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Togetherness!: adult companionship – the key to music making in kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Group singing encourages social bonding, which brings a plethora of positive side effects. Music as a subject in the training of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers nonetheless faces cutbacks in many countries. Furthermore, ECEC staff often lack confidence in their singing and music-making abilities, and we might therefore say that their musical identity is negative. Our prior research has found that, despite an individual negative musical identity among individual ECEC staff members, their joint musical identity as a group can be positive. The key word is 'we.' In this paper, we analyse the notion of 'we' in the context of the concepts of 'voice shame' and 'the squelching of childhood' as well as research on friendship, trust, and the 'broaden-and-build' theory. Our findings indicate that the adult companionship represented by the word 'we' is what makes it possible to overcome the squelching of childhood and thus minimise voice shame. We conclude by discussing how our findings might impact the music programme in ECEC teacher training.

Introduction

Group singing can facilitate many positive outcomes, such as social bonding, increased sense of well-being, language acquisition, and empathy promotion, not to mention the emotional and aesthetic pleasure of music as an art form (Busse et al. 2018; Kirschner and Tomasello 2010; Kulset 2018b, 2019b; Linnavalli et al. 2018; Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar 2015; Rabinowitch, Cross, and Burnard 2013; Weinstein et al. 2016).

One would therefore assume that singing is an obvious part of everyday life in all ECEC settings. However, mounting evidence suggests that ECEC staff have a considerable lack of confidence in their music-making skills (Barrett et al. 2019; Barrett, Flynn, and Welch 2018; Ehrlin 2014; Ehrlin and Tivenius 2018; Ehrlin and Wallerstedt 2014; Flores 2018; Hallam et al. 2009; Kim and Kemple 2011; Kulset 2016b; Nardo et al. 2006; Russell-Bowie 2009; Stunell 2010; Swain and Bodkin-Allen 2014; Welch and Henley 2014). Barrett et al. (2019) found that the more qualified the ECEC staff members were (that is, the more training they had as ECEC teachers), the less favourable their beliefs regarding the role of music in ECEC settings. Ehrlin and Tivenius (2018) reported similar findings; ECEC staff members who mainly see music as something important in and of itself (l'art pour l'art) carry out fewer music activities than peers who value music's transfer effects. The reason for this,

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argue Ehrlin and Tivenius, is if music is important in itself, it must be difficult to do, but if music is for learning about colours or the days of the week, singing is an appropriate activity because the students are not performing 'real music.'

This lack of confidence in music making can be seen as a negative musical identity. We use the term *musical identity* as defined by MacDonald, Hargreaves, and Miell (2002, 2017), which points towards how our view of ourselves as capable (or not capable) musical subjects influences several aspects of our self-perception and identity formation. DeNora (2000) and Ruud (2013) argue that our musical identity is a vital part of our self-biography. To hold a *positive musical identity* means that one considers himself or herself to be a human being capable of using his/her innate musicality in everyday life situations with other people (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009; Small 1998). Its opposite, *negative musical identity*, refers to feelings of insufficiency and incapability when it comes to everyday music making, often expressed by the presence of overwhelming voice shame (Schei and Schei 2017).

The inhibitory and negative musical identity often seen among ECEC staff members can be explained in several ways. First, it is possible that some of these educators subscribe to a cultural view of 'musicality' as an innate gift that only few are given (Gingras et al. 2015; Hallam and Prince 2003; Sloboda, Davidson, and Howe 1999), as opposed to an innate attribute of human beings (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009). This view plays a larger role in the formation of student musical identity than many ECEC music educators realise. According to Demorest, Kelley, and Pfordresher (2017), a culture that largely emphasises discourses related to 'musical talent' in connection with musical practice can lead many to conclude that they are not talented or skilled enough to make *any* kind of music. This idea is reflected in the negative musical identity commonly found among ECEC staff and student teachers. This is also discussed in Clarke, Dibben, and Pitts (2010).

Second, negative musical identity may be explained by the decline (or complete lack) of music education in the training of early childhood educators in many countries (Niland and Holland 2019; Russell-Bowie 2009). In Norway, music has been cut from approximately 30% to 10% of the mandatory programme over the past four decades (Vist and Os 2019). This decline in music as a mandatory part of ECEC teacher training may partially explain why ECEC educators lack confidence in their music-making abilities. Due to cuts in music as a mandatory subject in the Norwegian school teacher training programme, children and adolescents might complete their entire schooling, from kindergarten to 13th grade, with teachers who received no training in singing. Some of these musically deprived students become teacher candidates, and they begin teacher training programmes without any significant musical experience, creating a vicious cycle.

There are, however, kindergartens that feature a substantial amount of singing and music making. The teachers in these kindergartens are not necessarily trained as music specialists, and they have followed the same ECEC teacher training as everyone else. Yet these educators are able to include music despite cuts in the provision of music education during their training. Are they all equipped with specialised musical confidence and musical skills? (Kulset 2016b).

We recently demonstrated that even staff members in a kindergarten with a music profile[1] express feelings of insufficiency when it comes to music making (Kulset and Halle 2019). They too suffer from voice shame (Schei and Schei 2017) and a talent-based cultural given view of musicality just as ECEC staff members in any other kindergarten (Kulset and Halle 2019). However, despite this negative musical identity *as individuals*, we found a very strong and positive *joint* musical identity. In short, their perception of their capacity to make music as individuals is very different from how they see themselves as a group. Their use of the word 'we,' which appeared more frequently than any other word in the interviews for this study, proved to be an important clue (Kulset and Halle 2019).

In this paper, we examine the notion of 'we' and its contribution to a joint positive musical identity, which exists despite a negative musical identity at the individual level. We considered the components that make up the concept of 'we,' how this collective identity is created, and how the notion of 'we' might be adapted and implemented to improve the music curriculum in ECEC teacher training programmes.

Theoretical background

To analyse the notion of 'we' and the joint positive musical identity found in our previous study (Kulset and Halle 2019), we applied the theories of the squelching of childhood (Bjørkvold 1992) and voice shame (Schei and Schei 2017) as well as research on friendship and trust (Dunbar 2018; Pearce et al. 2017; Sutcliffe et al. 2012), and Fredrickson's 'broaden-and-build' model of positive emotions (Fredrickson 2004).

Voice shame and the squelching of childhood

Voice shame is a concept proposed by Schei in 1998 and later described as follows:

> [Voice shame is] the uncomfortable feeling of being heard as ridiculous, worthless or 'not good enough.' Voice shame arises when a subject becomes aware of an observer's attention and believes the evaluation to be negative. It causes intensive monitoring of one's vocal expression and of others' perception of oneself

(Schei and Schei 2017, 1).

According to Schei, voice shame is a product of internalised ideals and criteria of quality, and it is acquired through interaction with external authorities, such as parents, peers, mass media, and music teachers. At the same time, voice shame grows from self-rejection, and the social interaction that has shaped and coloured an individual's voice shame has no direct connection to what others actually think of him or her. It is the fear of being judged as ridiculous or 'not good enough' that feeds voice shame (Schei and Schei 2017).

To explain the phenomenon of voice shame, Kulset (2017, 2018a) applied Bjørkvold's notion of the squelching of childhood (Bjørkvold 1992, 124). Bjørkvold argues that we are all born with 'a muse within,' and that we make use of this muse—our innate musicality—in different life circumstances. Yet as this 'muse within' collides with the surrounding culture's musical standards, Bjørkvold continues, we risk squelching the muse and our belief in our innate musicality altogether. Demorest, Kelley, and Pfordresher (2017) assert that adults' own perceptions of whether or not they are 'musical' are determined by how they experience the surrounding assessments of themselves as musical subjects during childhood. A culture that largely emphasises discourses related to 'musical talent' in connection with musical practice may, according to this view, lead many people to believe that they are not talented or skilled enough to make *any* kind of music. For some, the consequence may be a lifelong feeling of being unmusical and unable to sing. Demorest, Kelley, and Pfordresher (2017) argue that there is a clear discrepancy between adults' real ability to sing and their (negative) self-perception of their skills. Many adults who believe that they 'cannot sing' or refer to themselves as 'tone deaf' are, in reality, no more deficient in the ability to perceive melodies or to sing than the general population. Relatedly, those who consider themselves to be musical (irrespective of their actual abilities) are generally more proficient at singing, simply because they allow themselves to practice the music.

According to Bjørkvold (1992), the squelching of childhood takes place at an early stage of childhood. Teachers, parents, mentors, and other caregivers should therefore pay close attention to the ideals and criteria of quality in music making that they are presenting to children. What is judged as a good singing voice? What does a good singing voice sound like? Where do we go to find out? The Voice? American Idol? Or maybe is the child (also) surrounded by adults who take advantage of the potential for social bonding and well-being that singing together promotes, and do they thus make music with their everyday singing voices? On the other side of the squelching of childhood, voice shame awaits. There are, however, ways to avoid these traps.

Friendship and trust

By any understanding of the word 'we,' there is some sort of relationship involved. Research on the brain chemistry of relationships demonstrates that the endorphin system appears to be an essential

component of the maintenance of relationships, such as friendship. As opposed to the oxytocin system, which play an important role in prosocial behaviour among all mammals, the endorphin system acts exogenously: it can be triggered in other individuals by grooming, and thus allows us to make others behave prosocially towards us (Dunbar 2018; Gordon et al. 2011; Heinrichs, von Dawans, and Domes 2009). According to Dunbar (2018), as human evolution increased the size of social networks, people had to find new ways of triggering the endorphin system remotely in order to 'groom' several individuals simultaneously. In short, something other than physical touch was needed (Dunbar 2010). These 'new ways' to trigger the endorphin system and generate an increased sense of bonding included laughter (Manninen et al. 2017) singing (Pearce et al. 2017; Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar 2015; Weinstein et al. 2016) and dancing (Tarr, Launay, and Dunbar 2016).

According to Sutcliffe et al. (2012), *trust* is the main component of every close relationship. Most definitions of the term relate trust to reciprocity and collaboration, and trust not only facilitates dyadic and group-level collaboration, but also underpins the formation and maintenance of social relationships. If individuals socially 'groom' each other frequently over an extended period of time, the level of mutual trust may increase to the stage where emotion becomes more important than the rewards of collaboration *per se*. This emotional engagement then provides the basis for future commitment whenever needed. To build trust, one must prove oneself as a committed and stable relation who can be relied upon.

'Broaden-and-build' model of positive emotions
    In Fredrickson's 'broaden-and-build' model of positive emotions (2004), positive emotions *broaden* an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire through feelings such as joy, interest, contentment and love. By broadening someone's momentary thought-action repertoire (as in play, exploration, or similar activities), the positive emotions promote the discovery of new and creative actions, ideas, and social bonds, which in turn *build* that individual's physical, intellectual, social, and psychological resources. According to the model, cultivation of positive emotions might thus form the basis towards personal flourishing.

Aims

This paper is a part of a larger study. The research aims for the larger study are two-fold: first, to identify the musical identity held by early childhood and care educators working in kindergartens with music profiles; and second, to adapt this knowledge so it can be implemented in ECEC teacher training programmes' music curricula thus increasing the quality of its music education credits.

The research questions that guided this part of the study were:

(1) How can the notion of 'we' overcome the squelching of childhood, voice shame, and negative musical identities at the individual level?
(2) What exactly is the notion of 'we'?
(3) How can one construct the notion of 'we'?

The study

Data collection took place in a Norwegian kindergarten with a music profile located at two different sites. A total of eight staff members were asked questions in semi-structured, qualitative interviews. Eight can be seen as a rather small sample size, but the interviewed staff members differ in terms of educational background, working period and age and thus represent different types of kindergarten co-workers who can best inform an understanding of the research problem under examination (*a purposeful sampling*, Creswell 2014, 189).

The questions were:

(1) How did you feel when you started working in this kindergarten, or how did you experience your role as a music maker in music-making situations?

(2) What kind of role do you think music plays in the kindergarten?
(3) What do you need to know, or what kind of skills do you need, in order to include music in the kindergarten?
(4) How dependent are you on the presence of other adults and key persons for you to be able to make music in the kindergarten?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed. The analysis proceeded in threefold fashion: thematic (what is being told), dialogic/performative (when, why, and to whom it is told) and structural (how it is told) (Riessman 2008). This threefold analysis was conducted in order to examine the interview narratives from as many perspectives as possible, and also to minimise the researcher effect.

The thematic analysis (what is being told) focussed primarily on the different ways in which the interviewees answered our questions. We were thus able to divide the data into several sub-themes, such as 'happiness in music-making,' 'self-efficacy,' 'voice shame,' and 'the squelching of childhood' (although interviewees did not use those specific terms). The next step was the dialogic/performative analysis (when, why, and to whom it is told). We applied this analysis to rule out statements that were likely uttered simply to please the us, the interviewers ('music is *soo* important'), to analyse why they uttered these statements to us in respect to the researcher effect, and to include the socio-cultural context of the interviews: their work place.

The third step was to analyse the texts structurally (how it is told), for which we applied Labov's method (Riessman 2008, 81–92). According to Labov, most 'fully formed' narratives include six elements: abstract (summary and/or 'point' of the story), orientation (time, place, characters, and situation), complicating action (the plot, usually with a crisis or turning point), evaluation (the narrator steps back and 'comments' on meaning or communicates emotions), resolution (the outcome of the plot), and coda (ending or coming back to the present). By structuring the narratives with these six elements, we pushed deeper into the data and the themes from the structural analysis. What is the 'complicating action' for the different interviewees? Do several interviewees talk about the same 'complicating action'? How has it resolved for each of them? At this stage of the analysis, the individual negative musical identity and joint positive musical identity emerged, as presented in Kulset and Halle (2019).

We then ran the interviews in NVivo (CAQDAS) to look for connections among the different statements. Little of novelty came out of this, except when we ran the query for word frequency (checked for stop words). 'We' was by far the most frequently used word. A second structural analysis was run, this time on where and why the word 'we' appeared as well as its role in the extensive music making done by the ECEC staff in this kindergarten. When looking further into the notion of 'we,' several perspectives to the word's appearance were discovered, all in connection to a striking feeling of togetherness. Three main categories in connection with the word 'we' emerged from the NVivo analyses: (1) The music making and singing is better when we do it together, (2) Making each other feel safe, and (3) Increased self-confidence due to the working environment (making music together)

Findings and discussion

As our analysis of the interviews based on our research questions advanced, the word 'we' emerged as a striking notion. We will in this article discuss the following three categories generated from the word 'we':

- The music making and singing is better when we do it together
- Making each other feel safe
- Increased self-confidence due to the working environment (performing music together)

In the typical set-up for singing and music making in Norwegian kindergartens, one of the staff members conducts circle time (of which singing is a natural part) largely on his or her own. This

happens while other staff members are occupied with other tasks. Alternatively, one other staff member might have the sole function of keeping order in the group, and he or she typically does not join in the music making (Kulset 2016a, 2016b, 2019a). Educators are perhaps motivated to individually lead music making by pragmatism and efficient division of labor, but an equally likely consideration is that voice shame (Schei and Schei 2017) is keeping them from singing with their colleagues. Both motives (as well as a combination) are plausible, but this does not change the fact that they engage in music making alone, with no colleagues present, and there is thus no concept of 'we.'

Mutual support is one of the key features of collective music making in the kindergarten examined by our study. This idea was articulated by the head of the kindergarten: 'If I start to sing a song, everyone else from the staff who can hear me will join in. No one will have to stand alone and sing or dance. The other staff members will join in immediately unless told not to.' This has a remarkable effect, and this effect is consistent with our findings in connection with the word 'we' (see above). The staff members make most of the music together, and they improvise on each other's ideas. As a result of this group support, there is less room for voice shame, and there is also less room for feelings of musical inadequacy. The adult companionship that characterises the music making in this kindergarten is astonishingly comprehensive and is very different from the average kindergarten.

As noted above, the notion of 'we' and the joint positive musical identity found in our previous study (Kulset and Halle 2019) helps participants overcome the squelching of childhood and individual voice shame. In this section, we discuss the role of the three perspectives generated by the word 'we' by applying research on friendship and trust (Dunbar 2018; Pearce et al. 2017; Sutcliffe et al. 2012).

The music making and singing are better when we do them together

As the staff members sing and make music together, each triggers the endorphin system of the others: One might say they 'groom' each other socially as a group (Dunbar 2018; Gordon et al. 2011; Heinrichs, von Dawans, and Domes 2009). Singing and dancing were two of the 'new ways' humans adopted to trigger the endorphin system as the size of our social networks increased and physical touch was no longer a viable option for social grooming (Pearce et al. 2017; Pearce, Launay, and Dunbar 2015; Tarr, Launay, and Dunbar 2016; Weinstein et al. 2016). The endorphin system makes people behave prosocially towards each other, and it reinforces social bonding. One of the people interviewed for our study stated: 'In our staff choir, we sing ourselves in love with each other.' In short, singing together generates an increased sense of bonding between staff members. The notion of 'we' is in the making. In this way, togetherness creates more togetherness, as opposed to solitude, which does not trigger any kind of social bonding among the ECEC staff. 'It is much harder to do the music alone with the children,' said another participant. This is a remarkable comment considering the number of ECEC staff members who refuse to sing in front of their colleagues. It is important to point out that one might experience strong feelings of togetherness with the children in a music-making situation such as group singing. The feeling of togetherness among staff members, however, is the focus of this paper.

Making each other feel safe

Group singing does more than activate the endorphin system. Another important part of the concept of 'we' is the high level of trust among staff members. These educators individually described feelings of voice shame and lack of competence in music. However, the level of trust between them seemed to make a big difference, as these quotes from the interviews demonstrate:

- The other adults create a safe space for me to dare to sing and make music
- I feel it is easier to do music alongside other adults as I know they will join in on the music making, and it is better when we do it together

- All staff members are on friendly terms with each other, but some individuals give me additional feelings of safety, and these people make me believe that I can sing and everything will be fine
- It is about collaboration; he needs me and I need him, and that feels so right

Two of the subcategories in *Making each other feel safe* are about helping newcomers into this feeling of 'we': Mindful musical pathfinders for new employees, and A feeling of inclusion and being taken care of musically as a new employee. This inclusion reinforces a high level of trust. According to one of our participants, 'As a new employee, I could see everyone else coming forward, no one was critical, everything was fun.' Sutcliffe et al. (2012) noted that the formation and maintenance of social relationships (such as those among staff members in a kindergarten) are underpinned by trust. As staff members socially 'groom' each other on a regular basis over an extended period of time (as in daily group singing), the level of mutual trust may increase. This trust, we argue, is pivotal to a joint positive musical identity. One of our interviewees claimed to be able to sing and that 'everything [was] fine' while doing so alongside someone who gave her a feeling of safety (that is, someone she trusted). Voice shame is quite simply not as debilitating among friends. Voice shame grows from awareness of an observer's attention and fear of that observer's negative evaluation. Trust is the antidote to these unproductive feelings.

Increased trust between staff members in music making can thus lead to decreased voice shame. Instead of a downward spiral of decreased exposure to singing, the staff members (and children) in this kindergarten greatly increased their singing, with trust in relationships as its cornerstone.

In short, singing triggers the endorphin system, which in turn reinforces social bonds. The frequent social 'grooming' that singing represents helps build the trust necessary to form and maintain relationships. In such a 'safe space,' a person can make music and sing songs even if his or her individual musical identity is negative. People trust each other and help each other make music. This idea was best summarised by Stewart and Lonsdale (2016) in their article titled: 'It's better together.'

Increased self-confidence due to the working environment (doing music together).

To explain how the building of a safe collective relationship can foster new behaviours (such as joint positive musical identities and improvements in self-confidence), we use Fredrickson's 'broaden-and-build' model of positive emotions (2004). The positive emotions *broaden* their momentary thought-action repertoire which promotes the discovery of new and creative actions, ideas, and social bonds. This will in turn *build* their intellectual, social, and psychological resources. By supporting group music making and singing, ECEC staff members *broaden* each other's momentary thought-action repertoire. Little by little, it becomes a habit to sing, dance, and make music together, despite individual feelings of voice shame and musical inadequacy. They *build* their personal resources and music-making skills. According to Fredrickson (2004), these resources function as reserves that can be later used to improve the odds of successful coping and survival. In this model, relationships exist to nurture positive emotions, creating a social and psychological environment that facilitates not only individual survival, but also more effective cooperation within functional groups. With their reassuring presence, such relationships reduce stress (Sutcliffe et al. 2012), and this stress reduction helps explain the apparent contradiction between positive joint and negative individual musical identities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we considered the notion of 'we' and how it can help overcome the squelching of childhood, voice shame, and negative individual musical identity. The notion of 'we' is one of the keys to increased music making and singing in kindergarten, and it helps people overcome the squelching of childhood and voice shame, both of which were present in the individual musical identities of our interviewees (Kulset and Halle 2019). The notion of 'we' is built up as the endorphin system is

triggered by the social 'grooming' that singing together represents, which in turn builds trust among the group members and further reinforces collective social bonding. Individual stress (in the form of the squelching of childhood and/or voice shame) is reduced through a 'broaden-and-build' model of positive emotions, and these positive emotions also contribute to improved musical skills and confidence.

The findings of this study underline the significance of adult companionship and togetherness with respect to singing and music making in ECEC practice. Making music is not something to be done with the children only; it is even more important to involve the entire staff. This has, to our knowledge, not yet been a central focus in any part of ECEC musical practice. As we try to repair educators' musical confidence, the momentum of adult companionship, the notion of 'we,' and the concept of togetherness have a great deal of value.

Niland and Holland (2019) state that professional development in music education should aim at building educators' musical knowledge and skills, so that they can become more musically attuned to children. When educators develop sufficient musical awareness and skills, both their musical confidence and their belief in the value of music will increase (Kim and Kemple 2011; Niland and Holland 2019). We argue that the notion of 'we' broadens and builds ECEC staff members' thought-action repertoire and personal resources within music-making, thus contributing to their musical awareness, musical abilities, and belief in the value of music.

Consequently, the feeling and creation of the 'we' concept is something that should be addressed thoroughly in ECEC teacher training programmes. Collective music making promotes positive emotions, but this theoretical finding is not enough: This idea must be put into practice among teachers with little confidence in their musical skills. We therefore asked ourselves how the notion of 'we' can be constructed.

Essentially, we seek to construct the notion of 'we' from scratch. One solution is to follow the head of the music kindergarten from our study by telling all staff members that they must join in the moment a colleague starts singing. However, such a directive will not automatically be followed by success. It should to be preceded by knowledge about why music is important, regardless of what one thinks of his or her own singing voice, and knowledge of why doing it together makes it better and easier.

We argue that ECEC student teachers must include the rest of the ECEC staff in music making, thus creating the 'we' concept. They should acquire the knowledge and practical skills that make fellow staff members *want* to participate in the music making. Considering the prevalence of voice shame and feelings of musical inadequacy among ECEC staff, this is no easy task, and these skills should therefore be addressed and practiced during the ECEC teacher training music programme.

Improvement of the music programme in ECEC teacher training requires a scholarly and critical approach. As formulated by Lindgren and Ericsson (2011), teachers and students scrutinise themselves, their values, and their activities in music making. This scrutiny should emphasise the importance of togetherness; we must show student teachers how to create the concept of 'we', not only with fellow student teachers in our classrooms, but also how do make it happen in the kindergarten. We must explain the reasons that this concept is beneficial, and we must make sure they experience the difference of 'me' and 'we'. The goal of music education in ECEC teacher training should be, in our opinion, to create 'confident togetherness-music makers.' In her cross-cultural study on music in primary school classrooms, Russell-Bowie (2009) concluded that there is a need for teachers who feel confident and competent in the acts of teaching, learning, and making music. Our contribution is to add the notion of 'we': Students must be taught the importance of this notion and the skills necessary for its implementation. Then, we believe, things will change.

Note

1. We use the term 'a kindergarten with a music profile' to describe kindergartens who promote themselves as kindergartens who make extensive use of music in their everyday life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Kirsten Halle is an Associate Professor at the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Stavanger (UiS). She is an educated singer and music teacher with a main interest in singing interactions in early years and adult's conception of musicality. Her research field is on aesthetic and emotional learning processes in early years.

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