell, & Weatherford, 2016). Nonetheless, it has effectively created a *nationalized* political economy for the development of curricular professional development resources, accountability tests and classroom assessments, and tools for monitoring assessment.

The remarkable success of the contemporary standards movement in the United States illustrate the ways that standards are first and foremost expressions of power, and should be analyzed as such (Esmonde, 2017); they influence, compel, and coerce teachers into adopting some goals for student learning but not others. Indeed, critics of the new standards in science have pointed out ways that concerns about justice and ethical debates about the role of science and engineering in society are excluded from them (e.g., Gunckel, & Tolbert, 2018; Morales-Doyle, Price, & Chappell, 2019). At the same time, standards offer what might be considered an "ambiguous" stimulus to action; that is, they are open to interpretation and reshaping by local actors during implementation in different venues (McDonnell, & Weatherell, 2016). There are, moreover, significant openings within the guiding documents for standards, to foreground equity and justice concerns (Bell, 2019). For example, a key principle of *A Framework for K-12 Science Education* (National Research Council, 2012), on which the standards were based:

...a major goal for science education should be to provide all students with the background to systematically investigate issues related to their personal and community priorities. They should be able to frame scientific questions pertinent to their interests, conduct investigations and seek out relevant scientific arguments and data, review and apply those arguments to the situation at hand, and communicate their scientific understanding and arguments to others. (p. 278).

This effort to link science to student interests and community priorities, while still addressing new standards in science, has been the focus of the second author's research since 2014. A key focus of this work has been to develop a structured process for developing units of instruction that reflect student interests, as well as a process that can be used to select design challenges that address contemporary societal issues (e.g., the threat of antibiotic resistance, gene editing, the loss of species) and community priorities (e.g., reducing pollution in urban neighborhoods). Elsewhere, we have documented the relative success of such efforts in yielding curriculum experiences that are interesting to students and that foster their identification with science (Kali et al., 2019; Penuel, Van Horne, Severance, Quigley, & Sumner, 2016).

In the processes we have devised, we have sought to provide an indirect means to solicit youths' interests to guide selection of "anchors" or focal points for problem-based units in science. The process begins with an analysis of the standards and brainstorming by researchers, district leaders, and teachers of potential "anchoring phenomena" or problems that will require students to develop understanding of targeted science standards in order to explain. We then ask students of teachers from multiple classrooms to respond to a survey that invites them to rate how interesting each candidate phenomenon is to them. These survey data are then disaggregated by race, gender, and home language, and analyzed by a co-design team of teachers where they give priority to phenomena of interest to racially minoritized students, girls and gender nonconforming students, and emerging bilingual and multilingual students. Co-design teams make a final decision on anchors based on a combination of factors: alignment to standards, interest data from students, and an in-depth analysis of potential student explanations of the anchoring phenomenon.

The process has some features that allow us to center race, gender, and home language as relevant categories of identity for design without essentializing them, but we have also discovered some limitations. The process does not presume that belonging to a particular identity category will be linked to particular interests, and when we develop statistics to present to teacher, we emphasize both overall mean scores and variation within and across group. In the process, we privilege problems that are of interest to nondominant youth, but we also pay attention to variability, seeking to place our bets on interests where there is low within and across group variation and high overall interest. Of course, in approaching the problem in this way, a central dilemma of standardized curriculum comes to the fore: the need to design for a common experience for students. A more responsive curriculum would, of course, be grounded in particular concerns and interests, and be partly improvised by the teacher. However, our district partners' request that we have sought to fulfill was to develop a common resource that could be used to support students' science learning across an entire district.

Our process also has limitations, in terms of how it tends to subordinate community priorities. A critique of the standards is that they present science and engineering as largely technical fields that do not entail ethical reasoning (Gunckel, & Tolbert, 2018). In a recent design workshop, a co-design team chose an anchoring phenomenon for a chemistry unit that was rated as highly interesting to students over one that addressed directly a local community priority for youth and that youth had helped to identify. The reason for the choice was that the first phenomenon would more readily address standards. To address this tension, the team has adopted an alternate approach to co-developing culminating design challenges for units. This approach centers identifying community concerns and priorities with youth first and identifying standards that could be addressed by them second. It also involves using a contrasting set of standards from action civics, in order to prioritize both justice concerns and social action as part of science learning.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper has presented a narrative account of how global nationalism shaped local efforts to connect curriculum to students' identities in efforts intended to counter deficit views of students and promote more equitable learning. The challenges, in some ways, are all too familiar. The robustness of deficit thinking and limitations of standards-based education are, after all, well documented (e.g., Bianchini, & Kelly, 2003; Valencia, 2010). This paper adds an explicitly political lens to this body of work, one focused to global nationalism, and examines how efforts to counter deficit thinking intersect with projects to promote national unity challenge those efforts.

Such an analysis necessarily begins with a consideration of the specific form that nationalism takes in a region, school, and classroom, in order to make sense of how it may show up in local curriculum efforts. The Catalonia and U.S. contexts are different in the forms and politics of nationalism. In Catalonia, there exists at least two large national forces, that is, Spanish (National State) and Catalan (supported by the Government of Catalonia that has competences in educational laws of the Catalonia). Other national realities also are salient, though, due to immigration, which has significantly diversified the region, and curriculum efforts that privilege Catalan identity in an effort to combat Spanish nationalism do not adequately integrate the pluricultural and multi-linguistic landscape of the territory. The U.S. context is shaped by histories of racism and erasure of Indigeneity, and a logic of common standards and accountability that cut against efforts to recognize difference as a resource.

There are potential implications for design teams and educators of this work. Efforts to integrate identities into curriculum must be aware of the ways that nationalist discourses can undercut initiatives like these to connect curriculum to students' identities. They must also anticipate these tensions and expect that teachers will need to hold difficult conversations, not just avoiding pitfalls in treating groups as homogeneous but also actively challenge both nationalist narratives and demeaning images of other groups.

Furthermore, various studies shown the positive impact of transnational hybrid identities –identifications that characterizes some immigrants who maintain ties of affection and knowledge for their country and culture of origin while acquiring, at the same time, new roles, beliefs, and behavior patterns characteristic of the host country- on psychological adaptation (personal wellbeing and optimal mental health), and sociocultural adaptation (academic performance, social integration, management of daily life) (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Suárez-Orozco, & Osei-Twumasi, 2019; Taylor, Wangaruro, & Papadopoulos, 2011). The challenge is to us designing curriculum and educational practices for sustaining multiple-transnational hybrid identities in ways that treat students' legacies, stories and trajectories not as “underdeveloped” but as a plurality of languages, identities and cultures that co-mingle in the territory beyond the language-identity of national majority groups.

Finally, despite the appeal and promise of linking curriculum to students' identity as a means to make curriculum more meaningful, design teams must wrestle with the limits of our own positionality with respect to students' identities at stake. That includes attending to the composition of design teams themselves. The goal of design is not to promote identity development per se, but a design team none the less sets the terms by which

some identities are featured while others are not within materials. Teachers, by default, must bridge curriculum to actual student identities in ways that treat them and their experiences with dignity, rather than deficit.

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