

Students with Dual Exceptionalities:
Does K-12 Public Education Meet Their Needs?

Lillian Calendrillo Guzowski

Lynchburg College

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As public education becomes increasingly standardized, it may be more difficult to meet the academic needs of students who do not easily fit into one category. This is especially true for students with dual exceptionalities, who are academically gifted or talented and who also have a diagnosed disability. According to Baum and Owen (2004), there are an estimated 300,000 students in America who should be considered dual exceptional (as cited in Foley Nicpon, Allmon, Sieck, & Stinson, 2011). Another estimate, by Nielson (2002) suggested that 3.5% of all students with learning disabilities also meet gifted criteria (as cited in Leggett, Shea, & Wilson, 2010).

Part of the difficulty in meeting the educational needs of these students is that they have a broad range of academic talents and also a broad range of disabilities, and severity of disabilities. Often, students with dual exceptionalities only receive intervention for one of those exceptionalities, most often their disability (Yssel, Prater, & Smith, 2010).

Although the research on students with dual exceptionalities is comparatively recent, there have been many throughout history who fit into this modern category of students with dual exceptionalities. There has been a great deal of research done in the past 30 years on the categories and characteristics of students with dual exceptionalities, the identification and education of students with dual exceptionalities, and what teachers and guidance counselors can do to help students with dual exceptionalities reach their potential.

This literature review will describe these strands of investigation and the research that has been done on dual exceptionalities. It will look at the key concepts of dual exceptionality including history, categories of students with dual exceptionalities, and characteristics of students with dual exceptionalities; the identification of students with

dual exceptionalities; and the educational programs for students with dual exceptionalities including teaching strategies and the role of guidance counselors.

More research needs to be done and, particularly, more empirical studies need to be completed to take the ideas and theories on best practices for identification and education of students with dual exceptionalities and ground them in research so that educators can help these students meet their full academic potential.

Key Concepts of Dual Exceptionality

History

The concept of students with dual exceptionalities is a fairly recent one; the first conference on students with dual exceptionalities was held in the early 1980s at John Hopkins University and the first book on the subject was written in 1977 by C. June Maker and entitled *Providing Programs for the Handicapped Disabled* (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011; Lovett, 2013). However, even if it wasn't previously studied, that does not mean that there weren't students who fit into the dual exceptionality category.

In a study completed in 1985, six out of 20 world-class mathematicians reported having problems learning to read (Bloom, 1985, as cited in Al-Hroub, 2010). Colangelo, Assouline, Kerr, Hueman, and Johnson (1993, as cited in Al-Hroub, 2010) studied a group of 34 inventors. They found that although the inventors all had significant strengths in mathematics, most reported that they had weaknesses in writing and verbal areas. More than half also said they had been under achievers in school and had failed at least one course.

We have all likely heard the stories of the great thinkers who retroactively fit into the dual exceptional category. Albert Einstein, for example, was a scientific genius who had

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problems with language (Kwang-Han & Porath, 2011). Others who speculatively fit into the dual exceptional category include historical figures in a wide range of specialty areas: Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Alva Edison, Auguste Rodin, Hans Christian Anderson, and Agatha Miller Christie (Leggett, et al., 2010).

Definitions

Simply defining these terms—gifted and disabled—can lead to difficulty. As Assouline and Whiteman (2011) pointed out “there is no absolute or universal definition of giftedness or system of identification” (p. 381). There is only one piece of federal legislation, the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act, which was passed in 1988 and defunded in 2011, that specifically deals with gifted and talented students and offers this definition:

The term gifted and talented, when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (Title IX, Part A, Section 910[22]; para. 8 as cited in Assouline & Whiteman, 2011, p. 400)

This broad definition leaves it up to school systems to determine what requirements they use in their own enrichment programs. Many school districts use IQ tests; however, this can be problematic for students who are dual exceptional. Traditionally a designation of “gifted” is limited to students who have an IQ of 130 or higher; however, for students with dual exceptionalities, some have argued that threshold should be lowered to 120 (Al-Hroub, 2010). To complicate even this issue, Lovett (2011) looked at an IQ level of 125, considering that to be a level of superior intelligence.

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Renzulli's (2000) oft-cited multiple intelligences model for giftedness offers an alternative, non-IQ test based, method for determining giftedness. In Renzulli's model, three interlocking rings exist with three crucial components to determining giftedness: above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment. According to Renzulli, the problem with the gifted definitions used for identification is a reliance on ability at the exclusion of the other two dimensions.

Federal legislation regarding disabilities must be followed by school systems, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) has established the following categories of disability: mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, and specific learning disabilities (Altshuler & Kopels, 2003).

The definitions for disability are more clear-cut than the definitions for giftedness; however, that does not mean that the label of dual exceptional is not without some controversy on the disability side of the definition. Foley Nicpon, et al. (2011) used the broad definition of all students with disabilities although they, and the research they are looking at, focus on students with specific learning disabilities, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorders. Others researchers focus on just students with learning disabilities (e.g., Lovett, 2013).

This focus on non-physical disabilities does not mean that gifted students who also have a physical disability struggle any less than students in other dual exceptional categories. Besnoy, Manning, and Karnes (2005) cited research by Johnsen and Corn (1989), Corn (1986) and Friedrichs (2001) that argued that gifted students who are visually impaired are some of the most underserved students in the country and that at least 5% of the blind and visually impaired students are gifted (Besnoy et al., 2005).

Categories of Students with Dual Exceptionalities

Students with dual exceptionalities are usually put into one of three categories (Al-Hroub & Whitebread, 2008; Crepeau-Hobson & Bianco, 2011; Foley Nicpon et al., 2011; Leggett et al., 2010). First, students whose gifts and talents are first recognized; but, as time passes, the divide between their achievement and their potential widens, possibly leading to a diagnosis of a disability. Second, there are students whose disability is first identified and either during or after intervention their abilities become more apparent. And third, referred to as masking and more complicated in terms of identification, the student's abilities and disabilities mask each other, resulting in average, grade level performance and they are neither referred for enrichment or intervention.

The third masking category noted above is one of the most problematic ones for identification and subsequent intervention and enrichment. Both the National Education Association and the National Association for Gifted Children endorse this hypothesis and it is found throughout in the literature on students with dual exceptionalities (e.g., Lovett, 2013). Although it is pervasive and widely accepted, the nature of the hypothesis makes it very difficult to identify students who fit the category. As Lovett (2013), described the theory: "consider two children who perform in the average range of tests in both intelligence and reading" (p. 138). The masking theory puts forward the hypothesis that one of those two children is actually of average intelligence and potential, while the other child is gifted, but has a reading disability that is limiting their potential and causing them to perform at an average ability level. The question is, which child?

Lovett (2013) expressed the concern that without a better way to evaluate and identify students for dual exceptionalities, that the masking category can be taken advantage of by

parents and educational professionals. As noted by Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004), having your child identified as a student with dual exceptionalities “could become a way for affluent parents to get the best of both worlds” (as cited in Lovett, 2013, p. 138). Lovett goes on to argue that because of the masking hypothesis, “a practitioner who suspects that a student is [gifted with a learning disability] can explain away any evidence that appears to suggest otherwise” (p. 139). The concern is that without an empirically tested, research based method of identifying students with dual exceptionalities, those responsible for making the identifications that will result in enrichment and intervention will use their own judgment, which may be clouded by their own personal and professional experiences and stereotypes (Lovett, 2013). Lovett further expressed his concern that without clear identification guidelines, the category of students with dual exceptionalities will not be used to help students who might be at risk for falling through the cracks, but instead will be used by parents and educators as an aid for students who come from the higher socio-economic status backgrounds.

Characteristics of Students with Dual Exceptionalities

Although each student with dual exceptionalities is unique, given the nature of both giftedness and disability, and each may present in a different way, there are some general characteristics that many students with dual exceptionalities share. Some of the characteristics come from gifted education and some from special education, but many overlap in students with dual exceptionalities. Table 1 summarizes some of the more frequently cited possible strengths and weaknesses of students with dual exceptionalities.

Table 1: Strengths and Weaknesses of Students with Dual Exceptionalities

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Advanced vocabulary	• Frustration with inability to master skills
• Exceptional analytical ability	• Perfectionist
• Highly creative	• Low self-esteem
• High productive in areas of interest	• Lack of social skills
• Advanced problem solving skills	• Unrealistic self-expectations
• Wide variety of interests	• Lack of organization
• Good memory	• Inattentive
• Ability to see interrelationships between ideas	• Failure to complete assignments
• Strong reasoning skills	• Dominates classroom discussions
• Desire for knowledge	• Careless about work
• Desire to explore and discover	• Hypersensitive

Adapted from Robinson, 1999, p. 196; Ruban & Reis, 2004, p. 117; and Song & Porath, 2011, p.

219.

Self-esteem and self-perception in students with dual exceptionalities.

One characteristic shared by many students with dual exceptionalities is low self-esteem and low self-perception, in part caused by low social skills. Previous studies indicate that both students with learning difficulties and gifted students face social difficulties and research indicates that students with dual exceptionalities feel the same pressures and social concerns (e.g., Barber & Mueller, 2011). Kavale and Forness (1996) found that 7 out of 10 students with learning disabilities reported having low social skills and that 70 to 80% have low self-esteem and self-concept (as cited in Barber & Mueller, 2011).

Students who are gifted also report feeling different from their classmates, even if enrolled in an enrichment program, and they may develop coping strategies to fit in, including avoiding situations that might make their gifts more obvious to their peers (Barber & Mueller, 2011). For gifted students, the low self-esteem seems tied to the students' perception of their social skills as opposed to any actual weakness in their social skills. Gifted students are more likely to view their own social abilities negatively while their classmates might actually view them highly (Barber & Mueller, 2011). Although both gifted students and students with

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disabilities may perceive that they have social weaknesses, they also tend to view their parents as supportive allies, an important point for students who might feel out of place or different at school and in the community (Barber & Mueller, 2011).

Students with dual exceptionalities also struggle with low self-esteem and have a negative self-perception. Baum and Owen (1988, as cited in Baum, Cooper, & Neu, 2001) argued that the understanding of what they should be capable of combined with an awareness of the limitations that their disability imposes and with increased sensitivity lead to students with dual exceptionalities having low self-esteem and low self-confidence. Leggett, Shea, and Leggett (2011) pointed out specifically that students with dual exceptionalities are at risk for developing “perfectionism, intense frustration, and learned helplessness” (p. 2).

Barber and Mueller (2011) looked at students with learning disabilities, gifted students, students with dual exceptionalities, and a control group of students without any additional diagnosis to see which group the students with dual exceptionalities were most like in terms of their social perceptions. They looked at 360 students, 90 in each category, and tried to ensure that the categories were matched in terms of the socio-economic status (Barber & Mueller, 2011). They asked the students about their “(a) sense of belonging at school, (b) sense of relationships with parents, and (c) self-concept” (Barber & Mueller, 2011, p. 114). The students were given a list of statements, such as “mom is warm/loving” and “feel close to people at school,” and asked to mark their agreement to those statements on a 5 point scale (Barber & Mueller, 2011, p. 115). The answers were then analyzed for statistical significance across the four groups (Barber & Mueller, 2011).

The one area the students with dual-exceptionalities differed greatly from either the gifted students or the students with learning disabilities was in their relationships with their parents,

primarily with their mothers (Barber & Mueller, 2011). Barber and Mueller (2011) found that whereas majority of the gifted students, the students with learning disabilities, and the students in the control group reported positive relationships with their mothers, the students with dual exceptionalities did not believe that they had a strong maternal relationship.

Barber and Mueller (2011) found, in analyzing their data, that there was a direct interaction between positive or negative self-perception and the student's perception of their maternal relationship. Students with dual exceptionalities are more likely to perceive that they have negative maternal relationships and that, in turn, causes them to have a negative self-perception (Barber & Mueller, 2011). They speculated that this perception of a negative maternal relationship is based on the feeling that students with dual exceptionalities have that they are failing to live up to their potential and disappointing their parents.

Stereotypes of gifted students and their impact on students with dual exceptionalities.

Gifted students are typically stereotyped by those in education as fitting into a very particular mold: "high-achieving, well-behaved, Caucasian, English-speaking, male students from upper-middle-class families" (Bianco & Leech, 2010, p. 322). Teachers are more likely to refer these students, and students with dual exceptionalities often don't fit into that mold. Because of the frustration they often feel in the classroom, students with dual exceptionalities often don't show the high levels of achievement expected in gifted students and their frustration often leads to disruptive behavior and acting out which does not fit into the expectations that educators have for gifted students (Barber & Mueller, 2011).

Limitations of Prior Research

Foley Nicpon and colleagues (2011) analyzed research in the area of students with dual exceptionalities over a 20 year period. They found, during that time, only 43 empirical studies had been completed. Lovett (2013), doing a similar review of the literature, found 940 manuscripts on the topic, with 46 of those containing empirical research.

The growing body of literature in the field tends to raise more questions than answers. The study by Foley Nicpon et al. (2011) discussed eight broad recommendations for further empirical research and Lovett (2013) argued that “recommendations and thought pieces regarding G/LD students continue to outpace empirical research” (p. 137).

Although there has been some empirical research on the problems involved with identifying students with dual exceptionalities and some on how to teach students with dual exceptionalities, there are still many in education who do not understand or recognize the special needs of these students. Many see the idea of a student who can be both gifted and have a disability as “paradoxical or even impossible” (Song & Porath, 2011, p. 215). These students, if they are referred for special services at all, are much more likely to be referred for remediation rather than enrichment (Yssel et al., 2010).

Identification

As the ones with the most daily contact with students, teachers usually make the first referrals for enrichment or remediation programs. McEachem and Bornot (2001) stated that approximately 80 to 85% of referrals for both gifted programs and special education services come from general education teachers (as cited in Al-Hroub & Whitebread, 2008). If teachers do not know the signs of dual exceptionality, or if they do not even know of or believe in the

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possibility that a student can be dual exceptional, the risk is that they will miss students who qualify for both remediation and enrichment or that the dual exceptional student will be referred for only one of his or her exceptionalities.

Al-Hroub and Whitebread (2008) looked at the accuracy of teacher identification of students who were mathematically gifted and also had specific learning disabilities. Al-Hroub and Whitebread (2008) asked teachers at three public schools in Jordan to identify mathematically gifted students who also had specific learning disabilities. They started by organizing seminars for the teachers to give them some background in students with dual exceptionalities and providing them with a list of common traits and characteristics of students with dual exceptionalities (Al-Hroub & Whitebread, 2008). After offering this training, Al-Hroub and Whitebread asked the teachers to identify students who they believed fit into the category of students with dual exceptionalities. The teachers filled in a nomination form for each student listing the student's strengths and weaknesses (Al-Hroub and Whitebread, 2008). On examining the teacher nominations, Al-Hroub and Whitebread found that teacher nominations were accurate on an average of only 57.6% of the time. Additionally, the accuracy of teacher nominations over the three schools involved ranged from 33.3% accuracy to 80% (Al-Hroub and Whitebread, 2008). They pushed for greater teacher education and training, both pre-service and in-service as a way to help improve teacher understanding of dual exceptionality and their ability to accurately identify and refer students.

As many students who are dual exceptional already receive intervention for one of their exceptionalities, Bianco and Leech (2010) looked at the effect on teachers that an existing disability diagnosis has on a student's chance to be referred for a gifted program. They created a vignette describing the positive and negative characteristics of a stereotypical gifted student,

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without giving any specific test scores. They randomly divided 195 general education teachers, 52 special education teachers, and 30 gifted education teachers into three groups; one group was given the control vignette which described the student without adding any diagnosis, the second group received the vignette with an added learning disability diagnosis, and the third group received the vignette with a diagnosis of an emotional and behavioral disorder. Before distribution, the vignette was reviewed to ensure that the characteristics included were typical of gifted students by a group of teachers certified in gifted education (Bianco & Leech, 2010). Bianco and Leech (2010) compiled both qualitative and quantitative data. They asked the teachers to fill in a Likert-style scale about the likelihood that they would refer the student for various intervention and/or enrichment opportunities and they asked the teachers to provide a written explanation about their answer to the question about referral to the gifted program (Bianco & Leech, 2010).

Bianco and Leech (2010) found that the student in their control vignette was significantly more likely to be referred for the gifted program than in either of the vignettes with the disability diagnosis. Additionally, they found that the special education teachers were the least likely to refer any of the students for the gifted program. The study lends credence to the concern that a dual exceptional child who has already been diagnosed as having a disability and is receiving services, from special education teachers, is not likely to have his or her gifts recognized or to be referred for a gifted program. Bianco and Leech (2010) also emphasized the crucial role that teacher training has on a teacher's ability to recognize and refer a dual exceptional child. They pointed particularly to the teacher education training in both gifted and special education, neither of which tends to address the other—thereby reinforcing the assumption that a child is either gifted or has a disability.

Educational Programs

Strategies for Teaching Students with Dual Exceptionalities

Although more training for teachers in order to better identify and refer students with dual exceptionalities is needed, other suggestions exist for best practices for teaching students with dual exceptionalities. Given the scarcity of empirical research regarding students with dual exceptionalities, and the fact that most of the existing empirical research focuses on identification of students with dual exceptionalities or on psychosocial characteristics of students with dual exceptionalities (Foley Nicpon et al., 2011), the teaching suggestions should be carefully evaluated before implementation.

One of the few studies in teaching practices for children with dual exceptionalities was conducted by Al-Hroub (2010) and looked at whether traditional math instruction or a math instruction that combined enrichment with a multisensory approach was more successful for dual exceptional students. Al-Hroub found not only that the students in the multisensory, enrichment group performed at a higher level, that they were more engaged in the material and that the participation discrepancy between the two groups expanded as the lessons progressed.

Al-Hroub (2010) suggested a few teaching strategies for students with dual exceptionalities, particularly for those who are mathematically gifted and have learning disabilities: first, teachers need to accommodate the students' strengths and their weaknesses by using alternative strategies and techniques; second, multisensory approaches will help students who learn complex tasks easily but struggle with simple materials; third, instead of thinking in words, students might think in pictures, shapes, or visual aids and instruction should be designed with that in mind; fourth, a students' mechanical difficulties should not cause a student's grade to be lowered, the grades should be based on concept and procedural knowledge; fifth, timed

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testing should be avoided; and sixth, students with dual exceptionalities will benefit from having a big picture vision in mind.

Others made similar suggestions about teaching to a variety of learning styles, offering enrichment, and addressing strengths and weaknesses (Robinson, 1999; Winebrenner, 2003; Yssel, 2010). Many also focused on the need for designing lessons that would be interesting to students and would engage them in the subjects and ideas that already appealed to them.

Having students with dual exceptionalities read books about children with their same learning disability in order to help them think more positively about themselves is another idea. (Robinson, 1999). This idea is particularly interesting since there is some concern about self-esteem in students with dual exceptionalities.

Students with dual exceptionalities should be taught to use early on how to use technology in ways that will help them work at a higher level (Robinson, 1999). Teachers should not view assistive technology as “cheating,” rather as a way for students to focus on the concepts and content instead of details like spelling or basic math functions (Winebrenner, 2003).

Renzulli (1977) discussed a concept called “compacting” by which a student is able to demonstrate their mastery of a subject and then opt out of the standard instruction on that subject and instead participate in an alternate enrichment project (as cited in Winebrenner, 2003). Compacting can be a good opportunity to enrich instruction while also offering the dual exceptional student time to work on some of the skills or material they may need more time on.

The key for teachers of students with dual exceptionalities is to remember that the students are capable of higher level thinking in their talent areas, they may just have difficulty with some of the skills (Baum et al., 2001). Reaching out to students with dual exceptionalities and offering alternative ways to demonstrate their learning can lead to remarkable outcomes.

Role of Guidance Counselors

Although often the referrals for gifted programming come from teachers, guidance counselors play a major role in the lives and education of dual exceptional children. Unfortunately, they may suffer from the same lack of knowledge and training. Leggett and colleagues (2010) studied a group of 44 graduate students in counseling and found that only three of the students had knowledge of dual exceptionality. As Leggett and colleagues pointed out, it is difficult to advocate for students with dual exceptionalities when you are not aware of or informed about dual exceptionality. Again, more training and education is need, both pre-service and in-service.

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), counselors should operate under a code of ethics that requires them to be change agents who advocate for students and implement programs that create a climate in which all students reach their full potential (Leggett et al., 2011; Leggett et al., 2010). Ideally, counselors should be focused on helping all students achieve their potential; unfortunately, counselors are increasingly being given responsibilities that take them away from their advocacy role (Leggett et al., 2011). This shift away from the crucial advocacy role is particularly problematic for students at-risk, such as those with dual exceptionalities.

Part of what is needed is to shift counselors away from administering standardized tests and scheduling classes and back to their role of acting as an advocate for all students. All students, particularly those at risk of not meeting their potential, such as students with dual exceptionalities, would benefit from having counselor advocates helping to create a school community that is designed for them to meet their potential.

A sweeping change of the way that schools are run may not be possible, but there are some practical steps that counselors can take to help students with dual exceptionalities. One way counselors can make a difference is to make sure that faculty and staff at the school are aware of the possibility of a student being gifted and having a disability. As seen throughout the literature, many in education are unaware of students with dual exceptionalities.

Additionally, counselors, as frequent members of IEP and 504 committees, need to ensure that those committees and those documents are designed effectively to help students with dual exceptionalities. Committees should include special education, general education, and gifted teachers in order for each to offer the best ideas from their areas and to collaborate on coming up with a plan for the student (Rizza & Morrison, 2007). IEPs and 504 plans need to reflect the student's strengths as well as their weaknesses and include the need for academic challenges (Assouline & Whiteman, 2011).

Discussion and Implications

Although a number of articles and books have been written on the subject of students with dual exceptionalities; ultimately, more empirical research needs to be done. The articles and books may make interesting points and suggestions for the identification and education of students with dual exceptionalities, but there are still too many uncertainties and speculation. Also, many of the studies that have been completed focus on one socio-economic status group or on only one or two disabilities which leads to concerns that the other groups, those that might already be at risk, will be left behind.

More empirical research is needed, particularly focused on the identification of students with dual exceptionalities. As Lovett (2013) pointed out, too much of the identification of students with dual exceptionalities is left up to the teacher or practitioner thereby allowing for

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their own stereotypes and preferences to play into the diagnosis of dual exceptionalities. Without clearer guidelines for identification, these students may not get the intervention or enrichment services they need. Also, if concerns about the potential misuse of the dual exceptional category are found to be true, then students with dual exceptionalities who are truly in need of enrichment and intervention may be hurt by those taking advantage of the system.

From a review of the literature, it appears as though many in education are worried about whether or not current education is meeting the needs of students with dual exceptionalities. However, more empirical, data driven research is needed in order to make sure that the best practices are put into place for identifying and educating students with dual exceptionalities.

Much of the literature regarding students with dual exceptionalities, with the exception of Lovett (2013), tries to remove any socio-economic issues from further complicating the concerns of students with dual exceptionalities. The study completed by Bianco and Leech (2010) is a good example of this. Although the study was based at a school district in South Florida, an area with a diverse population, Bianco and Leech (2010) deliberately choose schools with a more homogeneous group of students and with a lower percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. It would be potentially revealing to recreate Bianco and Leech's study including the additional questions and concerns of socio-economic status and gender—although the Bianco and Leech wrote their vignette to be carefully gender neutral, a majority of the comments written assumed that the student was male.

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