

Village Schools in England: At the Heart of their Community?

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Abstract

Recent debates within UK rural studies have stressed the shifting interplay of economic, social, political and cultural forces, with a concomitant blurring as to what constitutes rural living, rural spaces and even rural occupations. This article situates the rural school within this social, cultural and political landscape and attends to the frequently heralded discursive policy conviction that ‘local schools are at the heart of many rural communities’. The research applies an inclusive model of ethnography, drawing on participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis, to facilitate a multi-faceted engagement, and holistic exploration of the role and place of the village school in two contrasting English rural localities.

Introduction

In the current state of the UK countryside there is a blurring as to what constitutes rural living, rural spaces and even rural occupations. The situation marks a ‘differentiated countryside,’ that resists any ready essentialism being ascribed to rural localities (Murdoch, Lowe, Ward, & Marsden, 2003). Our research - funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council¹ - situates the rural school within this contested, somewhat oblique, and shifting cultural and political landscape.

In this article, by holistically exploring the role and place of the village school in two contrasting English rural communities, we seek to uncover the important but relatively under-researched interrelationship between the local village school and its community (Hargreaves, Kvalsund, & Galton, 2009). In so doing, we attend to the

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previous Government's policy conviction and oft-repeated discursive mantra that, 'Local schools are at the heart of many rural communities' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions [DETR], 2000, p.28)

Capturing the Rural Plural

So, what do we mean by 'rural'? Bell (2007), in addressing the ontological and epistemological antecedence of the concept, made an analytical distinction between what he referred to as *first* and *second* rural; a distinction akin to Halfacree's (2006, p.47) reference to a material 'rural locality' as opposed to ideational 'representations of the rural'.

The *first* rural Bell (2007) identified as 'the material moment of the rural' (p. 402). In essence a bounded modernist conceptualisation of rurality, which draws on normatively referenced relative definitions or structural factors such as demographic or statistical variables, related to the labour market or population density, to determine what is rural. For example, the designation of *rural* primary schools in England, is based on a settlement approach and the identification of rural towns, villages and scattered dwellings within a grid framework of cell size 1 hectare (100x100 metre squares) (Department for Children Schools and Families [DCSF], 2008). The common features of a *first* rural conceptualisation can thus be categorised as fundamentally materialist, rooted in the presence or lack of persons on the foundation of the land, fundamentally spatial, the rural as something which can be mapped, and fundamentally relative, understood with respect to the urban (Bell, 2007, p.405).

According to Bell (2007), in the quixotic desire of modernism to provide the rural with a presence, it 'sought boundaries in the boundless' (p. 409) and as such, while offering a materially defined object for study, opened the way for postmodern scholars, to reformulate a position which he referred to as the *second* rural.

The *second* rural, conceived as 'the ideal moment (in the philosophical, not the evaluative, sense) of the rural' (Bell, 2007, p. 408), challenges the saliency and value of trying to define or speak to something termed the rural. This position was

encapsulated by Mormont (1990, p.40) with his assertion *that the* ‘rural is a category of thought’.

For Bell (2007), the key issue in delineating between *first* and *second* conceptualisations of the rural, and drawing on Halfacree (2006, p.47), is that they ‘intersect in practice’. In this crucial sense ‘first rural and second rural, are equally first - and equally second - in the lived experience of the rural’ (Bell, 2007, p.412), *and* should therefore be analytically conflated to constitute the notion of the ‘rural plural’ (Bell, 2007, p.412). In determining our theoretical understanding and methodological engagement with rural space, the work of Bell (2007) and Halfacree (2007) provide valuable ontological and epistemological starting points, through which to situate and view our work.

Research Method

The research was conducted through intensive – ethnographically informed - fieldwork in two contrasting English villages over two years. One village was in the North East with a strong coalmining heritage, a population of around 2,500, and a village school of 164 pupils. The other village, in the East of England, had an arable farming heritage, a population of around 600 and a small village school of 50 pupils. The villages have been given the pseudonyms Minbury and Cowshill respectively.

The research employed participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002) inside the village and the schools. Semi-structured interviews (30 in each site) were conducted with school staff, parents, the governing bodies and key members of the local community. Field interviews and conversations also took place with village residents (long-standing and new arrivals) in a host of informal settings including social clubs, public houses, community centres, shops and homes, with data recorded in research diaries (Burgess, 1981). Strong use was also made of documentary material including school inspection reports, ordnance survey maps, residents’ websites, parish newsletters and social history records and accounts relating to each village. A digital photographic and video archive of each village was also collated.

In terms of our focus in this article on the interrelationship between the village schools and their rural communities, we took as our starting point the discursive assertion that a village school is at the *heart* of its community (DETR, 2000). Drawing theoretically on Bell (2007) and Halfacree (2007), we conceive of the notion of *heart* in both normative and idealised terms; as problematically denoting a physical geographic centre, a political policy discourse, and an organic everyday function. Data were subsequently analysed inductively (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); the findings situated within a heuristic analytical frame delineating ‘heart’ as material, political and cultural.

Material Heart

In normative terms both of the case study sites are specific geographic locations which, on the basis of settlement criteria, as applied by the UK government, are classified as rural (see [Countryside Agency, 2005](#)). In so far as we ‘still need to draw a line someplace so we can talk about things’ (Bell, 2007, p. 405), the *material heart* speaks to the physical make up of the village. In particular, whilst wishing to avoid any claims to environmental determinism, it reflects on the physical presence of the school in relation to the layout of the village, and the implications this may have for the social and cultural relations of its inhabitants.

Minbury

Minbury’s first village school was opened in 1804 by a local landholder and rebuilt by another, in 1848. It stood in the West of the village and was later used as a Sunday school after a new school was erected in 1913, near the village crossroads. In the late 1960s a secondary school was built in the northeast of the village, to which pupils from the primary transferred. Due to falling school rolls, a decision was taken in the 1970s to demolish the old primary school, and to make what had been the secondary school, the new primary school. It is this primary school that which is the current school in the village.

In terms of the school being located at the geographical ‘heart’ of the village, this was a particular concern, not so much for parents, as for the head teacher who commented in the following terms:

It's a shame we don't have the old location, much nearer the centre. I think it's important for the school to have a physical presence, to be seen and walked past by the community, and in this location we are a bit away from things

(Minbury, Head Teacher)

For the head teacher the physical location of the school was important for its profile. She commented 'I want local parents to not only know we are here but to see we are here, and that we are the local school to which they should send their kids' In this sense the school's geographical location was perceived as having a promotional role, the school building acting as its own advertising hoarding. This perception relates in part to the *political heart* and in particular the marketisation of education, in which educational policy permits parents to choose or express a preference for the school they wish to send their children (Department for Education and Science [DES], 1988). This policy has financial implications, as funding is directly linked to pupil intake. Thus, in terms of the *cultural heart* and everyday implications, school choice can be particularly crucial in rural areas in which village schools may be already struggling with small numbers and for financial survival.

In Minbury, the head teacher, in order to compensate for the school's location on the periphery of the village took the decision at the time of the school's refurbishment to paint the school a vivid red! As she remarked, 'I wanted the school to stand out and this was one way I thought we could say to the community, look we are here. Come to us.'

Cowshill

The village primary school was built in 1865. The school has around 50 pupils. The school remains on its original site (although expanded in 2005) and this is – potentially significantly – where the two prongs of the village converge. Hence the school is the one remaining institution that is physically located in the heart of the village. A large extension to the building includes a sports and arts hall, which is 'in principle' shared with the local community. The positioning of the hall inside the school means that it is essentially run and maintained by the school. The initial wave of funding that came with the build (as a community project) has now finished and it

has now become, ironically, a drain on the school's budget, which is limited by its enrolment.

The village's own attempts to raise funds to build a hall on the village playing fields were effectively undermined by the school's extension success. The cost of hiring the new hall, as well as bureaucratic procedures, has been cited by some as prohibitive. As one resident remarked, 'there were so many rules... women weren't allowed to wear heeled shoes in there and things like that because they might damage the floor'. As it stands, only parents and the scout and karate groups using the hall. Indeed, even associations once closely linked with the school have become distanced.

In essence the physical structure and location of the school hall in the 'heart' of the village didn't function as a material space, in which to bring the school and community together. Rather, due to its locally contested antecedence, financial drain, and under usage, it functioned symbolically as a signifier of school-community disharmony and disassociation.

Political Heart

The *political heart* speaks to what Halfacree (2007) terms the 'formal representations of the rural' (p. 127) and is aligned with social constructs around the meaning and regulation of rurality (Woods, 2005). As such it acknowledges and encompasses an external viewpoint of the rural school, discursively positioned outside its community in a centralised urban-facing policy environment, in which all schools are politically positioned, need to respond and can be judged.

For example, as already touched on above, the continuing legacy of major educational changes heralded in England with the introduction of the Education Reform Act 1988 (DES, 1988) and the implications for enrollment due to enhanced parental school choice necessitated a response from rural and urban schools alike. But, as with all such changes, the rural dimension brought with it its own challenges and concerns. In particular, difficulties in affecting economies of scale, a disproportionate non-school age population, problems in attracting workers to rural locations, and increased competition between rural schools for pupils, all ultimately contributed in the 1990s

to a spate of village school closures (Moser, 2004). Significantly, campaigns against these closures have been identified as one way in which otherwise disparate local communities came together (Kilpatrick, Jones, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott 2001), often utilising the slogan that the village school is at the heart of the community.

In 1998 the UK government seemingly recognizing the value of maintaining the availability of rural schools, introduced a 'presumption' against their closure (Department for Education and Employment [DfEE], 2000). Interestingly, the wording in the 'presumption' drew on similar idealised notions of the village school, to state 'Government action has halted the decline of rural schools and put them back at the heart of their communities' (DfEE, 2000). Further, in attempting to solve the cost-effectiveness problem, small schools were encouraged to work together in clusters (DfEE, 2001), or to form federations, with a single governing body or a single executive head teacher running several schools.

Recently, in more explicit political heart-centred terms, education policy has increasingly emphasised the importance of engendering strong school, family and local community partnerships (DfEE, 2000) with the utilisation of school space for community-based social activities. The positioning of the rural school as a 'one stop shop' at the *centre* of local services for families and children was consolidated with the UK government's extended services initiative. The intention of this policy was for schools to provide a range of services including childcare, parenting support, homework clubs, referral to specialist agencies and in general to 'contribute more fully to the creation of economic, social and human capitals in their communities' (Commission for Rural Communities [CRC], 2010, p. 6).

A further education policy which explicitly and discursively positions the school at the heart of the local community (urban as well as rural), relates to mandatory school inspection procedures. Since 2007, all schools have been required to show the contribution they make to community cohesion. The term 'community' is classified as having a number of dimensions including:

- the school community, defined as the children and young people it serves,
- their parents, carers and families,

- the school's staff and governing body,
- community users of the school's facilities and services; and
- the community within which the school is located, defined as the school in its geographical community and the people who live or work in that area.

This applies not just to the immediate neighbourhood but also to the city or local authority area within which a school is located (Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted], 2008). Schools, under one of the sub-categories for leadership and management, are subsequently graded for their standard of provision in this area.

Minbury & Cowshill

In terms of Ofsted and community cohesion both Minbury and Cowshill schools received a satisfactory ranking, which in both schools was the lowest grade they had received for any of the assessed leadership and management sub-categories. The Minbury head teacher, when asked about this grading commented that she believed the inspection 'had failed to fully appreciate the extent to which the school community is the local community' (We return to this point below in reflecting on the cultural heart of the school). The Cowshill head teacher accepted the grading as a fair appraisal of the school's relationship with the community.

In terms of Sure Start Children's Centres (government designated school-based locations for multi-agency service delivery) neither school had a Centre, although the head teacher at Minbury had campaigned unsuccessfully to try and get one located at the school. She commented:

I thought it would be good for the school to have one here, In addition to meeting local need, if I am being perfectly honest, anything which establishes a link, especially from an early age with mothers and mothers-to-be, creates a link between them and the school, and makes it more likely for them to send their children here when they reach school age.

(Minbury, Head Teacher)

Certainly, as the above quote implies, government policies on school choice and its implications for the financial viability and sustainability of a school, occupied the

minds of the head teachers at both schools. At Minbury, while the head teacher hoped to attract newcomers from the new estate, she also appreciated that the overwhelming majority of the school population came from long-standing local residents, whose association with the school went back over generations. It was this group whom the head teacher referred to as her financial ‘bread and butter’, and the community with which the school interfaced the most. To this extent, in a competitive educational environment, the social value of strong community-school relations inevitably afforded a school marketing value, especially important when school choice means that newcomers to a community no longer have to send their children to the local village school. In Minbury and Cowshill, it appeared that wealthier families (primarily from the new estate in Minbury, and of longstanding in Cowshill) were either sending their children to private schools or to schools outside the village. As one resident who had recently moved into Minbury commented:

If I have the choice, then I am going to look around. Just because I have bought a house in the village, doesn’t mean I am going to send my son to the village school. If the one in the next village gets better results then I will be taking him there.

(Minbury Resident)

In this regard both the Minbury and Cowshill head teachers referred to the possible ‘creaming off’ of the brightest pupils to neighbouring schools, observing that in terms of social backgrounds their ‘current school population doesn’t necessarily reflect the diversity of the village’.

In Cowshill the very small pupil numbers brought additional pressures in terms of budget planning and sustainability, the head teacher predicting that ‘smaller schools of this kind of size would ultimately close’. Indeed, the neighbouring village school had itself merged with Cowshill in the 1980s. Similarly, in 2010 a small village school about two miles from Minbury, with about 50 pupils, was federated with the school and placed under the leadership of the Minbury head teacher. Whilst it was not possible to evaluate the impact of this change on local school-community relations, the development does signify the extent to which wider policy promulgations can reconfigure local contexts in particular ways.

Cultural heart

The *cultural heart* focuses on the ‘everyday lives of the rural’ (Halfacree, 2007, p. 127), the perspectives and experiences of pupils, teachers and residents, which in their local arenas ‘take in and, to a greater or lesser extent subvert’ (Halfacree, 2007, p. 127), the material and political.

Minbury & Cowshill

Ofsted’s scrutiny of a school’s role in developing community cohesion and the previous governments establishment of Sure Start Children’s Centres - many of them located in local schools - both signify a shift in education policy towards encouraging schools to become more local community facing (DCSF, 2008). While neither of these measures is specifically aimed at rural schools, it helps create a culture of expectation in which all schools have to operate, and challenges previously held notions of schools doing things ‘for’ rather than ‘with’ the community (Hargreaves et al., 2009). A key player in this process – signalled in Ofsted’s reflections on community cohesion as assessed under school leadership and management - is the school’s head teacher. In this regard the head teacher facilitates, if not controls, the transition of community-facing policy into practice.

Given the central importance of the head teacher in shaping school-community relations, it is notable that schools in rural areas find it much more difficult to recruit a head teacher than those in urban areas. Indeed, commenting on this situation, the General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers drew on an idealized notion of rural schooling to stress: ‘Small rural schools are the glue of the local community’ (Paton, 2010). Similarly, a recruitment campaign by the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services (NCLSCS) to encourage more applicants to apply to become head teachers of rural schools, observed:

Headship of a rural school presents particular leadership challenges. But those in the role value their place at the heart of the community, the opportunities to build close links with families and the chance to collaborate with others.

(NCLSCS, 2011)

In line with the apparent difficulties associated with the recruitment of rural headships, Cowshill experienced a significant turnover in senior teaching staff, having had six different heads since 2005. The previous head had been in the post for three years (2005-8) and left to take up the headship of a larger rural primary school. Prior to this the school had a temporary head for a few months, but before this the head had been in the post for 15 years. The result of this situation is that many of the teaching staff in Cowshill currently had little local knowledge of the village.

Further, the attitude and relationship towards the village forged by the last long-term head at Cowshill had established a legacy that had become somewhat insular. He enjoyed a reputation of having managerially run a very 'tight ship,' with school interactions with the village strictly controlled, restricted to activities such as Christmas events (village churchgoers visiting the school to make Christingles) and the Sports' Day. This is not to suggest that visitors to the school were prohibited or made unwelcome, rather that the timing and extent of such visits were carefully stage-managed. The school, at this time, did not operate an 'open door' policy, for parents or villagers alike. Currently in Cowshill, while a karate club and scouts used the school hall (the scout master was also caretaker and village resident), the impetus for more extensive village use had seemingly been lost. Moreover, the lack of continuity in leadership had, to use the acting head teacher's term, left the school 'rudderless' in effecting any significant change. The result was an impasse or inertia towards the development or establishment of new community-school links.

In Minbury, the village school had experienced much greater stability and continuity of staffing and leadership, with the current head teacher having been in the post for five years. During interviews it was frequently mentioned by teaching staff and parents who had known the previous head, that the leadership and management style had undergone a marked change, since the 'old days'. As one parent remarked:

Don't get me wrong, the last head was okay, it was just that he could come across as a bit stand offish, you know what I mean. He came across as kind of superior, I guess a little bit scary in some ways. It was like it was his school

and he knew best how to run it. Whereas Mary (*current head*) couldn't be more different, she makes you feel welcome, part of the school.

(Parent, Minbury)

In Minbury, unlike Cowshill, parents frequently stressed how they felt themselves to have a stake in the village school. The Minbury head teacher had a clear philosophy with regards to the school and the local community, which she outlined in the following terms, 'I wanted to establish a school that was an integral part of the community, that was open to parents and one which they felt comfortable visiting.' The school operated an open door policy, providing a regular opportunity for parents to see their child's class in action, with parents able to use the school to meet and chat with other parents anytime they wished, and to this end the school had a designated room which parents used as a social drop-in for coffee and biscuits.

Minbury also ran a breakfast club for pupils from 8.00am charging 60p per day attracting a mix of regular attending children and on-off's. Parenting support opportunities including numeracy and literacy classes on a Wednesday evening and Monday afternoon respectively. There was an active parent-teacher association with a regular newsletter sent to parents each term.

In line with the findings from Bell and Sigsworth (1992) on the central role of the head teacher in facilitating school-community relations, the Minbury head was very familiar with pupils, their families and their association with the village. Indeed, she appeared to have a warm, close, and personal working relationship with them. Moser (2004, p.4), pointed out that a 'primary school is itself a social community of shared interests' and in the case of Minbury, interviews and observations indicated that the head teacher, staff, governors and parents, had been collectively working to establish a strong school-based community. In this way, the *in-school* position echoed the findings of a CRC (2010) case study report on positive community-school relations in rural areas, with a notion of community as:

...an interlocking pattern of just human relationships in which people have at least a minimal sense of consensus, within a definable territory. People within a community actively participate and cooperate with others to create their own

self-worth, a sense of caring about others and a feeling for the spirit of connectedness.

(Friere, 1998, cited in CRC, 2010, p. 71)

In this sense, the local community was largely perceived as the parents/grandparents of children associated with the school rather than the wider village community per se. Indeed wider community engagement at Minbury school was not markedly different from that at Cowshill and largely limited to a Christmas carol service in the centre of the village, harvest festival at the parish church, and a summer fete. Other in-school activities such as the Christmas play, sports events, end of year performances etc while open to all, were only attended by parents and grandparents who had a child at the school. In the case of Minbury however this relatively narrow school community focus is perhaps a moot point, as the highly stable, long standing village population meant that even those residents who didn't currently have a direct association with the school were in the past very likely to have attended it. To this extent there existed a temporal bond between the village and the school.

Moser (2004, p.4) contended that the extent to which a school will interact and interrelate with a local community will in part be determined by 'the proportion of local and incomer pupils that belong to the school community; the more local pupils the stronger the bond. Interviews and conversations with long standing residents revealed a sense of loyalty to the local school, with the predominant reason parents give for choosing to send their child to the school, being because it was 'the village school'. Interestingly, the second most frequently given reason was the school's head teacher. That the overwhelming majority of parents from the village with school age children chose to send their child to the school, and that a sizeable number of those – if the existing trend continues – may ultimately come to live in the village, means the school may well be seen as fulfilling a particular role in the engendering of social capital. By helping to establish social networks built around close bonded ties of family and friends within a neighbourhood, it may facilitate a shared understanding and co-operation and a sense of shared identity (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001). As Woods (2006, pp. 9-11) observed,

‘local schooling reinforces identification with a community and friendships formed in the classroom may shape the social networks of a community for decade.’

In Minbury, in contrast to Cowshill, a sense of identity as being ‘from the village’ was exceptionally strong amongst local residents, and used descriptively to position the ‘other’ as ‘from’ or ‘not from’ the village. Individuals who fell into the ‘not from the village’ category included both those who lived outside the village, or newcomers living in the village but with no family association to it. In the main a social setting still existed in Minbury in which to a very large extent (apart from newcomers) everyone broadly knew everyone else. In line with Bell and Sigsworth (1992, p. 65) individuals did ‘not merely reside within their particular locality, but ... they belong to it’. The village locale and personal, familial, and group association with it, providing a sense of shared identity, a common sense of place and a mutual sense of pride and obligation.

In interviews and conversations with parents and young people who had attended the village school, almost all referred to the lifelong friendships and associations they had first forged at the village primary, as the following quote reveals:

I’ve known Mick since I was six; we went to school together, played football together, just known him all my life really. But that’s what it’s like round here, you go to school together, you grow up together, my mam knows his mam, they went to school together, his gran knew my gran, our granddads went down the pit together...you’re just from the village. The pits closed years ago but the school’s still here and that is where we first got together

(Minbury Resident)

As the above quote reveals, the primary school plays a key role in engendering a temporal sense of belonging and community running over generations, which remains a constant in the face of social and economic change (Bell and Sigsworth, 1992). As Bell and Sigsworth, (1992) observe:

It is associations such as these, the memories they invoke, and the emotional attachments they generate, which can invest rural primary schools with a peculiar symbolic significance for the communities they serve.

(Bell and Sigsworth, 1992, p.2)

Moreover, relations established at school are not only consolidated in the community through proximity of living, socialising, and working, but return to the school when former pupils become parents and grandparents of children at the school. They may also return to the school as employees, as one dinner lady and one teaching assistant at Minbury were former pupils. In Cowshill, the dinner lady, teaching assistants and caretaker, were also from the village and as such the schools in both settings can be seen as fulfilling an economic role as a local employer (see also Kilpatrick et al., 2001). Despite these local economic ties, historical and social circumstances in Cowshill have seemingly created an environment within which the school, while spatially located at the material heart of the village, is not culturally embedded in that same village. In contrast, while the school in Minbury is not located in the geographical heart of the village, it seemingly constitutes an integral part of the social fabric of the village, with a that transcends the educational.

Conclusion

Significantly, Hargreaves and colleagues (2009, p. 81) contend, ‘the assumed closeness of the rural school-community relationship is a modern myth’. Arguably, the critical point here resides around the word ‘assumed’, as in certain rural locales there might well be a very strong relationship between the village school and the community; it is the assumption that in all rural communities such a relationship exists simply because it has a village school, which is key. Such claims serve only to ascribe a ready essentialism, to what is in fact a contested and highly differentiated countryside (Murdoch et al. 2003).

As we have shown with Cowshill – a village with a school at its geographical heart - it cannot be taken as read that a school will self-evidently play ‘a multidimensional role’ in its community (Woods, 2006, p.587). Rather, as the work of Arnold (1998, pp 4-5) into rural school-community relations suggests, ‘notions of simple, direct and easily forged and maintained relationships, should be abandoned’. Indeed, just

because parents may gather outside the village school gates does not in itself constitute a strong and robust school–community relationship (Hargreaves, et al., 2009). However, in certain social contexts such as the case in Minbury, where local schooling appears to reinforce ‘identification with a community (Woods 2006, p.587), so ‘informal school-gate conversations between parents’, may indeed ‘contribute to the structuring of community engagement’ (ibid, p.587). Further, it would appear from our data that friendships formed in the school – coupled with the relatively low migration out of the village - may be helping to ‘shape the social networks of a community for decades’ (ibid, p.587). The notion of community, as conceived and driven by the head teacher in Minbury, may largely relate to the students, staff, governors and parents, of the primary school. Nevertheless, in the context of a long standing community, in which most people were educated in the village and still know each other, the primary school occupies a powerful symbolic, cultural and temporal position, which unlike in Cowshill, brings the school into the village’s idealized heart.

Key Words: Rural Schools, Rural Sociology, Rural Areas, Politics of Education, Ethnography, Community.

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