

# Global Education Reform Movement: Challenge to Nordic Childhood

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## Abstract

The international comparison and competitive focus on (academic) performance, together with the growing awareness that early years impact children's learning and development in education as well as over a lifetime, has resulted in heightened political interest in the learning of the youngest children. Politicians take action to achieve what they assume to be most effective approach, resulting in more centralized control, and more structured learning approaches introduced to children at still younger ages (Brogaard-Clausen, 2015; Brehony, 2000; Moss, 2013).

In the Nordic countries<sup>1</sup> there is a general concern for early years and the challenges facing early childhood education and care in an era of increasing globalization, with focus on accountability and academic competition (Ringsmose, Kragh-Müller, 2017).

In Denmark, the social pedagogical tradition has been part of the culture of early childhood education for decades. In the social pedagogical tradition, relationships, play, and children's influence are considered of key importance, and as the child's natural way to learn about, and make sense of the world. It is considered that children learn and explore through play and participation embedded in the culture.

Recently, the ministry of education has discussed more focused learning plans, and has tried out a program with more structured learning approaches. The gradual changes, together with the possible political action, are changes seriously threatening the social pedagogical tradition with more school-like, and more structured ways for children to interact. The purpose of this article is to present the Danish example as an alternative to the *schoolification* of early years that we see in many countries.

## Keywords

Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), Danish education, Nordic social pedagogic tradition, early childhood education, developmentally appropriate practice

## Introduction

The international research community has pointed to high quality environments as important to young children's development, both in the short and long term (Huntsman, 2008; Pramling-Samuelson, 2008; Heckmann, 2006; EPPSE, 2015). Although it is also debated what constitutes high quality (Woodhead, 2007), research reveals that a high quality early environment positively affects children's

learning, motivation, and school readiness, enabling children to gain more from schooling in the long run term (EPPSE, 2015, Schweinhart et al., 2000; Bauchmüller, et al., 2011). Quality of early environments is especially significant for

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children growing up in disadvantaged environments (Heckmann, 2006, EEPSE, 2015). As a consequence, more countries, politicians and stakeholders are making early childhood education and care a priority, and they are looking to research to make informed decisions for early years.

When it comes to the question of what is a high quality environment, childcare research points to the importance of educated professionals, child-adult ratio, group sizes and other structural aspects that influence the qualities that are important for children's wellbeing and development (Huntsman, 2008), and to the importance of investments in early years (OECD, 2006). However, there is a disagreement of what quality in childcare involves. Researchers express concern about the child's right to enjoy childhood, and not to just focus on what the child is "becoming" (Kragh-Müller, 2013).

Across the OECD countries two different approaches have been identified: The central European and Nordic "social pedagogical tradition" and the French-English "early education approach" or "the readiness for school tradition". The two can be seen as different curriculum emphases: one with a focus on broad developmental goals, and the other with a focus on skills and school-like learning areas (OECD, 2006). In an era of global competition, the readiness for school tradition is pointed to as a powerful one with a focus on skills and school-like learning areas (OECD 2006 p. 63). It is carried by American (English-language) research to all countries, and also it holds out the promise to education ministries of children entering primary school already prepared to read and write, and being able to conform to normal classroom procedures." (OECD, 2006 p. 63).

Countries and/or organizations that publish the most research internationally<sup>2</sup> also have the potential to influence policies and practice to a greater extent and alternative

practices such as the central European and Nordic "social pedagogical tradition" with a focus on broad developmental goals (OECD, 2006) might not be explored. With the politicians being informed by research, alternative "philosophies" are under threat by this dominance in research of the early education research tradition. This imbalance in the exchange of knowledge may result in politicians reaching the conclusion that teaching and structured learning approaches are necessary in order to support children's learning and development which is not the case.

This article draws on the Danish experiences where the social pedagogical approach has been an integrated part of early years learning based on the developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a holistic approach to children's learning and development. The aim is to explore how the social pedagogical tradition, together with the investments made through society in early years, benefits children's learning and development. The social pedagogical approach, together with a broader view on how societal investments that are found in the Nordic welfare state societies (UNICEF benchmark figure 1 page 5 in this article) form children's learning and development.

The increased focus on the importance of early years combined with the focus on accountability and academic competition has resulted in Danish politicians regarding focused learning plans for childcare, with specific targets for professionals. This can be seen as the paradox of the global movement pointed to by the English professor Peter Moss of the University of London, (Tonsberg, 2012). Why are Danish politicians looking to other countries when they aim to develop childcare and raise performances? He also pointed to the problem of *schoolification*, which is school being introduced to children at an increasingly younger age, asking "why?" what do schools have to offer to children in early years?

## Welfare States Care for The Child

Peter Moss (Tonsberg, 2012) pointed not only to the important pedagogical traditions, but also to the fact that the Danish system has been developed in conjunction with the development of the welfare state over the past 40 years, which means that it is well structured, an integrated part of the culture. This together with the investments through the welfare model has resulted in higher numbers of educated professionals in childcare than in most countries (60% bear a degree). Also subsidies that allow all parents and children to access the same quality of childcare, increases enrollment rates, which, in turn, has a positive effect on equality – giving children and families in different income levels the same opportunities. He noted that in some countries childcare is only for the wealthy people whereas the children in more disadvantaged families do not have access (for comparison see figure 1). One would think that this has to do with how wealthy the country is, but this is not the case; quality care is also a matter of priority (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2012). In Denmark, equal access to childcare/public facilities is important for creating a more equal society (Tonsberg, 2012). Ninety-eight percent of the children age 3-5 are in childcare in Denmark. Ninety percent of the 1-2 year olds are in childcare.

This was experienced by the North American mother and housewife Kristen Podulka (Podulka, 2016). She was surprised moving to Denmark to find that not only did the state provide a subsidy for her children to attend nursery, but also that she was encouraged to do so both by the state and by other parents. One of the arguments she heard from another parent was the same as in airplanes - to provide herself with oxygen before helping others meant that she would help both herself and her child by providing herself with time, and the child with the opportunity to play with other children. With a different cultural background coming to live in Denmark, she was surprised; she was also surprised by the extent of the difference in how

children were encouraged to be independent and adventurous.

This example illustrates some of the cultural differences between children's lives and upbringing in different cultures. What would be obvious to a Dane might not be obvious to people from other countries. In Denmark, it is part of a normal childhood to be in full time care, partly due to the high percentage of both men and women in the workforce, which is one of the highest in the world (OECD, 2016), but also because of the trust parents have in the care the children receive when they are away from home. Childcare is considered good for both the child and the parent (BUPL, 2006).

The need for childcare grew because more women entered the workforce and the concurrent development of the welfare state which resulted in the state gradually taking responsibility for establishing places, guidelines, and resources for childcare (Kristensen, Hamre, Bayer, 2015). Childcare has become a right to all parents and children, and the state provides public funding and subsidies for all regardless of income. Due to the welfare state, a maximum of 25% of cost is paid by the parents and less than 5% of nurseries are privately run (Pedersen, H. BUPL, 2011). Nurseries are open, on average, 51.7 hours per week (Bureau 2000). This does not imply that all children are in childcare for approximately 50 hours a week; the long opening times simply provide the flexibility that working parents need.

Because of the trust between the childcare facilities and the parents, childcare enjoys a strong foundation in the welfare state. Childcare allows parents to work, and children to grow, enjoy childhood, and to play with other children.

The welfare state investments are high in early years in the Nordic countries, and no doubt early investments are important to children's learning and development. A group of researchers from the US (Dr. Amity Niemeyer, Dr. Kevin R. Bush, Dr. Jon Patton, Dr. Doris Bergen, 2012) conducted an examination of the relationship between Maslow's deficiency needs and academic achievement. The factor most

significantly related to achievement outcomes was access to health and dental care, demonstrating the importance of considering children’s lives in a broader sense, and to understand the opportunity for growth through a broader societal view. Children growing up in the Nordic countries grow up in societies which provide them, and their parents with good opportunities the Nordic countries present themselves as countries with high focus on investments in families and early years. The

countries have a one-year period of maternal/paternal leave. All families have access to the same level of quality childcare facilities. The countries have low poverty, which is very important for children’s growth, and also the countries present a higher investment of GDP than most other countries. This also has to do with the long tradition of childcare and the high numbers of both men and women in the workforce. In this UNICEF benchmark, the Nordic countries stand out with the willingness to invest in children and families.

Benchmark		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Number of benchmarks achieved										
	Parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary										
	A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children										
	Subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3										
	Subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds										
	80% of all child care staff trained										
	50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualification										
	Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education										
	1.0% of GDP spent on early childhood services										
	Child poverty rate less than 10%										
	Near-universal outreach of essential child health services										
Sweden	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Iceland	9		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Denmark	8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Finland	8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
France	8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Norway	8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Belgium (Flanders)	6		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Hungary	6		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
New Zealand	6		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Slovenia	6	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Austria	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Netherlands	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
United Kingdom*	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Germany	4		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Italy	4		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Japan	4		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Portugal	4		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Republic of Korea	4		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Mexico	3		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Spain	3		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Switzerland	3		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
United States	3		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Australia	2		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Canada	1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Ireland	1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Total benchmarks met	126	6	19	13	15	17	20	12	6	10	8

\*Data for the United Kingdom refer to England only.

Fig. 1. UNICEF benchmark

In the Nordic countries, children have access to health and dental care. In addition, the accessibility of childcare due to the economic subsidies given to the childcare sector by along with measures that promote equality guarantying that all families have a certain level of income all children have access to good healthcare, housing and a certain standard of living – and that everyone has access to education starting in early childhood – is significant for children’s learning and development. Equality is important for children’s learning and development. Countries that do well have high equality (Social Progress Index) providing children and families protective factors as well as it grants them good opportunities for growth.

Economy as well as the people gain from a more equal society such as the Nordic countries. (Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009) providing children and families protective factors as well as providing good opportunities for growth.

It is not only access to health and dental care, and not only the investments in early years, but also that children grow up in an equal society in a broader sense. Worklife, lifestyle, economy, health and wellbeing is affected by equality. Especially access to education benefits the generations to come by growing up in societies with cultural capital. For the society education matters for growth and welfare. “education is a strong investment for the individual as well as society” (AEraadet, 2011).

Having the early years prioritized is not only connected to the wealth of the country, but also has to do with values and priorities. The ranking benchmarking early education in the study “Starting Well: Benchmarking Early Education Across the World” (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2012) which ranks 45 countries according to the quality of their childcare facilities. is based in comparison of overall early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision and quality in the different countries. Several high-income countries rank poorly in the study,

since the focus is not the wealth, but rather evaluation of the learning that is presumed to take place through children’s participation in ECEC.

The countries that rank well in the study have the following characteristics (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2012).

- A comprehensive early childhood development and promotion strategy, backed up with a legal right to such education.
- Universal enrolment of children in at least a year of preschool at ages five or six, with nearly universal enrolment between the ages of three and five.
- Subsidies to ensure access for underprivileged families.
- Where provision is privatized, the cost of such care is affordable relative to average wages.
- A high bar for preschool educators, with specific qualification requirements. This is often backed up with commensurate wages, as well as low student teacher ratios.
- A well-defined preschool curriculum, along with clear health and safety standards.
- Clear parental involvement and outreach.
- A broad socioeconomic environment that ensures that children are healthy and well-nourished when they enter preschool.

In general, the Nordic countries take high ranking in the study. Finland, Sweden and Norway rank. 1, 2 or 3, Denmark ranks six. Several rich countries have low ranking, e.g., on accessibility, and some countries with financial challenges have high rankings in the study. The Czech Republic rank number 17, Chile rank number 20, the United States number 24, and Canada number 26. The study criticizes the fact

that countries with good economies do not prioritize early childhood. The Nordic welfare state systems provide high investments in young children in general providing children with equal opportunities.

### **The Danish Law on Childcare**

Up until 2004, there were no national or sub-national prescribed guidelines on pedagogic approaches specified by the government or the local authorities in Danish childcare. Childcare was part of a set of broad-based regulations stating the values of ECEC. These are still predominant in the law.

The Law on Child Care in Denmark (Ministry of Welfare 2015) emphasizes that childcare must provide a physical, psychological and esthetic environment for the children that promotes their wellbeing, health, development and learning. The following aims are required to be reflected in the locally developed learning plans.

- The setting must, in collaboration with the parents, give children care and support the individual child's all-round/holistic development and self-esteem as well as contribute to the child's experience a good and safe upbringing.
- The childcare setting must promote children's learning and development of competence through experiences, play and pedagogical planned activities that provide opportunity for engrossment, exploration and experience.
- The childcare setting must give child co-decision, co-responsibility, and understanding of democracy. As a part of this the childcare setting must contribute to develop children's independence, abilities to commit themselves in the community and solidarity with and integrate in the Danish society.
- The setting must, in collaboration with the parents ensure a good transition to school, by developing and supporting fundamental competences and the inclination to learn. The setting shall in collaboration with the schools create a coherent transition to school and afterschool provision.

In 2004, the Pedagogical Learning Plan was introduced with six learning themes: language, social competences, personal competences, nature and nature's phenomena, cultural expressions and values, body and movement. The individual ECEC setting had to both incorporate the overall aims and learning themes set in the law and produce a plan for children between 6 months and 2.5 years and for children between 3 years and school age. Local decision making was maintained and the curriculum remained a broader based regulation.

The curriculum has been adjusted a number of times; however, the local development of aims and methods remains. The Danish curriculum does not in itself imply structured school preparatory activities and it does not detail method or specify goals or assessment of the individual child. For a very short period of three years, from 2007-2010, with language assessment for all three-year-old children, the requirement was changed to a language assessment of solely the children perceived in need of special language support. There has traditionally been a strong resistance to testing young children (Ringsmose, C.& Brogaard Clausen).

The only assessment is that once a year the children are interviewed about their opinions on childcare. A commission under the Danish Ministry of Education has developed a questionnaire that can be used when interviewing the children. This questionnaire includes questions to the children about childcare in general, about their relationships to

the other children and friendships, about the teachers (e.g., whether the child like the teachers, feels that the teachers like him/her, whether the teachers listen to the child, scold him/her), and about indoors and outdoors equipment for play and a range of other things. Granting children influence.

The broad value based goals are part of the social pedagogical tradition. It is considered that learning takes place through play, relationships between children and adults, children's influence, and the outdoor life as significant which is direct opposite to what we can witness in many systems of early childhood around the world with focus on direct teaching, standardization, and less play. In the Danish curriculum does not imply structured school preparatory activities and it does not detail method or specify goals or assessment of the individual child (Ringsmose & Brogaard Clausen, 2017).

In the law it is evident how children's participation, well-being, social development and learning are equally valued and how they are perceived as a part of supporting character formation, which is positioned as the main aim for children's lives in the early years' settings.

## **Learning and Development in The Social Pedagogical Tradition**

In the social pedagogical tradition "The pedagogue sets out to address the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity. This is not the child only of emotions – the psycho-therapeutical approach; nor only of the body – the medical or health approach; nor only of the mind – the traditional teaching approach. For the pedagogue, working with the whole child, learning, care and, more generally, upbringing (the elements of the original German concept of pedagogy: *Bildung*, *Erziehung* and *Betreuung*) are closely-related – indeed inseparable activities at the level of daily work. These are not

separate fields needing to be joined up, but inter-connected parts of the child's life." (OECD, 2006 p. 59).

The Danish early years' practices are built on philosophies of Fröbel and Montessori. Both theories focus on how children learn and develop based on an understanding of the child's efforts and strategies to learn and develop, and also on the motivation and eagerness to understand and master. Play is considered essential to children's development and learning (Kristensen, Hamre, Bayer, 2015). For the preschool child, the motivation to interact and communicate does not only focus on connecting with adults, but also on joining peers in play activities (Hviid, 2000, Karrebæk, 2008).

The American researcher Judith Wagner, who studied childcare in Denmark, noticed that Danish preschool professionals often protest to being referred to as teachers, because they claim they do not teach children. She explained that this is not what American's call custodial care, but rather a view of interactions between children as active constructors and adults who care for them. She thinks that what Danish early years' professionals call care is consistent with what American's call developmentally appropriate education for young children. Yet the Danish pedagogue would still be uncomfortable with the term *teaching*; instead, the term *learning* has become predominant. Traditionally the Danish pedagogues' self-perception is that they do not teach but rather care for children, in the understanding of care as 'developing strong relationships with them and engaging them in a democratic community' (Broström and Wagner 2003).

The tradition is based on a broad understanding of learning in which children learn through play and participation. It is a child-centered, socio-cultural approach to learning and development. Learning is connected to the child's experiences in social relationships, body experiences, and experiences with materials as well as with other people. It is

considered that young children do not learn best through teaching, but in everyday life experiences, activities, play, and relationships (Hansen, M, 1997). The relationships between the children and between the children and the professionals are considered the core of the child's ability to grow and thrive. This is supported by research indicating that the relationships between the educational staff and the children are important for the children's personal, cognitive and social development (WHO, 2004). The WHO review reported that the most important factor for quality in child-adult interaction is the adult's sensitivity towards the child's expression and the adult's responsiveness i.e., whether the adult's response to the child's signals is in accordance with the child's expression. The WHO review also shows that the adult's personality, wellbeing and engagement in the children affect the relationship and thereby influence child development. The OECD's review of child care services has described the essence of quality care as "a stimulating close, warm and supportive interaction with children". A similar review in the United States has concluded that "warm, sensitive and responsive interaction between caregiver and child is considered the cornerstone of quality" – a characteristic that is as difficult to define and measure as it is to deliver." (UNICEF 2007 p. 21).

Children develop by engaging in social interaction and joint attention through participation in meaningful activities with adults as well as with other children. Shared attention scaffolds the child's competences and abilities in all areas of development (Tomasello, 2003, Vygotsky, 1978). Joint attention is defined as the phenomenon achieved when two individuals know that they are attending to something in common (Tomasello, 2003). The task of preschool curricula is not to teach the children a certain curriculum, but to create opportunities for joint attention and social understanding (Carpendale and Lewis, 2006: 106). This joint

attention happens when adults and children explore together, read a book together, play a game or engage attentively in any other social activity. Allowing children to enjoy childhood while learning to actively participate in society and develop the social and cognitive skills and competencies necessary to do well in society.

Grethe Kragh-Müller who has studied Danish and North American childcare (Kragh-Müller, 2013) found that the adults in both the American and Danish childcarecenters believe that growth-promoting relationships between the pedagogues/teachers and children comprise the most important quality indicator in childcare. In practice, however, the relationships vary. Relationships between children and adults appear to be more personal and equal in the Danish/Nordic tradition than in the North American tradition. Interviewing Danish pedagogues, she found that they identify attentiveness between pedagogues and children, care and appreciative relationships as the most important aspects of educational quality. When you interview Danish parents – and also American parents, for that matter – they indicate that the most important factor is that pedagogues should show that they care for and love their children. And the children themselves, also both Danish and American children, say that the most important aspects of a good day in childcare are good opportunities for playing with playmates of the same age, and that the adults are nice (Kragh-Müller, 2013).

Recent studies on Danish childcare centers reveal the impact of the increased focus on early years which is gradually changing the relationships between the children and the adults with more structured approaches to childcare and more adult directed activities with the children and less play. It is obvious in the centers that there are more materials focusing on learning activities, and less materials for play which may affect the child's possibilities to have an influence, to play, and to interact with peers through play. This can be viewed as a result of

the influence from the global education reform movement influencing Danish childcare towards more school directed activities at the expense of play and personal contact.

### **Global Education Reform Movement Challenging Nordic Childhoods**

The social pedagogical approach to early years learning is challenged with the increased global focus on quality early childhood education, politicians and practitioners take action to achieve what they assume will be more effective. In Denmark in 2014 the Minister of Education who was then responsible for childcare was pointing to more focused learning plans, and also trying out a program with more structured activities in early years (Future childcare, 2014). With the structured activities and focused learning plans program we also saw examples of children undergoing pressure while they were being tested to measure their cognitive and social abilities. This was presented in the media, and resulted in a huge debate. The structured program was highly criticized from several parts. The Danish union for social pedagogues (BUPL) resisted strongly to the program. So did the parents organization (FOLA), as well as many pedagogues and researchers. The newspapers and television news and debate programs communicated the debates. The resistance was criticizing the narrow goals which as a consequence made the pedagogy look more like teaching, and the pedagogue holding more structured plans a more narrow focus. The strongest resistance was on behalf of the testing, and the narrow understanding of children's development that can be seen as a result of the test practices. Researcher's supported the debate saying that it was more like laboratory experiments that we left behind 40-50 years ago ([http://www.bupl.dk/presse/pressemeddelelser/forskere\\_i\\_haard\\_kritik\\_af\\_fremtidens\\_dagtilbud?opendocument](http://www.bupl.dk/presse/pressemeddelelser/forskere_i_haard_kritik_af_fremtidens_dagtilbud?opendocument))

The critique resulted in partnership lead by the government office involving the organizations, the unions, the researchers, the pedagogues, the parents and the politicians describing the new aims and goals for the learning plans in childcare. This has resulted in a consensus report which is now the common point of action, and which is at the moment debated in the parliament, and may become the new common ground based on the cultural values, and on the foundation of the tradition of social pedagogy.

For now, the resistance to the changes was strong enough to stop the program, but the question is for how long. The politicians are strongly influenced by research looking for the "right pill", and also changes in the social pedagogical tradition are happening gradually.

Returning to the question of why Danish politicians are looking to other countries when they aim to develop childcare. The schoolification approach that is found in many countries in early years has an immediate attraction to politicians in an era of global competition with focus on which countries have the best performing students. Although this may seem obvious, the fact is that children do become ready for school in cultures such as the Danish with a focus on relationships, play, and children's influence. Young children learn when they play, explore, and participate in everyday activities. In cultures such as the Danish where the social pedagogical approach has been an integrated part of early childhood children have become ready for school for many years. The international comparison and competitive focus is an ongoing threat to important values of early childhood.

#### **Notes**

1. The Nordic philosophy of early years will be viewed with Denmark as an example. Within the Nordic countries traditions vary, but the countries share the welfare state model, and also philosophies of learning taking place

through play, relationships between children and adults, children's influence, and the outdoor life as significant.

2. E.g., the Environmental rating scales such as ECERS-R, ECERS-3 and ITERS-R developed in the US is now used in many other countries. On the official website it says "The scales are used not just in their country of origin, the United States, but world-wide for research, and quality assessment and improvement. International use includes, but is not limited to Canada and various countries of Europe, Asia, and South America. They apply across varied cultures when desired outcomes required for success in a global society, and desired goals for children (downloaded from the worldwide web June 29, 2017 <https://www.ersi.info/inpractice.html>).

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