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**From 'Maybe' To 'We'll See':  
Understanding and Fostering Teacher Research In Schools**

by

**Brenda Power**

*Research is a high-hat word that scares a lot of people. It needn't. It's rather simple. Essentially research is nothing but a state of mind ... A friendly, welcoming attitude toward change ... going out to look for change instead of waiting for it to come.*

*Research is an effort to do things better and not to be caught asleep at the switch. It is the problem-solving mind as contrasted with the let-well-enough-alone mind. It is the tomorrow mind instead of the yesterday mind.*

*—Charles Kettering*

My niece Julie is a born researcher. At four years of age, her plans one summer morning included persuading her mother to take her and her two-year-old brother Johnny to the playground. All morning, as her mom worked in the kitchen, she was approached by Julie with the query, "Can we go to the playground this afternoon?" The first six lobbying efforts were met with the response, "I don't know." The seventh received the reply, "I don't know, but if you ask again, the answer is NO."

A few minutes later, two-year-old Johnny toddled into the kitchen. Mom spied Julie, hiding just beyond the kitchen door. "Momma, go playground?" asked Johnny. Mom replied in an exasperated tone, "I don't know—we'll see." Johnny toddled back out of the kitchen, to be met at the threshold by Julie. "What'd she say? What'd she say?!" Julie demanded. Johnny replied slowly, enunciating as clearly as he could, "She say 'we'll see'." Julie jumped up and down in glee. "Oh goody! Cuz 'maybe' means 'no' but 'we'll see' means 'yes!'"

After hearing this exchange, Julie's mom began to monitor her speech for the next two weeks. She realized Julie was right. She discovered every time she said 'maybe,' unconsciously the answer was really no. And when she said 'we'll see,' the children got their way.

Research is a process of discovering essential questions, gathering data, and analyzing it to answer those questions. Like Julie, we are all born looking for patterns in the world. These patterns unlock the secrets of how language works, of how affection is gained and lost, of how one piece of knowledge builds upon another. In its simplest sense, research helps us gain control of our world. When we understand the patterns underlying the language we use or the interactions we have with others, we have a better sense of how to adjust our behaviors and expectations. For four year olds, a critical goal of research might be to gain access to a playground. But for teachers who engage in systematic and thoughtful analyses of their teaching and students, the goals are diverse and complex.

Teacher research is research that is initiated and carried out by teachers in their classrooms and schools. Teacher researchers use their inquiry to study everything from the best way to teach reading and the most useful methods for organizing group activities to the different ways girls and boys respond to a science curriculum.

I began with the anecdote of Julie and her mom, because it conveys the simplicity of beginning with genuine questions which are truly relevant to researchers. For many years, most teachers have criticized educational research as not being relevant to their needs, or written in a way that fails to connect with their classroom practice. I'm not denigrating the value of traditional educational research—I've completed many research studies myself as a university professor. But there's little question even the finest educational research studies have failed to find a wide audience among K-12 teachers. It's no wonder that teacher research (also known as "action research" and "practitioner inquiry")<sup>1</sup> has emerged not only as a significant new contributor to research on teaching, but also as a source of systemic reform within individual schools and districts.

I also began this essay with Julie's story because much teacher research is rich in classroom anecdotes and personal stories. While all methodologies are used for teacher inquiry, it is dominated by qualitative inquiry. In contrast to traditional education research studies, written in a distant, third person voice, teacher research often has an immediate, first person tone. Findings in teacher research are usually presented as narratives from the classroom, with metaphors a common means of highlighting key findings. As Jalongo, Isenberg and Gerbracht (1995) note, "Stories are both mirrors of our own practice and windows on the practice of others" (p. 174). In teacher research, stories are a critical tool for illuminating the deeper theories or rules governing the way a classroom community works.

As an administrator, it is natural to see teacher research as "maybe" work—something that can be considered when the pressing needs of the district (i.e., balancing the budget, implementing a sound after school program or new science curriculum) are done. In this scheme, teacher research will never reach a high enough spot on the roster of needs in a district to be developed and supported. The concept of "teacher research" and the value of this work are vague to many educators, while the immediate issues that need to be resolved in any district demand an instant response.

But there are numerous ways to help teachers develop inquiry skills that are relevant to most any initiative enacted by a district. Learning not only how to solve but also how to seek out and analyze problems enables teachers to integrate more reflection naturally into their practice, which is essential for any reform movement in schools. Educational researchers and reformers agree that sustained and significant change in schools will require a reflective stance on the part of all educators, as well as a willingness to change practice based on that reflection. School leaders can play a crucial role in creating environments in schools that support the development of these reflective and research skills in teachers. These are the "we'll see" possibilities for teacher research that will be explored later in this essay.

### **Teacher Research: A Very Brief History**

While teacher research has re-emerged recently as a significant kind of educational research, it's important to realize that the movement has deep and enduring roots. The three

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<sup>1</sup>What to call research by school personnel causes no small debate within the educational community. Some teachers feel putting the words "teacher" or "practitioner" before their research serves as a diminutive, diminishing the perceived importance of the work. Others feel "action" as a modifier conveys a "quick and dirty" approach to research, which also demeans the value of this type of research. I use the term "teacher research" because I like the notion of the teacher being central to the work and coming first in the label. My own contributions to the field have been in looking at how teachers work within individual classrooms to study learning and their own development.

principles that define the teacher research movement today all have been used widely in different educational contexts, at different times in history:

1. *Teacher research is based upon close observation of students at work.*

Educational historians (McFarland & Stansell, 1993) have traced the roots of teacher research back to Comenius (1592-1670), who was a proponent of linking child psychology with observational data to develop teaching methods. Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and Rosseau (1712-1778) developed and advocated observations of children to understanding learning, but it was Herbart (1776-1841) who applied these methods in a systematic way in schools to develop principles of curriculum development. At the turn of the century and beyond, the work of Montessori (1870-1952) emphasized the value of teachers using their observations to build systematic understanding of students.

2. *Teacher research begins with the teacher's questions and concerns and is integrated into her existing teaching practices.*

At its best, teacher research is a natural extension of good teaching. Observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of all students have always been skills demonstrated by fine teachers. Teacher research involves collecting and analyzing data, as well as presenting it to others, in a more systematic way. But this research process involves the kinds of skills and classroom activities that already are a part of the classroom environment. As Glenda Bissex (1996) writes, a teacher-researcher is not a split personality, but a *more complete teacher*. While research is labor-intensive, so is good teaching. And the labor is similar for teachers because the end goal is the same—to create the best possible learning environment for students.

3. *Teacher researchers depend upon a research community.*

While there are examples of teacher researchers doing fine studies without support, sustained inquiry in schools or districts over time almost always involves the development of a research community. One of the earliest proponents of teacher research was Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Mitchell, a close colleague of Dewey's working in New York City, is famous for founding a consortium to support teacher research and distribution of findings in 1916. This group, the Bureau of Education Experiments, became the Bank Street School of Education in 1930 (McFarland & Stansell, 1993).

In England, Lawrence Stenhouse is widely credited with initiating an international teacher research movement. His consortium for supporting school inquiry, started in 1967, was a sensation in the English teaching community. This initiative led many English educators to begin research projects in their schools and become part of school research communities that endure today.

Maine's own Nancie Atwell is widely credited with much of the interest and excitement in the modern teacher research movement. Her studies of literacy learning in her middle school classroom in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, elegantly combine research findings with teaching strategies. Atwell was inspired by naturalistic researchers to analyze her teaching practice and used this work to validate the research of other teachers. Her book, *In the Middle*, was published in 1987. Atwell always acknowledges the importance of her colleagues in her development as a

researcher, noting that while “one teacher can do great things, a community of teachers can move mountains” (Atwell, 1991, p. 318).

While early teacher research communities often evolved within lab school settings, in recent years these communities have become more far-flung and diverse. Internet listserves like XTAR are designed solely to build international teacher research communities through ongoing dialogue. Many professional organizations (including the National Council of Teachers of English and the American Educational Research Association) now have teacher research special interest groups, with teacher research studies representing an increasing number of presentations at local and national research gatherings.

### **Critiques of Teacher Research**

The presence of a research community for teacher researchers is essential, in part because teacher research has always been viewed suspiciously by many university education faculty. Throughout history, as teachers have sought to research their practice, they have been criticized by university-based educational researchers. While the fundamental principles of teacher research have endured, so has the nature of the criticisms of this work. In 1957, Hodgkinson wrote, “Perhaps it would be better to describe action research as quantified common sense rather than a form of scientific, empirical research ... research is no place for an amateur” (p. 151).

Recent critiques of teacher research (see Huberman, 1996) make almost identical criticisms to Hodgkinson’s—teacher research in the eyes of critics is not generalizable, and teachers researching their own practice cannot meet existing standards for “quality” research.

For school leaders, what matters in a debate about the quality and value of teacher research is understanding the different aims of different kinds of research. Teacher researchers rarely seek to initiate and carry out studies that have large scale implications for educational policy. Unlike large-scale educational research, teacher research has a primary purpose of helping the teacher researcher understand her students and improve her practice in specific, concrete ways. Teacher research studies can lead to large-scale educational change if many teacher researchers studying similar problems see similar patterns in their findings. But for most teacher researchers, the significance of the study is in how it informs and changes their own teaching. Judging the value of large-scale educational research against teacher research confuses the purposes of different research agendas and devalues both types of studies.

Dewey was perhaps the first major figure in education to argue for teachers’ entree into the educational research community. In commenting on the large array of scientific reports on education and learning in 1929, he wrote:

A constant flow of less formal reports on special school affairs and results is needed. Of the various possibilities here I select one for discussion. It seems to me that the contributions that might come from classroom teachers are a comparatively neglected field; or, to change the metaphor, an almost unworked mine ... There are undoubted obstacles in the way. It is often assumed ... that classroom teachers have not themselves the training which will enable them to give effective intelligent cooperation. The objection proves too much, so much that it is almost fatal to the idea of a workable scientific content in education. For these teachers are the ones in direct contact with pupils and hence the ones through whom the results of scientific findings finally reach students. They are the channels through which

the consequences of educational theory come into the lives of those at school. [One questions] whether some of the incapacity, real or alleged, of this part of the corps of educators, the large mass of teachers, is not attributable to lack of opportunity and stimulus, rather than to inherent disqualification. As far as schools are concerned, it is certain that the problems which require scientific treatment arise in actual relationships with students. (in Wallace, p. 27)

Dewey, like other proponents of teacher research, chose to emphasize the strengths that teachers can bring to their research agendas (notably “direct contact with pupils” and their significant role as the “channels” for educational theory). He looked at the potential of teacher research, interestingly, from the same place many teachers now look at the potential of each of their students—building from teachers’ strengths, rather than from criticizing “real or alleged research deficiencies.

Perhaps there will always be tension between university and public school research communities, because the different aims of the research lead to different languages to discuss findings. Glenda Bissex’s study *GNYS At Wrk* (1980) is widely acknowledged as one of the fore runners to much modern day teacher research. In recounting an experience of presenting this research to a university hiring committee (Bissex, 1996), she confronts this dilemma of justifying the validity of her work to university researchers:

“And what does that prove?” one faculty member challenged me during an interview for my first full-time college teaching job. I had just finished telling him about my dissertation, a longitudinal study of my young son’s writing and reading development. Nobody on my dissertation committee had asked me that question, nor had I asked it myself in all the years I collected and pored through data, searching for patterns. I was confronted with an alien view from which—I too keenly grasped—my research appeared worthless ...

What had I proven? I hadn’t set out with a hypothesis to test in order to prove something to somebody. I’d started out with a curiosity whetted by transcripts of children’s talk ... I was fascinated by what I was seeing. I guess I was so busy learning that I didn’t worry about proving anything. Here was this wonderful growth unfolding in front of my eyes, and I wanted to truly see it. I wanted to probe it in places so I could know more than was on the surface. I was constantly looking for patterns as I reviewed piles of writings, tape recordings, and notes. Again and again, I asked, “What does this mean?” ... As I look at it now, the question of what I proved appears thin and pale and irrelevant beside the richness of all the meanings I discovered, of all that I learned. I wouldn’t have had any trouble answering the question, “And what did you learn?” (p. 142)

Bissex goes on to explain the fundamental differences in aims of teacher researchers that lead to miscommunication in research discussions:

The word *research* suggests the researcher is “proving” something, frequently to someone else ... While “research” has the right literal meaning—to look again—its connotations may be wrong for what teachers are doing. We are not researchers in other people’s classrooms, looking for proofs and generalizable truths, but reflective practitioners in our own classrooms, searching for insights that will help us understand and improve our practice. That does not exclude us from finding generalizable truths, although we may not know when we have found them. (p. 143)

Lytle and Cochran-Smith (1992) argue that standards in traditional educational research took many years to evolve, and in many respects are still evolving. They believe, like many teacher researchers, that the field of practitioner research also needs time to allow standards to evolve, and these standards might be very different from those of traditional educational research.

Stenhouse (in Ruddick & Hopkins, 1985) noted that the difference between the teacher researcher and the large-scale educational researcher is like the difference between a farmer with a huge agricultural business to maintain, and the “careful gardener” tending a backyard plot:

In agriculture the equation of invested input against gross yield is all: it does not matter if individual plants fail to thrive or die so long as the cost of saving them is greater than the cost of losing them. This does not apply to the careful gardener whose labour is not costed, but a labour of love. He wants each of his plants to thrive, and he can treat each one individually. Indeed he can grow a hundred different plants in his garden and differentiate his treatment of each, pruning his roses, but not his sweet peas. Gardening rather than agriculture is the analogy for education. (p. 27)

School administrators in many respects must move between the roles of “agribusiness manager” and “careful gardener.” They must attend to the large-scale measures of success or failure in their schools. But at the same time, they want every single student and teacher in their care to thrive, even if this means carefully analyzing and changing practices with individual students, classroom by classroom.

### **Teacher Research Today: Will It Endure?**

There are many important new trends in education that administrators must understand, and there are always fads within learning communities that come and go. A critical skill for anyone who wants to lead other educators is to learn the difference between the two. Given that the value of teacher research has peaked and waned at different times in this century, what evidence is there that it will be a significant part of education reform in the next century? I think there are a number of differences between the teacher research initiatives in previous decades and the current work of teacher researchers that point to the movement enduring.

First, teacher research in recent years has received significant new support and validation from existing educational research communities. In my own field, literacy education, teacher research studies have emerged as a dominant research methodology during award competitions. For example, Wilhelm’s study *You Gotta BE the Book* (1996) was awarded the Most Promising Researcher award from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1995—five of the last ten annual awards have also gone to teacher research studies.

Nancie Atwell’s book *In the Middle* (1987) was the first teacher research study to win the highest research award from the National Council of Teachers of English, the David Russell Award, in 1989. Teacher research studies continue to win top literacy research awards, most recently the James Britton Research Award given to *Sounds From the Heart* (Barbieri, 1996) in 1997.

Second, major funding agencies have designated existing and new funds for teacher research projects. The Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) has awarded millions to new teacher research development programs in Georgia and North Carolina since 1990. The Spencer Foundation, a leading funding agency for educational research, developed a

new program in 1995 to support the development of teacher research networks. In its 1996 Annual Report, it set a new goal of integrating teacher research awards into all of its other existing grant programs, too.

Third, teacher researchers are having a significant effect on research writing. In the recent *New York Times Book Review* essay “Dancing With Professors: The Problem With Academic Prose,” Patricia Limerick (1993) recounts a conversation with a colleague about scholarly writing:

Ten years ago, I heard a classics professor say the single most important thing—in my opinion—that anyone has said about professors: “We must remember,” he declared, “that professors are the ones nobody wanted to dance with in high school.”

This is an insight that lights up the universe—or at least the university. It is a proposition that every entering freshman should be told, and it is certainly a proposition that helps to explain the problem of academic writing. What one sees in professors, repeatedly, is exactly the manner that anyone would adopt after a couple of sad evenings sidelined under the crepe-paper streamers in the gym, sitting on a folding chair while everyone else danced. Dignity, for professors, perches precariously on how well they can convey this message: “I am immersed in some very important thoughts, which unsophisticated people could not even begin to understand. Thus, I would not want to dance, even if one of you unsophisticated people were to ask me.” Think of this, then, the next time you look at an unintelligible academic text. “I would not want the attention of a wide reading audience, even if a wide audience were to ask me.” Isn’t that exactly what the pompous and pedantic tone of the classically academic writer conveys? (p. 3)

While Limerick is writing about scholars in general, it is easy to imagine education professors sitting on those lonely chairs, and teachers out on the floor dancing. I’ve sat sheepishly through many a graduate class where teachers, either dumbfounded or stifling giggles, read back virtually incomprehensible prose written by an educational researcher that I had assigned them to read. The high school dance is an apt metaphor, too, for the distance and hostility sometimes experienced between teachers and academic scholars. Teachers respond well to teacher research studies because they are peppered with anecdotes from the classroom that connect with their own experience. Teacher research challenges the notion that research writing needs to be dry, distant, and filled with jargon. Best-selling teacher research studies like Jeanne Henry’s *If Not Now*, Vivian Paley’s *Wally’s Stories*, and Timothy Lensmire’s *When Children Write* are great reads—they are as well-crafted as fine novels in the way teachers, students, and events are portrayed.

Teacher research challenges the writing conventions in much education research, but I also believe that it has the potential to be the needed bridge between practitioners and university researchers. Teachers are demanding, in large part through their wallets, a research writing style and tone different than the scholarship that has dominated the research literature for decades. Many current best-selling education textbooks are teacher research studies—Nancie Atwell’s study of her Maine students alone has sold over 400,000 copies worldwide.

At the same time, as teachers begin to complete their own research studies, they often need a new language to describe what they are seeing. What teachers scoffed at as “jargon” before they began their research sometimes becomes useful new terms to describe learning events. They see their classrooms in a new light, and the language of research in a new way, after trying to accurately describe their own findings.



The need for large-scale school inquiry by researchers who aren't part of the school communities they study will always be an essential part of school reform. Teacher researcher Jeanne Henry (1997), in her defense of teacher research, explains why university research communities are still essential:

I am not arguing that conventional research has no value, or is always exploitative or offensive. Teachers do terrible things sometimes, and we need others who are not knee deep in our reality to point this out. We need the work of researchers like Ray Rist (1970). Rist observed that ability group placement sometimes had more to do with students' socioeconomic background—including matters such as race, dialect, and cleanliness—than with their linguistic knowledge, a finding which shook the field of literacy instruction to its very core. Since carcinogens such as classism, racism, inertia, and indifference can invade our teaching, we need outsiders who can point out what our perceptual limitations do not permit us to see. (p. 6)

I would argue that a teacher researcher who has been sensitized to her own flaws in teaching through reflective inquiry in her classroom is probably more ready to deal with those "terrible things" revealed through research initiated by outside professionals and scholars.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly for school leaders, we have reached a point where it is no longer possible to tackle one school issue or concern at a time. We face those "carcinogens" of racism and inertia, but we also deal in individual communities with test scores that have fallen in math, or a science curriculum that needs to be rebuilt, or a block schedule that is successful in two district schools but failing dismally in a third, or a very needy student who is disrupting an entire third-grade class. More and more, administrators and teachers depend upon their ability to build a corps of reflective learners in their schools, from administrators in central offices to teachers in classrooms to students in their care.

This community of learners must have the ability to be those "problem seekers" Kettering praises in the cover quote for this essay. It is a complex, complicated garden we are tending, and we need a diverse array of research tools and strategies to make it thrive.

### **The Evolution of One Maine Teacher Research Group**

One evening in the fall of 1996, some Mapleton, Maine, teachers and their teaching principal, Gail Gibson, went out for dinner after an inservice presentation on reading. "We're always trying to figure out how to help readers in our school who are struggling. Teachers were feeling frustrated—they felt like they needed more information than what they were receiving from books and workshops," explained Gail. That evening, the group sketched out first thoughts for what became a \$2,000 minigrant from a state agency to learn more about teacher research from a staff developer.

I asked Gail why reading was chosen as the research topic, given that Mapleton has very high Maine Educational Assessment Scores in reading. An outsider viewing the scores alone might wonder how reading instruction could improve at the school. Gail laughed, and replied, "It doesn't matter how high the scores are. Every teacher has at least a couple of students in her class that aren't reading as well as they should, and this will always be something that concerns a good teacher." This is a clear example of the "careful gardener" metaphor for teacher research in action—

until every student in every class thrives in reading, teachers will want to know more about how to best teach reading.

The Mapleton teacher research group's evolution is chronicled by Chandler (1997), who found it was important to begin with a few basic premises:

1. *Every teacher was free to choose how much they wanted to become involved.*

Teachers weren't required to participate in the group—the make-up of the group shifted over the course of the year. “One teacher last year really struggled to attend meetings, and often couldn't because she had a new baby and a lot on her plate. I respect that, because I've been there in my life, too. She came when she could, and did what she could. This year, she's found more time to take notes, and even used some of her research notes to make a point at a district curriculum meeting this fall. I was so happy to see that—to help her see last year that it's all right to have other priorities for her life, and to see this year that when she does have more time for research it's easy for her to integrate it into her professional life,” said Gail. “When you tell teachers come in when you can, if you can, there is a place for everyone, no matter what their personal situation is at the moment.”

2. *As part of the research, teachers observed each other and compared their notes to develop their observation skills.*

For Gail, consistent and frequent visits by teachers and herself to other classrooms have become an essential element of fostering an environment where teacher development remains central in staff planning. “There is so much pressure on teachers,” explained Gail. “We always expect them to do better, and even great teachers are expected to maintain that high level of terrific work at all times. It's remarkable what a difference it makes to teachers when they have colleagues who recognize and note in concrete ways the skills evident in their teaching. It makes them very willing to listen to suggestions for improvement.”

3. *The principal (Gail Gibson) was a full participant in workshops, reading discussions, and observational visits.*

Gail found her participation in the group was critical for the group's and her own development, as she recounts: “Learning to take notes as a teacher researcher was important in maintaining a rapport with the teachers—I was very nervous about this, being a new principal when this project began. When I went to do observations of teachers, I found myself naturally scripting notes, and then going through and color-coding three different themes or patterns I saw in each observation. Once teachers saw this was my process, and I was noticing so many positive things in their classrooms, they became very comfortable with my visits and looked forward to them.”

4. *Money is budgeted to support the research throughout the year.*

This dollar amount at Mapleton is small, but it's significant to Gail and the teachers. “I want to make the teachers feel cared for, and it's amazing what a boost it is to the staff when you surprise each of them with a small new research notebook or professional article in their mailboxes,” said Gail.

The focus of the research this year has shifted from reading instruction to spelling. “Because it takes extra time, it’s so important that it be something that the teachers really care about, that they can see as having an immediate effect on their practice and classroom needs. Spelling is also a topic that parents are concerned about, and they have many memories and experiences at home of standing at the sink washing the dishes at night, quizzing their kid on this week’s words. It’s something they want to understand and they see it as part of their ‘job’ as a concerned parent to help in some way with it,” said Gail.

The change this year in the research agenda includes more awareness on the part of students of their role as both research informants and co-researchers. “We just did report cards, and I have students write comments to their parents about what they’ve learned. I noticed 75 percent said something about their spelling development—they have become so aware of their strategies and the research going on in the school around this issue. There is so much more talk in the teacher’s room, too—a palpable change in the intellectual climate as teachers get more and more comfortable with talking about their research and comparing their findings with those of colleagues,” said Gail.

Lieberman and Miller (1995), in a series of case studies of teacher researchers, note that certain conditions must exist if teacher research is to lead to sustained schoolwide reform. The Mapleton teacher research group meets all these conditions. In the group, there are:

- norms of collegiality, openness, and trust
- opportunities, time, and support for disciplined inquiry
- teacher learning in context
- a reconstruction of leadership roles
- participation in networks, collaborations, and coalitions. (p. 209)

Gail considers integrating inquiry into Mapleton’s daily agenda has already been a big success: “It’s made every teacher aware of how much control they really have in their classrooms, and how much ability they have to make those classrooms better. It has increased every teacher’s sense of autonomy and skill in this school, and the value of that to me is immeasurable.”

### **Final Thoughts**

All careful gardeners begin from the same place. They plant seeds, they wait, and they hope. I hope this essay has planted enough seeds to allow some possibilities for teacher research to sprout in your own classroom, school, or district. Every teacher and every school leader has wonderings worth pursuing. Teacher research is one avenue for pursuing those wonderings in a thoughtful, systematic, and collaborative way.

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