

EXAMINING THE MENTORING AND INDUCTION EXPERIENCE OF NOVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract

This study examines the mentoring and induction experiences of first-year teachers in special education. We attempted to understand what these novice teachers encountered by using their personal narratives. Participants had the chance to openly discuss what support they had and the roadblocks they had to face during their initial teaching experience in terms of mentoring. Our goal is to explore the voices of the novice teacher in the field of special education, hoping to start a frank and honest conversation in the area of first-year mentoring and induction, which, to our surprise, is lacking research and academic attention.

Keywords: Induction, Special Education, Narrative, Mentoring

There is a problem in special education: school districts, across the nation, are facing chronic shortages and high attrition rates of special education teachers (Amos, 2005; Donne & Lin, 2013). To solve this problem, many districts have implemented induction and mentoring support programs (Donne & Lin, 2013; Irinaga-Bistolas, Schalock, Marvin, & Beck, 2007). Nevertheless, these programs tend to yield mixed results, and the problem continues to be unresolved (Amos, 2005).

This study explores the perspective of five novice teachers in special education during their induction years (one-five years of experience). Most specifically, this study explores what novice teachers value most during their induction years. Although research is available in the induction and mentoring process of novice teachers in special education (Correa & Wagner, 2011; DeMik, 2008; Donne & Lin, 2013), research about the experience of these educators appears to be numerical and statistical in nature (Pohl, 2013). For the most part, there seems to be a lack of narrative that explores these experiences in depth, especially from the teacher's perspective, which we believe is important because a

narrative can provide a valuable window into the emotional realities that novice teachers experience (Boyer, 2005; Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005).

Teaching in Special Education

Today, approximately six million students receive special education services in the United States. 450,000 teachers service these students. Currently, the teacher-student ratio in special education is about 7 teachers for every one hundred students (Donne & Lin, 2013), which is considered a high ratio for special education. This creates, undoubtedly, serious problems for the education of students with special needs and the professionals who provide these services. Furthermore, there is a high turnover rate of teachers that provide special services, which has created inadequate and deficient results in the proper training and support of new teachers due to the non-predictive nature of the field.

One of the most serious and chronic problem facing special education is the attrition and shortage of teachers (Boe, Cook, & Sunderland, 2008; DeMik, 2008; Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). In special education, up to 13% of beginning teachers do not return to teach for a second year (Williams & Dikes, 2015). In addition, thirty out of one hundred teachers will leave the profession after their third year of teaching (Thornton et al., 2007); even more, 40% percent of special education teachers leave the profession before or by the end of their fifth year of teaching (Whitaker, 2000; Williams & Warren, 2007). To make matters worse, research shows a permanent job vacancy of 27%—unfilled positions—in districts across the nation in the area of special education (Donne & Lin, 2013). Moreover, up to 30% of special education teaching positions are filled by teachers and substitutes not certified in special education (Billingsley, 2004; Pohl, 2013).

There are many reasons for the chronic shortage of teachers in special education. Lack of administrative support had been cited as one of the main explanations for the high level of attrition in this profession (Boe et al., 2008; Fall & Billingsley, 2011; Whitaker, 2000). Overwhelming administrative duties and excessive demands are also mentioned as top contributors to the high number of teachers who stopped servicing special need students (Billingsley, 2004). In addition to the reasons mentioned, there are other causes that motivate teachers in this field to quit their job: professional isolation, lack of preparation and opportunities for professional development, low salaries, poor working conditions, shortage of teaching and classroom resources, minimal administrative support for behavioral and discipline issues, and inadequate training and support for assigned duties (Pohl, 2013; Thornton et al., 2007).

In recent years, however, research has indicated that proper mentoring and induction support of novice and first-year teachers are crucial for the retention of these educators (Dempsey, Arthu-Kelly, & Carty, 2009). In her study, Boyer (2005) mentioned that lack of professional support and incentives were important reasons why novice teachers left the profession. Moreover, Boyer (2005) also stated that the high level of attrition among novice teachers was also due to lack of mentoring.

In the past, research has pointed out that professional isolation and absence of support were very acute among novice educators servicing special need students (Schlichte et al., 2005). This tends to occur even when it is widely accepted that proper mentoring programs are crucial for the successful retention of beginning teachers in special education (Amos, 2005; Donne & Lin, 2013). Studies, such as the one conducted by Amos (2005), have shown that the retention of new teachers in special education increases dramatically when they are provided with proper and positive mentoring and induction experiences. Furthermore, good mentoring also significantly influences special education teachers' positive satisfaction about their job, which increases the likelihood that beginning teachers will stay in their job after their first year of teaching (Whitaker, 2000). Even more, studies have demonstrated that special educators are more likely to stay in the profession if they experience more positive social interactions with other colleagues and administrators (Schlichte et al., 2005).

Literature about Induction and Special Education

Literature regarding teacher attrition tends to emphasize the learning environment, school atmosphere, administrator's attitude, and teacher's effectiveness to deliver the curriculum (Boyer, 2005; Williams & Dikes, 2015). This literature often differentiates between urban, suburban, and rural settings, citing the different components that are particular to each venue. Some of the findings from these studies cite inadequate supports during the first-year induction process as another major component influencing the high incidence of teacher attrition in general and special education (Boyer, 2005; Donne & Lin, 2013; Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007; Whitaker, 2000).

Despite studies showing the benefits of good and positive mentoring and induction programs for beginning teachers (Ingersoll, 2012; Marshall et al., 2013), when compared to general education, the number of research and publications studying the mentoring programs for novice teachers in special education is minimal (Gehrke & McCoy, 2012). Furthermore, most of the data and studies available are numerical and statistical in nature (Barber & Turner, 2007; Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013; Donne & Lin, 2013; Irinaga-Bistolas et al., 2007; Marshall, Karvonen, Yell, Lowrey, Drasgow, & Seaman, 2013; Williams & Dikes, 2015), exploring only the technical components of induction in relation to special education teachers, such as job retention and statistical analysis of job satisfaction. Empirical research is

negligible for in-depth narratives in this area that explores the feeling and experiences of novice teachers (Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010). Moreover, when using academic databases such as ERIC, Academic Search Complete, JSTOR, Education Full Text, and Professional Development Collection, only two published studies were found that specifically explore the narratives of mentoring and induction experiences of novice teachers in special education (DeMik, 2008; Schlichte et al., 2005), confirming the need for more studies that explore the narrative of teachers in special education (Valentine, 2007).

Methodology

Letters were sent introducing the research study to the special education director of three schools at a school district in a southern metropolitan city in the United States. The special education directors sent copies of the letter to novice special education teachers in their school, who were in their first or second year of teaching. Interested teachers were invited to contact the researcher if they wished to participate in the study. Five special education teachers in their novice years volunteered for the research. They were interviewed individually, using a semi-structured script. The teachers responded to open-ended questions about their beginning teaching experience and the development of any mentoring relationships. Interview questions included the following:

- What type of mentoring has occurred (i.e., professional development workshops, assigned mentor, informal mentors, other forms)?
 - Have any informal mentoring relationships developed?
 - How are formal and informal mentoring relationships different?
 - Which relationship offers the most useful support?
- Has mentoring been effective? If so, how? If not, in what ways was/is it lacking?
- How often is cohort support sought?
- Ideally, what could be done to best support transition as a new teacher in this school?
- Discuss your greatest source of support in your position.
- Discuss your greatest source of support in your school.
- Discuss your greatest source of support outside your school.
- What sources of support do you wish were always available to you? Explain.
- Name three things you wish your teacher education program had taught you, but did not.

Data was audiotaped, transcribed and edited for clarity, and analyzed for emerging themes. Data was then integrated with analyses and subject comments to construct vignettes that emerged from these interviews.

Case Studies with Analytic Commentary

Tracy: Relationships are Important

“Right now, in my new school, my relationship with my new partner, who is also my assigned mentor, is cordial, professional, friendly; but that’s it. It’s not like we go out to dinner or happy hour or anything like that.” As Tracy sits in a coffee shop during her interview, she reflects on her first two years of teaching. When asked what it is that she feels that she needs the most, Tracy said, “The friendships and relationships that I had in my first school are not present in my assigned school. That is what I miss the most. I can go to anyone for a technical question about IEPs (Individual Education Plans), a classroom situation, and other stuff. However, teaching special ed is a very emotional job, and the support is not there in the new school.” The fact that Tracy finished her second year with high remarks and a good evaluation does not ease her feelings that good, close mentoring relationships with co-workers are vital to a teacher’s success.

What does it take to keep a special education teacher in the field? In the case of Tracy, a veteran teacher assistant in the contained settings with more than 20 years of experience, who decided to become a teacher of record herself, it was the proper relationship with colleagues and mentors that kept her going during her first year of teaching. “Right now, I am assigned to two inclusive classes, for which I am the special services co-teacher. Then, I manage ten academic cases. In the afternoons, I have a two-hours class that is contained for discipline management. You add meetings, parent phone calls, diaper changes, meals, hall duty, and other issues, and this becomes pretty stressful.”

It is a proven fact that surviving the novice years in teaching requires the trusted relationships that develop between the novice teachers and veteran teachers (Williams & Warren, 2007). Most importantly, these relationships must be based on trust, and it must be close enough so that the novice teachers do not fear the new teaching environment. According to Tracy, “Mentors need to be there when you need them. It should be a person you fully trust. He or she should be able to tell it to you like it is.”

Tracy’s assigned mentor in her new school only speaks to her on few occasions and when it is needed, according to her. “It’s not like I see her every day. It’s not like it was before with Amy—who was my first assigned mentor,” she said. Tracy remarks that her relationship with her old mentor was different: they had lunch together every day; they held weekly meetings to analyze her progress and teaching; and they did their lesson planning together. With her new mentor, Tracy said that she goes to her when she needs help or “something like that,” including guidance, but she emphasized the professional formality of the relationship with this new mentor.

Research has indicated that the mere presence of a mentor is not enough (Schlichte et al., 2005). Novice teachers should be comfortable enough with their mentors, including the ability to properly build close relationships and trust. In addition, it is agreed that mentorship in teaching is a support system that must act formally and informally (Dempsey et al., 2009). Novice teachers look for more than a mere formal appraiser in their mentors; they search for individuals with whom they can confide, laugh, and even cry; for some, mentorship needs to be more than a formal professional relationship (Schlichte et al., 2005). Often, when mentoring relationships are formal, it is when teachers experience loneliness, alienation, and despair. In the case of Tracy, proximity was also a factor. According to her, in her first school, her mentor was also her neighbor. She candidly recalled how she always opened the curtain after school. In her new school, Tracy's new mentor is on the other side of the building, and this does make a difference to her. As she stated, "I do feel lonely sometimes. In the new school, I have a bigger load. I don't have teacher assistant for every period. And the emotional support is missing. I cannot just open the curtain when school is over, and rant, and scream, and laugh about stuff like I used to do last year with Amy."

Michael: The Importance of Instructional Support

"I am the typical teacher that half of his family members are teachers. My mom is a teacher. My dad is a high school coach. My grandma and several aunts of mine were teachers. My sister is a teacher...etc..etc..etc." Michael just finished his second year of teaching in special education. He works as an inclusion, co-teaching specialist in social studies. He serves 40 students in the regular setting, and he is the academic case manager for 12 students. He does not find his situation overwhelming. And for the most part, he expressed a high level of satisfaction with his new job, but he expressed doubts about the curricular support from the administration. "I love my students and my colleagues. I enjoy coming to work every day. This is a great place to work. If we could only have more instructional support from the main office, that would make a difference."

Michael's story is not new or unique. Emphasis on the lack of administrative support is a key factor in the high attrition rate of special education teachers. Problematic interactions between teachers and administrators have been well documented, which has been cited as a problem that is critical for the success of novice teachers (DeMik, 2008; Schlichte et al., 2005); however, it continues to be a problem that has not been adequately addressed in public education (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2013). In addition to the relationship between teachers and principals, another important aspect is the instructional support that novice teachers receive (Al-Bataneh, Anderson, Toledo, & Wellinski, 2008), which can also make a difference in the professional life of a beginning educators.

“Here is the thing,” Michael continued, “I started to teach at another state. During my first year of teaching, I attended all kind of workshops and training. From classroom management to reading strategies, you name it, I did it. I probably did over 70 hours of professional development during my first year. I did not teach my first year in this state; I did my first year of teaching somewhere else. When I came back to this state, and I started to work in this district, I had to learn the computer system myself, and so many other things on my own and without any help. I didn't have any kind of orientation for new teachers. I had to also figure out on my own how to write the IEPs (individualized Education Plan) and do the paperwork for this district. In addition, during our only curriculum day, we just spent the entire day going over data and numbers for testing. There wasn't one single workshop about reading, writing, classroom management, or anything like that. I have yet to see a math, reading, or literacy coach in this school, much less an instructional specialist for SPED from the main office.” Michael, who became a teacher straight out of college when he was 23 years old, feels that the administration does not consider instructional support as important as other aspects of the school setting. According to him, there is a lot of emphasis on compliance, testing, and paperwork, but he feels that the administration does not care about the learning process itself.

Instructional support is also cited as another reason for teacher attrition (Boyer, 2005). Breakdowns between the administration and teachers are not unique; it can also lead to an unhealthy environment within a school. Lack of administrative support can take many shapes. In the case of Michael, it is the lack of instructional support from the main district office. Despite that, Michael is very positive about his current job. He expressed that his colleagues and the administration within the school are very supportive, and that makes all the difference for him.

Brian: What I Didn't Learn in College.

“I have to be honest. I love it where I am. Everyone is so supportive here. From day one, it felt like I was part of an awesome family.” Brian, who is 25 years old, also started teaching after he graduated from college. He earned a teaching degree from a very reputable state university, which is considered a public ivy-league school. His classroom is bare and not well decorated; this is because he is a Life-Skills teacher in special education. During our interview, he sat in the middle of the room. In his face, the radiant satisfaction with his job was evident. “Everyone in my team is really helpful. I could go to anyone and ask for help. I don't have a mentor; I have mentors.” he said. In addition, Brian appeared to have established a good support network. He added, “I have a very good formal and informal relationship with my mentor. She also teaches Life Skills; therefore, I can go and talk to her, and she knows exactly what I am talking about.” Brian also mentioned that he had a good network of informal

mentors throughout the school, including teachers from other departments, who have guided him about teaching in general.

Brian is a good example that good, supportive mentoring works. Research has pointed to the attributes that contribute to the success of the novice years in teaching (Gehrke & McCoy, 2012). A positive outlook, emotional support, resources, and proper communication with colleagues and staff are critical for beginning teachers during their first years (Schlichte et al., 2005). Brian's story indicates that his school has developed that critical positive culture and emotional support that new teachers need during their early years in the profession. Brian stated that he is very lucky to be working in this particular school.

In the case of Brian, it appears that he has found the relationship with his mentor to be very valuable for another reasons. His satisfaction with his job is opposite to his dissatisfaction with his college education. In our interview, Brian expressed the fact that he did not feel that he learned much about "teaching" in college. He said, "I am very blessed about my mentor and this place. I learned a lot here. I don't feel that I learned anything practical about teaching and what I could use in the classroom during college. I mean, there was a lot of theory, but nothing useful that I could actually use in a real setting. I did not have a good mentor teacher or field supervisor during my internship. I had to start from scratch and learn everything when I arrived here. It was like starting all over again."

Learning the proper skills is important for teachers (Phillips, Allred, & Brulle, 1990). Unfortunately, Brian did mention a contentious point in teacher education programs, which is whether or not teacher preparation programs are properly training our teachers for the real settings (Boe, Sujie Shin, & Cook, 2007). In the case of Brian, it appears that his mentor filled the important gap between what he learned, or better said what he did not learn, in college, and what he needed to know in order to survive the real classroom.

Sarah: The Importance of Formal Mentoring and Cohort

In her mid 30s, Sarah is a second career seeker. She earned a degree in finances, and she worked in the finance sector as a manager for stock-portfolios for many years. Few years ago, she decided to switch careers to become a teacher. "Don't ask me why I did it," she said laughing. "When it comes to mentoring, I really like my mentor. She is incredibly supportive, but she is not in special education," she remarked, "If I have a question about what to do in the special education classroom, I cannot go to her. To be honest, I don't why she was assigned to me as a mentor." Although Sarah spoke very fondly of her mentor during our interview, stating what a wonderful person she was, she did express her frustration

with the fact that she had a mentor who did not teach special education. For her, this was a clear disadvantage.

In the case of Sarah, who does like her mentor, with whom she maintains a very good relationship, she did find the technical support in other colleagues from the special education department. “Lucky for me, if I have a specific question about special ed, I do feel like I can go to anyone in my department and ask,” she said. In addition, Sarah was assigned to a cohort of new teachers in the school where she works. “I really like the cohort; it is very helpful to me,” she added. The cohort is made of all the new and novice teachers in Sarah’s school. According to her, they hold regular meetings after school, attend workshops, and regularly meet with a master teacher. In her interview, this was very important for her, because it appears that it is from the cohort and the informal mentors where Sarah obtained her practical knowledge. “I also have been able to maintain contact with professors and college friends,” she said, “And that helps.”

In the case of Sarah, it appears that having a good mentor in the subject that one teaches was important for her. “Don’t get me wrong. I love my mentor, and she is the person I go to if I need a good listener; however, if I have a question about an IEP or a special ed issue, I cannot ask her,” she stated. In the end, Sarah stated that districts and schools needed to be more sensitive in assigning mentors. “It’s ok to have a good friend, but you also need someone who can guide you with the practical and technical stuff that you need to know,” she said as she ended the interview.

Ashley: The Need for Better Resources

“I love the people where I work, but we are in dire need of resources,” Ashley said, a first-year special education teacher at the age of 28. In her interview, she advised all teachers to research carefully the place where one wants to work “because it can be a place where resources are very scarce. It is hard to even get pencils around here. We are not even allowed to make photocopies by ourselves. For every set of photocopies, every single set, I have to fill a form and put a request. Moreover, I don’t even have a set of textbooks. This is becoming very frustrating for me, right now.”

Ashley’s story is not unique. The proper access to resources and teaching materials has been vital to the success of new teachers (Dillon, 1994; Luft, Bang, & Roehrig, 2007). She identified the lack of resources as the source of her stress during her first-year of teaching. She did have a mentor during her first-year, and it appears that they had a relationship; however, it seemed that the lack of access to materials for teaching did become a more important and central issue for Ashley. “It is a stressful situation,” she added.

In our interview, Ashley expressed her desire to continue teaching after her first-year, but she had some reservation. “The year ended in a positive note; the students accomplished a lot; but this is not good, and there has been times when I had doubts. For example, I had to spend over \$1,000 of my own money to buy supplies and materials for the kids. This is a high poverty area, and many of them come to school without a pencil and notebook. This is very frustrating for me. It appears like I can never catch up in this school. There are a lot of good people working here. Don’t get me wrong; however, we are all struggling to support the basic needs of these students the best we can. I never thought that I was going to be spending so much of my own money to buy classroom supplies.”

The Analysis of the Narrative

We can all agree that narratives are important in the case of teachers’ experience. Collectively, there are many samples of narrative about the experiences of teachers in the classroom. However, little has been done to explore the narrated experience of novice teachers during the process of induction, most importantly in special education. Therefore, and for that reason, it could be important to take a closer look at what was found in the stories of Tracy, Michael, Brian, Sarah, and Ashley.

In the case of these novice teachers, everyone will continue to be a teacher. However, we do see some points of contentions in their careers. Although each case was very different, and each teacher’s experiences were unique, we did see a couple of emerging themes. In all cases, we were able to witness a significant amount of emotional attachment to their jobs. One of the main purposes of this study was to explore what each candidate value most during their induction and novice years. As such, we discover three main themes emerging: 1) the importance of mentorship, 2) the value of proper training, and 3) the significance of the working environment.

Mentorship

In our study, we clearly see two cases where mentorship is important: Tracy and Sarah. In the case of Tracy, a personal relationship with a mentor was very important for her. She valued having someone to ask questions; however, this was not as important as having a true leaning shoulder and the emotional support when she needed it. In her case, not having the support and relationship that she had with her old mentor was indeed a spiritual void that was very significant to her. At the time of our last interview, Tracy already submitted a transfer request to her first assigned school, which was granted for the coming year.

In the case of Sarah, we see that sometimes districts and school are not very sensitive to the teacher’s need. In her case, her mentor did not teach special education. Although Sarah’s relationship

with her mentor was good, and they were very close friends, she felt that this arrangement did not benefit her as a teacher of special education. We saw that she did benefit tremendously from a cohort of novice teachers and her extended relationship with former professors and college friends; however, she was very critical of not having a mentor who was also a special education teacher. Despite having a very amicable relationship with her assigned mentor, she felt that this arrangement did have limitations, which for Sarah was an important observation.

Training

Our study also shows that proper training does matter, and we were able to see that very distinctively in two cases: Michael and Brian. In Michael, we saw somebody who was indeed very happy at the place where he was working as a teacher. However, we witnessed somebody who placed a lot of value on instructional support, which he was not getting at the new school where he was teaching. This bothered Michael very much, and he expressed that very vividly during his interview. He was very fond of how much professional development he obtained when he began his teaching career at another state, and he was very critical of how much instructional support he was missing at his current school. In the case of Michael, we witnessed somebody for whom pedagogical knowledge and instructional strategies were important.

In Brian, we witnessed a success story. He went as far as calling his co-workers family. He highly valued his mentor and the rest of his colleagues. However, Brian was very bitter about his college experience, and he was not shy about this fact. He did not feel that he learned something valuable for his teaching career during college. He credited his mentor for a lot of what he had learned, emphasizing the importance of benefiting from her knowledge and experience. In his teaching job, Brian was fortunate, as a novice teacher; he had everything that makes the induction years a good and successful experience: good mentor, a strong formal and informal relationship, positive school environment, and excellent support from staff and faculty in general.

Working Environment

In one case, however, we witness that other stressors can significantly affect the experience of the novice teacher, significantly reducing the importance of mentorship and other common induction experiences. A good example of this is the case of Ashley, for whom having a mentor was secondary to her struggles with the lack of resources and material in her class. She did mention that she had a mentor; however, she did not elaborate too much on the subject. In our interviews, it appears that the issue of a mentor was not important to her. In her story, we witnessed someone who was very concerned with the

welfare of her students. She mentioned the fact that she spent a sizable amount of her money on materials for her students, and that appeared to be a source of frustration for her. The lack of resources in her school was a big issue for Ashley, and this was defining her experience during her first-year of teaching.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the fact that there is confidence in the soundness of this methodology, this study does have limitations. First, this study was conducted with five participants. It would be noteworthy to see if the same themes (mentorship, training, and job environment) emerge with a larger pool of candidates. In addition, it would be appealing to replicate this study in different geographic areas with more variety in the socio-economic landscape. Furthermore, it would be helpful to interview more veteran teachers to explore how experiences like the ones mentioned shaped their teaching careers in the long term. Finally, it would be worthy to explore if the initial success of induction years changes dramatically with the rotation of the administration, new teaching assignments, and transfer of schools.

Despite that each story in this study was unique, the strong emotional bond each teacher developed in their own situation remained a significant constant throughout the study. Regardless of the different experiences, each story showed these teachers had a basic spiritual need that had to be cultivated and cared. In the end, at a basic level, it appeared that these emotional needs were essential for the successful completion of the induction years.

Despite its limitations, this study did yield some interesting observations that can be helpful to administrators, professors, novice teachers, and mentors in the effort to support more successfully the induction of teachers into profession:

1. Emotional support and strong relationships seem to be important and crucial for the success of novice teachers. It is not enough to have a professional and formal relationship with your colleagues.
2. Novice teachers are in dire need of learning teaching strategies. Pedagogical and instructional supports are vital for their success of beginning teachers.
3. Mentor teachers do play a big role in teaching the practical knowledge that is often missing from college and teacher preparation programs.
4. Placing novice teachers with the right mentor teacher does matter. Districts and schools do need to be more aware of the necessities of novice teacher when assigning a mentor.
5. School administrators and district officials should be aware of the stressors that can affect the good performance of novice teachers. Often these stressors can become overwhelming for beginning teachers, affecting how they initially perform in the classroom.

6. The creations of informal networks, professional cohorts, and long-term relationships are important for novice teachers. Universities and districts should be encouraged to participate in the creations of networks that have the potential to create those spaces where novice teachers can find support. The creation of these supportive bonds can be important for the success of teachers during their beginning years.

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