

# PERCEPTIONS OF YEAR 8 STUDENTS REGARDING THE TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL. STRATEGIES USED BY SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS FROM YEAR 8 TO YEAR 9

A STUDY CARRIED OUT DURING SABBATICAL LEAVE, TERM TWO, 2009

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## SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This study comprised three aspects:

- A review of some of the material which has already been produced on this topic, both in New Zealand and overseas
- Analysis of answers from a survey carried out with 77 Year 8 students from Otumoetai Intermediate in December 2008
- Visits to a number of secondary schools in Auckland, the Waikato and Hawkes Bay to discuss strategies used by schools in transitioning students from Year 8 to Year 9

## INTRODUCTION

The years of compulsory schooling are of considerable significance in the lives of young New Zealanders. During these years one of the significant changes which students face is the transition from primary or intermediate to secondary school. This transition has been identified as the 'greatest divide' which students must cross in their years of compulsory schooling (Hawk and Hill, 2000) and the transition which has the highest degree of anxiety associated with it (Hawk and Hill, 2004).

Information gathered during this study reinforced the significance of the transition from Year 8 to Year 9, for both students and schools. While evidence of anxiety and factors which could cause anxiety was indicated it was equally apparent that for a significant number of students the prospect of going to secondary school has many positive aspects. Visits to schools carried out during the study revealed programmes involving a range of strategies designed to assist the transition process.

### A. REVIEW OF MATERIAL RELATING TO THIS TOPIC

Material that has been produced on this topic both in New Zealand and overseas (Kirkpatrick, 1993; Sutton, 2000; Hawk and Hill, 2000; Hawk and Hill, 2004; Wylie, Hodgen and Ferral, 2006; Marston, 2007) underlines the significant changes that students need to adapt to when they begin secondary school. These changes include such aspects as:

- Physical: often a larger school, often a greater travelling distance to school, moving classroom for each lesson, a new environment, a larger year group.

- Social: losing existing friends, making new friends, 'fitting' in, going from being a senior in the previous environment to being a junior at secondary school, coping with older and bigger students.
- Educational: a variety of teachers and teaching approaches, new subjects, different organisation including timetable, assessment and examinations, reporting.

Student's perceptions about these changes are significantly influenced by the information which they receive prior to their transition to secondary school. The most common sources of this information have been identified as:

- Parents
- Teachers at the contributing primary or intermediate school(s)
- Siblings
- Friends
- Orientation events/programmes run by the secondary school

It has been indicated (Kirkpatrick, 1993; Hawk and Hill, 2004) that teachers at the contributing schools and parents are the primary sources of information. If this is the case for the majority of students who are about to enter secondary school then it raises some questions as to the veracity of the information which students are receiving, this will be discussed in more detail later on in this paper.

In terms of how students thought secondary school would be different from their primary/intermediate experience there were several consistent aspects:

- Shifting classrooms from lesson to lesson
- Having a variety of teachers during the day
- A greater variety of subjects, including new subjects
- Work that would be larger in quantity and also more challenging
- A larger environment where they would have 'junior' status as opposed to the 'senior' status in the environment they were about to leave.

Students also expected more homework and that the teachers would behave differently to primary/intermediate teachers which included being stricter (Kirkpatrick, 1993; Hawk and Hill, 2004; Marston, 2007)

Students viewed these changes and the general prospect of going to secondary school with a range of emotions. While all the studies that were examined mentioned aspects that students were concerned about there was variation in terms of the overall attitude towards starting secondary school. One study (Hawk and Hill, 2004) indicated that the vast majority of students held either neutral or negative perceptions about what their new school would be like and that these perceptions were based on what people had told them to expect. It has also been suggested that anxiety about secondary school may in some cases be exacerbated as a consequence of well intentioned primary and intermediate teachers wanting to impress on their Year 8 students the reality and importance of secondary school (Sutton, 2000).

Other research (Kirkpatrick, 1993; Sutton, 2000; Wylie, Hodgson and Ferral, 2006; Marston, 2007) while acknowledging the concerns held by students has indicated more of an optimistic attitude. Many students looked forward to new challenges and opportunities, new subjects, the chance to make new friends and the greater freedom and independence they associated with being a secondary school student. While there was an expectation that work would be more demanding it was also hoped that the work would be “not too hard and not too easy” (Sutton, 2000) Aspects that could cause concern for some students, eg having a variety of teachers, were seen as positives by others

Common concerns held by students included aspects such as getting lost and not being in class on time, having to read and understand timetables, dealing with more and different rules, coping with work and homework which was expected to be both greater in quantity as well as more demanding. The presence of older and bigger students and the possibility of being bullied was a concern, but not to the same degree as coping with the physical and organisational aspects of the new environment.

While concerns were held by both male and female students there were indications (Marston, 2007) that overall female students expected the transition process to be easier and more straight forward than males. It was common for secondary schools to have some form of transition programme although it was also noted that there was considerable variation across schools as to the amount of support provided for students by these programmes (Hawk and Hill, 2004).

The experiences that Year 9 students undergo in their first days at secondary school are clearly significant in either allaying or reinforcing any concerns that they may have. In this regard it has been suggested that some well intentioned comments and processes may have negative consequences for some students. Some secondary teachers/administrators in their desire to stress the importance of secondary education may indirectly or directly devalue the learning which has occurred prior to secondary school. For students with low self-efficacy this can make the challenge of coping with their new environment even more daunting (Sutton, 2000).

Secondary schools are also understandably keen to gain extra information about their new entrants in order to increase student profiles as well as confirm class placement. However the wisdom of carrying out formal testing on students in the first few days while they are still coming to terms with a new environment has been questioned, especially in regard to the validity and reliability of the results obtained (Sutton, 2000).

## **B. SURVEY OF YEAR 8 STUDENTS AT OTUMOETAI INTERMEDIATE**

This survey was carried out in December 2008, during the last week the Year 8 students were at Intermediate. The survey covered three classrooms, which were recommended by the intermediate staff so as to provide a range of students in terms

of academic ability and general attitude towards school. The survey involved a questionnaire sheet consisting of five open ended questions.

Students were informed that the purpose of the survey was to gather information regarding their thoughts about secondary school so that both the college and the intermediate were aware of student's opinions regarding the transition process. After a brief explanation students were left to complete the questionnaires in their own classrooms with their usual classroom teacher. Students were not required to put their name on their responses. Questionnaire sheets were completed by 77 students.

### QUESTION ONE

*How did you find out information about the secondary school that you are going to?*

Siblings and the secondary school (through orientation events and information packs) were identified as the most significant sources of information. Parents and teachers at the intermediate school were also mentioned, although not being the prime sources of information as was indicated in some of the research material (refer p.2). In regard to information from parents several responses were worded along the lines of "I'm going to a particular secondary school because that's where my parents want me to go". Only a very small proportion of students mentioned gaining information from the internet/websites, although during enrolment interviews it was not uncommon for parents to indicate that they had consulted ERO reports and/or the college's website.

### QUESTION TWO

*What do you hope to achieve during your time at secondary school?*

Success relating to class work was the most significant factor and this was expressed in a number of ways: good academic results, excelling in a particular subject, gaining a scholarship, equipping me for a career. Almost as significant as class work was involvement in sport and the desire to make a top team in a particular sport. A small proportion of responses also hoped that they "would have fun" at secondary school.

### QUESTION THREE

*In what ways do you think secondary school will be different from the schooling that you have had so far?*

Responses for this question were consistent with information from the research material. Changing classes and teachers from period to period were the most significant aspects identified by students. There were indications that in at least one case this had been thought through a bit further, with a comment that teachers may be less personable/concerned about students since they are not with the same class all day. The size of secondary school was a point of difference for about a third of the respondents, both in terms of the physical layout and total number of students.

There was clearly an expectation that secondary school would be more demanding. Students expected there to be more work, including homework, and that the work would also be more challenging. While life at secondary school was expected to be more demanding it was also seen as providing a greater range of opportunities, including the chance to develop independence in a more grown up environment.

#### QUESTION FOUR

*What are the things that you are looking forward to when you go to secondary school?*

Responses indicated that for many students there was an expectation that their experience at secondary school would have positive and rewarding aspects. Meeting new people, making new friends and taking advantage of the opportunities at secondary school were common aspects that students were looking forward to. The simple fact of being at secondary school was mentioned along with the maturity and independence that went with this. It should also be seen as significant that a number of students mentioned they were looking forward to learning and teaching that was both new and enjoyable. On a more practical note several students noted the desirability of longer holidays while two responses expressed relief at going to an environment where there would be less singing!.

#### QUESTION FIVE

*What, if anything, makes you feel a bit nervous about going to secondary school?*

Responses to this question reinforced the findings from the research material that the prime concern for Year 8 students is coping with the physical environment of secondary school. Getting lost and adapting to the larger size of the school environment were the major concerns noted by respondents. The presence of older and bigger students and the possibility of bullying were concerns for a smaller proportion of students. The insecurity felt by some students in coping with a new environment was expressed through comments such as "I might not be smart enough so I will get into trouble" and "I might fail and make a fool of myself".

The responses to the questionnaire indicated that in most respects the perceptions of students at Otumoetai Intermediate reflected the information revealed by the research material. The questionnaire also reinforced the impression given by the research material that perceptions of Australian students are similar to their New Zealand counterparts. The main point of divergence between the research material and the questionnaire responses related to who/what were the primary sources of information about secondary school with siblings and the college taking precedence over parents and teachers at the intermediate.

## C. VISITS TO SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The third component of this study involved visiting seven secondary schools in the North Island. Six of the schools were co-ed with the seventh being a boys school. The focus for each visit was a discussion with the relevant staff (Principals, Deputy Principals, Deans) regarding the school's transition programme for Year 8 students coming into Year 9. I am grateful for the time that staff at these schools gave up for discussion as well as the friendly reception that each school accorded me.

### CONTRIBUTING SCHOOLS

All the secondary schools that were visited dealt with a medium to a large number of contributing schools (range was 10 – 30 contributing schools). For most of the schools that were visited there were one or two contributing schools (usually Intermediates) that provided a sizeable proportion of the total intake.

The large number of contributing schools meant that there was a considerable amount of variety. Year 8 students came from large urban intermediates (several hundred students) as well as small country primary schools. Decile ratings for contributing schools in some instances ranged from 1 – 9. Two of the secondary schools that were visited drew part of their intake from versions of middle schools, one contributing students at the end of Year 9, the other at the end of Year 10.

### LIASON WITH CONTRIBUTING SCHOOLS

All the secondary schools made personal visits to their contributing schools, usually at the end of term two or the start of term three. With the large number of contributing schools involved these visits involved a range of staff – Principals, Deputy Principals, Guidance staff and Deans. Several schools also involved Year 9 and/or senior students in these visits.

In a number of cases secondary schools were working with contributing schools in regards to curriculum and teaching. These initiatives covered aspects such as:

- Visits by secondary school Heads of Faculties to intermediates to discuss curriculum alignment between intermediate and secondary
- The establishment of an extending higher standards contract which involved learning teams from primary, intermediate and secondary meeting and working together. One secondary school had recently organised the establishment of an 'educational forum' involving all schools in the local area. Through the forum discussion had occurred on issues such as sharing of data and attendance.
- The secondary school co-ordinator for gifted and talented students consulting with staff at contributing schools.
- Visits by RTLB and other specialist staff

- The establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding between a contributing intermediate and the secondary school, covering aspects such as curriculum development, community consultation and the sharing of resources.

Differences in curriculum coverage and interpretation, in pedagogical approaches and in methods of learning/assessment have been identified as some of the most significant gaps which need bridging between contributing and secondary schools (Sutton, 2000). The complexity of such issues clearly increases when a secondary school is dealing with a large number of contributing schools. While there is no doubt scope for further work in these areas it was pleasing to hear about the initiatives mentioned in the previous page. These initiatives mirror and complement developments which have occurred in the writer's own school such as promoting the use by secondary teachers of assessment for learning (formative assessment) in a manner similar to its use in primary and intermediates.

Several secondary schools involved senior students in visiting contributing schools to work with Year 8 students in activities such as helping to coach sports teams, assisting with foreign language lessons and judging speeches.

While a lot of attention is inevitably focused on Year 8 secondary schools also emphasised the importance of their links with primary schools and students who were below Year 8. One Principal commented that this interaction was as important as that which took place with contributing intermediates and that it should not just be Year 8 students who have a profile of their local secondary school. Initiatives such as extending higher standards contracts, enabling college ICT staff to work with their primary counterparts and senior students assisting with students at and below Year 8 were means by which links were being developed and strengthened.

Schools also recognised the value of liaising on a more informal basis with intermediate and primary students being invited to attend events such as musicals and talent quests. Staff at one secondary school joined with their counterparts from a contributing school to form teams for a quiz evening.

## COMMUNICATION WITH PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS/PARENTS

All the secondary schools provided information opportunities where prospective students and their parents could come and hear what the school had to offer. In some cases this was combined with tours of the school (usually in the late afternoon or evening), in others the information session in the evening was separate from tours of the school which occurred during the school day. These events took place in the first weeks of term three.

As has already been noted all secondary schools took time to visit their contributing schools, in some cases this was seen as an opportunity to provide a bit of a 'road show' with music groups from the secondary school performing at the contributing schools. All schools offered a prospectus as well as providing a website.

Enrolment opportunities were provided at a range of times for students and parents, including during the school day, evenings and in one case during a weekend. Students and parents were generally encouraged to attend an enrolment interview, for four schools this was an expectation/requirement of the enrolment process. Secondary schools in Napier used a common enrolment form with students indicating on the form which school they wished to attend. Completed forms were picked up from contributing schools by the respective secondary schools.

Several schools noted that there were a small number of families, and in particular parent(s)/caregivers who took the view that their son/daughters transition was something that the school would handle and therefore it did not need to concern them. In the writers experience this viewpoint has on occasion extended to surprise or even indignation that as parent(s) there was an expectation that they would fill out an enrolment form. The time and effort required to enrol such students is often out of proportion to the numbers involved.

Several secondary schools offered an orientation day, (also referred to as a 'tasting' day) where Year 8 students who had enrolled were given the opportunity to spend a morning or day in the secondary school. These occurred when Year 11 – 13 students had left to sit external exams. These days provided the opportunity to introduce or re-introduce staff who would be working with the incoming students, to provide one or two sample lessons and to carry out testing on the incoming students.

## TESTING OF YEAR 8 STUDENTS

All secondary schools tested their Year 8 intake either at the end of term three or more commonly during term four, as noted above some schools carried out this testing on the orientation day. Testing was done for two main reasons, to assist in placement of students and to provide a standard profile/further information about the incoming cohort.

There was variation in the testing used, some schools had developed their own literacy and numeracy testing, others used astle or CEM test material. Some schools carried out testing at the contributing schools, others brought the year 8's into the secondary school for testing. All schools indicated that they took note of information which was provided by contributing schools although concerns were sometimes raised about the consistency of this information. Some secondary schools had developed student profile forms in order to help standardise information from contributing schools.

The majority of secondary schools visited retested students after they had arrived. This usually was astle or PAT testing and took place within the first two to three weeks of the first term. One school had a policy that every enrolment throughout the year at Year 9 and 10 was astle tested before the student began classes.

## PROCEDURES TO SUPPORT YEAR 9 STUDENTS

It was common practice for Year 9 and Year 13 to begin school a day earlier than most other year levels. This gave the Year 9 students the chance to get to know their new surroundings before the whole school attended.

Year 13's attended on the same day as part of the peer support programme, a programme which was used and valued in all schools. Feed back from Year 9's at the writers own school has reinforced the value of peer support as a support mechanism and this has also been recognised in research material (Hawk and Hill, 2004). Schools are also looking to extend the concept of peer support, in one case peer support students in conjunction with guidance and RTLB are working with selected Year 9 students in a reading support programme. This programme has had a significant impact on raising reading levels.

Some schools ran camp programmes for Year 9's in the first term. This provided the opportunity for increasing a sense of belonging to a class unit as well as again involving peer support students. One school had however recently made the decision to discontinue with Year 9 camps on the grounds that they were disruptive to the settling in process for both students and staff.

Secondary schools generally recognised the anxiety felt by students in coping with a larger physical environment. The peer support programme on the first day usually included activities to help orientate students to their new surroundings. One school provided an information booklet for every year 9 student, this included a map of the school as well as aspects such as the main people who would be involved with Year 9, what to bring on the first day and what to expect on the first day. Another school has a policy that for the first three days each Year 9 class at the end of a period is escorted by its teacher to a central point in the school (Gymnasium). Here the teachers for the next period organise their class and then escort them off to the classroom, returning them back to the central point at the end of the period.

In discussion with staff the question was asked as to whether any differences had been noted between genders in terms of coping with the transition process. While acknowledging that it was an impression a number of schools felt that in some respects girls may find the process easier than boys eg changing classrooms during the day. The comment was made that some Year 9 boys are still very immature; differences in maturity between genders was also noted as a factor in the research material (Marston, 2007).

#### D. SOME THOUGHTS FOR CONSIDERATION

This study has provided the opportunity to explore some of the issues around the transition of students from Year 8 to Year 9. Schools should review their systems and processes on a regular basis\*, to that end the following thoughts are seen as relevant when considering the transition process.

- Parents of students and teachers at contributing schools are significant sources of information about secondary school for Year 8 students. It would be a useful exercise to survey parental perceptions about the nature of secondary schools in 2009 -2010. Discussion with parents over the years has given the impression that there is a wide range in their perceptions as to what actually takes place in a modern secondary school. While some parents indicate that they consult a variety of sources for information ( ERO reports, administration and teaching staff and parents of existing students) there remains the impression that for others perception is largely based on comments such as “It was a good school in my day, so it must still be a good school today”. As with most aspects of life the perception of a school may also be strongly influenced by one factor or incident which anecdotally then gains a wide distribution.

Parents will, and obviously should, continue to be important sources of information for students. It is therefore important that secondary schools also continue the development of means by which information about the school can be distributed through the community. Prospectuses, information packs, orientation days and evenings, open days, information sessions on aspects such as NCEA, information/feedback evenings for Parents of Year 9’s in the first month of school all assist the process of informing discussion between parent, student and the secondary school.

The development of Online Learning Environments such as Knowledge Net should also be seen as an increasingly significant way for all schools to inform and involve the community they serve.

Secondary schools should not underestimate the value that some Year 8 students will give to information from their primary/intermediate teacher. Having predominantly one teacher for the year will often result in a student giving a lot of weight to comments and opinions they trust and respect.

\* The New South Wales Department of Education has a useful transition audit for any secondary school wishing to carry out a review of its transition processes (reference provided at the end of this paper)

Relations between teachers in secondary schools and their colleagues in primary and intermediate have sometimes been seen as being coloured by misunderstanding and even at times a dismissive attitude by each sector as to the validity of the work carried out by the other (Sutton, 2000). Secondary schools that were visited during this study were involved in several initiatives to strengthen links with their contributing schools (refer p 6-7), although comments were still made about a lack of information in regard to some students as well as concerns regarding coverage in some curriculum areas.

The desire by secondary schools to pass on information to Year 8 students is another factor which can create tension with contributing schools. Teachers at contributing schools have commented that information about Year 9 can distract student's focus from the work they still have to complete at Year 8. This factor will often be more apparent where there are several secondary schools drawing students from the contributing school. Consultation between the two sectors may be required to strike a balance which means students are informed with a minimum of distraction from their present studies. Senior staff from secondary schools can also assist by stressing to Year 8 students the importance of continued application for the rest of their year.

Effective and constructive communication between contributing and secondary schools benefits both parties; most importantly it benefits the students at the schools. Such communication will help to promote understanding and in turn an appreciation of what both parties are doing. While teachers at contributing schools may not all be advocates for their local secondary school effective communication will enhance their ability to provide information for Year 8 students. While the initiatives mentioned in this study are positive steps there still appears to be scope for further attention to this issue.

- The transition to secondary school is a significant step for students with varying degrees of anxiety associated with it. This study has also highlighted the point that many students have a positive view about aspects of Secondary School. In the writer's own experience it is not uncommon for Year 8 students to comment along the lines of 'I am a bit nervous about college, but I am also excited'.

While it is understandable that both contributing and secondary schools should wish to emphasise the importance and seriousness of the transition it seems apparent that by the second half of the year the majority of Year 8 students have picked up on this. It is appropriate that from this point on an emphasis is placed on promoting the concept that the transition, while important, is also something to be looked forward to. The transition programmes which schools have in place are helping in this regard. Comments made by both contributing and secondary staff can also play a part in either promoting or negating positive expectations. The use of students, and in particular Year 9 students, to

pass on their positive experiences can have a significant impact, especially if they are known by the Year 8 students they are speaking to. Secondary schools should never lose sight of the fact that beginning the year with positive expectations is often a significant factor in reducing anxiety and promoting success.

- All three aspects of this study agreed that one of the biggest concerns for Year 8 students was how they would cope in the first few days with the physical environment of secondary school. There are a range of strategies which schools are using to deal with this concern (refer p.9) with the result that for the majority of students adjustment to their new physical environment turns out to be simpler than expected. While perception in this regard may often outweigh reality secondary schools should continue to look at ways of addressing this concern which seems to be a 'hardy annual' for Year 8 students. This includes information given to Year 8's as well as strategies once the same students begin Year 9.
- While generally there appears to be little difficulty in adjusting to a new physical environment research material indicates that for some students adjusting to differences in teaching and learning is not so straightforward. This results in some students becoming bored/disengaged through lack of challenge or an inability to cope (Kirkpatrick, 1993, Sutton, 2000, Hawk and Hill, 2004).

Research material and questionnaire results also indicate that it is not unusual for students to be looking forward to the academic challenge of secondary school, with some having a clear expectation that teaching and learning will be both stimulating and enjoyable.

Mention has already been made of the desirability of communication between contributing and secondary schools as to what is actually being taught in particular subject areas as well as the level that students are working at. It is understandable at the start of the year that some repetition of material may occur as secondary teachers get to know their new students and also as they seek to consolidate knowledge and skill bases. Co-ordination between schools could help to control duplication of material between the two sectors and thus mitigate a feeling for some students that their Year 9 course is at times simply a re-run of Year 8.

The introduction of a new national curriculum with an emphasis on competencies and values also has implications for this issue. The new curriculum is consistent with the philosophy of 'teaching less and teaching it better', emphasising the skills required for lifelong learning as opposed to a primary focus on the acquisition of knowledge. Schools will have the opportunity to provide more flexibility in the courses that they offer. For secondary schools this has particular relevance for Years 9 and 10 where there is not a requirement to directly prepare students for external examinations.

Secondary schools should also ensure that they do not neglect the resource base provided by their staff. All schools have talented teachers with the ability to motivate and inspire students. Their experience and methods are valuable resources which should be utilised across the school.

- The majority of secondary schools visited during this study tested their Year 9's during the first few weeks of the school year. This provided further information about the incoming cohort in general, helped to confirm placement of individual students and provided base data to help measure progress as the students moved through the various year levels.

Schools are often requested by parents/caregivers to explain the placement for a student, they are also required to show how 'value has been added' for students during their time at the school. Testing of the incoming cohort provides information to deal with these requests and requirements.

It is clearly in the interests of the school and the students that testing information provides an accurate representation of the student. In this regard secondary schools should give careful consideration as to when they carry out testing. The start of the year is always a hectic time with a range of programmes having to be accommodated with the desire to have students quickly involved in their usual classroom routine. The temptation to carry out testing and get it out of the way as soon as possible is understandable, however this needs to be balanced against providing the opportunity for Year 9's to settle into their new environment. It is suggested that secondary schools should allow at least a week before any formal testing occurs.

## CONCLUSION

This study has reinforced the significance of the transition to secondary school for Year 8 students and their parents/caregivers. For students this is inevitably a time of nervousness and some anxiety; it is also clear that for many students the transition represents opportunities that are looked forward to. Secondary schools need to ensure that they continue to address the issues that cause concern as well as building on the positive feelings in the cohort.

The secondary schools that were visited had developed transition programmes incorporating a range of effective strategies. These visits highlighted the usefulness of discussing issues and sharing ideas with colleagues in other schools. The study has also indicated the importance of consolidating and enhancing communication links between the three sectors – primary, intermediate and secondary. Year 8 students of the future can only benefit from such communication and its associated 'cross fertilisation' of ideas.

Communication with parents/caregivers is another important aspect of the transition process. As indicated earlier there would appear to be scope for further investigation of this aspect, in particular the perceptions parents have about secondary school and

what these perceptions are based upon. It is to the benefit of all parties - parents, students and schools, that a high degree of common understanding is established.

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