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Decoding new normal in education for the post-COVID-19 world: Beyond the digital solution

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Abstract: The new normal in education has been in the spotlight since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The mainstream discourse is in favor of online education as the new normal during the pandemic crisis and even in the post-pandemic world. This reflection first examines education in its broad sense, i.e., in the context of the United Nations' 2030 agenda through the lens of social justice. It then makes a strong case for a caring, inclusive and equitable approach to education as the new normal for the post-COVID-19 era. The role of technology in the new normal as well as in education in general is discussed with six lessons drawn from the past experiences. It is argued that the normal - whether new or old - in education should first and foremost embody care, inclusion and equity and that technology is but a means, not an end, although education would be unimaginable without technology. The reflection concludes by appealing to stakeholders in education to learn from decades of research and practice in the field of open and distance education.

Keywords: care, inclusion, new normal, open, distance and online education, social justice

Highlights

What is already known about this topic:
- There is a lot of hype about the new normal in education both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic era characterized by technocentric thinking or an "affordances" account.
- The mainstream discourse is in favor of online learning or blended learning as the new normal.

What this paper contributes:
- Looks at education in the context of the United Nations' 2030 agenda, i.e., beyond cognition, and through the lens of social justice.
- Reiterates the centrality of humanity in education and draws lessons from the past experiences in using technology for educational purposes.
- Argues for a caring, inclusive and equitable approach to education as the new normal for education in the post-pandemic world rather than defining it in terms of modality.

Implications for theory, practice and/or policy:
- We should not pursue cognitive achievements at the cost of less tangible, less standardized, and less measurable values and qualities which, however, are instrumental in promoting social justice.
- Care, inclusion and equity should be at the heart of education, whatever the circumstances may be.
- Research and practice in open and distance education can effectively inform the new normal in the post-COVID-19 education.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every sector of society, including education. Millions and millions of students have been affected (United Nations, 2020). Nevertheless, this shocking number alone cannot reflect the adversity of the consequences that the pandemic has brought about to education. Even today, not all educational institutions around the world can return to "normal" campus life. Against this backdrop, there is increasing interest in what the new normal in education should be like.

The "new normal" hype is gathering momentum, although it is not a new topic, attracting research interest ever since before the pandemic (e.g., Dziubanet al., 2018; Norberg et al., 2011; Wildemeersch & Jütte, 2017). It has, however, gained greater popularity soon after the global pivoting to online learning (e.g., Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Li, 2020; Male, 2020; Puri, 2020). The mainstream discourse is in favor of online education as the new normal during the pandemic and even in the post-pandemic world (Hanson, 2020; Kobb, 2020; Raveendran, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Yan, 2020). During the pandemic crisis, online education might be the only or last resort in many circumstances although it was perhaps not fit for all (Xiao, 2021). Nevertheless, this justification does not necessarily translate well to the post-pandemic world in that many of the barriers to successful online education during the pandemic will continue to exist when the crisis is over (Xiao, 2021). Recognizing the limitations of and barriers to online education, researchers turn to blended learning, arguing that it can be an adequate alternative to online education as the new normal (Agarwal, 2020; Mubeen, n.d; Olivier, 2020; Weitzel, 2020). Nonetheless, both online education and blended learning are neither new nor have ever been the norm. Looking back at the history of educational development, they originated from the field of online and distance education and later were "mainstreamed" into campus-based education. They were and still are only parts of the educational ecosystem.

A review of the literature shows that the "new normal" discourse, be it online education or blended learning, is somewhat characterized by technocentric thinking or an "affordances" account (Lambert, 2018), in other words, with a focus on modality. Technological affordances do not translate by default into the promised realities, an argument which has been justified by many studies and meta-analyses. Over twenty years ago, Russell (1999) came to the famous "No Significant Difference" conclusion after analyzing 355 research reports, summaries and papers that set out to investigate learning outcomes between alternate modes of delivery, i.e., learning with or without technology. This conclusion has been reinforced again and again by numerous subsequent studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Higgins et al., 2012; Means et al., 2013; OECD, 2015; Pei & Wu, 2019; Tamim et al., 2011). Despite this result, it does not mean that we can or should reject the use of technology in education. Whether technology can play a role in facilitating education depends on when and how it is used by whom for what purpose (Quilter-Pinner & Ambrose, 2020; Sharma, 2021), not on whether learning through technology or with technology is the norm.

Technology has never proved to be a panacea for education. When it comes to education, the center of attention is supposed to be human beings rather than technology or educational content (Dennen, 2020). Indeed, "now is the time to ask what is past, what is present, and what is next" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. i), turning this crisis into "an opportunity for a renaissance in education" (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. vii) and to build back better (Quilter-Pinner & Ambrose, 2020).

This reflection will look at education in its entirety from a social justice perspective in an attempt to answer the following question: what should the new normal in education be like in the post-COVID-19 world?

Education is more than cognition

This is a fundamental question, the interpretation of which will shape our perspective on the new normal in education. It is widely accepted that education is a human right. However, it should be borne in mind that education is not an ordinary human right. Instead, it is "an enabling right with direct impact on the realization of all other human rights" (United Nations, 2020, p. 3). In this sense, education involves far more than cognitive activities and its impact stretches beyond education itself (Xiao, 2021).

Similarly, Tuscano (2020a; b) makes a convincing case that education is more than teaching and learning, suggesting nine principles that the new normal in times of emergency should take into account. These principles equally apply to education in the post-COVID-19 era. For example, the "Maslow before Bloom" principle is "to ensure that the basic physical, social-emotional, and psychological needs of students are met before they can even start learning" (Tuscano, 2020a). It is hard to imagine how students can concentrate on their learning if they are stricken with hunger, worry and anxiety or if they do not have daily necessities in their shelter (Bozkurt et al., 2020). In the same vein, other "universal" principles include equity, diversity of delivery modes, adequate teacher capacity building, pedagogy-driven use of technology, skills of flexibility, adaptability, and empathy as well as the assurance of privacy, safety, security, and digital well-being (Tuscano, 2020 b; also see Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Dron, 2021). Some of these principles are echoed by the World Bank (2020) which emphasizes that "education systems must confront issues of inequity front and center. They must also prepare multi-modal responses, capitalizing on existing infrastructure and utilizing a combination of different learning mediums to ensure students are engaged and learning" (p. 96). *Innovating Pedagogy 2021* also embodies similar spirits as can be seen in the pedagogy of best learning moments, gratitude as a pedagogy, equity-oriented pedagogy, student co-created teaching and learning, and hip-hop based education (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021).

It goes without saying that it makes very little sense to talk about the new normal in education exclusively or chiefly in terms of modality such as online education or blended learning. As is clear from the preceding arguments, "schools are not just places where young people learn; they are also places of community and connection, physical and emotional safety, shelter and food, democracy and deliberation" (Fege, 2020). This is because education is a human enterprise, not a human-technology

transaction, and is "primarily about human beings, for human beings and by human beings" (Xiao, 2021, p. 3). It is exactly because of this humanity that the (new) normal in education should be cultivated within the framework of social justice (Lambert, 2018).

Education through the lens of social justice

Education is not only a human right but also a public good, which means it should be equally accessible to all. Nonetheless, inequality is an inherent characteristic of human society. There is simply no way to eradicate inequalities, hence "the need to tackle inequalities outside, as well as inside, the classroom" (Quilter-Pinner & Ambrose, 2020, p. 3). For example, even in the most developed Western countries such as the USA and Canada, significant inequalities exist in terms of access to technology and infrastructure for online education, to say the least (Bates, 2020; Fege, 2020; Fowler, 2020). On the other hand, even if we could achieve equality, social justice has yet to be done unless barriers are removed because equality which means "everyone has exactly the same thing" is not equated with equity which means "everyone has what they need" (Pipecone, 2020). Equality, equity and justice can only be achieved in a utopian society and yet there is no reason that we can spare any effort to pursue them and enhance them. With this persistent pursuit, we will be moving forwards to the world we aspire to. However, if we give it up, we will have to live in an increasingly divided world with less and less social justice to speak of.

Informed by Fraser (1995), Keddie (2012), and Young (1997), Lambert (2018, p. 228) proposes "the principles of redistributive justice, recognitive justice or representational justice" to guide the open education movement. This social justice framework equally applies to the new normal in education for the post-pandemic world. Through redistributive justice, i.e., "allocation of material or human resources towards those who by circumstance have less" (Lambert, 2018, p. 228), we move closer towards the goal of equality and equity. We can - at least in theory - enable equal access to material and/or human resources. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily meet everyone's need. Through recognitive justice, i.e., by recognition of and respect for diversity, we move further towards the goal of equity and justice. If diversity is catered for, learners are more able to have what they need and more likely to encounter fewer barriers. Through representational justice, i.e., empowerment of learners to participate in education as an active contributor rather than as a passive recipient, we are on course for justice. If learners take an active part in developing education, they can have their voices heard and their concerns addressed when it comes to issues of interest to them, which will most probably further reduce barriers, though it is impossible to remove all barriers for everyone.

Lambert's (2018) social justice framework is echoed by Bali (2020a; b; c). For example, in the new normal, no learner has "to be reminded regularly that they are less, have less, must be 'accommodated'" one way or another (Bali, 2020a). In other words, no one should be seen as "exceptions" that need to be taken care of. Bali (2020c) also argues that empowering "those farthest from justice" to have a decisive say in their own education is one of the most effective ways to "redress injustice". This is in line with Lambert's (2018) representational justice.

It is exactly because education is a public good that social justice is of utmost importance (Watters, 2014a). Social justice and student participation is a major theme embodied in the Open University's *Innovating Pedagogy 2021* (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021), for example, as can be seen in equity-oriented pedagogy which "has a focus on inclusivity, going beyond opening up access to education and asking how every student in a class…can achieve similar positive outcomes, regardless of their background and characteristics such as gender, disability or ethnicity" (p. 7). Perhaps it is no coincidence that emerging trends such as equity-oriented pedagogy are gaining popularity, given what we have gone through since the outbreak of COVID-19.

"Social justice education is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (Bell, 1997, p. 3). To achieve this goal, educators, among others, need to foster equity-mindedness, critically reflecting on how to address systemic inequities and pave the way for social justice (Harris & Woods, 2020). The more social justice is promoted and implemented, the more sustainable education is both as a human right and a public product. It is noteworthy that achieving social justice has always been a major factor underlying the development of open and distance education (ODE) (Gaskell, 2017; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020).

Towards a caring, inclusive and equitable "new" normal in education for the post-pandemic world

In 2015, the United Nations announced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 associated targets, of which SDG 4 – "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" is education-specific (United Nations, 2015). SDG 4 has since become a major force driving the development of education around the world. Nevertheless, a close review of its associated targets shows that the focus of SDG 4 is on education in the narrow sense, i.e., a cognition-oriented approach to education. The concept of "inclusive" tends to be restricted to the sense that no one is left behind and the concept of "equitable" seems to favor equality, i.e., "everyone has exactly the same thing" over equity, i.e. "everyone has what they need" (Pipecone, 2020). This seems to be at odds with the wider context of SDG 4, that is, the discourse of the 2030 agenda, according to which education involves more than cognition. As argued above, it also concerns daily necessities as well as, among other things, psychological, socio-emotional, and physical well-being, as evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis. Put another way, education should concern individual learners' holistic development rather than focus mainly or exclusively on academic achievements. If education is only about cognition, it cannot possibly become "a bedrock of just, equal, inclusive peaceful societies" (United Nations, 2020, p. 3). To deliver the ultimate goal of education, we need to have a caring, inclusive and equitable "new" normal in education for the post-COVID-19 era.

Care

Since education is primary about human beings (Dennen, 2020), and its "core function has always been social and cultural formation" (Peters & Rizvi, 2020, p. 2), the pedagogy of care cannot be

overemphasized, just as convincingly argued by Bali (2015) who said: "Sometimes, the most valuable thing we can offer our students is genuine care for them, their well-being, their happiness. Not just their grades. Not just their learning. But their whole selves." The pedagogy of care is particularly relevant today in the times when we may find it hard to "resist the slide into passive technologization" (Pacheco, 2020), which has existed for quite a while and escalated due to the pandemic.

Care is essential to the realization of "Maslow before Bloom" (Tuscano, 2020). Without an ethic of care, education is reduced to a curriculum of things (Laist, 2016), advocating an object-oriented pedagogy instead of a pedagogy of care. Nevertheless, there is little success of such a curriculum to speak of in the first place unless learners' "Maslow" needs are met, not to mention that this is not the curriculum/education that we look forward to.

Care is the first step to inclusion, enhancing our awareness of and responsiveness to learner diversity in terms of learning experiences and needs (Robinson et al., 2020). It is far from sufficient to ensure that everyone, regardless of socio-economic background, gender, age, race or ethnicity, physical well-being and so on, has access to education. What really matters is that everyone can access the kind of education that is most suitable for them in terms of learning needs, learning styles, and learning environments. Given the nature of diversity, there is no quality education for all. What is quality education for some may turn out to be poor education for others. But care can help make education more inclusive, hence enabling more people to access the kind of education they need most.

Care is also the prerequisite to equity in that we will be able to be tuned in to what a student needs by "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible" and help remove barriers if we go on to "act in behalf of the cared-for" (Noddings, 1984, p.16). It is true that care from educators and educational institutions cannot clear all barriers to one's education, but each barrier removed is a progress towards educational equity. It is also worth noting that care is not an act to patronize those who have less or are less (Bali, 2020a); instead, it is a genuine gesture of goodwill to tell students that every one of them really matters to us as educators or educational institutions. In the former case, even if we were able to remove students' barriers, those cared-for might not feel good and succeed in achieving the intended academic objectives. In contrast, students may be motivated to look for solutions to their own problems in the latter case because they are not taken to be less – less capable, less advantaged, less intelligent, less autonomous, in a word, less than their peers. To enhance equity, care should also be mutual – care for your students and encourage them to care for each other.

In summary, care should be embodied in learning design (Karakaya, 2021) because it is a non-negotiable starting point for social justice. What Lambert's (2018) redistributive justice, recognitive justice and representational justice have in common is care. Without care, it is hard to imagine how resources will be properly redistributed to help those in need, different realities and perspectives will be duly recognized and valued, and all have equal say in what and how they learn.

Inclusion

Normally, inclusive education refers to "a model wherein students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-special (general education) needs students" (Wikipedia, n.d.). However, such an approach "carries the danger of focusing on discrete categories of learners at the expense of other marginalized groups that do not fit within these predetermined categories", hence not really inclusive (Robinson et al., 2020, p. 99). As argued above, inclusion as embodied in UN's SDG 4 means more than no one is left behind. It is "a principled approach to education and society" whereby such inclusive values as "equity, participation, community, respect for diversity" should be used to guide policies and practices (Messiou, 2017, p. 147).

The key to inclusion is respect for diversity. There is no doubt that inclusive education leaves no one behind. It is also "a package of solutions intended to cater for learners of various types" (Xiao, 2021, p. 7), referring to different modes or modalities of delivery. In other words, the norm should not be confined to any single solution. Instead, the focus should be on "using a range of tools and technologies" from which learners can choose according to their specific needs and contexts (Sharma, 2021, p. 91), hence inclusive in terms of tools and technologies.

When discussing the future of schooling in England, Quilter-Pinner and Ambrose (2020) argue for the need for conversations about "how our education system can prepare children for life, not just exams" and "where and how learning takes place - as well as who is involved in it" (p. 3). To prepare students for life, we need to provide them with diversity, for example, in learning pathway, content, and goal (Cahapay, 2020) because life may vary from one person to another. Another important aspect of inclusion is diversity in many other areas such as learning environment (for example, dedicated educational institution, workplace, at home, and public facilities), assessment (for example, in terms of modality, types of examination questions, aim and scope, grading system and so on), qualifications (including credit-bearing and non-credit bearing, traditional and emerging, i.e. diploma, degree, micro-credential, badge, nanodegree, micromaster and the like), pedagogical approach (for example, constructivism, behaviourism, cognitivism, and connectivism), as well as mode/modality of delivery as mentioned above. Diversity in these aspects is in line with the current trend towards integrating formal, non-formal and informal learning into lifelong learning.

Inclusion is the foundation of social justice. Without an inclusive mindset, one is likely to, for example, turn a blind eye to inequality in access to resources (redistributive justice), impose uniformity and standardization in the curriculum at the sacrifice of socio-cultural diversity, with mainstream stories prioritized over marginalized views and experiences (recognitive justice) and discourage full and equal participation of all in co-creating learning and teaching (representational justice).

Equity

Equity starts with the removal of inequality although as argued above it is more than equality. The onus is chiefly on educators and educational institutions to make the curriculum as inclusive as possible. In

contrast, it requires concerted efforts by stakeholders from various sectors, including educational communities, of the society as well as the government to tackle inequalities related to education in the broad sense. In some cases, stakeholders from sectors other than education play a more decisive role, for example, in overcoming "disparities in parental support, the home environment, access to learning resources and exposure to vulnerabilities such as mental health problems (either children's own or their families'), violence, neglect, abuse, bereavement and caring responsibilities" according to Quilter-Pinner and Ambrose (2020, p. 7) who, therefore, call for "a conversation about the need to tackle inequalities outside, as well as inside, the classroom" (p. 3), in order to remove "barriers at many levels, from personal to cultural and societal" (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021, p. 6).

By removing inequality and going further to ensure that everyone has what s/he needs, we are on our way to equity. Equity is built on both access and inclusion (Willems et al., 2018) and extends beyond the cognitive dimension of education, ranging from "Maslow" to "Bloom" (Xiao, 2021). Equity is of particular relevance to the increasingly digitalized post-COVID-19 world in that digitalization could deepen exclusion and inequality, resulting in further marginalization of the already-disadvantaged (Motala & Menon, 2020; Wildemeersch & Jütte, 2017) despite its promises to facilitate and enhance learning and teaching.

Equity is at the core of human society and should be upheld in education – a human-to-human enterprise. Bali argues that one of the literacies that teachers need during the pandemic crisis is equity literacy (Bali, 2020b). We are justified in making the point that equity literacy is also a must in the post-pandemic world. Similarly, we need to foster equity-mindedness which entails recognition of how systemic inequities disadvantage the marginalized, attribution of poor learning outcomes to inadequate institutional performance rather than individual learners' underperformance or personal deficits, and reflection on roles and responsibilities in redressing these inequities (Harris & Woods, 2020). While equity-oriented pedagogy is essentially about learning and teaching (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2021), both equity literacy and equity-mindedness are not merely pedagogical and only relevant to educators and educational institutions. All stakeholders in education should be equity-literate and equity-minded.

Whether redistributive, recognitive, or representational justice (Lambert, 2018) can be ensured to the core depends on how well equity is promoted. Only with equity literacy and equity-mindedness will we always make a point of removing barriers so that everyone can get what they need to succeed in their education, not simply giving everyone the same thing. There is no social justice without equity.

(Digital) technology

The history of education has witnessed the role of technology in catalyzing educational equity. For example, today's education would remain an exclusive prerogative enjoyed by a tiny minority of privileged people without the invention of paper and printing. In every sense, the history of educational development is the history of technological development. The more essential a technology is to education, the more invisible it is in educational activities. This "invisible" phenomenon, that is, "when a

technology is … hardly even recognized as a technology, taken for granted in everyday life", is referred to as "normalization" (Bax, 2003, p. 23). It is unimaginable what education would be like without pen and book and yet we do not speak of PAI (Pen Assisted Instruction) or BAI (Book Assisted Instruction). But we have been speaking of CAI (Computer Assisted Instruction) and CMC (Computer-mediated Communication) for decades because computer technology is not as essential to education as pen and book although it is more advanced and in many people's eyes, more desirable. It is beyond doubt that there was, is and will always be a place for technology in education; education cannot do without technology. Nevertheless, not all technologies will stay. "Only when the technology is normalized… will it have found its proper place in … education" (Chambers & Bax, 2006, p. 446).

Several lessons can be learnt from the seamless integration of pen and book and other "invisible" technologies into education. First, only when a technology is normalized will we be able to "reap its full benefits" (Chambers & Bax, 2006, p. 446) because "the only time we notice media is when it does not work" (Rahm & Fejes, 2015, p. 137). This is a universal truth. Secondly, the normalization of technology in education is the result of joint efforts, both direct and indirect, by all stakeholders in education rather than educational communities alone. Thirdly, such normalization is a long process probably lasting for hundreds of years. In other words, education does not readily adopt whatever new technology comes to its door and the newer may not by default be better and normalized. Fourthly, these "invisible" educational technologies have always been used as a means rather than an end and they have always been meant to support rather than replace human teachers. Fifthly, both in educational practice and research, people come first, content second, and technology third. This "should always be our mantra as educators" because "it is only after we find out what people need and are ready to learn that we can determine what content should be learned. Then technology should just be brought in as a support, not as the showcase itself" (Dennen, 2020). Last but not least, the more accessible the technology is, the more equitable the access is, the more readily the technology will be normalized. Therefore, educational reform and innovation should be driven by the spirit of equity rather than technological innovations, the commercialized nature of which jeopardizes education as a human right and a public good, not to mention that they are not designed for pedagogical purposes in the first place.

In light of the above lessons, it is not difficult to figure out why new and emerging technologies such as computer, online network, artificial intelligence and blockchain still remain all too visible despite an abundance of research intended to demonstrate their positive impacts on education. They have yet to be normalized in education, which in turn means their potential contributions to education are yet to be verified. There is no doubt that education will continue to adopt new technologies, but this is a slow and time-consuming process. What we need is not "hi-tech" hype but lessons from history, in particular lessons from the field of ODE (Watters, 2014b; Weller, 2020).

Hanson (2020) argues that online learning will be the new normal in a post-COVID-19 world, saying "The day when we no longer speak of 'online learning' but only 'learning' might arrive sooner than we think". With concerted efforts by the whole society, this day will come. But it is inappropriate to label

"online learning" as the "new" normal. What will have been normalized by that day will be online technologies, not online learning. What distinguishes the future "new" normal from the present "old" normal will be, among other things, the addition of "new" technologies to the invisible toolset of education. Other types of learning, for example, learning enhanced, supported, facilitated, or assisted by other "invisible" technologies will continue to exist side by side with online learning in the "new" normal rather than be replaced by online learning.

Conclusions

Education is not merely a matter of cognition although academic achievement tends to be the focus of education today. In some cases, we even go so far as to strive for academic achievement at the expense of less tangible, less standardized, and less measurable values and qualities which underlie "holistic, inclusive, just, peaceful, and sustainable development" and are particularly relevant "to the well-being and fulfillment of current and future generations" (Marope, 2017, p. 8). It is no exaggeration to say that we are losing sight of the fundamental mission of education. We know our educational system has gone wrong and yet we have been looking in the wrong direction for solutions to fixing it. Education is broken but should not and cannot be fixed with technology alone (Teräs et al., 2020).

The contribution of technology to education is unquestionable. There is always a place for technology in education. That said, technology will not be able to bring about desirable effects to education unless used at a right time for a right purpose through a right means by right people. It is not a panacea for all educational problems.

Given the accelerating trend of technologization of education, there is an urgent need to restore and strengthen humanity in education. The best remedy for our ailing educational system is the ethos of care, inclusion and equity. It is this ethos, perhaps with the help of technology that can turn education into "a force for social equity, justice, cohesion, stability, and peace" (Marope, 2017, p. 29). This is because education is about "creating, sculpting, and finessing minds, mentalities, and identities, promoting style of thought about humans, or 'mashing up' and 'making up' the future of people" (Williamson, 2013, p. 113).

The normal - whether new or old - in education should first and foremost embody care, inclusion and equity. In this regard, ODE has much to offer. It is a new comer to the wider field of education but emerged mainly out of care, inclusion and equity and was available thanks to the development and use of technology, in the first place. Decades of research and practice in ODE can effectively inform the new normal in the post-COVID-19 education.

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