Integrating Student Consultation into Teacher Professional Development: The Middle Grades Collaborative

John M. Downes, University of Vermont
James Nagle, Saint Michael's College
Penny A. Bishop, University of Vermont

Most professional development for teachers does not involve opportunities for them to hone their practice in direct collaboration with students, which sits in stark contrast to the heavy emphasis placed on student voice in middle grades education. For almost two decades, however, the Middle Grades Collaborative (Collaborative) has offered a week-long, summer institute in which a core pedagogical principle is to actively involve young adolescents in developing classroom practices of the approximately 70 middle grade teachers who participate annually. During this time, middle school students act as consultants and collaborators, experts and panelists. They offer their voice and expertise on issues such as young adolescent needs, classroom and school organization, curriculum development, and classroom assessments.

The purpose of this paper is to describe this practice of including middle grades students as consultants in teachers’ professional development. We begin by briefly providing the context of the Collaborative and its summer institute. Next we describe the theoretical underpinnings and research base that informs the work of the Collaborative. We then provide an overview of 1) the conditions conducive to a collaborative culture and 2) participant perspectives on student consultation. We conclude by considering how teachers and students might benefit from such practices within the context of their own classrooms and schools.

Introduction

While teachers’ professional development has moved a considerable distance over the past two decades to include collaboration and inquiry as essential components, students’ voices remain notably absent from the endeavor. Most professional development for teachers does not involve opportunities for them to hone their practice in direct collaboration with students. This omission sits in stark contrast to the heavy emphasis placed on student voice in middle grades education. How might teachers’ practice evolve if given access to young adolescents’ perspectives on their pedagogy? What are the possibilities of joint work between teacher and student in middle grades professional development?

This paper examines the use of student consultation as an integral part of teacher professional development. The Vermont Middle Grades Institute (Institute), hosted by the Middle Grades Collaborative (Collaborative), is based on the core pedagogical principle of actively involving young adolescents in changing classroom practices of middle grade teachers. We begin by briefly providing the context of the Collaborative and its Institute. Next we describe the theoretical underpinnings and research base that informs the work of the Collaborative. We then discuss 1) the conditions conducive to a collaborative culture and 2) participant perspectives on student consultation. We conclude by considering how teachers and students might benefit from such practices within the context of their own classrooms and schools.

Background and Context

The Collaborative is a unique alliance of Vermont colleges and universities that has, for almost two decades, provided ongoing professional development for aspiring and practicing teachers of 10-15 year olds. During this time, the Collaborative annually has offered the Middle Grades Institute, a statewide, week-long, residential learning community aimed at providing this support while also helping educators earn their Vermont Middle Grades Teaching Endorsement. The Institute faculty consists of fifteen facilitators, who represent both university teacher educators and veteran middle school teachers. These professors and practitioners team-teach throughout the Institute. Beyond the week-long summer experience, follow-up activities occur during the fall semester in participating teachers’ schools, on an online forum, and at a culminating meeting of all participants.

The Institute places student voice at the center of professional development to change the attitudes and practices of middle grade teachers. To that end, the Collaborative invites students to join the teacher
participants for the majority of the Institute. Some students come from local schools; some are brought by participating teachers; still others are recruited from a team well versed in student-directed pedagogy. The invited students are culturally, linguistically and economically diverse representing all students from Vermont. Throughout the week, middle grades students act as consultants and collaborators, experts and panelists, offering their voice and expertise on issues such as young adolescent needs, classroom and school organization, curriculum development, and assessment. Most students also partake in their own student strand during the week designed to strengthen their leadership capacities and expose them to post-secondary possibilities.

These young adolescents join the teachers’ courses or “strands” as teachers work individually or in teams on aligning their teaching practices with adolescent needs. In one classroom, where the *Nature and Needs of Young Adolescents* strand takes place, a panel of middle schoolers may answer teachers’ questions about how it feels to be their age and what they need from teachers and classroom environments. Next door in *Middle Level Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment*, pairs of students will meet with teams of three or four teachers helping them develop engaging and relevant, standards-based units to teach for the following fall semester. Further down the hall in *Middle Level School Organization*, students from a nearby school may discuss their experiences with teaming and teacher advisories or their feelings about grouping. Table 1 depicts the most common forms of consultation employed at the Institute.

As members of the Collaborative, we have found these moments of consultation—when students work with teachers in the midst of professional development—to be rewarding and powerful. They affect how students and teacher see each other and inspire substantial changes in teacher practice.

**Theoretical Underpinnings and Research Base**

**Teacher Professional Development and Joint Work**

Over the course of the last two decades professional development for teachers has moved from isolated, de-contextualized, externally driven training sessions for teachers toward a more integrated, collaborative process of on-going teacher learning anchored in teacher practice. In a review of research on teacher professional development for the National Staff Development Council, Wei and colleagues suggested that a ‘new paradigm’ for professional development has emerged that clarifies the content, context, and process of effective professional development (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

They note that the content of professional development is multifaceted and most useful when it focuses on “concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation and reflection;” specific pedagogical skills and how to teach specific content to learners; and student learning (Wei et al., 2009, pp. 3-4). In essence Wei and colleagues reiterate the call that Ball and Cohen sounded a decade earlier when they stated that teachers would need to have an understanding of their subject, an appreciation of cultural backgrounds different from their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Student Consultation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Form of Consultation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Enacted at the Institute</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Panels</td>
<td>Students serve as an expert panel before a gathering of 15-30 teachers (e.g., on creating a positive team culture, service learning, young adolescent needs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Group Collaboration</td>
<td>1-3 students serve as expert members of a group of 3-5 teachers trying to design an engaging standards-based unit</td>
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<td>Co-Experimenters</td>
<td>Students join with teachers in small groups to try out something new that teachers might be reluctant to try first with their own students (e.g., an activity meant to explore and honor early adolescence; James Beane’s process of generating curriculum from kids’ questions; or creating Dada poems as a literacy activity)</td>
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own, an expansion of their ideas about learning, a grasp of pedagogy, and a knowledge of children (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Ball and Cohen’s framework of “learning in and from practice” relies on two implicit assumptions: (1) teacher professional development engages teachers in the pursuit of in-depth understanding of professional knowledge—pedagogy, content, and context issues; and (2) teacher development builds learning communities that promote collaborative interactions among teachers. In the broadest sense of the term, “learning in and from practice” requires a new kind of understanding of teaching: one that is inquiry based and collaborative.

The framework of learning in and from practice derives its theoretical roots from Judith Warren Little’s construct of joint work (Little, 1990). Through her observation of teachers who worked together, Little defined joint work as the shared responsibility for the work of teaching involving collective conceptions of autonomy, support for teachers’ initiative and leadership with regard to professional practice, and group affiliations grounded in professional work. Practically speaking joint work required teachers to both collaborate with each other as professionals and investigate their teaching in an honest and forthright manner.

Many researchers since Little have found the dual elements of collaboration and inquiry of joint work essential for teacher learning and school reform. Putnam and Borko concluded that “the context for effective professional development includes designs that are a coherent part of school reform efforts; incorporate collaborative and collegial learning environments and communities of practice; and is intertwined” with teachers’ own practice (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 6). There are now a variety of professional development pedagogies that focus on inquiry into teacher practice, including microteaching and laboratory experience; computer simulations; uses of video technology and hypermedia; case methods; portfolios in teacher education; and practitioner research (Grossman, 2005). These recent professional development programs mark a shift toward “viewing teaching itself as a form of inquiry and experimentation” (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1999, p. 311).

While professional development programs highlight the importance of inquiry, the context of these programs has also become important. Collaboration among colleagues plays a significant role in how teachers inquire about their practice. No longer are teachers expected to work alone behind the closed doors of their classrooms. At the middle school level organizational structures and cultural norms have pulled teachers together to do joint work. Teachers are grouped on grade level or multi-age teams. Wei and colleagues devote considerable space in their report to exploring research into these new structures and norms such as professional learning communities; peer observation of teacher practice; analyzing student work and student data; developing study groups; professional communities that operate beyond the school; and school-based coaching and mentoring.

While professional development has moved a considerable distance to include collaboration and inquiry of teacher practice, nowhere do the researchers refer to opportunities for student involvement in the work of professional development of teachers even though these same researchers argue for teachers to understand the students whom they teach (Wei et al., 2009; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). Ball and Cohen’s emphasis on knowing students is particularly salient to this discussion. They note that a teacher would need to know,

…what children are like, what they are likely to find interesting and to have trouble with, in particular domains. They would need to become insightful in listening to and interpreting children’s ideas about academic subjects. They would need to expand the interpretive frames they are likely to bring to their observations of students so that they could see more possibilities in what students could do. And they would need to come to see children as more capable of thinking and reasoning, and less blank slates who lack knowledge. Some of this knowledge is general—about children of certain ages, for instance. Some of it is particular—what this child believes, how she works, what she means by what she has drawn or written or said. Learning to attend to one’s students with insight requires expertise beyond what one gathers from one’s own experience. What one enjoyed, thought, or felt as a child may afford helpful speculation about one’s students, but is insufficient as a professional resource for knowing learners (1999, pp. 8-9).

In light of the research on professional development and the understanding of educational researchers on the need for teachers to understand their students’ interests, needs and strengths to provide effective teaching, it seemed natural to us that the next step in teacher professional development was to involve students in the joint work of teaching.
Involving Student Voice as Part of Joint Work

In a comprehensive review of research into student voice, Thiessen (2007) describes three bodies of work that have emerged in recent decades: students participating in and making sense of life in classrooms and schools; understanding students and their development in school; and how students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities and in the improvement of what happens in schools (p. 8). The first strand examines students’ thoughts and feelings (Davies, 1982; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998), their relations with teachers (Apple & Beane, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1997; Lampert, 2001), and how they contribute to a social world and academic success (McCadden, 1998; Woods, 1990).

The second strand focuses on how the dynamics of classrooms and schools influence students’ identities (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Nagle, 2001) and how students adapt to different classroom and schooling structures, expectations, and work (McLaren, 1999; Nieto, 1994; Willis, 1977). Cultivating and listening to student’s voices, particularly marginalized voices, helps teachers to understand the “various ways in which student perceptions and identities are constructed” (McLaren, 2003, p. 242).

The third strand examines how teacher consultation with students shapes classroom management and curriculum design (Boomer, 1982; Brodhagen, 1995; Lee, 1999) and school rules, leadership, and governance (Kaba, 2000; SooHoo, 1993). Such student “engagement” appears to have benefits beyond informing reforms, but also in the development of students themselves, including their sense of agency, belonging, and competence (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mitra, 2004; Stevenson, 1998). Others have focused on “democratic” forms of student engagement in classrooms and schools (Apple & Beane, 1995; Beane, 1993, 1997; Flutter, 2007; Whitehead & Clough, 2004). Rudduck (2007) describes student consultation as follows:

Consultation may involve: conversations about teaching and learning and the conditions of learning; seeking advice from students about possible new initiatives; inviting comment on ways of solving problems, particularly about behaviours that affect the teacher’s right to teach and the student’s right to learn; and inviting evaluative comment on school policy or classroom practice. Consultation is a way of hearing what young people think within a framework of collaborative commitment to school reform (p. 590).

Rudduck points out that “consultation implies participation,” and that student participation does not necessarily indicate that students’ voices are being heard or honored.

Consultation in the research on student voice usually involves students’ participated on school committees that “focus on real issues, events, problems, and opportunities, and involving them through a wider range of roles and responsibilities. At the classroom level participation is about opportunities for decision-making and having choices and about understanding and managing your own learning priorities” (p. 590). Teachers who have opened themselves to these experiences appreciate students’ insights into the effectiveness of various teaching methods, how teachers might address the needs groups of students may have in classrooms, and teachers’ underestimation of students’ ability to handle challenge and responsibility (pp. 595-596).

Drawing on data from a number of projects, Rudduck found that when thoughtfully implemented, student consultation offered a range of benefits to students and teachers. Students said they valued,

• “being able to talk about things that matter to you in school;
• being listened to and knowing that what you say is taken seriously;
• feeling that you belong and that you can make a difference to how things are done; and
• feeling that by talking about things and taking part in things you understand more and have more control over your learning” (Rudduck, 2007, p. 598).

Rudduck observed that students “felt more included in the school’s purposes… felt positive about themselves as a result of being asked to respond… and valued being able to do something for the school” (2007, p. 598).

Rudduck noted benefits to teachers as well. After hearing from students in their role as consultants, teachers spoke of

• “a more open perception of young people’s capabilities,
• the capacity to see the familiar from a different angle,
• a readiness to change thinking and practice in the light of these perceptions,
• a renewed sense of excitement in teaching,
• a practical agenda for improvement, and
• confidence in the possibility of developing a more partnership-oriented relationship with their students” (Rudduck, 2007, pp. 599-600).
Rudduck also suggested that there is a difference between “work on student perspectives and work on student voice,” observing that, “[e]liciting and using student perspectives can provide a practical agenda for change, but it does not guarantee change in the status of student within the school” (p. 591).

We believe a substantial missed opportunity results from the distance between the literature on teacher professional development and the literature on student consultation for educational improvement. Student consultation presents important opportunities for professional development designs that are focused on knowing students better. Formal professional development settings are untapped sites for teachers and students to benefit from consultation. In order to advance such practice, we describe 1) the culture we strive to create for this work at the Middle Grades Institute; and 2) the outcomes of this work as perceived by both teachers and students.

**Our Practice and Learnings**

*Cultivating a Culture for Student Consultation*

The Institute facilitators have developed an elaborate and embedded repertoire of strategies proven to prepare participants for consultation with middle grades students during the Institute. These reflect shared beliefs about honoring young adolescents in general, and they contribute to more successful first-time student-teacher consultations. There are several ways that we establish this culture.

*Establishing the Culture*

Early in the planning process, Institute faculty identify opportunities for meaningful consultation as they plan their curriculum and coordinate schedules with other strand facilitators, an annual process that reinforces and deepens commitment to consultation as a valued pedagogical principle of the Institute. During this process we integrate learning opportunities for both students and teachers to work together in meaningful ways such as small group collaboration and student panels.

Additionally, throughout the intensive week – including opening remarks, morning meetings, evening activities, and strand sessions – Institute faculty emphasize how rare and important student consultation can be, often in the presence of the consulting students. For example, one could expect a session leader to say, “We are truly honored to have a group of students with us this week to offer their expertise on young adolescence, how they learn, and what they need from their teachers, teams, and curriculum in order to enjoy and succeed in their learning.”

Further, Institute faculty include in evaluation rubrics expectations that teachers will incorporate students’ ideas and interests in the planning and implementation of their final Institute projects. Facilitators continually seek out opportunities for students to take on and portray roles and abilities that stretch teachers’ expectations for what young adolescents can know and do. And students take part in whole-group Institute activities, work and play alongside teachers, join with teachers in literature circles, lead morning meetings, and present projects in which they reveal their hopes for the future.

**Managing the Consultation**

Institute facilitators typically prepare teachers for consultations and intervene during consultations when necessary, with various types of guidance. At times they emphasize that teachers will have only a relatively short period of time to take full advantage of this rare opportunity to consult with students about how to improve teaching and learning. At other times, facilitators counsel teachers that they are entering a different kind of student-teacher conversation than they may be used to. Here the students are the experts and teachers are there to listen and probe them in order to understand their unique perspectives and insights.

Institute faculty also encourage teachers to ask open-ended questions that prompt students to share ideas unimagined before. For instance, rather than asking “Would you prefer to learn about water quality by conducting experiments in the classroom or collecting and analyzing data at a nearby stream?” they might ask instead, “What are some ways you think you’d enjoy learning about environmental problems?” The facilitators instruct teachers to be patient and let the insights emerge naturally. It is tempting to leap immediately to judgments about students suggestions, concluding that one suggestion would be too expensive, or another impractical given travel challenges, building constraints, or inadequate time to accomplish the task. Instead, they emphasize patiently listening to what the students suggest is important to them. Students are then quite adept at helping navigate around the realities of schooling.

Further, although there are many benefits to pairing teachers with their own students, there is also an advantage to connecting with those they do not know.
In a course on the development of young adolescents, for example, teachers and students agreed that the relative anonymity contributed to the comfort and quality of their consultations; students spoke of feeling less anxious about presenting and participating given that they would “never see these teachers again,” and teachers noted feeling freer to ask questions of students not from their own classrooms. Rudduck (2007) also described how students commenting on teaching and learning can be “tricky to manage” among students and teachers who share classrooms. Teachers may apply various “demanding criteria” when judging the validity of students’ comments and are sensitive to “over-personalized account[s] of classroom realities,” whereas they were generally receptive to ideas students offered which emanated from experiences in other classes (p. 596).

Honoring and Sustaining the Work
Institute facilitators and participating teachers openly express their gratitude for students’ service as consultants. Facilitators are careful to save time at the end of consultation sessions for teachers to thank the students personally and reinforce the strands’ appreciation of their time and honest effort. Students generally depart the Institute a day before other participants, which provides a chance for a whole-group meeting at which students share some of their own work and thoughts from the week, which often include how much they enjoyed working with the teachers and how much they appreciate teachers’ clearly evident commitment to improving schooling for students. Teachers then are offered a chance to share their own appreciations. Teachers enrich and sustain the consultative culture from year to year; approximately 30% of the Institute’s participants each year are returnees and help convey the value and significance of working with students during the week.

Participant Perspectives on Student Consultation
The Collaborative’s commitment to continual improvement takes the form of considerable ongoing program evaluation. Through surveys, observations, artifact review, and a collection of online postings we have learned much from and about this practice of student consultation. Teachers and students alike value various forms of interaction at the Institute, including student panel presentations, small group collaboration, and informal conversations.

Teachers’ Perspectives on Students
An overwhelming majority of participating teachers report that interactions with students during the week contribute to changes in their pedagogy. These contributions take many forms. One teacher pointed to student panel presentations on negotiated curriculum as important to negotiating her social studies curriculum with her students the following fall. Another teacher ascribed to small group consultations with students her decision to develop a student-led portfolio initiative in her school. In each case, participating teachers were surprised at the level of maturity students can bring to their learning. Approximately 30% of teachers enriched and sustained from the consultative culture at the Institute are returnees and their presence further conveys the value and significance of working with students during the week.

Teachers often also come away from the student consultations with renewed appreciation for what it means to listen and to know students on a personal level. “…Listening to the stories of students connecting to their teachers made me remember my own experiences these past few years as being very self-centered…. The students’ stories about teachers taking the time to just listen made me rethink the way I should spend my time. Rather than spending most of the time coming up with lessons, implementing them, and all of the grading and assessing that goes with that, I need to incorporate strategies and activities to understand who my students are from a personal level.” (7th Grade Math Teacher)

Teachers also acknowledged that such experiences provide them with greater confidence to work with their own students this way.

“I learned a lot about who middle school students are and what kind of things they are capable of. [T]he frankness of the visiting children was awesome and I will think differently about my kids!” (Grades 7-8 Social Studies Teacher)

“And it was really exciting to see that happen [at the Institute]…. I was pretty amazed. It showed us that okay, we can do this with our kids. They’ve never done this before. But … I don’t think [the kids at the Institute] had ever done it before.” (6th Grade Generalist Teacher)

Another teacher discovered inspiration from her participation in an Institute literature circle,
“Wow! What a great idea to have a literature circle by combining students and teachers. The story from (the book) 13 was the poem Such Foolishness, which could have been a touchy subject but the girls [in our group] were great – they really got it and all of us were so impressed in how they handled such a mature subject. It really makes me want to try more young adult lit that handles real issues for students.” (Middle School Librarian).

Students’ Perspectives on Teachers

While teachers express the benefits of student consultation, students also report newly found appreciation for the work of teachers. Consulting students with experience in student-directed learning, for example, appreciated the challenges it poses for teachers trying it out for the first time:

KEVIN: I think that’s it got to be a really hard thing (for teachers) just to dive into [building curriculum with students] and to learn it in just a few hours because it’s really complicated.

ANDREA: It took us like a year to learn it.

KEVIN: Three!

ANDREA: Well, yeah, but we’re trying to teach them in like 25 minutes.

KEVIN: It’s really a lot deeper than – anyone who hasn’t gone through the program can’t really like understand, so it must be like really tough.

Similarly, students voice admiration for teachers’ eagerness to improve their practice and listen to students,

“I thought what worked was that we got a chance to like – the teachers always help us so we got to help the teachers.” (7th Grade Girl, Consulting Student)

“The teachers all seemed really like into it, because they were asking questions.” (7th Grade Boy, Consulting Student)

In these ways, teachers and students share genuine respect and warmth as they work together toward the common goal of improving schooling for young adolescents. Teachers generally appreciate whichever interaction focused on a change in practice they found particularly interesting. No one format appears salient, suggesting that multiple formats and opportunities for interaction may increase potential benefits.

Discussion and Conclusion

The many benefits of student consultation noted by Rudduck (2007) and discussed earlier are reproduced when consultation is incorporated into formal professional development, even when the teachers and students involved do not know each other. We echo Rudduck in asking, “Why then is student voice still so difficult to introduce and sustain” (p. 600)?

Among the obstacles are “time, building institutional commitment, anxieties generated by the change in power relations, sustaining authenticity, and inclusion [of often marginalized voices]” (Rudduck, 2007, p. 600). Introducing student consultation in a formal professional development setting, particularly with students and teachers who do not know each other, addresses many of these concerns. Institute facilitators provide the time, create a safe environment, promote authentic dialog, and intentionally address inclusion in the selection of students, perhaps more readily and easily than teachers and school leaders can in their own buildings.

The Institute facilitators appreciate the benefits of consultation for the learning that occurs during the week but the larger goal is to expand the role of student voice in schools. The MCG facilitators strive to help teachers make the leap from consulting with students at the Institute to engaging their own students in a similar manner back at their schools. We are encouraged that many teachers speak eloquently about their desire to incorporate student voices into continuing change efforts, including efforts to improve classroom climate and revamp curriculum. A large majority of participants report consulting students about curriculum design after returning to their classrooms, and even more seek student critique on their Institute projects. The Institute consultations appear to inspire these efforts; for a year or more after their Institute experience, many teachers point to those experiences as pivotal in their pursuit of change. Some teachers describe revisiting the memories for encouragement to persevere in the face of obstacles in their school context and as an important reason to return to the Institute in subsequent summers.

We acknowledge, however, that much more can be done to promote student consultations in participants’ schools. Building on their insights into students as consultants, teachers can organize their own students to serve as an expert panel before a local curriculum committee, school climate task force, parent involvement committee, or faculty meeting. Students might routinely serve as consultants to a group of teachers designing a unit of study, culminating event, festival, or field trip. And students permanently or intermittently can join professional learning communities, critical friends groups, or collaboratively examine student and teacher work. Virtual consultations are also possible. Further,
teachers may invite students from another team or nearby school to help field test and hone a new activity or process.

Vibrant and inspiring professional development experiences are too rare. Rarer still are professional development activities that lead to greater student voice in the schooling. Yet for nearly two decades, the Middle Grades Collaborative has built upon a rather traditional summer institute framework to make vivid to participating teachers and students – as well as staff – how students can contribute to teachers’ professional growth and school improvement. Teachers and students consistently point to Institute consultations as the week’s most important source of learning, inspiration, and teacher-student understanding. We have witnessed a remarkable convergence of teacher enthusiasm for changing their practice, students’ pedagogical insights, and both groups’ joy and appreciation in puzzling together to make classrooms and schools more responsive to the nature and needs of young adolescents. The Institute culture – steeped in our respect for students and their voices – creates a rich foundation for introducing teachers and students to consultations year after year. Underlying it all, however, is our simple belief, arrived at through our own experience in middle school classrooms: when our practice is stuck, when we are failing to connect with the vitality, passions, and imagination of our students, ask them what they think.

References
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