BIG IDEAS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Summary

A report from Exeter University introduces the process of using Big Ideas in Religious Education (RE) as powerful tools for developing curriculum and assessment in the subject. Big Ideas have been developed across the curriculum over many years in other countries. They are only now becoming recognized in England for their ability to act as criteria for the selection and sequencing of subject knowledge, for their potential to achieve curriculum coherence and to enable students to transfer their learning to everyday life. The report presents six Big Ideas for RE set out in four progressive narratives for the key stages. They reflect a number of disciplines that underpin the RE curriculum, including religious studies, philosophy and ethics, theology, and the historical and social sciences. The report illustrates the method of using Big Ideas to plan a unit of work and its accompanying assessment tasks.

Introduction

Most teachers know that the advice to the government in 2013 from National Curriculum Review group, led by Tim Oates, included the recommendations that the eight level scale should be abolished and that students need to study fewer things in greater depth in order to secure *deep learning* in subjects. These recommendations have been the subject of much discussion and many pages of print. What is less well known are Oates' precise words that students needed to secure '*deep learning* in the *big ideas* in the subject'. The reference to *big ideas has* been generally ignored. Until now the only subject to have a comprehensive set of Big Ideas for all key stages is science¹; big ideas for geography are also in production².

In November 2017 the University of Exeter published 'Big Ideas for Religious Education'. The report is the outcome of a year's work by twelve leading academics and advisers working with teachers in the South West. It proposes a radical but simplified approach to planning the RE curriculum and to assessment without levels.

http://tinyurl.com/bigideasforre

This paper is a general introduction to Big Ideas for teachers and others interested in curriculum and assessment. Although the Exeter report was specifically directed towards RE, most of its messages have a wider application.

The purpose of the project

The project 'Big Ideas in Religious Education' was developed in response to four questions that arise in education generally, and in RE specifically.

- i. If the content of the RE curriculum is to be reduced, on what principles or criteria should we decide what content is included?
- ii. On what principles or criteria should we decide how the selected content should be sequenced for ages 5-18?
- iii. How might the RE curriculum be presented in a more coherent way?
- iv. How might we make RE more engaging for young people growing up in the 21st century?

The Big Ideas project also seeks to address wider concerns.

- i. A curriculum based on Big Ideas can complement a range of different approaches to RE.
- ii. The project seeks in particular to redress the current neglect in provision of high quality guidance to support RE in schools without a religious character.
- i. The project supports the recent re-focusing of RE on the more explicit study of religion and belief, for example in the new GCSE syllabuses.
- ii. For its understanding of progression and assessment, the project uses familiar concepts such as diversity, impact, analysis and evaluation, making them the focus of developing understanding from KS1 rather than introducing them much later.

¹ Harlen, W. (2010). Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education. Association for Science Education

² https://www.geography.org.uk/Where-Will-I-Live--Key-Concepts-and-Big-Ideas

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- iii. The project is designed to make students aware of the relevance of religions and beliefs in Britain and the wider world. It does this in two ways:
 - a. by drawing on the important contribution of wider cultural, historical and social studies to students' understanding of the central place of religions and beliefs in most communities;
 - b. by encouraging teachers to apply the idea of '*RE live'*, which approaches the study of religions through the lived experiences of people rather than through the study of 'isms' and abstract ideas.

Why Big Ideas?

When I ask people to think of big ideas in RE they usually come up with concepts such as God, worship, prophethood and so on. This is quite understandable. RE is full of ideas that are 'big'. There is a 'big ideas' series of books, which includes '*The Religions Book'*. The big ideas in this book are the concepts of the main world religions that contribute to the subject content of RE. We can find one version of the core concepts of Christianity in the Church of England's '*Understanding Christianity'* project³: God, creation, fall, People of God, prophecy, incarnation, Gospel, salvation and Kingdom of God. These could be called the big ideas of Christianity. If five or six other religions and non-religious world views (NRWVs) were to publish similar schemes, schools committed to teaching about several religions would be faced with an impossible amount of content to teach. On top of this, there are many other important concepts at the heart of RE that are not religion-specific, for example worship, ethics, belief, experience, salvation etc.

'Big Ideas' (we have used upper case to distinguish them from any other big idea) is used in education as a technical term for an approach to planning the curriculum and assessment that has been applied for several years in many countries including Australia, New Zealand and the USA. The fact that Big Ideas theory has a track record is one of the most important points about it. Over the last 30 years revisions to the National Curriculum in England have come and gone with alarming frequency, which has not allowed for the thorough evaluation of their impact that was needed. Big Ideas on the other hand have been tried and tested in many locations and in most subjects, so we know that they can provide an effective structure for the curriculum and assessment.

It is difficult to find a simple definition of Big Ideas. The 'big ideas' (lower case) of religion and religions that make up the content of the RE curriculum are what we call 'substantive knowledge'. For example, substantive knowledge in history is the content of history, what history is 'about'. It can be related to specific events and people (e.g. the Battle of Hastings or Henry VIII) or it can refer to themes that appear over time in a wide range of contexts, such as peasant, monarch and revolution. There has never been any difficulty in identifying substantive content in RE, which also has hundreds of specifics such as Jesus, Passover, Hajj, or Bhagavad-Gita and more general themes such as worship and pilgrimage. As with history there is far too much substantive knowledge in RE for any student to study in depth over 13 years of schooling. Substantive knowledge is also far too diverse and diffuse to become the basis for understanding progression and for assessment.

Continuing the analogy with history for a moment, historians at all levels recognise that learning history involves the development of both substantive knowledge (the 'stuff' of history) and a working knowledge of 'disciplinary, 'procedural' or 'second-order' concepts. These are the concepts that shape the study and investigation of the 'stuff' of history and they originate with the study of history as a university discipline. Six of these 'disciplinary concepts' are to be found in both the National Curriculum and they form the assessment objectives at GCSE and A-level. They are cause and consequence, change and continuity, similarity and difference, significance, evidence and interpretations. This distinction between substantive and disciplinary knowledge has served history well but (as far as I am aware) none of the attempts to identify disciplinary concepts for RE have been successful⁴. Without the application of disciplinary concepts in any subject all that remains is rote learning. We could learn that Henry VIII had six wives, but unless we applied to that fact the disciplinary concepts of cause and consequence, the significance of Henry's marriages for British history would be lost to us and the facts about his dysfunctional family life would merely be the stuff of gossip columns.

³ Pett, S (Ed). (2016) Understanding Christianity. RE Today Services.

⁴ The only example I am aware of is a TVEI funded humanities project, which was developed in Essex in the late 1980s. That project referred to disciplinary concepts as 'structural concepts'.

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Although Big Ideas are not the same as disciplinary concepts, some writers have identified comparisons between them. For example, geographers may refer to place, space and environments as disciplinary concepts but they are also referred to as the Big Ideas of geography⁵. Both disciplinary concepts and Big Ideas are few in number and have staying power - they apply to all times and situations. Because they are few in number, they are capable of acting as constants, which cut across the vast array of substantive knowledge in both subjects. Above all, our Big Ideas for RE and the disciplinary concepts of history share common functions as organising principles in forming the subject curriculum, understanding progression in the subject and in devising assessment criteria.

Big Ideas have been developed particularly by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe⁶. First and foremost Big Ideas are statements about what students should **understand**, overall and at different ages. Wiggins writes about *real* understanding as 'getting it'. 'Not getting it' pretty much describes the relationship of many students to RE. When we 'don't get it', it is usually because that which we 'don't get' doesn't fit into any of our existing conceptual frameworks. Students of all ages 'don't get' a lot of what they are taught in RE because it seems alien to their experience of life and their other learning. I say 'seems' because religion and faith are fundamental realities of the world our students inhabit, whether or not they regard themselves as 'religious'. But they don't always see it, or if they do may not accept that it has an indirect, if not direct, impact on their lives.

The most important characteristics of Big Ideas, in addition to those above, are that they:

- i. *make sense of lots of what might otherwise be confusing information/experiences and isolated facts.* An important contributor to understanding is the ability to 'join up the dots', to see how the many different beliefs, practices and values of religions and non-religious worldviews relate to each other. Big Ideas make these connections.
- i. *act as lenses which, when used to 'view' content, help to clarify it.* When used as a 'lens' through which to view a mass of possible content, Big Ideas illuminate what is relevant to RE and hide what is not.
- ii. *taken together, express the core or central concerns of the subject.* The essential test of Big Ideas is that as well as meeting the above criteria they reflect what it central to the subject, not what is peripheral.
- iii. *are criteria for the selection and prioritising of subject knowledge in the curriculum*. If Big Ideas summarise what students' understanding should be, the content selected must enable students to achieve that understanding.
- iv. *are transferable to events outside the classroom.* An essential indicator of understanding is the ability to transfer learning to new settings. Religions and non-religious worldviews can only be properly understood when students recognise them as important elements of 21st century life.
- v. *are memorable.* If Big Ideas are to have this life-long impact they must be summarised in headlines that are short enough to be remembered but focused enough to act as reminders of their full significance.

Identifying big ideas for religious education

Central to Big Ideas are the concepts of transfer and relevance. If young people are to engage with RE, they have to see that it has some relevance for their lives, whether or not they regard themselves as 'religious'. 'Relevance' in this context refers to the world in which young people are growing up today. A 'relevant' idea is one that young people can apply to a wide range of situations in the contemporary world in order to make sense of them. These situations include learning in other subjects, whose knowledge sometimes seems at variance to ideas encountered in RE. In order to apply their learning in RE, students need to be able to transfer what they have learnt in the classroom to other subjects and to situations beyond school. Therefore, we began by asking, 'when today's students leave school, what issues and debates relating to religions and worldviews are they most likely to encounter during their lives?'. What is it about religion and worldviews that they 'need to know'?

⁵ https://www.geography.org.uk/search?q=big%20ideas

⁶ Wiggins, G. and McTighe, J. (2005) Understanding by Design (2nd. ed). Alexandria VA. ASCD

Our conclusions about what students 'need to know' about religions and beliefs confirmed our doubts over the wisdom of focusing on so called 'philosophy and ethics' courses early in secondary schools. These courses limit students' broader learning about religions to key stages 1-2. The answer that we came up with, in summary, was that **throughout all their schooling** students need to know and understand that:

- i. there is an amazing variety of religions, non-religious worldviews and ways of life in the world, each being characterised by continuity and change, and internal consistency and diversity;
- ii. people use both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, literal and figurative, to express beliefs, values, experiences and identities;
- iii. there are many ways in which religious and non-religious worldviews provide guidance on how to be a good person and live a good life;
- iv. religions and worldviews are about experience as much as belief, and they can help individuals interpret their experiences;
- v. religious and non-religious worldviews interact with the wider communities and cultures, affecting and affected by politics, artistic and cultural life, social values and traditional rituals, sometimes having considerable power and influence beyond their own adherents;
- vi. religious and non-religious worldviews provide coherent overall accounts, 'grand narratives', of the nature of reality life, the universe and everything.

These initial thoughts led to the creation of the Big Ideas, which are set out in full on page 15 of the report.

These Big Ideas reflect not only the wide varieties of contexts in which religion may be encountered in the world today, but also relate to the range of university disciplines to which RE owes its identity. The current emphasis on the relationship between RE and Theology in some sectors is potentially as damaging to RE as has been the growing exclusivity of its association with Philosophy and Ethics. A unique feature of RE is its derivation of content and concepts from multiple disciplines; a fact that has contributed in the past to difficulties in identifying disciplinary knowledge for the subject. Any overemphasis on one discipline ignores the strong association between RE and Religious Studies as well as other human and social sciences.

Progression through understanding big ideas

We believe that if students are introduced progressively to these six Big Ideas starting in Year 1, they will develop a conceptual framework that will enable them better to understand what they learn in RE.

The Big Ideas are presented in summary form on p15 and then broken down into *key stage narratives* (pp17-22). These describe, in relation to each Big Idea, what students should understand by the end of each key stage. Most of the development group's time was spent in writing these progressive narratives. Progression is difficult to define in any subject. In some subjects it may be that some things are naturally learnt as stepping stones to more sophisticated learning (although this is not agreed even in subjects like mathematics and science). It is certainly not the case with RE. The progressive narratives in the report are based on the principle that as they get older students' understanding is characterised by:

- vi. increasing detail;
- vii. extending the use of subject-specific vocabulary;
- viii. moving from local to global contexts;
- ix. making increasing links between smaller ideas;
- x. more exceptions and contrasts;
- xi. moving from simple to complex and controversial ideas.

The greatest challenge was to identify real progression between the end of KS2 and the end of KS3. A common criticism of students' work at KS3 has been the lack of challenge and the repetition of work at

the same standard as seen in Years 5 and 6. Consequently the narratives for Key Stage 3 are suitably demanding and clearly build on students' understanding at the end of KS2.

The understanding expected of 14-16 year olds is also intentionally demanding. Schools are increasingly providing non-examination RE classes for 14-16 year olds and it is important that such courses provide students with expectations that build on their learning in Years 7-9 and also prepare them for the challenge of 6th form work. Some of the understanding expected of 14-16 year olds is also appropriate for 6th form students taking non-examination RE courses.

USING BIG IDEAS

Big Ideas and' big ideas'.

It was suggested earlier that there is an essential difference between Big Ideas and the 'big ideas' of subject content. Big Ideas describe not the content that students study but some of the key things they will come to understand about religions and non-religious world views **as a result of** learning about them. The deeper their understanding of the Big Ideas, the easier it will be to understand new information by relating it to one or more of them.

Take this example. The Key Stage 2 narrative for BI1 expects students in this age group to understand that there are a number of features that constitute a religion or non-religious worldview which can only be understood in relation to each other. KS2 students learning about Islam will encounter the 'big ideas' of that religion such as Allah, Qur'an, prophethood, prayer, pilgrimage and Ummah. They can learn facts about each of these ideas in isolation but it is impossible to *really* understand each of them without seeing its relationship with the others. For example, the imperatives to pray five times daily and to go on Hajj can only be fully appreciated when students understand that they are required by Allah, revealed through the prophet Muhammad and transmitted in the Qur'an. The reason why it is important that students should be able to make these links is that the purpose of RE is not to enable them to answer quiz questions on Islam but to develop an understanding of Islam and of what it means to be a Muslim today in the UK and in the wider world.

The Key Stage 2 narrative for BI1 continues: Such features need to be understood in the context of their historical and cultural settings and the messages and lived experiences of the community being studied. In other words, students should realise that the relationship between these ideas may not look exactly the same in two different Muslim communities or in two different periods of time. The same is true of other religions and world views.

Big Ideas and the RE scheme of work

The key question for teachers is, 'how do I use Big Ideas for planning my scheme of work?'

Planning generally takes place at three stages; key stage, year and 'unit'. Most schools use an agreed syllabus or a syllabus provided by another organisation such as the Church of England or an academy consortium.

Big Ideas as a basis of planning works with any content and regardless of whether RE is taught as a single subject or in a modular or integrated humanities programme. They could be used with a school's existing scheme of work or with new content. At each key stage each Big Idea will ideally be a focus of planning at least twice. The way in which Big Ideas can be used in planning is best illustrated at the 'unit' stage. (Unit is used here to describe planned learning on a topic or theme, which will be the focus of RE for a particular group of students for a set period of time).

The method used for planning using Big Ideas has new features but is straightforward. The most important thing to remember is that the Big Idea(s) at the heart of the planning dictate the **questions** at the heart of teaching. After identifying what you want students to learn about (substantive knowledge):

1. **Decide which Big Idea(s) will best accompany the topic.** This decision will depend on a number of factors, such as what you want students to understand by the end of this unit and the distribution of Big Ideas throughout the key stage.

- 2. *Identify thematic questions.* Thematic questions are those that relate directly to the topic in hand. This is the point at which you create the link between content and Big Ideas that will shape the unit of work and enable students to develop understanding. The questions emerge directly from the Big Idea. The following example illustrates how a Y5 unit on the Biblical creation narratives could be shaped by BI6:
 - Stories from religions and non-religious worldviews are used to communicate important teachings and often form part of longer narratives. This poses questions, in relation to the topic being studied such as 'Where can we find this story? Is it part of a longer story? 'Is there only one story?' 'If there are more than one, why might that be? and 'Where else in this tradition might we find similar ideas expressed?'
 - All religions and non-religious narratives have a lot to say about where human beings fit into the grand order of things This poses the question, 'What does this story(ies) say about the place of human beings in the world; their responsibilities; and how they should relate to other living things? What are the main ideas about the place of human beings that have developed in this religion/these religions (Judaism/Christianity/both) from these narratives?
 - *People come to understand these stories in different ways.* This poses questions such as, 'What different meanings do people give to these stories?'
- **3** *Identify transferable questions.* Transferable questions are generalisations of topical questions that have long-term relevance and create connections with other units. They are the superquestions of life, whose relevance extends way beyond the current object of study. In relation to this example a transferable question would be 'are humans more important than animals?' or 'Do humans have responsibilities for our planet?' These are questions that reoccur throughout our lives. Each time we encounter or discuss the question we discover new information, evidence and arguments that will contribute to forming and modifying our opinion and attitudes. An obvious recent and relevant example, is Donald Trump's denial of global warming and the debates that followed⁷.

An interesting exercise is to compare this unit with one which teams the Creation narratives with a different BI. For example, using the 'lens' of BI2 (Words and Beyond) will produce a focus on analysing the text for its use of imagery, for example symbol, metaphor, simile, analogy and allusion, to communicate beliefs. BI2 and also BI5 (Influence, Community, Culture and Power) will lead students to understand how the Creation narratives have been interpreted through the arts as well as to opportunities for students to interpret the narratives through an artistic medium of their choice.

Ideally teachers would plan a unit of work drawing on more than one Big Idea in order that students will achieve the broader, more rounded understanding that comes from viewing content through different lenses.

RE LIVE

Teaching about religions

One of the purposes of Big Ideas is to contribute to the selection of content. BI 1 focuses on the characteristics of religions and worldviews and their patterns of continuity and change. In order to achieve the learning in BI1, students need to learn about different religions and worldviews. But how is this to be done? Religions are widely taught as belief systems such as Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The diversity within them is most commonly conveyed in terms of denominations or sub-groups, with very little reference to the extensive diversity that exists within these sub-groups. Religions, non-religious worldviews, their denominations and sub-groups are frequently defined in their most 'orthodox' forms as they are communicated by their central organisations and spokespeople.

This approach does not sit easily with Linda Woodhead's research that 60% of 18-24 year olds identify themselves as 'nones'; those people in the UK who describe themselves as having 'no religion'. This statistic is frequently used as an argument against teaching RE except in schools with a religious character. Yet Woodhead's research turns this argument on its head by revealing that although the 'nones' do not affiliate to any particular 'ism', they can't be described as 'secular' either. Only 41.5% call

⁷ "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing noncompetitive." Donald J Trump, Tweet, 6/11/12

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themselves atheists, although their ideas of the Divine are many and varied. A quarter of them take part in some sort of spiritual practice. 'What they absolutely do not do is take part in communal religious practices like church attendance and worship (unlike US nones). Nor do they join religious groups. On the whole they do not much care for religious leaders, institutions and authorities, although they tolerate them'.⁸

This suggests that an RE curriculum that presents its content in terms of religious 'isms' and religious practices, such as formal acts of worship and pilgrimages, is focusing on the very things that appear to have least appeal for today's teenagers. This is perhaps one reason why so many teachers have abandoned teaching about religions and focused instead on 'philosophy and ethics' courses.

But there is another way that does not involve abandoning learning about most aspects religions and worldviews at the age of 11, which might still hold students' interest. If we teach about (e.g.) Christians, Muslims and Buddhists rather than Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, then the focus of RE moves from structures to people. This is not to suggest that students should not know about the established teachings, practices and values of the main world religions and worldviews, but that the great 'isms' might be better approached through the experiences of the people who are in different ways and to different extents, affiliated to them.

We called this approach RE '*LIVE*' because it takes as its starting point *live* issues in the community, the country, the world and the lives of individuals. Not only did we feel that it would make RE more accessible to all young people, but it would also make it more interesting. The example on pp28-32 takes a common task - a visit to a place of worship. But the questions prompted by the Big Ideas focus not on the traditional 'fixtures and furnishings' of the building but on the people who come to the building, their regularity, reasons and motivations. It reflects the reality that the people are not just one 'congregation' but a wide variety of individuals with different traditions, experiences, beliefs and priorities.

As we applied the Big Ideas to a wider variety of content, we realised that the Big Ideas themselves were so powerfully embedded in RE that it was possible to be quite innovative with the content, hence the approach to pacifism and reconciliation through Britten's *War Requiem* (p33-35), the use of a contemporary issue to begin an enquiry into the relationship between religion and politics (Tim Farron's resignation letter p37), exploring people's religious beliefs about death through their reactions to tragedy (the Manchester bombing p37-38). An interesting introduction to learning about the diversity of Christian views on ordination, gender and sexuality might be the story published in the guardian on 24 November 2017 to the effect that the 'Church of Sweden stops using gender-specific language when talking about God'. We are not suggesting that a detailed study of Tim Farron's resignation should replace a traditional unit of work, perhaps in KS4 or 6th form general studies, on 'religion and politics'. But it provides a way of relating a current issue to the wider topic in order to provide relevance.

The key point here is that Big Ideas work hand in glove with substantive knowledge. Without Big Ideas, or another form of disciplinary knowledge, substantive knowledge (especially in the humanities) equips us for answering quiz questions and gives us some basic knowledge without understanding of the stories, customs and practices of religions and beliefs. Big ideas without substantive knowledge are no more than mantras to be learned but not understood because they are not anchored in religions and beliefs. We apply Big Ideas to substantive knowledge to give it meaning

What next for Big Ideas

Big Ideas for Religious Education will be followed later this year by Putting Big Ideas into Practice in Religious Education.

This will be the first of a two-part process of applying the principles in *Big Ideas for Religious Education* to designing teaching and assessment materials for teachers to use from Year 1 to Year 11. This publication will explain and demonstrate **how** Big Ideas provide a clear rationale for framing programmes of learning and assessment that support the drive towards a knowledge-rich curriculum and will provide a specification, with examples, for creating programmes of learning and assessment for RE. The

⁸ Woodhead, L. (2016). The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority. *Journal of the British Academy* 4, 245–61 © 2017 Barbara Wintersgill, Exeter University. All Rights Reserved.

publication will be used by team of writers involved in producing the full programmes of learning and assessment from Year 1 to Year 11: to ensure consistency of approach and quality. In addition it will be for those teachers who want to create their own units of work based on Big Ideas, as we know some are doing already.

The document will not be completed until the Commission on RE publishes its final report⁹. The project will complement the work of the Commission by suggested patterning to implement the recommendations, as they emerge.

There are well-established examples of how to put Big Ideas at the heart of curriculum planning¹⁰. Ideally we would give teachers a copy of *Putting Big Ideas into Practice in Religious Education* and expect them to create their own programmes of learning, using the specification provided. Realistically we know that only a handful of teachers of RE have the time or expertise (including subject knowledge) to do this. Therefore, subject to funding, we will put together a team who will provide Programmes of learning 5-16.

What you can do now

If you are interested in Big Ideas and want to get a better understanding of Big Ideas, here are some suggestions.

- 1. Try out the planning process yourself, or with colleagues by planning a unit of work using the process described above (Big Ideas and the RE scheme of work). At this stage it is advisable to work with a familiar area of content from your scheme of work.
- 2. If possible ask colleagues to teach your Big Ideas based unit and discuss with them how far they achieved the characteristics of Big Ideas described above.
- 3. Plan another unit of work, this time using the ideas in the 'RE LIVE' section. To do this you will need to find a contemporary event, including art exhibitions, concerts, obituaries anything that is relevant to an issue that you would normally include in your RE curriculum. Again, after teaching the unit, discuss with colleagues how successful it was in terms of pupils' engagement and progress.
- 4. We would like to hear from any teachers who have experimented with Big Ideas. We would love to know how you got on.
- 5. We will need a team of writers, including teachers, with a wide range of knowledge. If you are interested either in contributing to the programmes of learning or would like to be kept informed about new information and materials as they are published, please contact me at barwintersgill@gmail.com

9 http://www.commissiononre.org.uk/

¹⁰ McTighe, J. Wiggins, G. (2013). *Essential Questions. Opening doors to student understanding.* ASCD.

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