The Importance of Teacher Education: A critical discussion on policy reform relating to 2010 White Paper and its implications for preparing teachers

Abstract

This paper has been adapted from an emerging doctoral literature review and is in response to the recent Government White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*. The publication of the White Paper has created disquisition amongst the profession and at the heart of these debates are questions relating to the knowledge, values, and skills needed to become an effective teacher. This paper considers teacher education as a ‘policy problem’. It examines literature in the field of teacher education considering the cultural and neo-liberal influences of wider political agendas. The emerging discourse that teacher education should be viewed as an ‘apprenticeship’ and mediated through ‘on-the-job’ training is problematised signifying the complexities of teacher education and the role of higher education within this process.

Introduction

Teacher education has recently been described as having entered a ‘new era’ (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Such change has been made visible in the English system through the government White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). Although there exists much consensus amongst academics, politicians, parents, teachers and other educational stakeholders that quality teaching is important in order to improve pupil learning (Barber and Mourshead, 2007); the discourse that reform policies alone, that are driven by economic growth and are in response the neo-liberal markets have become hotly debated (Zeichner 2010, Furlong 2008 and Cochran-Smith 2005).

In the period since the election of the Coalition Government, initial teacher education (ITE) has been subject to a number of extensive and dramatic changes. The aforementioned White Paper highlights key areas to the reform of the sector, all of which have implications for current models of professional learning for beginning teachers. Higher education has seen to be implicitly marginalised in the reforms with the White Paper stating that currently
“we do not have a strong enough focus on what is proven to be the most effective practice in teacher education and development” and “too little teacher training takes place on the job” (2010: 19). In order to address this, the following has been proposed and implemented:

- A change in funding, with financial incentives being awarded to the best graduates and an expansion of programmes such as ‘Teach First’
- More on-the-job training to take place in schools
- The creation of a network of national teaching schools.

(DfE, 2010)

The above reforms have required higher education to review its role in the process of preparing and educating teachers. With closer inspection at documents relating to these policy changes, there is a notable absence in recognising ‘education’ as an integral element of this process. The language chosen in the White Paper describes the initial period of becoming a teacher as ‘initial teacher training’. Other ways of presenting this stage of a teachers development also exits nationally and globally including terms such as; ‘initial teacher education’ (Darling-Hammond, 2005) and ‘initial professional preparation’ (Ure, 2010). This subtle but distinct change in terminology can assume different ideological positions as to how this stage of a teachers’ career is regarded. For that reason both terms, as well as others, are used interchangeably throughout the paper to ensure the range of perspectives are cited.

An ideology of teacher education
According to Garrett and Forrester (2012), when exploring education it is paramount to examine the relationship between policy and Ideology. Ideology is a widely used term that has itself been subject to much debate about its role in establishing knowledge truths (Garrett and Forrester, 2012). Ideology has been criticised by theorists, such as Marx, for creating ‘illusions’ or ‘false truths’ (Garret and Forrester, 2012) but perspectives for social theorists such as Foucault argue vigorously against such a notion by indicating that “like it or not, it [ideology] always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth” (Foucault, 1980:118). Foucault’s idiom that ideology is ‘truth’ and not a ‘falsehood’ recognises that ideology represents a set of ideas and concepts about the social world that can influence important social and historical structures. It is this awareness of the role that ideology can play in policy that recognises that individuals and groups may give various responses when enacting a policy into practice. In recognising a relationship between power structures in a top down authority–delivery hierarchy, suggests that such structures are linear and policy completely controls the direction of curricular delivery. Apple however, in his extensive writing on strictures critically challenges this notion and puts forward a belief that educational actors are able and have the capacity to resist these structural influences (Scott, 2008). If Apple’s position, that relationships between the state and the education system are not constructed in a linear fashion and construed one-way, then “ideological or cultural formations also have a part to play in the formation of a society” (Scott, 2008:67). Apple argues that:

“The powerful are not that powerful. The politics of official knowledge are the politics of accords or compromises. They are usually impositions, but signify how dominant groups try to create situations where the compromises that are formed favour them” (Apple 2000: 10)
There is a critical view taken from Apple that suggests knowledge, made explicit through politics (such as reform policy), is done to serve a particular group and appears to be of a dominance of a particular discourse. However this is purely symbolic and in reality there are layers of re-contextualising of knowledge that take places by many different sectors of society before it becomes pedagogical knowledge (Scott, 2008). Knowledge dictated by the state is therefore limiting and policy reform therefore must not be considered as a simplistic process of written policy to exact implementation.

**Teacher Education: A Policy Problem**

Teacher education reform has been described recently in the literature as a ‘policy problem’ (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Although not necessarily meant in the pejorative sense, the rationale for presenting teacher education in this way could be due to its positioning within the wider educational landscape, which is protean rather than fixed. In trying to locate the influence of education policy making, it is recognised that it has a much wider sphere of influence than just education.

“Education policy-making does not ‘happen’ in a vacuum or bubble, but is subject to a range of competing influences which can be broadly categorized under the umbrella of social, political, economic, technological, religious or cultural factors” (Garrett and Forrester, 2012:1)

The positioning of policy within this complex web of inter-relating factors makes it difficult to identify any single influence that prompts a policy change in the first place. Adding to this complexity, are the varying ideologies of those individuals or groups who shape the policy and the subjective nature of interpreting policy into practice as “different assumptions can be made about what education should be doing, who should be doing what and how it should be done” (Garrett and Forrester, 2012:7). Policy therefore, is not a
neutral concept. In locating policy within rhetoric of problem-solving creates inevitable debate. Firstly, is there an agreed recognition of a problem and secondly does the proposed policy create a solution to the said problem? Trowler (2003) also connects policy-making to an issue or problem. In referring to education specifically, Trowler provides an explanation of policy as:

“a specification of principles and actions, related to educational issues, which are followed or which should be followed and which are designed to bring about desired goals” (Trowler, 2003:95)

In this lucid explanation of what education policy is meant to do, language is used to show a level of authority and command. Trowler (2003) indicates that policy is something tangible that is or should be followed and therefore takes the shape as a set of instructions, rules or commands. Ball (1993) in his conceptualization of policy however recognises it as either a text or a discourse. For policy which is made known through text (for example, a government White Paper), the intention is for the text to be read. However Ball (1993) cautions that while policies are officially put forward, they are unlikely to stay fixed as there is a level of subjectivity, interpretation and re-working of a policy that takes place from its conceptualization through to its implementation. From a Foucauldian perspective, policy contributes to the inextricable interplay between power and knowledge (Scott, 2008); whereby the policy text itself assumes command of the ‘knowledge’ to those receivers responsible for its implementation. Policy is therefore inherently wrapped up in “social, ideological, rhetorical and political practice” (Cochran –Smith, 2005:3). In contrast with Marxist and liberal versions of power, Foucault recognised that power does not only flow from top to bottom in society but can also work in reverse (Sawicki, 1991). This suggests that power is productive as well as repressive. In regards to enacting teacher education
policy, we see through Foucault, that those involved at the implementation level (teachers, student teachers and teacher educators) still have a degree of influence that can shape and alter the policy.

With countries competing globally for success in economic markets, link between teacher education and policy is further connected. According to Zeichner, currently “teacher education in many parts of the world is engaged in major transformation” (2010: 1544). The government White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching (2010)* makes specific reference to the overarching principle which is to ensure that England stands amongst some of the most successful education systems in the world.

“What really matters is how we are doing compared with our international competitors. That is what will define our economic growth and our country’s future. The truth is, at the moment we are standing still while others race past” (DfE, 2010:3).

The reforms for ITE in England are clear in purpose; to ‘attract and retain more excellent teachers’ with the view of improving the quality of teaching; ensuring “the workforce in England can become more highly skilled and compete economically with the increasing number of skilled workers in other countries” (DfE, 2010). The view that England is in need of reform is arguably in response to “the spread of neo-liberal ideas and policies about markets, privatization, deregulation, and the private vs. public good.” (Zeichner, 2010:1544). England however, has long used education as a political tool to resolve wider societal issues as it is believed that “education is the best economic policy we have” (DfEE, 1998b). The current push by the government, to encourage deregulation and competition in ITE is parallel to what has been happening in the United Sates and in other parts of the world.

“"The push toward markets and greater external controls in teacher education takes place differently in different parts of the world because of the interplay of local cultural traditions with the global trends that circulate from country to country. Thus, there is always a tension between the local and the global that determine the specific ways in which neo-liberal ideas influence both teaching and teacher education." (Steenson, 2006 in Zeichner, 2010:1545)

As Steenson (2006) illuminates, careful consideration needs to be made in regards to the geography, context, culture and industry before undergoing extensive teacher education reform. The White Paper however makes heavy reference to other education systems in the world and welcomes this as an important factor for reform England.

Cochran-Smith’s (2005) positioning of policy as a method of problem solving can be understood when viewing the number of societal challenges that confront education within many developed countries. Globally, there are 54 million teachers and in order to meet the goals of education for children within primary education for 2015 alone, there will need to be an additional 10.3 million teachers entering the profession (UNESCO, 2006). This illustrates a problem for policy not only in the recruitment of teachers, but also in matters relating to quality standards. Media journalists, practitioners and academics have illustrated the tensions that already exist around how the reforms will impact on professional models of practice for the preparation of beginning teachers in England. Gilbert believes these reforms will almost certainly result to a decline in standards (The Observer, 17th April 2011), whereas Husbands suggests that teacher education must, in fact, step-up to this new era (Times Educational Supplement, 17th June 2011).
Models of Professional Learning in Teacher Education

The current structure of ITE in England is a complex one (Husbands, 2010) with a variety of routes being offered. Since 1998 routes of entry into the teaching workforce have became more varied with an expansion in more employment based routes (DfEE, 1998a). In the previous Labour government administration, a number of new ‘on-the-job’ routes were created and some 18% of all new recruits entering the profession were doing so through an ‘employment based system’ such as the Graduate Teacher Programme and Teach First (Furlong, 2008). Husbands (2010) attacked these school based consortia as being programmes which are unstable and small in number. Zeichner, however states the introduction of different models of teacher preparation can “potentially stimulate innovation” (2012:23) and that they should not always be viewed with contempt.

In the recent publication of The Good Teacher Training Guide 2012, Smithers, Robinson and Caughlan (2012) reported that within the academic year of 2010 – 2011, 37,340 people were recruited onto teacher education programmes through various pathways; namely university, Employment Based Initial Teacher Training (EBITT) and School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT). In 2008, there were as many as 36 different routes into teaching (Furlong, 2008) which stemmed from these three main types of provision. Although The Select Committee Report (House of Commons, 2010) cautioned against further expansion of these routes, the diversity of entry into profession was heralded in the McKinsey Education Report (Barber and Mourshead, 2007) as strength of the English system.

The Coalition Government reforms in England currently indicate a shift towards more school based provision. This will be achieved by increasing the proportion of time trainees spend in the classroom on current university based programmes, expanding programmes such as Teach First (from 560 to 1,140 teachers) each year (DfE, 2010) and increasing the difficulty
of entry onto PGCE programmes from September 2012. Conclusions drawn from Smithers
et al (2012) show that no one training route emerges as superior, which could should be
viewed as a warning when proposing reforms mapped against complex and challenging
goals such as improving the country’s education system and closing the achievement gap
between the poor and the wealthy (DfE, 2010).

So far in England the various routes into teaching and different models of professional
learning in teacher education have arguably provided a number of strategies for ‘policy
related issues’. For example, graduates from university based programmes received higher
grades from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) compared to alternative routes,
which could arguably help address the ‘quality of training ‘issue. Those who entered via an
EBITT route, like the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP), provided the greatest percentage
of graduates who were retained within the profession therefore providing a model of
learning that helped to address the ‘retention issue’. Although the Teach First programme
appears, upon entry, to address the issue of how to attract the highest performing
graduates, it is not necessary a long term resolve as Smithers et al (2012) reported that
those on Teach First Programmes had the poorest retention of all the routes. Smithers et al
(2012) felt this way due in part to as they were probably headed for a different profession
prior to entering teaching, which is why so many then left the profession after the
completion of their training. However despite closer scrutiny of the figures and the impact
of these programmes against broader national objectives in education, James Noble- Rogers
(2012) reported at the University and College Union (UCU) conference that over the next
year 25% of Initial Teacher Training places will be allocated via Schools Direct and 70% to
higher education led provision. This indicates a higher percentage of places than before
away from the university based programmes and an increase in supporting the
development of more school based provision.

The Teach First model, which is currently being expanded in England, mirroring similar
models like’ Teach America’ in the United States, sees students receive 6 weeks of training
from a university provider prior to entering a classroom. They would be then expected to
develop the rest of their skills, knowledge and understanding whilst ‘on the job’. Research
on the effects of these different pathways into teaching, related to different educational
outcomes, is not conclusive (Constantine et al, 2006; Hellig and Jez, 2010; National Research
Council, 2010) although in the United States, there is some evidence of pupils experiencing a
‘learning loss’ (Zeichner and Conklin, 2005) from those who are taught by trainees who
teach whole classes before receiving their full award of qualified teacher status. Studies
have also been conducted to capture the experience of those on various initial teacher
training programmes and which explore the retention issue further. The Becoming a
Teacher (BaT) project (2003 – 2009) examined experiences of initial teacher training,
induction and early professional development of entrants into the profession through the
various routes offered in England. The final report noted that:

“trainees who had followed employment-based and school-centred programmes
tended to give higher ratings of the support they received and their relationships
with mentors and other school based colleagues than those who had followed other
ITT routes” (Hobson , Malderez, Ashby, Mitchell, McIntye, Cooper, Roper, Chambers,
and Tomlinson, 2009:iv)

The report however cautions against making generalisations about different routes as
experiences reported from student teachers, and from different providers, were usually
‘washed out’ by their subsequent experiences of teaching (Hobson et al, 2009: xii).
Therefore assumptions of teaching and the developing teacher beyond initial teacher training stage should be carefully measured before making large scale reforms that promise to address complex longitudinal educational issues.

In the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, the rationale for moving teacher education away from the university setting is to provide students with proportionately longer period of time in schools, based on the perception of new teachers that they are not always confident about some of the key skills they need; for example the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics as the proven best way to teach early reading and the management of poor behaviour in the classroom (DfE, 2010). This however is a somewhat limited view of what good models of educational systems are suggesting, as outlined in the McKinsey Education Report (Barber and Mourshead, 2007), which shows a much greater degree of complexity for initial teacher education than just subject knowledge in literacy and behaviour management. However, what constitutes ‘knowledge’ in teacher education appears central to discussions around how programmes of preparation for beginning teachers should be devised.

**The Content of Teacher Education: The Discourse of Knowledge**

The positioning of teaching away from the university setting has so far been portrayed as hegemonic. However a much broader debate around what teaching is has fuelled this debate with the discourse the teacher education is situated within a training and skills rhetoric. The White Paper cites ‘observing the craftsman’ and developing skills in ‘behaviour management’ as what is important to beginning teachers (DfE, 2010); although Tomlinson, Donnelly, Roper, Sugden, Welford, and Whitelaw, (1996) note, the ability to
manage and discipline pupils has often been the main concern of student teachers. This perception therefore is not necessarily new and is one that has been historically tied up in novice teachers concerns about how to ‘survive’ a placement and the first year of teaching. Compounding this view is the perception of student teachers that it is the classroom teacher who holds the ‘knowledge’ they need to acquire.

University-based provision has often been criticised for being highly theorised with Feiman-Nemser (2001) claiming that teacher educators can often overload student teachers with far too much information. Ure (2010) explains that teaching candidates often become confused about what pieces of information are important and they find that much of this initial learning is not directly useful when on teaching placement. Further research undertaken by Velija, Capel, Katene, and Hayes also concluded that students who undertook a one year initial teacher training course valued the school based elements over the university based input thus; “it is the knowledge that school-based mentors have based on teaching and practical elements, as opposed to university based tutors’ knowledge, that student teachers value” (2008:403). However Murray (2005) found that teacher educators believed that their “professional credibility centred on their identities as ex-school schoolteachers” and they in fact had a “strong sense of responsibility and commitment still to the school sector” (2005:70). They were not merely theoretical idealists.

These perceptions from student teachers seem to further reinforce notions of ‘reality’ versus ‘ideological’ knowledge in initial teacher preparation. Attard and Armour (2005) suggest that teacher training courses should stress the usefulness of reflective practice to help in bridging the gap between theory and practice and such attitudes could be avoided if teacher educators prioritise what beginning teachers need to know (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005). However, Velija et al (2008) explain that given the demands placed on
student teachers during a PGCE course or equivalent training, there is little time for in-depth academic reflection, therefore there could be a danger of this becoming another box that needs ticking (Velija et al, 2008). By responding to a perception of beginning teachers at a government level there is awareness that reform is being governed by what beginning teachers think they need in order to become effective in their practice, as opposed to what research and experience is suggesting. If beginning teachers are feeling anxious in any aspect of their teaching, those supporting the student should be addressing these needs at an individual level, opposed to these issues being a catalyst for whole scale reform. The move of ITE away from university based programmes arguably threatens this from happening, as beginning teachers have been set on a course to acquire craft skills and to replicate existing practice in school.

**Compliance and Knowledge**

In the last two decades, we have seen a focus on teaching competencies, with the development and continual review of a teaching standards framework presented by the former Teacher Development Agency (TDA) (now Teaching Agency). Documents such as 4/98 highlight standards for teacher competency as have subsequent revised additions (2007 & 2012) become embedded within ITE programmes. Heggarty (2000) argues that from a knowledge based perspective, approaches to standardising knowledge of pedagogy through teaching standards competencies have tended to focus the knowledge of teaching as a ‘craft’ as opposed to a knowledge based activity.

It has been previously mentioned that the very nature of the language within the White Paper positions teacher education as a process of ‘training’ rather than ‘educating’, with a more technical view of how teachers should be developed. In this discourse, a teacher is
increasingly becoming understood as a “pedagogic technician”, someone who can bring everything under their control (Alphonce, 1999:16) and viewed in simple terms as a person who needs to acquire a set of skills in order to be successful. In his speech to the National College Annual Conference, in June 2010, Education Secretary Michael Gove declared:

“Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom” (Gove, 2010)

Gove’s suggestion that currently training does not focus sharply enough on the techniques teachers need, such as behaviour management and the effective teaching of reading and that the skills of teaching can be learnt as a ‘craft’ by watching others, in Wadsworth’s (2011) view shows an alarming degree of ignorance into the complexities of what teaching is about. Giles also considers the use of such language with concern:

“This orientation ‘confines the teacher’s attention within the technical frame’. In a similar way, ‘teacher competency [becomes] a matter of mechanical efficiency [and] efficient pedagogic work production with an emphasis upon the basics’. This technicist concern reflects the dominance of the technocratic rationalist ideology and contrasts with humanistic and critical imperatives which advocate for the holistic formation of pre-service and beginning teachers which includes pathic knowledge; a knowledge which feels atmosphere, reads faces, and feels the mood of different situations” (Giles, 2010:1512)

In his (1983) seminal work on the Reflective Practitioner, Schon illustrates that real learning in practice settings is more than just problem solving:

“From the perspective of Technical Rationality, professional practice is a process of problem solving. Problems of choice or decision are solved though the selection, from available means, of the one best suited to established ends. But with this emphasis on problem solving, we ignore problem setting, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen. In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling and uncertain”. (Schon, 1983: 39-40)
Schon (1983) adds another level of complexity that the White Paper appears to omit. In merely recognising that being a professional requires an ability to resolve a number of challenging problems, (such as behaviour management or engaging children into their learning) by the technical accumulation of skills there is a whole set of other processes which are being ignored. Teaching is a diverse and complex activity (Heggarty, 2000), with changeable problems that may alter over time, place and people. Schon (1983) is suggesting that professionals must engage more purposefully in understanding the process of problem solving and the consequence these choices have.

Within this current political discourse around teaching as a craft, Orchard and Foreman (2011) suggests that there may be certain routine procedures and role-specific skills which teachers need to acquire for which a workplace-based training, led by practitioners, might be most suitable. However, teachers also need to be educated in defining education as a reflective and intellectual process (Orchard and Forman, 2011), the ability of which requires intellectual thinking space and engagement in the educational research (Wadsworth, 2011). However such activities require time and support from well qualified and experienced professionals; time which is now increasingly under pressure even in traditional university programmes. A further argument for the continued strengthening of school and university based experiences.

Giles (2010) and Wadsworth (2011) raise concern that viewing teacher education as a craft undermines the complexity of the profession. The ‘production of a teacher’ therefore is considered as an applied science (Arnowitz and Giroux, 1985) where skills, techniques, facts and content is sought to be acquired through a medium of training.
The assumption placed in the White Paper that learning to teach develops directly from practical experiences in the classroom and consists of acquiring pre-determined skills and crafts are hegemonic. How student teachers are engaged in reflective practice surrounding complex pedagogies and professional knowledge appears to be seldom considered. This creates variations in understanding about what professional knowledge is valued in teaching and therefore what should be at the heart of programmes for their professional learning.

Even a shared understanding about what is meant by ‘craft’ could be argued. Heggarty illustrates that an excessive focus on standardising can lead to an ‘impoverished notion of teaching which reduces it to the unreflective application of rules’ (2000:456). The reverse of this argument must also be considered when an absence of professional competencies and standards leads to ill-informed subjective judgements being made.

Reports from the Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) continue to identify the range of quality of teaching within schools. This is both between schools where ‘there are large gaps between the effectiveness of the best and weakest schools’ (Ofsted, 2009c: 22) and also within schools where “in any one school, the range and quality of teachers subject knowledge can vary from outstanding to unsatisfactory” (Ofsted, 2009b: 7). This potentially has major implications for trainee teachers who are learning from these experiences in school.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This paper has attempted to critically discuss reforms related to initial teacher education as positioned by the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*. In doing so it has tried to argue that teacher education reform is a complicated process which is influenced by competing expectations of government, with neo-liberal and global agendas, as well as the
ideologies and influences of educators, schools and beginning teachers. One of the concerns highlighted has been the apparent marginalisation of the university in the future preparation of teachers, further supporting a discourse of training rather than education. According to Furlong (2008) withdrawing university involvement in developing teachers may also have an impact on the development of future knowledge and may narrow further the forms of professional knowledge available to the teaching profession (Furlong, 2008). If we are to compete within the ongoing challenges and complexities of the twenty-first century, research and theoretical knowledge remain important as ever. As we strive towards a ‘what works’ model in schools, teacher education will be about replicating practice across classrooms in order to adopt correct techniques (Furlong, 2008). The McKinsey Education Report (Baber and Mourshead, 2007) also critiques this discourse and believes that the notion of external ideas that by themselves will result in a change in the classroom and school is deeply flawed as a theory of action. In this way, knowledge will be ‘hollowed out’ and opportunities for individual teachers themselves to engage with research and debate the nature or value of proposed forms of ‘excellent instruction’, will be systematically marginalised.

Reforms which presented merely as ‘policy problems’, that are not matched to the local and future needs of the society have also been discussed and problematised. In trying to grapple with the very essence of what teacher education and education is, there has emerged a clear need for greater consensus amongst the profession and policy makers as to the core knowledge, skills and experiences that teacher need in their initial preparation. This is not to be confused with having the necessary skills to merely survive one particular class or school placement.
Heggarty explains that education has many social functions, but its “core and distinctive purpose is concerned with learning” (2000:451) and from this teacher education should be viewed as an education within its own right. Regardless of the complexities, multiplicities and multi-dimensional elements of teacher education (or training), there seems to be general agreement in the literature that the process of becoming a teacher relates to a development of subject matter knowledge, knowing how to teach the subject matter, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of self, social awareness and organisational competence (Smith 2005, Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2005 and Cochran Smith and Lytle 2001). Care must also be taken not to marginalise any education stakeholder as we work through the current reforms and consider the contribution each has to play in the partnership of teacher preparation.

Author: Victoria Randall
Senior Lecturer in Teacher Development, University of Winchester
Victoria.randall@winchester.ac.uk

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