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Quality Assurance in the Work of Schools: The Swiss Case[*]

The canton of Zurich has always had a certain leadership position in the Swiss education system, at least in the sense that Zurich has done development work that other cantons have been able to profit from. Current educational reform in Zurich ranges from changes in teacher education to changes in the primary/elementary schools.[1] Many projects have undergone extensive evaluation, and most projects have also been approved through public vote. The different projects in Zurich have general premises and objectives for changes that are being seen as key to quality development in the education system. Complex systems can be changed only with the interplay of individual projects, never changed at once as a whole. And it is always only one's own existing system that can be changed; a foreign system can never be copied.

In this respect, Finland's comprehensive school system plays a rather subordinate role in Switzerland; if comparisons are drawn, then they are drawn with other Swiss cantons and not with a supposed ideal system. What is decisive is not the shortfall from an ideal but rather the coherency of the individual projects, which is difficult enough. There was no master plan at the start. Instead, there were various sketches that only gradually condensed into a series of projects. Plans forming a uniform and integrated whole that have everything under control from the beginning are fantasies of the authorities. The reality has to be able to make self-corrections.

There are seven fundamental maxims behind the reform projects in Zurich:

1. Greater autonomy for the individual schools tied in with fundamental changes in accountability and school oversight
2. Establishment of competent and authorized school management/principals
3. Special measures for problem situations, such as high percentages of children speaking foreign languages and from educationally disadvantaged families
4. Changing the purely "instructional school": Integration of social pedagogical and school psychological services
5. Reorientation of teacher education in the direction of standards for specific school subjects and for transferable skills
6. Utilization of education research for system management and monitoring
7. Development of new instruments

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[1] The reform at the elementary level is the integration of the two-year kindergarten into the first year of basic primary and secondary school. In other cantons, this is the *Basisstufe*, or basic level, with different arrangements, such as integration of a one-year kindergarten into the first two years of primary school.

In the following I will refer mainly to two projects, namely, the project for development and establishment of competent school management/principals and the external evaluations project. These two projects have progressed to a point where conclusions can now be drawn. And they are possibly of interest also to a German audience.

New forms of school management were developed in the framework of the Canton of Zurich's reform project called "semi-autonomous public schools." This school project was developed in the context of the canton's comprehensive public management reform along the lines of New Public Management.[2] The Zurich school system has some special features that should be mentioned: *Volksschule* in Zurich refers to the entire years of compulsory education, which are subdivided into primary school (grades 1 to 6) and secondary school with basic or advanced classes (grades 7 to 9). Upper secondary is structured in different levels. Pupils can enter the university-preparatory *Matura* diploma schools either after grade 6[3] or grade 8, so that there are a six-year-long Matura school and a four-year-long Matura school. There is no eight-year-long *Gymnasium* as found in Germany or Austria.

Most children by far attend basic primary and secondary school; 19% complete the university school-leaving Matura diploma (in Germany, *Abitur*). Only 5% of pupils attend private schools; at the primary school level this is only 2%. The percentage of foreign national children is on average 25% per school year, with the exception of the special education classes, as is also the case in Germany.[4] But the percentage can vary widely depending on the locality. In the Canton of Zurich the schools are not uniform in their means. The financial strength of the municipalities varies, and so the schools have different budgets.[5] Still, development is possible, as can be seen in the establishment of new forms of school management.

Semi-autonomous public schools and thus new school management were not introduced by decree but instead developed through considerable effort. This is important to mention, because quality assurance depends mainly on development work. Participation in the pilot project was voluntary; the project period was three years; the first schools completed the work in the year 2000. By mid 2004, 70 municipalities as well as the cities of Zurich and Winterthur were participants, with a total of 200 independent school units at the basic primary and secondary and kindergarten levels.[6] The pilot project was completed at the end of 2004 and represented the basis of a new school law, which was put to the vote in June 2005. The

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[2] The comprehensive reform program is called *wif!*, which stands for *Wirkungsorientierte Führung der Verwaltung des Kantons Zürich*. The principles and procedures of the reform program are set down in a law that was approved by the voting public of Zurich on December 1, 1996. The guidelines and regulations of the reform program apply also for the schools and institutions of higher education of the canton, subject to approval by the voting public, which had beforehand done away with the civil service system. The comprehensive public management reform, which focuses flexibilization, performance objectives, performance assessment, and continuous quality evaluation, was the basis for similarly reforming and restructuring the school system.

[3] Pupils enter into a lower Matura school after grade 6 for two years. After that they continue on to the four-year Matura school. Not all Matura schools have lower schools; in the Canton of Zurich 11 of 21 Matura schools have lower schools.

[4] The percentage of foreign national children in special education classes is 58% (source: Bildungsdirektion des Kantons Zürich (2002). *Die Schulen im Kanton Zürich.*).

[5] Differences remain also after cantonal financial compensation.

[6] In 1997 22 schools participated in the pilot project, in 1998 a further 29, in 1999 a further 39, in 2000 a further 23, in 2001a further 40, and in 2002 a further 45. By 2004 one-third of all school classes in the Canton of Zurich were participating in the pilot project.

law was approved with over 70% yes votes; this was three years after a first bill had been rejected. It is worthwhile, therefore, when the political process itself makes corrections.

The Zurich semi-autonomous public schools are based on the ideas of flexibilization and devolution of responsibility and accountability to the "front line," the school units, whose management/principals are delegated certain authority. Through the course of the development of the "semi-autonomous public schools" some in part very extensive changes were made that have strengthened local school management/principals. Local school principals have gained power and authority and are thus no longer merely designated, additionally burdened members of the teaching staff who have no formal powers. This is the tricky part of the reform, but it is also a prerequisite for the success of the project on external evaluation.

With the continuation of the semi-autonomous public schools project, the new school management/principals have become more and more established as a central element of school development. The new school management/principals replace the old "heads of the schoolhouse," that is, the previously designated teachers in each schoolhouse who had no special authority and were assigned mainly administrative tasks. Teachers' acceptance of the new system is positive overall; starting difficulties were surmounted; not one of the 200 schools participating in the pilot project dropped out, and not one went back to the old system after the project period, although that would have been possible. The effects of the pilot project are visible in the individual schools and not just in the evaluation reports. It is also clear that nothing can really be decreed and that reform must have the consent of the teachers. The teaching staff must see the benefit of the changes.

In contrast to the old system of a designated teacher with no formal powers, the new school principals have enormously increased jurisdiction, as an evaluation reports states (Rhyn, Widmer, Roos, & Nideröst, 2002, p.79). They receive compensation: Most of the old teachers designated as head of schoolhouse were not relieved of their regular teaching duties, whereas half of the school principals in the project schools[7] teach seven fewer lessons (Rhyn et al., 2002, p. 98). The greatest burden for the school principals is the "back and forth between classroom teaching and school management activities," the "many administrative tasks and the great deal of time required to handle them" (p. 127). But the earlier that schools began taking part in the project, the more tasks that the school principals have today for which they and *they alone* are responsible. They establish their influence and expand it, and this is apparently irreversible (p. 132).

With the passing of the new school law of 2005, all schools had to introduce school principals. It was only at this point – with the generalization of the pilot project – that greater problems appeared. The schools that had not participated in the pilot project were not prepared for this step. They reacted in part as if in culture shock, because now there were suddenly school principals and data had to be disclosed. Also, for many of the unprepared schools, target agreements were unknown territory, territory that some would have preferred not entering. And external evaluations met with fierce opposition. It is interesting that "wait-and-see" apparently does not pay, once development dynamics are underway.

If we want to sum up the experiences in the form of one principle, it is the following:

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[7] The pilot project schools differ in size and are variously equipped.

- Increasing autonomy for individual schools is a central prerequisite for further development,
- but greater autonomy demands also more management and other forms of control.

Teachers do not like to hear the word "evaluation" in connection with the word "external." That sounds too much like control and, more precisely, loss of control. What surprises German teachers the most when they visit primary schools in Switzerland is that parents and officials can visit the classroom unannounced, and thus in a disordered way, and that they actually do so. External evaluations are always announced, of course, but they are based on a comparable principle of transparency. It is not a threat but a part of the professionalism of teachers that they show their cards.

External evaluations are data-based feedback on the quality achieved and the local problem situation; the school is supposed to use the feedback for its further development. Evaluation of this kind represents a considerable change in school oversight, which in its basic form dates back to the nineteenth century and was not by chance called *Inspektorat*, or supervisory authority. An inspector[8] keeps something under surveillance but does not develop anything; the new problem is how control *and* development can be brought together. "Control" should not be understood literally; it is not about inspectors that come into the school but instead about experts exercising a critical eye to support the school. In my example, the experts are not a part of the administration. They are specially trained evaluators that have the ability to put the things that they notice to discussion, without any sanctions connected. The procedure is similar to the peer review process as it is known in the university area.

The second Zurich project was called *Neue Schulaufsicht*, or "new school supervision." This name was not chosen at random. The new school supervision was to replace a second level in the militia system, namely, the district school committee, which represented a kind of court of appeals for the teaching staff and has now been done away with by vote, against in part considerable opposition. What was decisive was that at voting time, a convincing alternative was available. Today there are only: school supervision in the municipalities and a cantonal evaluation office, or unit, which conducts evaluations of schools. I will tell you something about their development in closing.

Starting in 2007, in the Canton of Zurich there is an external evaluation of all schools every four years conducted by the new cantonal office for school evaluations (*Fachstelle für Schulbeurteilung*).[9] External evaluation is a fixed component of professional quality assurance. Also here, the canton has now had several years of experience, once again in schools that volunteered to participate in the project. And here again, non-participating schools that chose to "wait-and-see" had to try to comprehend what the others already had behind them, and this no longer under pilot project conditions. The reactions to the external evaluations were in part fierce; the procedure was questioned, as were also the fairness of the assessment and always the whole concept of steering through periodic feedback, out of which duties arise.

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[8] The Latin verb *inspicere* means to "look into something," "scrutinize," or "examine" an object or situation, which itself is not acted upon.
[9] http://www.bildungsdirektion.zh.ch/internet/bi/fsb/de/home.html

The method of external evaluation sees *school supervision* as part and parcel of school *development*. The evaluation data describe strengths and weaknesses; they serve further development of the schools; and they are converted into target agreements. This concept demands three main actors, namely, the evaluation team, the local school committee, and the school management. The concept would not be enforceable with the old type of "heads of the school house." Only with the new school principals can a longer-term development based on targets be achieved that can be implemented responsibly, which means not merely implicitly understood through consensus among teaching staff.

Since 1999, the new school supervision model in the Canton of Zurich has been tried out in over 70 schools. The concept was tested and validated based on these school trials. Without this long-year process, it would not have been possible to push through external evaluation, as it was politically suspicious and many teachers opposed it. It became possible because a locally tried and adapted process was available.

Today's cantonal office for school evaluations conducts standardized evaluations contracted by the schools after coordination with the local school committee. As a first step, the school conducts a self-evaluation and then a team from the cantonal office for school evaluations conducts the external evaluation. The procedure and the conditions can be described as follows:

- The teams at the cantonal office are independent; they are contracted by the local authorities but do not act under their instructions.
- The evaluations are conducted with the greatest possible transparency of the criteria and methods, which are disclosed openly.[10]
- The schools prepare self-evaluation reports; the evaluation team conducts a school visit, collects data, and prepares reports, which serve as the basis for further action.
- The evaluation reports are discussed by the teaching staff and also with parents and pupils; the discussions are target oriented and development oriented.
- On this basis, school principal and school committee reach an agreement on development goals and on special measures for the coming reporting period.

The new school supervision project was itself evaluated. The data at that time showed that the procedure met with the approval of the schools, which felt that they are taken seriously and that came to see that (and how) they benefited from the originally feared external evaluations. The schools were in favor of the project and graded it as a gain in quality. The data collection procedure was rated appropriate, and the results were judged highly credible. Precisely determining the consequences was seen as difficult; the evaluation reports were not in every case a basis for effective target agreements and thus for a targeted development policy of the individual school. It was also found a shortcoming that classroom teaching was not taken into sufficient consideration in the evaluation, mainly due to time constraints (Binder & Trachsler, 2002).

The members of the evaluation teams are experts who all have teaching certification and school experience, for otherwise they would find no acceptance in the field. Evaluation mandates cannot simply be given to evaluation offices; evaluators' knowledge and experience with the professional field must be carefully considered, because otherwise there will be an immediate credibility gap. Schools should be evaluated by teachers – but by teachers with

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[10] To this purpose there is an evaluation manual (Bildungsdirektion des Kantons Zürich, 2001).

extensive experience in the profession as well as evaluation competency. If schools are to learn to openly disclose information and to present themselves as transparently as possible, they must assume field-specific competency. Turned around, the acceptance of the data and conclusions of evaluations is the higher, the more that the teaching staff gain the impression that the evaluators understand teaching and holding school. In other words, schools cannot be evaluated by consulting firms.

The external evaluations also have an inner aspect. Projects on external evaluations are dependent upon their own development; they learn as they build up and continue their own practice. The evaluation teams must develop a sensorium for task and field that becomes a specific competency. A comparison of the evaluation reports that were prepared during the pilot project phase from 1999 to 2004 reveals that only gradually a language was found for describing the strengths and weaknesses of a school in such a way that the presentation was both acceptable *and* effective. The language must be sufficiently clear so that the weaknesses are not suppressed, but it must not offend and alienate the school being evaluated.

In the end the reports kick off inner-school examination and analysis, at the end of which are target agreements. Goals are merely semantic phrases until it becomes clear what they refer to. The reports by the evaluation team offer new approaches to school development that must be conveyed to the people involved in such a way that they seem promising. Here again, a great task falls to the school principal, who must work on translating the data and findings of the evaluation into the concrete development work of the school.

If the report is just put aside or, shelved, as the Swiss say, "*schubladisiert*" (literally, "put in a drawer"), nobody benefits. On the other hand, schools have to be able to act after the evaluation, which would put further and continuing education on a new basis, for instance. It must provide on-demand offerings that the schools can make use of depending on their needs. With that, external evaluation also has education and training consequences or consequences for personnel development. Experience has shown that especially the clear naming of weaknesses results in an immediate need for action. This impetus must be utilized.

The developments in the area of monitoring the schools can be summed up as follows:

- The decisive reference line for school development is: the teachers, their pupils, and the classroom.
- Everything else is framework conditions, which can be favorable or less favorable for development projects.
- Important for changing the local framework conditions are in fact new forms of organization, such as school principals with delegated authority or the monitoring of development through external evaluations.
- But it is also important that suitable instruments are available that get to instruction and are accepted by the teaching staff.

In German pedagogy this last dimension has always been underestimated and distrusted as an emphasis on "technologies." But schools consist of "technologies"; the question is only how suitable and good they are. Instruments play a central role also in the Zurich experiences with external evaluations. I will try to show this in my conclusion.

The new cantonal office for school evaluations began its work in the school year of 2006/2007. In that year 42 schools were evaluated, which was about half the number of schools planned for the full activity of the office. In the school year 2007/2008, 90 schools were evaluated. At the start of 2008, 26 evaluators conducted school evaluations; another 12 were recruited through the course of the year. Information on each evaluator's education and professional experience is available at the website of the office; this means that the schools being evaluated know something about the persons doing the evaluation.[11] Full activity for the office will mean that the office has more than 30 full-time positions and a budget of 5.2 million Swiss francs. It is responsible for the entire area of compulsory education but not for Matura schools and vocational schools.

The employment of the evaluators is flexible but the full-time equivalent, or FTE, is never below 50%. This means that the evaluators also work in other fields of the education area and thus utilize their various experiences. Commercial use of their know-how is out of the question. The evaluators are not permitted to run further education firms that would respond to their own findings, for example. This is definitely a problem, because the schools ask the evaluators whether they can assist them with future development. But precisely that is out of the question. The policy is as follows: Evaluators do not develop.

These specialists in school evaluations represent a new profession for which there is up to now no education and training. The office for school evaluations hires its own staff members based on their suitability for the job and their previous experience. At the start of their jobs, the persons selected are familiarized with the requirements, whereby the office mainly introduces the evaluation process. The selection of the evaluators is of central importance. The composition of the evaluation teams always changes, so each evaluator must be able to cooperate with all of the others, and each evaluator must be capable of heading a team.

- The evaluation process is based on nine quality requirements (QA) that are concerned with three central areas of school development
- For each requirement there are three indicators.

The quality requirements are described in greater detail in a school quality manual, *Handbuch Schulqualität* (Bildungsdirektion des Kantons Zürich, 2005), and they are also evidence-based, as far as was possible based on the current state of research. The manual was published in 2005[12] and was an important basis for the development of the office for school evaluations. However, the nine quality requirements are not taken directly from the manual but instead adapted for the tasks and possibilities of evaluation.

Evaluations have limited time resources; not everything can be done that seems appropriate. The process itself has been gradually standardized, especially in view of the reports, as otherwise the resources would not be sufficient. With increasing experience with the process, what at the start was an individual full-text report has become a standardized product based on criteria and comparative data. The nine quality requirements that guide the self-evaluations of the schools, the school visits, and the evaluation reports form the normative basis.

The quality profile with quality requirements is as follows:

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[11] www.fsb.zh.ch

[12] This is a trial version by the Bildungsdirketion Kanton Zürich from September 2005. The definitive manual is planned to be published in the summer of 2010. The current version is available at:
www.bi.zh.ch/internet/bi/de/Direktion/planung/de/Projekte/Handbuch_SQ.html

1. School life and environment

- *QA 1: The school cultivates a lively and respectful school community.*
  - Indicator a: Pupils are comfortable with each other and feel safe on school grounds.
  - Indicator b: The school fosters contact among all pupils through school events.
  - Indicator c: Pupils feel that teachers take them seriously and treat them fairly.
  - Indicator d: Through suitable arrangements, pupils participate in shaping everyday school life.
- *QA 2: The school guarantees that binding behavior rules are developed and followed.*
  - Indicator a: The school has common behavior rules for pupils.
  - Indicator b: Pupils are familiar with and understand the behavior rules.
  - Indicator c: The school monitors observance of the rules and responds when rules are broken.

2. Teaching and learning

- *QA 3: Classroom instruction is clearly structured and stimulating.*
  - Indicator a: The course of the lessons is coherent in structure.
  - Indicator b: Teachers give pupils a comprehensible framework for orientation.
  - Indicator c: Teachers issue clear oral and written instructions and tasks.
  - Indicator d: Teachers plan stimulating lessons.
- *QA 4: Teachers plan differentiated and individualized lesson sequences.*
  - Indicator a: Teachers make use of forms of teaching and learning that make possible individual learning.
  - Indicator b: Teachers differentiate the offerings in level of difficulty, learning pace, or interest of pupils.
  - Indicator c: Teachers demand of pupils individually appropriate performance.
- *QA 5: Teachers create a classroom environment that fosters learning and achievement.*
  - Indicator a: Teachers support pupils through encouragement and recognition.
  - Indicator b: Pupils are respectful of others, and ostracizing behavior is not tolerated.
  - Indicator c: Classroom instruction proceeds with few disruptions, and the consequences for disruptions are well established.
- *QA 6: Criteria and methods of assessment are understandable and fair.*
  - Indicator a: Performance expectations are clear to pupils.
  - Indicator b: The most important assessment criteria are transparent and understandable for pupils and parents.
  - Indicator c: Pupils and parents find the assessment fair.

3. Management

- *QA 7: The school principal's leadership in the areas of personnel, education, and organization is goal-oriented.*
  - Indicator a: The school principal holds regular and target-oriented leadership meetings with all members of staff.

- o Indicator b: The school principal makes sure that educational questions and issues are systematically made the subject of discussion.
- o Indicator c: The school principal makes sure that tasks and authority of school staff members are clearly set out and performed reliably.
- o Indicator d: The school principal makes sure that school staff members follow the common goals and targets for school quality and quality of instruction.[13]
- *QA 8: The school regularly evaluates important areas of instruction and the school.*
  - o Indicator a: School developments are evaluated systematically.
  - o Indicator b: Teachers regularly obtain 360° feedback on their teaching practice.
  - o Indicator c: Instruction developments at the school level are evaluated regularly.
- *QA 9: School principal and teachers give parents regular information on the school, instruction, and their children's school performance.*
  - o Indicator a: The school principal regularly informs parents of important projects/plans, events, and developments at the school.
  - o Indicator b: Teachers give parents regular information on the classroom and classroom instruction.
  - o Indicator c: Teachers regularly inform parents of their children's development in performance and behavior.

These are normative requirements, the point and purpose of which have been proved in practice. As an example, the last indictor listed above shows this well. A frequently heard and, I feel, justifiable reproach expressed by many parents is a lack of transparency in a pupil's development in scholastic performance, that is, in the longer term process, which from the parents' point of view is hidden or camouflaged. By the time that report cards are sent home, it is often too late to intervene in the developments, which many parents would like to do, as they are often not satisfied with what their children tell them. This is connected with the phenomenon that many pupils would rather wait for poor grades than change their performance behavior. A lack of transparency gives them short-term advantages, but parents frequently suspect that something is in store.

There are schools in Switzerland that inform parents of their children's progress every four weeks. The schools set up databases in which all of the teachers enter the children's grades on their written work. The parents are sent regular printouts that show the children's current grades, and parents have to sign them. This gives parents the chance to think about what their strategy will be, if they and their child are not satisfied with the child's grades. Schools that have changed to electronic formats and that work with virtual learning platforms, such as the secondary school in the municipality of Bürglen in Thurgau,[14] could also communicate in this way with the pupils. The pupils would always have access to their current performance levels. Tasks, results, and grades are stored electronically, so that learning status would also be highly transparent.

But to return to the Zurich office for school evaluations: The quality profile of a school is set down by the evaluators using an evaluation sheet. The criteria on the sheet correspond exactly with the nine quality requirements. Each of the in total 30 criteria is rated,

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[13] This refers to the school's mission statement, goals for the year, school program, or minimal standards of instruction.
[14] http://www.schulebuerglen.ch/Oberstufe_Buerglen/Download/ER-Lernraum.htm

and each individual quality requirement is given a total score. The schools put together their own school portfolio containing their base data and their previous activities. This school portfolio is the first document that the evaluators receive from the school that they visit. The school portfolio has the following sections:

- Facts and figures on the school
- Organization, management, and cooperation
- School program and instruction development
- Guiding educational concepts and emphases
- Analysis of strengths and weaknesses
- Quality assurance

In addition, the schools comment on special focus topics of the evaluation that apply to all schools in the canton and are the result of policy decisions. At present, a compulsory focus topic of school evaluations is the fostering of German language learning. The schools must disclose what they have undertaken or not undertaken in this area. Promoting reading and German language skills is then no longer at the discretion of the individual school.

Prior to and during the evaluators' site visit at the school, parents, teachers, and pupils fill out anonymous questionnaires. There are four questionnaires. Pupils are categorized as in the middle or upper level; pupils in the lower level are not surveyed. In addition, in-depth guided interviews are conducted on the compulsory focus topic. For evaluation of instruction, there is an observation sheet pertaining to quality requirements 3 to 5. All of the indicators are rated using the following scale:

1. Insufficient practice /non-existing
2. Somewhat in practice, functioning
3. Good, deliberate practice
4. Excellent, exemplary

In this way, the often cited "best practice" can become visible, which in turn has consequences for further education. You cannot learn from the best, if you do not know where it is. And that, of course, holds for the best schools, too.

After the data had been collected and the findings assessed, the school receives a report that has been written specifically for the school. The conclusion of the report contains clear recommendations for the further development of the school. Recommendations are, for example:

- We recommend that you standardize recording of the individual child's achievement level and the learning planning, for the purpose of concentrating resources.
- We recommend that you regularly evaluate instruction practice.
- We recommend that you utilize the results of comparative learning achievement surveys systematically for your school and especially for fostering of language learning.

Each year, the office for school evaluations prepares an annual report for the Department of Education of the Canton of Zurich on the school evaluations; it is assessed politically, and it results in measures. The first complete report was issued in February 2009. It is not an education report consisting of statistics but instead a very precise description of the

strengths and weaknesses of the cantonal system with locally collected data. One result is expected: The acceptance will reflect the assessment.

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