

## *Studies on the History of Special Education in Italy: State of the Art and Paths for Future Research*

### *Estudios sobre historia de la educación especial en Italia: estado de la cuestión y trayectorias para el futuro de la investigación*

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**Abstract:** The history of special education in Italy is a highly recent field of study. Prior to this, the theme had only been treated in a small number of publications that were limited in scope, primarily hagiographic and journalistic in style, and whose authors themselves worked in special education. In 1993, the article by Roberto Sani, devoted to *Severino Fabriani, educator of female deaf mutes in Restoration Modena*, marked the beginning of a history of special education that was researched using an interdisciplinary approach and situated within the broader framework of social and political history, and the history of institutions and cultural processes. Following in the line of enquiry into the history of special education inaugurated by Sani, further studies have been published since the beginning of the new millennium, by both established historians of education and young scholars joining the field. Some of these authors have maintained a focus on the world of education for the deaf; others have extended this model of interpretation to related field (educational institutions for children affected by rickets and by blindness). What avenues of research remain open to those wishing to pursue the history of special education? Numerous are the aspects still awaiting systematic investigation. It might therefore be to investigate the educational models and school programs offered over time for persons with disabilities affecting more than one sense (e.g., those who are both deaf and blind).

**Key words:** history of special education; Italy; state of the art; future researches.

**Resumen:** La historia de la educación especial en Italia es un campo de estudio muy reciente. Antes de esto, el tema sólo se había tratado con un pequeño número de publicaciones limitadas en su alcance, principalmente hagiográfico y periodística en el estilo, y cuyos propios autores trabajaron en la educación especial. En 1993, el artículo de Roberto Sani, dedicado a *Severino Fabriani, educador de sordomudas en la Restauración Módena*, marcó el comienzo de una historia de la educación especial con un enfoque interdisciplinario y situado dentro del marco más amplio de la historia social y política y la historia de las instituciones y los procesos culturales. Siguiendo en la línea de investigación sobre la historia de la educación especial inaugurado por Sani, otros estudios han sido publicados desde el inicio del nuevo milenio, tanto por los historiadores de la educación consolidados como por los jóvenes investigadores que integran el campo. Algunos de estos autores han mantenido un enfoque en el mundo de la educación de las personas sordas; otros han extendido este modelo de interpretación hacia campos relacionados (instituciones educativas para los niños afectados por el raquitismo y la ceguera). ¿Qué vías o trayectorias de investigación

permanecen abiertas a aquéllos que deseen seguir la historia de la educación especial? Numerosos son los aspectos que aún esperan a ser abordados por una investigación sistemática. Por lo tanto, una de las líneas a seguir podría ser la de investigar los modelos educativos y los programas escolares ofrecidos a través del tiempo a las personas con discapacidades que afectan a más de un sentido (por ejemplo, los que son sordos y ciegos).

**Palabras clave:** historia de la educación especial; Italia; estado de la cuestión; investigaciones futuras.

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## 1. Introduction

The history of special education in Italy is a highly recent field of study. Only from the 1990s onwards have scholars undertaken systematic and multi-faceted historiographic enquiry suitable for analysing the problematic nature of Italian special education and its complex interactions with a political, socio-economic, cultural and educational context that underwent profound change over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Prior to this, the theme had only been treated in a small number of publications that were limited in scope, primarily hagiographic and journalistic in style, and whose authors themselves worked in special education. These writings ranged from accounts of the origins and fortunes of individual educational institutions, to the biographies of leading scholars and educationalists, and reconstructions of the development of teaching methods over time.

There were multiple causes for this gap in the literature, and for the underlying lack of studies and research on the history of special education. A key factor was the tendency, long dominant in Italian educational historiography, to privilege the study of doctrines and systems of thought at the expense of the concrete application of these theoretical models. Only the emergence of new orientations with an emphasis on the role of «material» history prompted historians of education to investigate educational institutions and practices by consulting sources that give access to the everyday dimension of existence. Traditional lines of enquiry were also influenced by a sort of cultural prejudice that viewed special education as a «minor chapter – almost an appendix regarding procedure and application – of general education» (Sani, 2008, p. VII): a sector, that is to say, that did not merit being the object of broad-scale analysis.

## 2. An interdisciplinary historiographic approach

In 1993, the journal «*Pedagogia e vita*» published a paper by Roberto Sani devoted to *Severino Fabriani educatore delle sordomute nella Modena della Restaurazione* [*Severino Fabriani, educator of female deaf mutes in Restoration Modena*]. This article marked the beginning of a history of special education

that was researched using an interdisciplinary approach and situated within the broader framework of social and political history, and the history of institutions and cultural processes: all lines of historiographic enquiry that are inextricably and tightly interwoven. On the one hand, familiarity with the broader Italian sociocultural context helps to appreciate the position of the political class in relation to the welfare and education of subjects with disability, and by extension, the type and structure of the institutions provided for their care. On the other hand, the reconstruction of the overall history of the country clearly stands to gain from a detailed examination of the dynamics affecting the special education sector, including its close links and significant interactions with the broader school system. This mutual relationship is reflected in Sani's paper, which systematically presents Fabriani's writings and educational work with deaf mutes (deaf persons in contemporary terminology) in relation to the education and welfare legislation and administrative regulations then in force in the duchy of Modena.

Sani has continued to follow this interpretative model in his subsequent publications (over ten) on the same theme, produced in the course of the last twenty years: monographs, essays, articles and dictionary entries. Among these, of particular note is a collection of articles, *L'educazione dei sordomuti nell'Italia dell'800. Istituzioni, metodi, proposte* (2008) [The education of deaf mutes in nineteenth century Italy. Institutions, methods, projects], edited by Sani and contributed by some ten authors, who – based on the study of both public and private archives – built up an account of the main initiatives aimed at improving the welfare of the deaf in the 1800s, across the various regions of the country: north (Turin, Milan, Brescia, Verona, Trento); centre (Modena); south (Naples, Bari, Sassari); an approach that amongst other outcomes brought to light the marked geographic inequality that affected special education for the deaf. The anthology examined the educational model targeted at this particular category of disadvantaged subjects, in relation to the role of governments, local authorities and the Church, with a particular focus on the legislation that, post-Unification, led to changes in the statutes and functions of the so-called *Opere Pie*, that is to say, the numerous private, and in many cases religious, institutions operating in the sector. In addition, the events marking the lives of individual institutions were situated against the backdrop of the development of the school system in general, in terms of levels of schooling and types of curriculum, the progressive secularization of education, and the adoption of new teaching methods inspired by a positivist model of educational science (as reflected for example in the creation of school museums).

Clear connections may also be drawn between developments in special education and the historical and political backdrop throughout the long period spanning the Napoleonic Era and the twenty years of Fascist rule: it is interesting

to note for example that Italian teachers of the deaf initially displayed a preference for the manual method devised in Paris, at the very time that in Italy as in Europe generally, the majority of republics and kingdoms were affiliated with France, if not directly under her influence (Piedmont was even annexed to France in the period 1796-1799); it is equally significant that during the Restoration, the first attempts to teach deaf mutes to speak took place in Lombardy and the Veneto, areas under Austrian rule and therefore culturally close to the German-speaking world, home of the pure oral method. Neither is it surprising that the earliest, albeit inconclusive, debates about extending the principle of obligatory education to deaf children (as proposed in the Correnti bill of 1873) coincided with the first years of the Kingdom of Italy, characterized by a ruling class whose policy was to target school, especially primary school, as the privileged channel through which to form an Italian identity and national consciousness among the lower classes. Finally, it may not have been a coincidence that recognition of the right to education of subjects with disability (deaf-mutes and the blind) came about, by royal decree n. 3126 of 31 December 1923, under the regime of Mussolini, whose strategy was to achieve ideological indoctrination by exercising total control over all aspects of school life and educational contexts, as reflected in the setting up, shortly afterwards, of the Opera Nazionale Balilla, an organization that structured the leisure time of the vast majority of children and youth between the ages of six and eighteen years.

However, the debate on the issue of which methodology to adopt in educating the deaf is the aspect that most paradigmatically reflects the interconnections among what has been referred to as a «plurality of dimensions within a sector that on the surface was delimited and specialized» (Morandini, 2015, p. 127). It is only possible to fully explain the shift from the manual method (signing, finger-spelling, and writing) to the pure oral method (lip-reading and speech as the only mode of expression to be used alongside writing), which took place gradually and encountered strong resistance, by analysing it at multiple levels: social, religious and moral. While it is true that the Milan Congress' turn in favour of the exclusive use of oral language (1880) was underpinned by the desire to guarantee the effective inclusion of deaf people in a society with a high rate of illiteracy, it is equally true that the previous preference for teaching manual communication, which was simpler and therefore more easily learned, had reflected concern on the part of educators, most of whom were religious in the early 1800s, with communicating the faith to a large number of individuals who would otherwise have been excluded from all forms of religious instruction due to their sensory impairment. Furthermore, the French model was ethically superior in that it offered residential education that served to protect deaf-mutes «from the grave moral dangers to which their particular condition of disability, often accompanied by poverty and

abandonment, exposed them» (Sani, 2000, p. 288). The difficulties that arose in applying the pure oral system, once it had been decreed to be superior to the French manual method, were linked to economic factors. Specifically, it was difficult to meet the significant costs associated with extending the duration of schooling for the deaf by two years (going from six to eight years in total) and appropriately retraining teaching staff, given that the majority of specialized institutions depended on private contributions (bequests, donations) and funding from local authorities in return for providing free places for residents from the local catchment area. The economic aspect caused marked inequality between North and South, both in terms of the extent to which the new method was applied and in terms of the educational contents offered by schools: the larger number of institutions set up in the Centre-North of Italy with resources enabling them to offer a rich and varied education programme stood in contrast with a small number of under-resourced institutions in the South, which were often unable to offer students little more than a basic literacy programme and the opportunity to acquire a very limited amount of oral language.

It has been possible to clearly identify these geographical differences thanks to the «material» history approach adopted by Roberto Sani in his research on education for the deaf. As outlined above, this relatively recent approach draws on new types of sources: from the analysis of school curricula, to the examination of text books and other teaching materials. Sani has shown that some schools for the deaf were true centres of excellence, offering educational programmes that were richer, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than the standard for contemporary primary education. This superiority is reflected in the list of subjects included in the curriculum: from catechism, providing instruction in Catholic doctrine, to bible history in the form of stories from the Old and New Testaments; from the acquisition of the Italian language beginning with the lexicon of everyday experience to the recognition of grammatical rules in simple and compound sentences; from the capacity to express one's thoughts in writing to exercises in calligraphy; from arithmetic to geometry; from geography to the natural sciences; from history to «civic duties»; from physical education to vocational forms of learning (notions of artistic line drawing for boys and «female occupations», usually sewing and embroidery, for girls).

Thorough analysis has also been conducted of the range of schoolbooks in use in Italian special schools. This tended to vary from school to school and over time, depending on the students' current level and effective need for more advanced materials. In some schools, different textbooks were used with different classes and for studying different subjects, in others textbooks were limited to one reader, supplemented by a primer. Interestingly, the most commonly adopted textbooks included «some of the best and most prestigious school text books

of the late 1800s» (Sani, 2008, p. 28). Alongside authors specializing in the education of the deaf (Tommaso Pendola, Giulio Tarra, Severino Fabriani, Carlo Perini, Lino Lazzeri, Ciro Marzullo), we find prestigious names from the field of teaching (for example the historian Ercole Ricotti of the University of Turin) and popular textbook authors of the period (such as Father Antonino Parato). In addition, the supplementary teaching materials used in special education included a wide range of items: from posters for display on the classroom walls to special equipment for language exercises; from weights and measures for studying the decimal metric system, to pictures, to selections of objects in the display cabinets of the school museums that came into vogue in the late 1880s. Finally, Sani has also researched the materials offered for in-service deaf education teacher training. The small amount of data available suggests limited circulation among teachers of scientific treatises and methodological manuals written by authoritative figures in the debate that was ongoing in Italy as elsewhere on the topic of deaf education: from the Italians Pendola and Fornari, to Valade-Gabel and Cousin in France, and Hill in Germany.

Following in the line of enquiry into the history of special education inaugurated by Sani, further studies have been published since the beginning of the new millennium, by both established historians of education and young scholars joining the field. Some of these authors have maintained a focus on the world of education for the deaf, given the research potential that this topic continues to offer, carrying forward the reconstruction of previously unresearched educational institutions by means of the patient, systematic and often challenging assembly of documents and witness accounts of educational activities and other formal and informal aspects of everyday life at these schools.

Maria Cristina Morandini has focused her research on two institutions whose work spanned a period of many years and which, for different reasons, significantly influenced education for the deaf at the Italian level. The first was described in a 2014 article published in the journal «History of Education & Children's Literature»: namely, the school for the deaf founded in Genoa by Father Ottavio Assarotti, of the Scolopi religious order, which provided a model for an entire generation of teachers of deaf-mutes, some of whom went on to launch innovative and influential schemes for the education of the deaf: those influenced by Father Assarotti include the educationalist Fabriani referred to earlier. The second, explored in a monograph, was the school founded in Turin by Father Francesco Bracco, at the request of King Charles Albert of the House of Savoy: while on the one hand it represents a useful and significant example of methodological developments in Italian deaf education (the transition from the manual method to the mixed method and then to the pure oral method), on the other it presents original characteristics, including the initial decision (1838) to

offer teacher training during a period in which the majority of existing institutions only provided education for deaf students, and the decision at the end of the nineteenth century to hand the running of the school over to religious congregations, thereby going in the opposite direction to similar schools in the Italian context.

Morandini has also published an essay analysing the textbooks used to teach the school subjects Catholic doctrine and Italian, as part of an essay collection entitled *Le origini delle materie [The origins of subjects]*, edited by Paolo Bianchini (2010). A number of factors determined her focus on these two subjects in particular: first, the ready availability of catechisms and devotional texts (aimed at instructing deaf boys and girls in everyday religious practices), given that in the period in question the majority of educators of the deaf were priests or members of religious congregations; second, the rich potential for comparative analysis of the readers used in schools for the deaf in relation to the textbooks adopted in the same period in the primary schools attended by their hearing peers. The catechisms, in particular, witness to the evolution in methods outlined above. Those published before the Congress of Milan in 1880 followed a question and answer format and in their layout attempted to harmonically alternate written text with sign language; in contrast, the later catechisms were written «as required for teaching via the oral method». Overall, these religion books presented a vision of Christianity as marking the life of the individual and the community, in a way that was both concrete and all-embracing.

The various types of Italian textbook adopted (primers, written exercise books, readers) reflected «the new methods and progressive enrichment of contents that characterized children's literature in the early twentieth century» (Morandini, 2010, p. 140). The structure and language of these books were in line with a concept of the child as a person with distinctive characteristics and no longer as a «miniature adult». The child not only openly expressed its emotions but also played an active role in its own learning processes: in some cases, the child was the main character in the stories featured in the textbook. The key importance now accorded to children's own experience can be clearly deduced from the textbooks' contents, presentation and style: religious and moral education, a key component of the overall education provided to the deaf, took on a practical meaning linked to the students' everyday lives; the language was enriched with colloquial expressions and phrases designed to elicit wonder and speak to the hearts of the young readers. The fact that these books took on board more general changes in visions of childhood, evokes a world that was not locked away to itself, but capable of giving voice to and reflecting, albeit in its own peculiar way, the broader socio-cultural context in which it was situated.

Among more recent publications on the theme of special education for the deaf, worthy of note is Anna Debè's short and accessible account of the life and work of Father Giulio Tarra, director of the Institute for Poor Deaf-Mutes from the rural hinterland of Milan. The monograph «*Fatti per arte parlanti*» [«Made to speak by art»] (2014) has the merit of bringing to light the contribution of this Milanese priest, in a way that does justice to his multi-faceted and charismatic personality as an educator and scholar without being over-emphatic or unduly celebratory. Cited earlier in this paper as a successful textbook author, he was exceptional in his day in that he produced materials for schoolchildren in general and not exclusively for deaf students. Thus, Debè provides us with a rich and fascinating profile of Fr. Tarra, in which the human side of his story as narrated by those who were close to him is outlined alongside his gradual transition as an educator towards an increasingly firm and well-considered belief in the superiority of the pure oral method. His ideas were grounded in familiarity with the specialist literature on the topic and visits to other Italian and foreign schools for the deaf, as well as his own practical experience as director of the institute and in the equally challenging role of teacher. It was precisely Fr. Tarra's quest for the optimum system of deaf education, a constant focus in his studies and day to day teaching activities, which led to developments in teaching methods that not only prompted significant change in his own institute, but also – thanks to his prolific exchanges with other educators – laid the bases for the general methodological shift approved by the Milan Congress of 1880; a congress at which Tarra was to play a leading role alongside Frs. Serafino Balestra and Tommaso Pendola.

Thus, the work of Anna Debè brings to light aspects that had not been fully explored in earlier research: for example, the fact that some nineteenth century teachers of the deaf engaged in ongoing self-training, constructing a «body of experience» and developing networks of relations functional to exchanging information, enhancing the quality of their teaching and promoting the use and diffusion of new practices. This kind of contact among educators took the form of exchanging letters and visits to one another's institutions but could also involve forms of teaching exchange.

The interpretative model now being applied to the history of special education for the deaf may be extended to other comparable contexts: the most evident parallel is with education for the blind. Both for the deaf and the blind, recognition of the right to education was slow in coming, due to the persistence of a prejudice that led schools for these categories of person to be viewed as a form of welfare rather than as educational institutions. The same legislative measure (the earlier cited decree n. 3126) introduced the principle of obligatory schooling for blind and deaf children aged between eight and sixteen years. Nonetheless, there are key differences between the two groups, which again are

best interpreted in light of the broader political, socio-economic and religious context. Institutes for the blind were typically founded later than those providing for the education of the deaf: on the one hand the civil authorities were less interested in the education of a group whose disability did not make them a threat to society, differently to the deaf who had potentially greater possibilities to engage in law-breaking activities; on the other, the Church was aware of the fact that it is possible to communicate religious truths to a blind person without having to put them through a specific educational programme, given that they can be taught orally, an option that is not available to a deaf person. This explains the more secular – and at times anticlerical and Masonic – leanings that characterized the majority of institutions set up to educate the blind. The history of blind education is also different from the point of view of method: essentially, there was no debate between different schools of thought, because the system introduced by Braille was universally accepted as the foundation and benchmark for all subsequent theories.

These distinguishing characteristics are clearly borne out by a study on blind education in Turin, reported in a 2013 article by Maria Cristina Morandini, published in the journal «History of Education & Children's Literature». Turin's institute for the blind was only founded in 1879, over forty years later than the training school for teachers of the deaf (1835). The mainspring behind the project was Count Ernesto Riccardi di Netro, city counsellor with special responsibility for education, and a patriot who had earned distinction for his courage and military prowess during the wars of independence leading up to the foundation of the Kingdom of Italy. The fact that a secular and non-denominational institute was only set up in the 1870s is accounted for by the altered political and cultural context. During the reign of King Charles Albert of the House of Savoy (1831-1849), all initiatives to do with education and welfare were entrusted to the clergy and religious orders and it was therefore out of the question for the poor, ill or permanently disabled to be assisted by those with secular or liberal leanings; this veto no longer held in post-Unification Italy (1861) given a climate of great tension between State and Church and an idea of welfare that was no longer limited to concepts of charity and religious piety, in line with the new positivist cultural and scientific model. It was not by chance that the institute for the blind bore close connections with the non-fee paying school for children with rickets opened in Turin in 1872. The main link between the two institutions was the fact that they were both sponsored by the same prominent figures: from Ernesto Riccardi di Netro to Alberto Gamba, a doctor who, like others among his medical colleagues in the newly united Italy, was beginning to play a significant role in the care – physical and otherwise – of the working classes.

The history of educational institutions set up for children affected by rickets has been the object of a number of studies by Simonetta Polenghi, which were in keeping with the historiographic research model advocated here and specifically focused on the institution founded in Milan by Dr. Gaetano Pini: for example, the monograph *Educating the cripples: the Pious institute for rickets sufferers of Milan and its transformations (1874-1937)*, published in 2009. This topic clearly demanded an interdisciplinary approach in that it involves multiple interrelated dimensions: namely medicine, education and welfare. The need to offer those affected by rickets the opportunity to make a good physical recovery, via a special exercise regime, appropriate hygiene and eating habits and the administration of medicines, went hand in hand with the need to offer them a minimum level of education, given that they were precluded from attending ordinary schools. It was equally clear that children with this illness, who neither had access to the mainstream school system, nor to orphanages or charitable institutions, were at risk of becoming socially marginalized in the absence of specific care institutions. There were two possible modes of intervention: one was to set up an orthopaedic institution, comprising an infirmary with bed spaces, a school and an outpatient clinic; the other was to open a number of special schools across the local area, in which the teachers would be required to organize educational activities in such a way as to accommodate the pupils' needs for medical care and exercise. Each of these solutions reflected different priorities. The first model represented an efficient modern system with a primarily medical focus that would optimize children's chances of enjoying significant and rapid gains in terms of their health. The second model clearly placed greater emphasis on the educational aspect, in terms of guaranteeing widespread availability of literacy education amongst the poor and needy, especially in the working class areas of the city. These different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between the medical-healthcare and educational dimensions, each emphasizing one aspect at the expense of the other, translated into the choice between an elitist model (few places available, and for the most part fee-paying) and a charitable institution that would be both public and free.

### 3. Looking to the future

What avenues of research remain open to those wishing to pursue the history of special education? Numerous are the aspects still awaiting systematic investigation. First we have the rich and diverse sector of the specialist press, a channel for sharing educational experience and teaching practices, but also an instrument for raising public awareness of the problems, not solely educational, faced by persons with disability: from well-known journals with a long and prestigious

tradition and excellent contributors reporting both theoretical and experimental studies, to those that only produced a few editions, came out sporadically and/or enjoyed limited circulation.

Of even greater interest is the line of enquiry into special education teaching staff, which implies researching the institutions (statutes, regulations, programmes) that provided their training, analysing the training manuals adopted at these institutions, and reconstructing how teachers' in-service training and evaluation was conducted, often with the involvement of outside experts (inspections, lecture notes, etc.). Further study could also be devoted to other school subjects such as physical education, mathematics, drawing and manual activities, aimed at serving a variety of purposes such as improving the pupils' health, equipping them for everyday life situations, and helping them to acquire occupational skills. The textbooks of the period offer additional valuable research material: history, geography and civics books may help to reconstruct the idea of nationhood and national identity education for the deaf was intended to convey. Finally, other potential material for study is made up of the teaching aids advertised in specialist journals, reports of exhibitions of the pupils' work at the traditional end of year recitals, accounts of student participation in local and/or national competitions and exhibitions, including in the context of political and cultural events.

Equally worthy of exploration is the, hitherto virtually unknown, world of adult associations, which provides an opportunity to shift our focus from the education of the young to adulthood, a life stage characterized by economic independence, the construction of a network of social relations and the cultivation of individual and collective interests: while there is some existing research, which could be further extended, on the long and difficult route to finding employment, practically nothing is known about the initiatives of persons with disability themselves, from the late 1800s onwards, in the cultural and recreational sphere, and in the context of sporting associations, some of which are known to have participated in competitions and events at a national level. Such activities are closely related to the theme of citizenship, understood as effective recognition of the rights of the individual as a member of civil society, both at the level of the small-scale community based on affective ties (family), and at the broader level (nation). Adults with disability represent a weak model of citizenship that requires attentive study in order to explore and bring to light the deep connection between upholding the principle of social justice and equality enshrined in civil and penal law on the one hand, and access to education as the only instrument that can enable individuals to truly exercise their right to citizenship on the other.

A final potential area of investigation may involve analysis of medical and scientific treatises (such as those of Sante De Sanctis, Giulio Ferreri and Decio Scuri), which multiplied in number in the late 1800s thanks to growing interest on the part of medical science in subjects defined as «abnormal». These works acquired even greater influence in the course of the 1900s, with the effect of modifying the relationships and equilibriums, of themselves fragile and constantly shifting, between the medical and educational components in the care of these particular categories of subjects. It might therefore be of interest to investigate the educational models and school programmes offered over time for persons with disabilities affecting more than one sense (e.g., those who are both deaf and blind). This would be a medium- or long-term research project requiring the identification of an ad hoc interpretative model and the willingness to work with sources that may be difficult to recover/access: it is self-evident that prejudices concerning the feasibility of educating persons affected by a given form of impairment (whether related to hearing, sight or motor function) with inevitable and long-lasting repercussions on processes and levels of schooling, would have been all the more pronounced in the case of a double form of disability.

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