Conflict Resolution and Social Skill Development With Children

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ABSTRACT. Conducting psychodrama groups for children in an elementary school setting are extremely challenging because the interpersonal issues that emerge are complex and the institutional guidelines are limiting. The author recounts experiences with 10- to 13-year-old children placed in an elementary school special education program. The author used action techniques and psychodrama methods on a biweekly basis to help students communicate more positively with one another, allowing them to improve their status with peers in the classroom. Students' negative behavior in the classroom decreased, interactions with one another were more positive, and attitudes toward their own potential increased as a result of the psychodrama-based conflict resolution and skill-building training.

Key words: action methods with children, action techniques with special education students, conflict resolution with elementary school students, psychodrama with elementary school children

IN THE EARLY PART OF THE 20TH CENTURY, groups of children in the Augarten helped form some of Moreno's first impressions of spontaneity and creativity. From children came the spark that ignited what came to be psychodrama. It is, therefore, fitting that psychodrama be used to help students step out of the negative cultural norms (Kellar, Treadwell, Kumar, & Leach) of their classrooms and express empathy for one another, experiment with new and positive behaviors, and allow their creative, imaginative minds opportunities for expression. There is testimony to the effectiveness of using action methods with children. Slavson, as early as 1930, wrote about the effectiveness of activity group therapy in providing psychotherapy treatment for children (Lomonaco, Scheidlinger, & Aronson, 2000). In the early 1970s, Standford and Roark (1974) wrote about using role-playing and other action methods in the classroom to create cohesion and a good working environment. Specific to the special education population, Mishna and Muskat

(2004) noted that children and adolescents with learning disabilities are vulnerable to experiencing various social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties that can best be helped in group settings. To that end, using the groups that already exist in special education classrooms can be effective. Moreno and Zachariah (2005) focus on the use of sociodrama and psychodrama methods to promote inclusion in the classroom. Their work reinforces the value of J. L. Moreno's techniques in helping children see in what ways they connect with one another and develop empathy for one another. When children stop defending against the similarities and differences and accept one another and themselves, the level of conflict in the classroom is diminished.

Psychodramatists intent on bringing action methods to schools will find little in the literature specific to using psychodrama with children in groups. In addition, there is minimal institutional support in elementary schools for the use of action techniques to help students learn conflict resolution and social skills and to increase children's self-esteem. In this article, I introduce the use of action methods as a means of teaching conflict resolution and social skills in a public school environment. This use was prefaced by an in-service training session presented to the elementary school faculty and staff members to demonstrate how action techniques are used to deploy interpersonal conflicts in the classroom and reduce tension among students.

Project Background

In an in-service training program workshop, I presented instruction on using action methods to reduce interpersonal conflicts in the classroom and tension between the students and the elementary public school's faculty and staff members. As a result of that workshop, one of the social workers respected the sociometry experience to the degree that he included psychodrama groups in a grant that he was writing to secure funds to provide conflict resolution and self-esteem groups to the children in his school. The thrust of his program design was that conflict resolution groups, using action psychodramatic group-building activities, along with empathy training, would break down the unstated, hierarchal structures that foster conflict and would cultivate a supportive and less antagonistic student environment.

For the past 2 years, on invitation from the school social worker, I conducted psychodrama sessions with children in an elementary school on a biweekly basis as part of a grant awarded by the state education department for enrichment in the areas of self-esteem and conflict resolution. The public school is located in a New England city of about 150,000 people that has slowly lost its once-thriving industrial base, leaving a high concentration of unemployment. The kindergarten through eighth-grade school serves mainly

a minority population, and many students are from immigrant families where English is not spoken in the home. Also, it is not unusual to find a portion of the students living in foster homes. Most of the families live below the poverty level, which strengthens the notion among the students that they are different. The specific population addressed, 10- to 13-year-old boys and girls who have learning or emotional disabilities or both, received various diagnoses from school or private educational psychologists. The diagnoses included depression, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and behavior dysfunction including impulse control and thought disorder. Those diagnosed with educational disabilities run the gamut from being very intelligent to borderline intellectually challenged and with dyslexia or without. Most of the students struggle in the emotional and learning areas and present behavioral challenges to the teachers and staff members who interact with them.

The severity and complexity of the diagnoses qualify the students to be placed in special education, self-contained classrooms. Most of the families of these children are economically, culturally, and socially deprived, having minimal association with the community in general. That insulation and isolation is replicated in the school setting, where special education students attend school and create their own world in their self-contained, special education classes. In those classes, hierarchal structures are based on financial status, living situations—whether with a foster family or one's biological family—and physical prowess. The ultimate goal of the psychodrama sessions was to provide students with opportunities to perceive themselves and their peers more compassionately and in positive roles.

Demographics and Logistics

According to the contract, I was to come to the school every other week during the academic year and conduct 30- to 40-min sessions for three separate classes for groups of 6 to 17 students. Because of the student's short attention span and their high level of distractibility, the 30-min session proved to be optimal. Many of the students have repeated grades, some stay with the same teacher for 2 years. For those reasons, I was able to work with several students over the course of 2 years.

The groups are identified as Class A, Class B, and Class C, with each having one teacher and one aide. I invited teachers and aides to participate in the psychodrama group, and they did so to a varying degree, depending on the class. Class A was a large class of 17 fifth and sixth graders with educational and emotional difficulties. Given their behavioral problems, the 17 students in Class A proved to be too large a group. An offer to facilitate two groups for

this classroom was rejected because of the students' compact curriculum. Instead, I recruited volunteer participants, and five girls and one boy agreed to form a group. In the immediate weeks that followed, more of the students wanted to volunteer, but the integrity of the original group of six was preserved. The group met in the social worker's office, the library, or an empty classroom. This smaller Class A group emerged as an extremely focused, cohesive group that was without chaos and polite to one another. We were able to start and finish an activity within the time allotted. Although they often brought in their struggles with one another to be addressed during sessions, I had the time to balance the sessions with structures that led to developing social skills and role growth.

Class B was a class of nine fourth and fifth graders, also with emotional and educational limitations. There were two girls and seven boys, and the group sessions were always held in their classroom. Class C was made up of six sixth-grade students with primary emotional diagnoses. The range of the diagnoses were thought disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD, and depression. Five of the students were boys, and one was a girl. This group's session was initially held in the classroom, but because of the children's lack of attention and their interpersonal conflicts, we moved the psychodrama group either to the social worker's office or the library, depending on availability. In those rooms, I as the facilitator had more control. The room could be prepared, props laid out, and a warm and soothing atmosphere created, which was novel and compelling for the students. Here the group became more focused and cohesive.

Without their teacher, the students in Class C acted the most responsibly. They took responsibility for letting me know the kinds of limits they needed and how to set up a reward system that replicated what they had in their class. They communicated with one another without getting offended or offending the others. In the sessions with Class A and Class C, which were away from the home classroom, the teachers and aides were not present. The social worker attended group sessions on an as-needed basis.

One challenge in running the psychodrama groups was that all the subjects of the dramas had to be educationally and not psychotherapeutically oriented. I was in the school to provide opportunities for specific skill development. There were no signed consent forms from parents or guardians, and the program was considered an enrichment program for special education students. The psychodrama structures that I introduced to them focused on conflict resolution, social skill development, and role training for present and future school life and work life. When the children talked about their families, common themes were highlighted and discussed in terms of their effect on students' schoolwork. When they talked about their behaviors at home, that as well was connected to their behavior in school.

Dynamics of Special Education Children

The developmental concerns intrinsic to 11- to 13-year-olds that facilitators must take into consideration within an educational environment are numerous. There is enormous discrepancy in physical maturity between 11- and 13-year-olds, and within each age range, there is a wide spectrum of sexual development. Peer group and status in the group are paramount concerns. Although I observed one or two students in each class who were recognized for their academic abilities, most students competed to be the funniest or the cruelest. Those with seemingly more material possessions were looked up to, as were those who showed signs of more advanced physical maturity. Special education children bring the additional problems of low self-esteem, poor social skills, limited educational skills, and often, multiple daily crises. These elements demonstrated themselves in the high reactivity of the students and the rapidity with which things could get out of hand. They were always on guard against anything that they might perceive as shame inducing. They were careful about what they shared in front of their peers and reacted aggressively to any perceived insult or threat.

Building group cohesion was my first goal with the students. The undercurrents of competition that can ignite relations at any given moment in these groups challenged class cohesion. For example, those who are just a hair above economically scapegoat the poorest child; the educationally challenged child is mocked for liking academics; and other children wait for veiled insults from classmates. With those issues in mind, I selected warm-ups that are easy to do, with directions that are easy to follow and ensure that everyone can experience success. This protocol usually minimizes the potential for feeling shame and serves to warm up the students along with allaying their anxieties while setting the group agenda.

Warm-ups That Meet the Challenge of One's Inability to Focus

The Spectrogram

Given the students' limited attention span, I asked them to pull their chairs away from their desks to form a semicircle for the group. I invited the social worker, the teacher, and the aide to sit in and participate. Not only did the children have the opportunity to see and hear the teacher, aide, and social worker in the roles of group members, but they also had a model for participation in the exercises.

I often begin a warm-up while watching and listening for conflictual or negative explosive interactions between students. I use the spectrogram (Kole, 1967), explaining that there is an imaginary line in the room with numbers on it from 1 to 10, with 1 meaning *very difficult* and 10 meaning *very easy*. The

group members have to place themselves on the imaginary line. I ask them to select a number that indicates how easy it is for them to get up in the morning, and then the chairs are arranged according to that level of ease. I ask the social worker to be the first to participate. In that way, the children hear the directions and see them in action twice before doing it themselves. In some instances, I concretize the spectrogram line with a scarf or rope. The criterion question about the ease of getting up in the morning yielded interesting results. One student immediately stated how easy it is for him to get up, and two students challenged him. Two other students began nudging one another with teasing, conflictual comments that nearly erupted into conflict. Thus, in a few seconds, there were two arenas of potential conflict. Rather than proceed with the conflicts, I had the students sit down and think of a number from 1 to 10 (1 meaning *very difficult* and 10 *very easy*) to indicate the ease with which they got up in the morning. Once these data were collected, students were placed in chairs on the spectogram line according to their level of ease.

Name Games

Of the numerous name games (Dayton, 1990), those that I find most useful for special education students focus on students' first names. Usually they all know one another's first names; thus, I ask them to recite classmates' names at different speeds. First, I ask the students to say the names as fast as possible, which is safe because one can hide behind speed. I then ask them to say the names as slowly as possible; this is riskier because each is asked to take more time and have more attention focused on him or her for a longer period of time. Slow motion also encourages students to be silly. Next I request that they say the names as if they are surprised, and then as if they are sad. Depending on the responsiveness of the group, I continue to ask them to say their names under a variety of moods. This is something everyone can do well. This exercise helps them name feelings and identify the facial expressions that accompany each feeling. I end by asking them to say the names with a feeling that they decide to express and which the group has to guess. This focuses on the connection between body language and feelings.

Adjectives Attached to Names

Another name game requires remembering the group members' names with some identifying quality or adjective in front of each name. This is useful in helping children concentrate and focus on the adjective that assists them in remembering classmates' names. The students took great delight in repeating this every time we met and remembered the adjective that was identified with my name.

Weather as Mood Barometer

I find that using the weather is helpful to get a reading on how students are feeling and the type of mood they might be in. I ask, "What weather are you today?" The students often need coaching to understand the concept. I give them several examples, asking, for instance, how someone who says he or she is a hurricane might be feeling. The exercise introduces them to the use of metaphors and engages their creativity. When expanded, it leads to a discussion of how fast feelings change, like the weather, opening the door for mood and feeling exploration. Although name games build group cohesion, emotional games focusing on feeling awareness help children better understand how classmates think and feel in a disruptive classroom.

Warm-Ups Lead Students Into Action

When I sense that the students are warmed up to explore ways of thinking, I ask them to remember times in school when their feelings were changing quickly. This technique gets students talking and sharing experiences regarding difficult feelings and mood changes within their school environment. In that way, students contribute easily, and the opportunity to select a protagonist to explore anxiousness and mood changes becomes second nature to the group process. Through role reversal, the protagonist can experience what it is like for the students who are observing this quick mood change. Using doubling, other members of the class help the protagonist expand his or her expression of feelings and thoughts. We often moved from the general discussion of feelings and shifted quickly to talking about conflictual feelings about a person or an event. Then I invite them to think of a example of when they felt two ways about something. To assist the students, I give an example: I am enjoying the book I am reading, but I am nervous about having to take a test on it. To place the situation in action, I use two chairs to concretize those feelings and invite a student to sit in the chair and pretend to be me. When the student is in the first chair, I instruct him or her to express the feeling of enjoyment, and in the second chair, I tell the student to express the nervous feeling of taking a test. The students get the idea and generate their own examples. The teacher commented that this was helpful because during the week, she could ask a student which chair he or she might be in when a problem emerged. In both of these exercises, we are legitimizing students' experiences of emotional shifts and their having differing feelings about the same thing. We are also giving them a concrete reference point, the two chairs, when they notice negative emotional and mood shifts.

Social Skill Building

An exercise I use with success is the mirror exercise (Hale, 1968; Spolin, 1999) because it builds focus and student collaboration and offers the experi-

ence of encountering another by looking directly into the person's eyes. Partners sit close and directly opposite one another. Each student takes a turn as leader, moving hands and changing facial expression. The partner, as the follower, moves his or her hands and changes his or her facial expressions to match those of the leader. At a prompt from the group facilitator, the two shift roles, and the leader becomes the follower and the follower the leader. In the next segment of the exercise, the facilitator asks the participants to shift the leadership between them without direction and without speaking. Toward the end of the school year, when the students had developed greater interpersonal skills, I used this exercise with Classes A and C; they are older and therefore better able to follow directions, plus their attention problems and social skill problems could be helped by practicing the skills needed for this activity. The act of sitting in close proximity and facing another suggests some interpersonal development for these students who normally talk through one another. To confront one another directly with no belligerence is a step forward. Concentrating, looking directly at their partners, and allowing the experiences of leading and following are necessary components of this exercise, which stresses connecting with others in a positive way. That is ultimately a move toward effective communication.

The mirroring exercise can be expanded into daily life situations in which we create a short sociodrama to explore group conflicts (Sternberg & Garcia, 1989). I ask the students to think about a situation that involves sharing leadership responsibilities. In addition to being a hard concept for the children to understand, it taps into their sense of shame and insecurity, and the struggle plays itself out as classroom chaos. I have students assume the roles of leader and follower, whereby many thoughts and feelings are flushed out and expressed. I ask them to create characters that have to exchange leadership roles in school. On one occasion, we came up with the situation of two students collaboratively working on a school project. That required exchanging ideas and collaboratively working together to create a map of the United States with magazine pictures. The changing of roles allowed the students to see the other person's perspective. This gave them the opportunity to see that each person had a valid point and that in order to come to a mutual working relationship, each one had to listen and share his or her ideas with the other for a collaborative experience. Role reversal is the technique used to aid in developing insight into leadership and worker interpersonal relationships.

Classroom Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution

Crisis situations are more the rule than the exception in special education classrooms. For example, as I was entering the classroom to run a group session, a student was leaving for a mainstream class. As the student was exiting he threw all the books off another student's desk. That student got up and

threw objects off the desk of the parting student, and a third student got up and put everything back on the desks. After gathering the obviously anxious and angry students, I asked them what had happened. To limit their stories, students had to express what they saw by using only four words.

Locograms

To summarize their perspectives, the boy who left angry had been happy on the bus in the morning, but his mood had drastically changed when he walked into the room. Despite my challenge to limit the length of the classmate's descriptions of what happened, it was clear that verbal explanations were heading toward an argument over the details. Thus, I used sociometric locograms (Beglen, 1983) to shift focus from the boy who left the room to the students who remained. I asked class members to stand at a designated place in the room representing two conditions. The first locogram was ways of thinking about the conflict. The thoughts were subdivided into four feelings: angry, scared, excited, and embarrassed. I had them stand at one place if they felt angry, another place if they felt scared, another place if they felt excited, and another place if they felt embarrassed. Five of the students put themselves in the angry category, three in the excited, and one selected the scared emotion. They were then instructed to look at where their peers located themselves and to tell me what they saw. With coaching, they were able to do this. The second locogram involved behavioral reactions. The following were the possible situations: I want to get in on the action, I want to hide, I want to help calm down the angry person, and I want to get the person who is upset more angry. Four of the nine students placed themselves in the position of wanting to incite more anger, one wanted to calm things down, one wanted to hide, and three wanted to get into the action.

From that point, I asked the students to reenact the disruptive entrance into the classroom. Each student had to leave the classroom and return acting as upset as he or she could. The rule was that the acting student could not touch anyone or do anything to hurt him- or herself, others, or property. If the student were going to throw a book, it had to be his or her own. Then I asked each student to enter the room a second time with the same explosive behavior. This time, however, I asked the classmates to demonstrate what someone might do to make the anger smaller. They said things such as, " Chill man, it's OK" or "Why don't you come and sit next to me; it's OK." Others ignored the behavior and pretended to be reading a book.

The opportunities to experience the two different types of reactions to disruptive behavior precluded us having to talk about it; for these children, less talk meant greater focus. In the sharing, one reaction was that when someone calmed down, the incident became less exciting and, in fact, boring. I acknowl-

edged that and then asked if there were any advantages to a calm atmosphere. Some said none, whereas others said that no one got in trouble and the students were able to finish their work and have free time. That suggested that achievement had a calming effect emotionally. This exercise, as a lesson in conflict avoidance, gave the students another experience for their conflict resolution toolbox: an example of someone exploding and their not being drawn into the explosion. It was a role-training session focusing on de-escalating anger.

In another psychodrama session, the students in Class C, who have limited attention spans, had just witnessed an out-of-control, verbally abusive, and potentially violent outburst from a new female student. The other students did not like her. She was scapegoated because of her antagonistic attitude and provocative behavior. Her attitude could be seen as a response to her status as the new student in a group of boys and one girl who were tightly bonded to one another and to the teacher. I walked into the room just after she had been sent to the office. I could see that the students were angry and upset about the threats and comments that the girl had made to their teacher. I asked them if they would like to look at this issue with the help of some psychodrama. They were willing.

Human-Sculpted Images

I guided the students in creating human-sculpted images that reflected a student new to Class C who feels she does not fit into the class and a human sculpture of classmates ignoring the threats of verbally abusing a new student. Accompanying the second sculpture, I asked the students to think of some things they could say to themselves to help them keep control of their angry feelings about someone else's outbursts.

The exercise got the students out of their seats and shifted the focus from the incident in the classroom to a relatively fictionalized situation and their reactions. Their mood shifted from anxiety to concern about their well-being and their teacher's. Creating a human sculpture of the classroom situation required the use of their bodies, allowing some of their angry energy to dissipate. The human sculpture was an aid in translating the classroom situation into action and thereby helping the children generate some calm in the midst of a storm. It must be kept in mind that for many students at this school calm waters are unfamiliar territory. Thus, by providing opportunities for students to translate feelings into words and build a healthy repertoire of action responses, the action method gave them a new point of reference, which can be reinforced in their classroom.

Using Literature

Class C students were completing a test on a reading assignment as I entered their classroom. The teacher asked me if they could have a few min-

utes to complete it. I noted how involved the students were in the assignment. When they finished their work, rather than asking them to change focus, I began an activity centered on the book that they were reading. My objective was to learn more about what interested them and have them verbalize that interest in a group environment. I carry a bag with props such as scarves, medieval figures, small toys, and some stuffed animals. On this day, I asked them to pick a scarf to represent their favorite character in the story that they had just completed. The scarf acted as a transition from schoolwork to action, from pencil and paper to action, from the cognitive to the emotional, from a social (student) role to psychodramatic (the character) role. I asked them to think of their favorite character in the story, which had them engrossed when I walked into the room. For the set, I placed a chair in the center of the room and instructed the students to take on the role of their favorite character and introduce the character to the group. One student took on the role of a little duck that did not know how to swim, whose mother would not teach him, and at whom the other ducklings laughed. Ultimately, an older duck, who was a friend, taught him how to swim. That role enactment was parallel to the student's own life. After the role play, the student told the class that she was like the duck that could not swim and that the teacher in this classroom, to whom she was very attached, was the one who taught her. Another student spoke as the Cinderella character in her story. She, aside from loving to wear her beautiful gown, talked about being embarrassed to have anyone come to her house. Both girls, the only girls in the class, had been teased and often treated badly by the boys. Each of them was able to represent herself honestly through the characters they chose. The boys in the class, who were often mean to the two girls, became kind and asked questions of the characters that demonstrated their sensitivity to them. As each person spoke in character, I asked the witnesses to respond as their own characters from their own stories, stating whether they experienced the emotion the presenting character may have felt. That allowed for honest sharing and bonding, whereby the characters in the stories helped the group to achieve a new level of cohesion.

Future Projection

In addition to social skill development and conflict resolution, I use the psychodramatic method of future projection to help the students see themselves in a future state. That is a way for the students to imagine themselves differently, to verbalize their dreams, and to speak those dreams aloud to their peers. One of the techniques I use for this is a reunion. I bring in a REUNION banner and hang it in the room. When the children from Class A walked into the social worker's office where we were meeting, I greeted each of them with these words: "It's 2010, and I am so glad you have come to the reunion; it's

so good to see you again." I had a chair in the middle of the semicircle decorated with streamers and informed them that they each had a chance to come and sit in this chair and tell the group what had been going on with them for the past 5 years and what they were doing in their projected future state. The strategy presented them with a chance to state how they solved past problems and to express their dreams.

My social worker colleague was always willing to do the exercise first and to model what was expected. Some students did not have anything to say, and others had goals that in most situations are clearly out of reach.

I noticed that these children responded favorably to literature and made useful connections with their own world through the words of others. I believe the following poem (Moss, 2003) reflects the children's inner emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, and I used it to help the students focus on their feelings, thoughts, and actions. Before reading the poem aloud to them, I had them check their moods, using the weather report technique to aid them in warming up. Once they reported their emotional and behavioral forecast, I read the poem to them.

On the Other Side of the Door

On the other side of the door
I can be a different me
As smart and as brave and as funny or strong
As a person could want to be.
There is nothing too hard for me to do
There's no place I can't explore
Because everything can happen
On the other side of the door.
On the other side of the door, I don't have to go alone.
If you come too, we can sail tall ships
And fly where the wind has flown.
And wherever we go, it is almost sure
We'll find what we are looking for
Because everything can happen
On the other side of the door.

After reading the poem, I took one of the scarves from my bag and hung it up to make a door. I then invited the students to step through the door, telling them that when they were on the other side of the door, they could be whoever or whatever they wanted to be. Before each person walked through the door as the protagonist, one of the other students reread the poem to that person. Each student had an opportunity to walk through the door and rehear the poem as she or he walked in. After each one walked through, I instructed each child to be, rather than say, who they were on the other side of the door. They could select auxiliaries if they needed them. From the other side of the door, we heard dreams put into the context of what the children wanted to achieve. The

contents of the students' goals were indeed realistic for them. The girl who wanted to be a veterinarian talked to the animals as she took care of them, saying she was rescuing them from abuse and neglect. The girl who was a singer sang. Although her continual, attention-seeking behavior alienated her classmates, they were able, in this activity, to clap and cheer for her, something she was desperately needing from them. A third student wanted to be president so that she could get enough food for children who were hungry. In these and other examples during this session, I was struck by the modulating of goals that had taken place and the understanding that the students had gained of themselves and what they needed and wanted. The opportunity to participate in an enrichment program gave them time to express themselves with words and actions and to develop increased empathy for each other.

Conclusion

Summarizing the accomplishments of the 2 years of this grant for developing action groups with special education children was challenging. When psychodrama works, there is nothing like it. That is not to say, however, that there are not days when it does not work. I recall stopping a session full of distracting behavior in which students were talking and teasing one another. Any activity or intervention that I made was dismissed and only provided more opportunity for disruptive behavior. I said to the children, "I am not getting it right, and I have some hard thinking to do. I will come back next time and offer you something more worth the time." That verbal intervention turned things around because they stopped acting out. How I handled a "failed" situation became a model for them. Rather than letting all their defenses clamp me down, I acknowledged my imperfection and that opened a door. It showed and expressed that limitations are part of being human.

With this school project, I had the opportunity to explore a variety of action techniques with learning and emotionally disabled children within a public school environment. The level of affiliation that the students felt toward me and the deepening bond they developed with one another were apparent in the final sessions. They now had the ability to talk without reacting aggressively to one another and had increased their levels of trust and self-esteem.

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