

**Multilingual Education or English as a Medium of 'Destruction':  
Language and literacy policy and practice in South African Early  
Childhood Classrooms<sup>1</sup>**

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## Introduction

### Three steps forward... Six steps back....

Educational change in the 'new' South Africa since 1994 has been characterised by progressive policy shifts, particularly in the area of language. The 1996 constitution gives official status to eleven languages, explicitly promotes multilingualism, the development of the African languages and states that languages should be viewed as resources rather than problems. The Language in Education Policy (LIEP) of 1997 develops these tenets for education and has at its heart additive bilingualism approaches to the use of languages for learning and teaching<sup>2</sup>. This is a profound and potentially empowering shift when seen in the light of our colonial and apartheid past, where only English and Afrikaans speaking children had the privilege of mother tongue education throughout schooling and into tertiary education. This is a very different scenario to that experienced by African language speaking children, who were forced into initial learning in mother tongue (for three or four years) followed by an abrupt switch to English.

As yet, these policy shifts remain impressive only as printed words on paper. There is little evidence of implementation strategies, either at national or local level. The situation we had then, and still face now is one where the majority of children are taught in what is in effect a foreign language, by teachers who themselves speak English badly. Poor teacher training and a chronic lack of resources have compounded this. Moreover, as in many other African countries, the ethos in society at large is one that continues to perpetuate the lofty status of the ex-colonial language as the legitimate language of literacy and a 'culture of reading' in the African languages is fragile and extremely limited.

African languages have been deliberately underdeveloped as written languages up to now and the tradition of writing stories for young children, among other things to capture, reinterpret and transform the oral narratives of early childhood into early reading material is almost totally absent. There is as yet, very little of value to read to young children<sup>3</sup>. This has sobering consequences for initial literacy learning, which I will discuss below.

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<sup>2</sup> This means that wherever possible, children should learn in their mother tongue, and that additional languages should be added on rather than replacing it.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, an ambitious project "First Words in Print" (FWIP) is underway as a collaborative endeavour between several organisations. The FWIP project is initiating the process of book development in indigenous languages for young children (0-6). Its aim is to produce and then distribute several sets of books free into the hands of all young South African children, as well as to assist carers in using these books in mutually rewarding ways.

A curriculum reform process took place at the same time as the new language policy process resulting in an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) system termed Curriculum 2005 (C2005). Instead of synchronising the development of this curriculum with the substance of the language policy, the government has invested very heavily and publicly in curriculum implementation, with little reference to the language policy's underpinning principle of mother tongue plus additional language/s. The process that began in 1998 with grade 1, has been strongly criticised, not least because C2005 was developed without reference to the LIEP. The lack of official backing for the implementation of the language in education policy has led many schools and their teachers, already burdened by a deeply alienating new curriculum, to simply ignore the language issue, and this leaves us with the 'business as usual' of moving rapidly to English as before. As C2005 neither explicates how delivery of an integrated curriculum should occur in multilingual contexts nor does it advocate a 'mother tongue plus additional languages' approach, the very best aspects of C2005 become impossible by definition to achieve. For instance, C2005 promotes some fundamental principles of good teaching practice like beginning with what children know and bring to school and building on that. This is the case both in township schools, where African language medium continues to be phased out after the foundation phase and in English or Afrikaans medium 'mixed language' schools, where teachers are unable to communicate with many of their pupils. How can you start with, and build on what children know, if you cannot find out what they know, and have to facilitate engagement with concepts and knowledge in a foreign language? Apart from the fact that the majority of teachers who were badly trained under apartheid have been expected to make a sudden and substantial paradigm shift, generally with only three days of in-service training, the curriculum documents are heavy with totally unfamiliar 'OBE speak' terminology which English speaking educationalists find impenetrable, let alone teachers for whom English is a second or third language. At the time of writing, a review of the curriculum has been conducted, and some changes are imminent, but not many educationalists are as yet clear about the details of these changes.

A sizeable minority of African language speaking parents across South Africa, seeking a better education for their children have been making great financial and other sacrifices to send their children to the former 'white' and 'coloured' schools. Many parents appear to follow the apparent truth that 'English is equal to education', not only because of the obvious need for children to know English for future employment, but also because people have vivid memories of their own inferior early childhood education, forced upon them in mother tongue under apartheid. This has

contributed to the myth that African languages are impediments to progress. Some influential educationalists use this to suggest that (in the interests of democracy), the language policy should be changed to a straight for English one (Taylor and Vinjevd 1999). Moreover, many teachers across the country interpret parents wish for their children to know English, ‘the sooner the better’, to equal only one possible scenario: that English must replace the mother tongue (of African language speaking children) as a medium. This syndrome has influence in the African language speaking schools too – from urban townships to rural situations, teachers express the view that they must teach in English like the ‘multiracial’ schools or else they will lose pupils (Pluddeman et al 1998, Gamede 2000). Even at preschool level, the demand is for English (Bloch 1999).

Because of the apparent indifference of the national ministry towards addressing this issue by giving information, guidance and direction to provincial departments, schools and communities, to interpret and implement the language policy, a lack of clarity feeds to the existing misinformed position that interprets the linguistic situation as an ‘either – or’ one. Ironically this apathetic official attitude is destined to nullify the possibility of the education system to, at last, *actually* provide for the effective learning of English through a conscious and well-considered bilingual system<sup>4</sup>. In a recent paper, Neville Alexander explained how

Most of Africa is caught in the no-man’s-land between the need for the global language(s) - mainly English - in order to access the benefits of modernity, and the need to develop African languages for use in high-status functions in order to democratise their polities as well as their economies. The twin pressures of negative language attitudes (“colonisation of the mind”), based on misinformation, and disinformation about the alleged costs of multilingualism and mother tongue education disseminated by mainly international economic institutions and some academic associations constitute an ideological roadblock which has to be removed so that the way to a normal situation can be opened.

For this reason, however, a transitional period in which a range of bilingual educational options will help to bridge the period until in all of Africa the situation comes about where we can use our own languages as other people use theirs, i.e., as vehicles of education at all levels and as means of learning other languages.  
(Alexander 2000)

Caregivers and educationalists at all levels need and have the right to access relevant information, in languages they can understand, so that they can make informed choices about what is best for children’s learning success, as well as for the development of the country. One important source

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<sup>4</sup> Teaching in at least two languages has always been common in ‘black’ schools, but randomly and in some respects furtively – usually it happens not because it is seen to be the correct way to teach in a multilingual situation, but out of a sheer survival instinct, because students comprehend little or nothing of the English texts or lessons, and the teachers resort to mother tongue to allow at least a modicum of comprehension and communication.

of information can arise from description and analysis of practical initiatives, which explore alternative ways of operating in multilingual situations.

Such implementation initiatives are rare, and have yet been taken only by the few organisations who understand the foundational significance of language, not only for educational achievement, but also for addressing racism and promoting equality. Young children adjust intuitively to the balancing of power relations that comes about when there is equal weight given to self-expression and communication for all through use of home languages. They imbibe, seemingly effortlessly strategies and propensities for intercultural communication and empathy between each other as they learn how to speak each others languages. In the following pages I describe one such Early Childhood Development<sup>5</sup> (ECD) developmental research initiative carried out by PRAESA, which has attempted to address the language issue in a classroom of young Xhosa and English speaking children.

### **Swimming against the tide**

PRAESA had since 1995 put forward the concept of a Multilingual Demonstration School (MLDS) programme as a necessary step towards developing workable models for multilingual education in South Africa. Our idea was that one or more multilingual demonstration schools should be set up in ordinary state schools to develop models for teaching and learning in the various multilingual contexts of South Africa. These would become centres for both research and teacher education and would provide much needed inspiration and guidance for parents, teacher educators and teachers. We had evidence of the need for such an initiative from the research that was conducted to find out how teachers in a selection of Cape Town schools were coping with the 'language issue'. It became clear to us that neither teachers nor pupils were benefiting from the present situation (Bloch, Pluddemann, De Klerk 1996). No teachers had been trained to educate children from linguistic, class and culturally diverse backgrounds, and generally an assimilatory ethos prevailed which promoted and valued English as 'normal' for educational purposes at the expense of any other language. Xhosa speaking parents were sending their children to former 'white' and 'coloured' schools to get a good education. The language policy of the previous regime was still intact to embrace such perceptions, and in 1995 it was common practice for schools to do language tests to establish English competency, (and to exclude those children who could not speak English) for 'township' children trying to gain a place in grade

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<sup>5</sup> Since 1994, Early Childhood Development (ECD) describes the educational phase from birth to 9 years of age. The intention behind this is to encourage this phase to be viewed as a continuum. ECD thus spans non-formal (before school) and formal provision. However, the reality is that only about 11 % of the total under-six population of South African children is provided for (World Bank 1994:6). Until 1999, both 'overage' and 'underage' children were often in early primary school classes, but a recent government bill has stopped children from beginning Grade 1 until the year they turn 7.

1(personal communication, Marie Louise Samuels 1995). Moreover, Xhosa speaking children who were accepted were often labelled as having ‘no language’, and were sent for remedial attention.

The education departments had ‘opened’ their schools without preparing for what it means when teachers speak a different language to that of their pupils, and for when children enter school having had widely differing home and preschool experiences.

Due to the Education Department being unable to support the MLDS initiative substantially (ie they could not meet PRAESA’s request to provide a school and pay the regular salaries of the teachers), but with their verbal support, a revision of the MLDS emerged in 1998 in the form of a multilingual stream at one ‘coloured’ primary school.

### **Bilingualism and Biliteracy**

Our intention was to begin in grade 1 and to explore, over a number of years, how to enable children to use both their mother tongue and an additional language in an English medium school, where both teaching staff and parents understanding is that Xhosa speaking (and in lesser numbers Afrikaans speaking) families send their children to school to learn English. The teachers as with most of the ‘coloured’ schools, have always been, and remain 'coloured', and most of them are bilingual in English and Afrikaans. The linguistic make-up of the children has changed over time – during apartheid the children were Afrikaans and English speaking ‘coloured’ children, but by the mid 1990’s, the majority were Xhosa speakers.

**Table 1: March 2000 language breakdown of children Grades 1 to 4.**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Total*</b>	<b>Xhosa</b>	<b>Afrikaans</b>	<b>English</b>
1a**	15	13	28	24	2	1
1b**	12	14	26	19	4	3
2a	23	19	43	35	0	7
2b	23	17	40	26	8	4
3a***	25	21	46	30	10	6
3b	25	22	47	38	3	5
4a	22	22	44	40	3	1
4b	18	31	49	30	7	6

Data collected by Thabile Mbatha March 2000

\*Where this figure is inaccurate, a Sotho or Zulu speaking child makes up the total.

\*\* Relatively low intake is due to the new age 7 entry limit to Grade 1.

\*\*\*The multilingual stream

A newly trained Xhosa speaking primary teacher, (Teacher N) was employed by PRAESA at the school to work alongside Teacher E, an existing grade 1 teacher. Teacher N's task was to raise the status of Xhosa in the classrooms as an oral and written language, to support and maintain Xhosa for the Xhosa speaking children, and to introduce Xhosa to the English speakers<sup>6</sup>.

### **Fi fi fo - nics**

In South Africa, a combination of factors (Bloch 2000) have been inherited which combine to offer young children a highly decontextualised and meaningless introduction to literacy. While with the advent of C2005, fresh ideas are beginning to find a place in some teachers repertoires, skills based methods continue to dominate. Particularly in the teaching of writing, doses of essentially mindless exercises are generously dished up to unsuspecting eager children to such an extent that by the time they can actually form letters, copy words and sentences (after two or three years), many have not yet ever written for any real purpose, nor do they have any desire to. It is not an exaggeration to say, that for many children at the end of the Foundation phase (grades 1 – 3), writing is still a matter of copying shapes off a board. For most children, encounters with books are rare, and skills-based training methods compounded by a desperate lack of reading materials in African languages means that reading is often taught without reference to books at all. Rather learning to read consists largely of phonics exercises and learning sight words. For children from 'literate' homes and communities, this can be overcome, but as I explained recently such approaches are at best totally inadequate when we consider that

In South Africa, as in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa which are characterised by extremes of poverty, great daily life differences in rural and urban contexts, and varying and contrasting language and cultural practices, *first regular experiences with print tend for many children to begin on entry into primary school*. Most children have little if any exposure to written language in any language - at home many parents do not read and write and children have few opportunities to see people reading or writing as they go about their daily lives. Most young children in South Africa live a rural life<sup>7</sup>, and English is often not used or heard by them and their families in their daily lives, nor is print necessarily useful for getting things done.

(Bloch 2000)

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<sup>6</sup> Many of the so-called English speakers are actually Afrikaans speaking or bilingual at home. A similar desire for English instruction has developed among Afrikaans speaking 'coloured' parents. Because the status of Xhosa is so much lower than that of Afrikaans, we made a decision to concentrate our energies on Xhosa and English, though not to the exclusion of Afrikaans.

<sup>7</sup> The 1997 government statistics state that 35,2% of 0-14 year old African children live in urban areas. For 'coloured' children, the figure is 84% and for whites, it is 95,4%. In total, for this age group, 45% live in urban areas. In terms of a total for the whole population, 53,6% of South Africans live in urban areas.

## Challenges and progress

For three years, the children from one of the classes have had mother tongue support and maintenance for their learning<sup>8</sup>. They have also been learning to read and write in both Xhosa and English. The developing bilingual competence and fluency of the Xhosa L1 speaking children in terms of both oral and written expression is greater than that of the English/Afrikaans children. This gives an indication of the extent to which the high visibility, dominant use in print and general status of English provides a strong incentive to learn English for Xhosa speaking children, as well as how the reverse holds true with Xhosa for non-Xhosa speakers. Although they have been having Xhosa lessons this year, and now know some basic phrases, and have some receptive knowledge, the greatest gain for the English L1 speakers seems to be their open and positive attitude towards Xhosa, a willingness to try. In their 4<sup>th</sup> year at school and in this programme, the English/Afrikaans children will receive regular Xhosa lessons for as the focus has been on the validation and use of Xhosa.

### *Team teaching*

The first two years involved a team teaching approach where the teachers worked on strategies for making sure that what was being taught was comprehensible to all the children (see Appendix A). A challenge has been to get both teachers to treat each other as equals, so that Teacher N becomes as a Xhosa speaking role model for the children and staff alike. Another has been to get the Xhosa speaking children to feel comfortable enough to use Xhosa for educational purposes in the classroom. The following extract from Teacher E's diary in 1998, the first year of the programme, captures both the sense of initiative the two teachers began to develop as they explored working together as well as the self-confidence she saw being engendered in the Xhosa speaking children through this process:

Ntombi and I also tried team teaching at the same time. She would have a group of Xhosa speaker and I would have the English speakers. We would use a chant with a sequence of pictures relating to a story. A discussion (in each group, CB) about the pictures would follow, encouraging the children to speak out more freely e.g.

“Nadeemah what do you think is happening in the picture numbered 4?”

They would then listen to me telling the story. After this the groups would then formulate their own story, using the pictures as a guideline. The two groups then get together and a few children from each group would read their story. I would normally ask a Xhosa speaking child to translate their story to the English

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<sup>8</sup> Shortly after Teacher N began work, one of the class teachers began to complain that the presence of a Xhosa speaker and use of Xhosa in the classroom, was taking up too much of her time, and was preventing her from teaching 'the basics' to the children. Her attitude was the exact opposite of the other teacher (Teacher E), and by the end of the first term, we agreed that it was best to cease engagements with that class.

speakers. This I always find interesting because the majority of Xhosa speakers' hands would dart up, to volunteer to translate. This just shows that their confidence is boosted by them getting the concepts and ideas in their mother tongue. I am proud to mention that we used a particular story: 'Zanele and Tammy' that children came up with.

### *Writing*

I worked closely with the teachers in this 'multilingual stream' (and with other teachers who show an interest<sup>9</sup>) to help them to consider ways of adapting their literacy teaching to embrace an emergent biliteracy approach which emphasises for children:

- meaning making
- risk taking, especially with writing
- developing a sense of the usefulness of reading and writing.
- the importance of many and varied encounters with print – 'wallowing in books'
- making use of and understanding about the possibilities and potentials of translating and interpreting

In particular, a lot of work has gone into thinking about how the teachers approach the teaching of writing. In most South African schools, children are introduced to writing as a mechanical and technical task (Bloch 1997). All emphasis is on copying and neat letter formation. No space is allowed for initiative, child construction of meaning (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1993), emergent writing (Holdaway 1979) or invented spellings (Bissex 1980).

During the first year the teachers encouraged the children to try to write for themselves, in whichever language they felt most comfortable. They worked at creating an atmosphere where writing from real reasons was happening often and regularly. In this way they shared with the children some of the real reasons that people have for writing and introduced the idea that even when you are learning to write, and can't yet do it 'properly', you may still want to write— you may want to 'saying something' on paper and that it is correct to make mistakes and that as you learn. At first this was an arduous process for many of the children, who felt comfortable only with the safety of copying words of the board<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Several teachers do not want to get involved with 'the language issue'. Unexpressed fear of losing their jobs if Xhosa should become a medium of teaching and learning in school, and a more generally negative attitudes to the value of African languages contribute to a fair amount of subliminal racism among staff members in many ex'white' and 'coloured' schools. Dynamics such as this will be challenging the education system for some time to come.

<sup>10</sup> It was very interesting to notice how even in their first year of schooling, many children have already picked up attitudes about what they can and cannot, should and should not do, and what constitutes 'schoolwork'.

It took the most part of the year to arrive at a point where we could see that the children were beginning to write. I entered the classroom one day and the teachers showed me some childrens writing about frogs after they had sung “ Five Little speckled Frogs”. The fact that one of the teachers said “We were astounded” indicates the importance for the teachers of this moment when they had it proved to them that these young children can and will take initiative when given the opportunity. Their previous training had taught them to have little faith in young children’s capacity for learning:

The Frg is her, I luyk The Frg The luyk me/ I hufe a Frog/ uno masele/  
my Frog is green/ I luv The frogs, frogs luyk to sot in the rod/I so a frog wn i was comege ot  
skul/ I see 1 vog and my vog is  
my vog is brown  
(Bloch and Nkence 1999)

### *Interactive Letter Writing*

In 1999 we began an interactive letter-writing programme (following Hall 1990) We felt that the low status of Xhosa as a language of literacy in society, makes the early years of childhood critical ones for fostering the development of early positive attitudes to Xhosa writing in as meaningful and accessible ways as possible, with both English and Xhosa speaking children. Our intention was to get children to understand and act on the fact that like talking, writing can be used to communicate and express what they feel, think, imagine and know.

Over the course of the year a Xhosa speaking colleague and myself wrote letters in Xhosa and English to the children. Although we both visited the class regularly, we were both very busy, and told the children that we would love them to write to us when we couldn’t visit. The teachers read our letters out loud, and then displayed them on the wall, and the children wrote back, in either language, but they were encouraged to use their mother tongue.

### *Reading*

We have put great value on reading in the classroom, in both languages:

- The teachers read daily stories with the children in one or both languages<sup>11</sup>;
- The teachers are encouraged to use rhymes, songs and the childrens own writing to make more to read;

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<sup>11</sup> A serious problem exists with finding appropriate reading materials in Xhosa (as with other African languages). There is are some translations from English or Afrikaans, but not enough and often these are badly translated. Virtually no original story writing for young children has taken place as yet.

- The children have times to choose their own books and read alone or with friends – we encourage English and Xhosa speakers to help each other with reading in each others languages;
- They are encouraged to go to a library, and to bring books to school to share;
- The children are taught reading in mother tongue groups, both English and Xhosa at regular times.

#### *Family involvement – the reading room attempt*

While recognising the importance of family involvement in children’s learning, this is often not easy to achieve. Many parents do not read and write, many often work long hours, do not have access to libraries close to home, do not read as part of daily practice and feel that it is the schools responsibility. Nonetheless, mother tongue support and maintenance in the form of a story reading programme is essential for all of the children (G 1 – 4) and family and community members have been invited to participate. To date, we have had two volunteers, who are contributing. A difficulty lies in preventing what is intended as a ‘reading for pleasure’ process from become a version of English remedial teaching. This is because once helpers are identified, some teachers try to persuade them that skills practice in English is more important. This is the case because during apartheid, although teaching took place in children’s mother tongue in the early years, because of the continued underdevelopment of African languages, there was virtually nothing to read. Today the majority of ECD classrooms are not places where one might expect to find many (if any) storybooks at all. Books and stories have been understood as peripheral rather than central to early literacy development.

#### **Valuing each other**

Although the project has not yet been evaluated in any formal way, our perception is that the children are learning well using both languages.

We hear this from outsiders as well – a visiting teacher who has had recent contact with both Grade 3 classes has informed us that the multilingual stream children read better in English than the class who have not had Xhosa input. Visitors to the class have commented on the children’s confidence and positive attitude towards learning and towards each other – within the walls of their room, the languages have equal status in their eyes, and they are curious and respectful of each others ways of saying and writing things. At the same time, there can be no doubt that English has an almost overwhelming attraction - the Xhosa speakers are bilingually fluent to a far greater extent than the English speaking children, but this is not a surprise at all.

Further, Xhosa speaking children quickly slip into a preference for using English written language when they are not encouraged consistently to use Xhosa.

What is needed is a whole school approach, where initiatives like the ones I have described can be developed systematically. Some of the strategies we have used have been recently taken up in a small education department initiative in five schools. However, the funding was not enough to continue for more than two terms.

### **Summing up - 'It's the way things should be'**

The project I have described indicate just some of the possibilities and problems with language policy implementation for certain multilingual contexts in South Africa<sup>12</sup>. While the school itself is now unfortunately threatened with closure, we are hopeful that this is just the beginning of a phase of growth in many different schools throughout the country.

At a recent meeting with the multilingual stream parents, I was struck by the contrast of this relaxed and animated group of parents to the many mixed gatherings I have attended when Xhosa speaking adults sit in silence as the English speaking teacher awkwardly tried to get her message across. Here, because of the presence of a Xhosa speaking teacher, there was a normality of communication - people were communicating as equals. When I later raised a point in English, people were already involved in the meeting and keen to discuss more issues. I asked them to comment on the fact that often the story goes that Xhosa speaking parents send their children to ex - coloured schools because they want them to learn English, and they do not actually mind if Xhosa only happens at home.

Two fathers began speaking at once. One explained

That would not be true at all. We do want English, if our children go to a township school, they come out and can't get a job because they don't know English well enough. But we're happy if they know English and Xhosa, because that's their culture, and they shouldn't lose it.

The other's words were

I am very happy to see what Teacher Ntombi has done for my child. It's the way things should be.

## Appendix A

### *Strategies developed in 1998 and built upon in 1999 and 2000*

#### **Team teaching: -**

both teachers (T1 and T2) work together with whole class: T1 introduces lesson in English (E) or or Xhosa (X) , T2 summarises in the other language. Reverse next time. All children are exposed to content in both languages.

#### **Home language group teaching:**

- 1) T1 with X first language (L1), T2 with E L1 for L1 support, maintenance and development
- 2) T1 with EL1, T2 with XL1 for intensive modelling/ enrichment

#### **Focus on literature - stories and rhymes**

- Daily story read by teacher - either in Xhosa or English
- selection of books in both languages for looking at informally - regularly and often
- teachers producing posters of rhymes and songs in both languages, displaying these, and reading with the children. Using plastic sleeves, to put Xhosa/English rhymes and songs (1 language per side) to take home for use with family members.
- teachers telling stories which the children then help to retell in their own words. Teachers writes this up in large for them all to read. Children then copy this OR write their version in their books. Teachers write on the board words that children ask for. Teachers write what children dictate. Children then read to each other.

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<sup>12</sup> Another of PRAESA's projects is underway in two 'township' schools, where systematic dual medium education (Xhosa and English) is being explored.

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