

The educational dimension of penal execution inside and outside prison walls: Treatment approaches between annihilation and rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals

La dimensione educativa dell'esecuzione penale intra ed extra-muraria. Gli approcci "trattamentali" tra annientamento e rieducazione delle persone ristrette

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## 1. Adult education in prison as a social investment. The Nordic model

Growing international evidence shows that education in prisons significantly improves wellbeing, reduces recidivism, and strengthens communities. Guided by the Nordic Network for Lifelong Learning (NLL<sup>2</sup>) mandate, the NLL Prison Education Network has taken on a central role in advancing this agenda by building professional capacity, fostering cross-national collaboration, and advocating for inclusive lifelong learning policies that reach even the most marginalized learners.

### *Nordic collaboration*

The Nordic Network for Education in Prison aims to contribute to the development of knowledge in the field, supporting education as a key component of the rehabilitation process. Through targeted knowledge-sharing activities and thematic working groups, the NLL Prison Education Network has created a platform where research, practice, and policy dialogue come together. The network has helped to highlight persistent gaps such as uneven access to accredited learning opportunities, limited digital provision, and the need for more robust support for learners with low literacy levels or disrupted schooling histories. At the same time, it has showcased innovative solutions emerging across different countries, e.g. in the fields of guidance and digital competences. The network has contributed to

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the outcome of sustained and fruitful collaboration among all the authors. For the purposes of academic attribution, the authors declare the following distribution of responsibility: Antra Carlsen authored Section 1; Timothy Ireland authored Section 2; Pierangelo Barone authored Section 3; and Francesca Torlone authored Section 4.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service (Kriminalvården, <https://www.kriminalvardens.se/>), the County Governor of Vestland (Statsforvaltaren i Vestland, <https://www.statsforvalteren.no/vestland/om-oss/kontakt-oss/>), and the Prison and Probation Service of Finland (RISE, <https://www.rikosseuraamus.fi/>) for their valuable support and for providing essential data and information that made our reflections possible.

<sup>2</sup> Nordisk Netværk for Livslang Læring.

strengthening the case for coordinated regional collaboration and exchange, which is essential for closed environments of prisons.

### *Education in prison matters*

The Network's efforts reinforce the broader understanding that prison education is a societal investment, not merely an institutional service. When individuals in custody have access to meaningful learning pathways, the benefits extend far beyond prison walls. Families, communities, and labour markets all stand to gain when people leave prison better equipped to participate fully in society. In this sense, the work of the NLL Prison Education Network resonates strongly with global priorities such as social inclusion, community resilience, and the strengthening of democratic culture.

*Terje Røstvær*, Senior Adviser in national prison education authority in Norway (County Governor in Vestland / *Statsforvaltaren i Vestland*) argues: "Education during and after imprisonment is an investment with significant benefits for both the individual and society. It provides inmates with opportunities they often have not had before, and contributes to increased competence, strengthened self-worth, and the development of a prosocial identity. At the same time, education reduces the risk of reoffending, increases employment, and promotes social integration. When education is organised as a holistic, coherent, and long-term process, it becomes a transformative force capable of changing lives and strengthening society's overall safety and sustainability."

Although each Nordic country operates within its own legal, institutional, and cultural framework, they share a longstanding commitment to equality, welfare, and human-centred learning. The Network has supported national ministries, agencies, and education providers with evidence and has enabled countries to benchmark key elements of their prison education systems – such as digital access, vocational pathways, reintegration models, and quality assurance – and to draw inspiration from one another's reforms. The network members have contributed to this editorial by providing several examples of recent policy initiatives that support quality development of education in prisons.

### *Sweden*

Adult Education within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service has, for the past few years, worked more systematically with quality assurance. This involves planning, monitoring, analysing, and documenting the effects of education, and based on the outcomes, defining measures to improve educational quality.

Another strategy is to expand upper-secondary vocational education (*gymnasieskolan*) to more prisons, in collaboration with prison units and prison industries for workplace-based learning. A national vocational advisory board has been established to oversee the area, manage development issues, and drive quality improvement. More vocational teachers are being recruited, and more vocational specialisations are being offered.

### *Norway*

Norway introduced the Completion Reform adopted by the Norwegian Parliament (*Stortinget*) in 2021. Modular vocational training (MFY<sup>3</sup>) was introduced as part of it, with the aim of making education more flexible and better adapted to adult learners' needs. MFY was officially implemented on 1 August 2024 after several years of testing in selected vocational subjects.

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<sup>3</sup> Modulstrukturert Fag- og Yrkesopplæring.

MFY represents a structural and pedagogical breakthrough in adult education and has gained relevance in correctional services. For education within the correctional services – an area characterised by short and unpredictable sentences, varied learning prerequisites, and a high risk of interruptions – MFY appears to be a particularly suitable model. This is due to the model’s flexibility, modular organisation, and its ability to ensure documented progression regardless of changes in sentence-related conditions. Adult learners can attain competence more quickly and in a more individualised manner, while maintaining the same final competence level as traditional vocational education.

From 1 August 2024, MFY was adopted in 13 vocational subjects that had been part of a national pilot project. Experiences from both mainstream schools and schools in prisons showed that the model strengthened opportunities for targeted training and more effective cross-sector collaboration. In the correctional services, the need for such structures was quickly recognised, as inmates’ learning conditions are often affected by security concerns, operational factors, and frequent changes in daily routines. Experiences from the County Governor of Vestland show that MFY provides a more robust framework for education in such environments.

#### *Finland*

A particular concern in Finland – as in all Nordic countries – relates to underage and young prisoners. The number of underage prisoners has increased significantly. Imprisonment does not remove compulsory education, which in Finland continues until the age of 18. A particular challenge is ensuring sufficient in-person teaching within prison conditions. Around half of underage prisoners require basic education, while the other half have completed basic schooling and therefore need upper secondary education.

*Satu Tsharkov*, Senior Specialist from the Prison and Probation Service of Finland mentions a positive development made by a working group established by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Justice, which have the task to develop upper secondary education provided in prisons.

The expectation is that the recommendations and findings of the working group will help improve and expand prison education. Among the tasks of the working group are the following: examine the current state and feasibility of providing general upper secondary education in prisons, assess the need and conditions for offering basic adult education in prisons, update and supplement the 2019 guidelines for implementing vocational qualifications and training in prisons and extend them to include adult basic education and upper secondary education, and examine the situation of providing education for compulsory-school-age learners, particularly underage prisoners and sentenced juveniles.

#### *Rising involvement of young people in criminal activities*

Nordic police cooperation highlights the need for shared and coordinated responses to emerging crime phenomena, including the online recruitment of youth. Nordic countries call for reinforcing mutual learning and joint strategies that strengthen national efforts to protect vulnerable young people from criminal networks.

The Nordic network for education in prison is an important arena for further collaboration and exchange, which is crucial now and in the coming years. *Lena Broo*, adult education expert from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service points out that “The concept of young inmates needs definition. In the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, it has until now referred to ages 18–21. From 1 July 2026, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service will receive a new mandate to house children aged 15 (possibly 13) to 17. Many are

expected to have short or insufficient schooling, and a high proportion are likely to have diagnoses.”

The network members are concerned about the tension that arises in prison environments, dominating control measures from one side and flexible learning environments as a motivating factor for learning on the other side. *Terje Røstvær*, County Governor of Vestland argues that “the most decisive factor for young inmates is that education forms a coherent whole – from initial assessment to follow-up after release. Continuity, motivation, strong relationships, clear structures, and seamless transitions must all function together. When they do, education can be a powerful force for improved participation, increased inclusion, and reduced risk of reoffending. When even one of these elements fails, the pathway forward becomes much more difficult. The most important task is therefore not only to provide education, but to provide it in a way that is coherent and sustainable over time.”

#### *Continued Nordic collaboration*

As the Nordic region continues to confront new forms of youth crime, the integration of lifelong learning into prevention and reintegration strategies will be increasingly important. There is a shared recognition that preventing young people from entering criminal pathways requires far more than reactive measures: it requires sustained access to learning, guidance, and supportive communities from an early age.

This is precisely where the NLL mandate and the work of the NLL Prison Education Network offer contributions, by promoting inclusive lifelong learning systems, before, during, and after involvement with the justice system.

## **2. Between rights and reality: the Brazilian prison system and the tension between normative frameworks and practices**

In October 2023, the Brazilian Federal Supreme Court finally ruled on ADPF<sup>4</sup> 347 (Claim of Non-Compliance with a Fundamental Precept) recognising the existence of systemic and massive violations of fundamental rights in the Brazilian prison system and recognising an Unconstitutional State of Things (*Estado de Coisas Inconstitucional*) in that system. The National Plan which ensued, known as *Pena Justa* (Just Sentence) recognised the need to control the prison superpopulation; to improve the quality of places and the services offered to the incarcerated; to reduce unnecessary admissions, particularly for less serious offences, and to increase necessary releases and respective progressions of regime as a way of guaranteeing the return to social reintegration and the security of society.

Whilst this constitutes just one national case, it should be remembered that in 2025 Brazil had a prison population exceeding 900,000 individuals, making it the third largest prison population in the world after the United States of America and China. This population was made up of a majority of young men (95.7%) between the ages of 35 and 40 years of whom 62.4% were either black or mixed-race individuals (Sisdepen, 2023). In the same year the deficit of places in the prison system was over 174,000. The situation was further complicated by the dominant presence of criminal factions and the exacerbation of social inequalities which, despite affecting a specific stratum of the population, extrapolated the

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<sup>4</sup> Arguição de Descumprimento de Preceito Fundamenta.

prison walls and resonated in Brazilian society as a whole.

In this context, the National Plan concentrated its investments on measures designed to contribute to the resocialisation of the incarcerated, namely education, work, professional guidance and social and religious assistance. If we focus specifically on education, data from the Ministry of Justice reveals that 81% of all prisoners have not concluded basic education, the vast majority of whom have not even finished primary education (Sisdepen, 2023). Clearly low levels of schooling also impact the field of professional and technical education and tend to increase recidivism.

Despite the enormity of the challenge, significant progress was made at least in normative terms in the field of formal and non-formal education in the period between 2005 and 2025. In 2010 and 2011, National Guidelines were established by national councils linked to the Ministries of Education and Justice, as part of the constant tension between the demands for education and security, for the provision of adult education in the prison system. This was followed in 2016 by the guarantee of remission of sentence for those taking part in formal educational programmes and later for those participating in reading and other social practices of education.

However, normative progress has not been matched with the expected increase in enrolments. Official data demonstrates that even when adding the numbers of those enrolled in formal education with those involved in reading projects and other sports or non-formal activities, 83% of all prisoners do not have access to any form of educational activity (Depen, 2020). A recent national survey of all penal units revealed that 39% do not have libraries (Conselho Nacional de Justica, 2023).

Constitutionally, education is a right for all people independent of whether they are ‘free’ or in prison. Hence given the data cited above, the Unconstitutional State of Things continues to be the rule. This can in part be explained by the lack of specific training for those working in the prison context – penitentiary officers, teachers and other professionals. The Brazilian system suffers from a chronic shortage of physical space for educational and training activities. Whilst the discourse continues to be a defence of human rights and the critical importance of education as both a right and as part of the rehabilitation process, the practice reveals that what remains prevalent is the punitive function of the prison system. Prison systems worldwide were historically designed to punish the wrongdoers rather than to provide the tools necessary for dignified social participation and decent life.

### **3. Eclipse of the educational paradigm in Italy: Juvenile justice following Law no. 159/2023**

In Italy the approval of Law no. 159/2023, converting the so-called “Caivano Decree”, has marked a sharp break in the tradition of Italian juvenile justice. For decades, the juvenile criminal system (D.P.R. 22 settembre 1988, n. 448) was considered a model of European excellence, founded on the principle of detention as an *extrema ratio* measure (measure of last resort) and the prevalence of educational objectives. Today, the tightening of precautionary measures and the lowering of the age of criminal responsibility are transforming juvenile detention centres into places of mere containment, saturating spaces and compressing the timeframe for rehabilitative design.

Data provided by the Antigone Association in 2024 and the early months of 2025 describe an alarming situation. While in 2022 there were approximately 392 detained minors, by

mid-2024 this figure exceeded 560 units, with peaks leading to a detention population increase of over 48% in just two years. This surge has inevitably led to a worrying situation of overcrowding: in 12 out of 17 Italian juvenile detention centres (Istituti Penali per i Minorenni, IPMs), maximum capacity has been exceeded, with occupancy rates in facilities such as Treviso or Milan approaching or exceeding 150%. The increase in the detained juvenile population is undoubtedly attributable to the massive use of pre-trial detention, incentivized by new regulations that facilitate recourse to precautionary measures even for minor offenses. This is highlighted by the data on pre-trial detention: approximately two-thirds of the youth present in juvenile detention centres have not received a final conviction (Associazione Antigone, 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, overcrowding is not merely a logistical issue but a structural impediment to the educational relationship. The saturation of spaces prevents the personalisation of the Individualised Rehabilitation Project, transforming intervention into the bureaucratic management of emergencies. The increase in admissions has not been accompanied by a proportional increase in educators, psychologists, and cultural mediators. This creates a climate of tension that often results in acts of self-harm (which increased by 4.1%) or attempted suicides. Furthermore, there is an ongoing process of further medicalisation of deviance: in the absence of valid educational alternatives, there is a troubling trend toward “sedating” conflicts through the use of psychotropic drugs, with pharmaceutical expenditures in some institutes increasing exponentially.

Within this altered regulatory scenario, the role of the educator in juvenile detention centres is experiencing a profound identity and operational crisis. While the Italian model was once distinguished by its ability to “look beyond the crime”, today’s educator is forced to operate in a context of perennial emergency. Overcrowding imposes a frantic pace that reduces the time available for individual interviews – the fundamental core of the supportive educational relationship. Instead of being a “designer of change”, the educator risks being relegated to bureaucratic functions of monitoring disciplinary behaviour. The scarcity of human resources – highlighted by the Antigone report – means that the numerical ratio between educators and detainees is often insufficient, leading to a “standardisation” of educational projects at the expense of personalisation (Associazione Antigone, 2024).

Added to these difficulties is the problematic management of multicultural complexity. Indeed, the increase of Unaccompanied Migrant Children (UMC) within the penal circuit adds a further layer of challenge. Without structured cultural mediators, the educator must bridge linguistic gaps and address migratory traumas, often in the absence of an external family network. In this context, educational intervention risks becoming mere “time management” rather than a path toward integration.

Finally, of particular pedagogical and procedural relevance following the application of Law 159/2023, is the decline of the “Probation”. The new law places obstacles in the way of Article 28 (Suspension of the trial with probation) if the minor does not proactively adhere to rigid re-educational paths, effectively hollows out the transformative and fiduciary nature of this instrument.

Critical analysis suggests that Law 159/2023 is sliding toward a model of “penal populism” that sacrifices educational flexibility on the altar of perceived security. If the juvenile detention centre loses its specificity, becoming a miniature duplicate of adult incarceration, the State fails in its constitutional mission of social reintegration. Without massive investment in local welfare and pathways outside the cell, the risk is the premature institutionalisation of distress, fuelling a spiral of re-offending rather than breaking it.

#### **4. Educational dimension of penal execution of adults. Challenges and Directions Emerging from the Contributions**

Issue 3/2025 of *Form@re* is published at a critical moment for recent developments in Italian penitentiary policies. The fiftieth anniversary of the Prison Law (Legge 26 July 1975, n. 354) represented a missed opportunity to reflect on the possibility of genuine changes in detention conditions and in the educational quality of imprisonment.

For this reason, *Form@re* launched this call for contributions with the aim of fostering reflection on the various critical issues and potential areas from which to initiate paths of meaningful renewal, at least within the scientific debate. The attempt has been made.

This issue brings together essays (research articles and practice-based contributions) that offer a range of perspectives. All of them approach prison and custodial settings – for both juveniles and adults – as organisational and educational devices that generate educational effects, both positive and negative, as well as identity-related, relational, and symbolic consequences for people deprived of liberty at every stage of penal execution and in the everyday life of detention. Participation alone is insufficient to ensure learning from an emancipatory perspective: “Contrasted with the participation objective is a different parameter focused on the individual and social future consequences of the learning processes in which each adult is involved.” (Federighi, Torlone, De Maria, 2025, p. 504).

When we speak of “rehabilitation,” bearing in mind the Italian constitutional principle (Article 27, paragraph 3), we necessarily refer to the whole set of educational actions – embedded, informal, non-formal, and formal – that take place both inside and outside prison walls and that intersect with the educational dimensions of every moment of prison life. These educational dimensions shape the processes and outcomes of learning experienced by incarcerated individuals in the form of learning, de-learning, and un-learning, as consequences of relationships, institutional dynamics, interactions with rules, and engagement with organisational actors.

Actions within prison – including educational ones – are experienced by individuals whose pre-offense life trajectories have often been marked by “adverse educational experiences” (Bethell et al., 2014; Federighi, 2016). To the educational consequences of such experiences, detention is added as a further layer of harm – an educational injury that calls for forms of *compensation* and *reparation* (Torlone, 2018).

The educational actions that constitute the prison experience are first and foremost embedded in the wide range of educational and counter-educational events that shape the daily life of incarcerated individuals. These experiences carry the potential to transform future behaviours, making incarcerated people tomorrow better or worse than they are today.

This transformative potential – whether constructive or destructive – is linked not only to the material conditions of prison life but also to the educational quality of interactions and, consequently, to the informal educational processes that develop within custodial settings.

This issue of *Form@re* seeks to address this thematic complexity beginning with the two Invited Papers.

Hybrid warfare and cognitive warfare, both inside and outside prison, are the focus of the Invited Paper by Paolo Federighi. The article explores emerging forms of warfare aimed at shaping adult learning processes through a range of aggressive, informational, and persuasive devices. Particular attention is given to the possibility of developing strategies of protection and defence through a conscious and critical management of the learning

processes that unfold in the relationship between consumer publics and digital educational objects.

The second Invited Paper by Francesca Torlone outlines the educational dimension embedded in the reception process. An educational lens makes it possible to orient the behaviours of organisational actors involved in the reception process with a view to counteracting the immediate effects of prisonisation. From the outset, admission and reception impact learning processes, sense-making, and the identity reorganisation of the incarcerated person. In the analysis presented, prisonisation is conceptualised as a process that, if intentionally governed, can counteract the suicidogenic conditions of prison beginning at the very moment of entry.

More than fifty years after the 1975 penitentiary reform in Italy, the rehabilitative function of punishment is critically revisited by Davide Latella, who highlights the tensions between constitutional and legal principles and their actual implementation in practice.

The reflection on the denial of the right to education for individuals held in pre-trial detention is further developed in the contribution by Ioana Curt. Where everyday practices fail to guarantee this right, jurisprudence attempts to intervene – as in the ruling of the Bucharest Court – revealing a field still permeated by educational practices that hinder the intellectual development of incarcerated persons, meant in the broad sense.

Language and narration in prison represent a further decisive focus of reflection in this Issue of *Form@re*. In the contribution by Alessandra Augelli and Caterina Benelli, attention is directed to the lack of words that often affects incarcerated individuals due to cultural and educational deprivation. This deprivation hinders the expression of their orientations, needs, and aspirations, as well as their ability to engage in authentic communication with other detainees, institutional actors, and the wider community.

Beyond the difficulty of self-expression, incarcerated individuals also face significant obstacles in constructing pathways aimed at reducing recidivism. Orsolya Czenzer offers an in-depth analysis of the Predictive Measurement Tool (PME) currently used in Hungary, examining its structure, functions, and implications within the correctional system.

Education likewise represents a key mechanism for reducing recidivism for those who are able to access and remain in structured learning pathways. Participation in such programmes tends to activate in learners the capacity to pilot life transitions and navigate change across their life course. The three-year ethnographic study conducted in six Second Chance Schools in Greece, analysed by Antigone K. Efstratoglou and George A. Koulaouzides, identifies the components that qualify the school experience as a transformative process for participants, highlighting the relational, motivational, and identity-building dimensions that sustain long-term change.

In a related perspective, the contribution by Luca Decembrotto and Giulia De Rocco examines access to higher education and the professionals engaged in fostering participation. University tutors can act as a strategic bridge between the often unexpressed demand for higher education among incarcerated individuals and the concrete possibility of accessing and overcoming the obstacles and barriers that hinder enrolment, persistence, and academic success.

This issue devotes four contributions to juvenile detention. Two are authored by Márta Miklósi: the first adopts a theoretical perspective to examine the risks that detention poses to healthy psychosocial development and to a positive transition into adulthood. Participation in educational and learning pathways may strengthen the production of

beneficial outcomes for minors, particularly in fostering processes of desistance, while underscoring the need to ensure the actual quality of the educational provision.

This raises the still largely unresolved issue – in Italy as well as in other EU countries – of the training of teachers and professionals tasked with delivering educational activities, including formal schooling, within custodial settings. In her second contribution, the Hungarian author Márta Miklósi offers further reflections on this matter, highlighting the specific competences required and the structural gaps that continue to affect professional preparation in juvenile detention contexts.

Participation in educational and training activities therefore remains an open issue, due to the shortage of qualified professionals and the difficulty of implementing such initiatives within a highly regulated environment that is often poorly equipped – both culturally and materially. This scarcity has a direct impact on the temporal dimension of life in detention. The management and use of time become a critical node in the educational and identity-related processes that unfold in prison, as detention alters the temporal coordinates of existence, producing experiences of suspension, immobility, and “empty time,” frequently perceived as time taken away or wasted. The ways in which incarcerated individuals represent and organise their daily prison time are explored by Antonietta Maiorano and Raffaele De Luca Picione, who emphasise how structured educational activities can transform the time of detention into a resource, reactivating sense-making processes and future-oriented perspectives.

Among these initiatives, cultural heritage education in custodial settings deserves particular attention. In the analysis proposed by Maria Rita Mancaniello and Sabina Leoncini, art is not conceived as passive consumption but as an aesthetic experience in the Deweyan sense (Dewey, 1934), through which incarcerated adolescents explore emotions, self-representations, and symbolic belongings, projecting possible pathways toward desistance.

The issue concludes with five contributions gathered in the miscellaneous section which, although not directly situated within the thematic scope of penal execution, engage meaningfully with the questions raised throughout the volume.

Their inclusion is justified by at least four points of convergence.

First, the type of educational target groups addressed: the contributions focusing on persons with disabilities and on older adults in residential settings draw attention to populations who, similarly to incarcerated individuals, experience conditions of vulnerability, institutional dependency, and limited access to educational opportunities. Reflecting on these groups broadens the perspective on the educational responsibilities of institutions toward fragile populations.

Second, the object of study, with particular reference to emotional dynamics in learning processes. The analysis of how emotions are managed within educational activities provides interpretative frameworks that are equally applicable to custodial settings, where the affective and relational dimensions deeply influence the quality of educational processes and their transformative outcomes.

A third element of coherence concerns the attractiveness of educational and training professions. Reflecting on the conditions that make educational work desirable and sustainable means addressing a structural issue that also affects the penitentiary field: the quality of interventions depends on the preparation, motivation, and social recognition of professionals working in the most complex contexts. Professionalism and professionalisation processes are decisive in determining the quality of learning outcomes

achieved by people deprived of liberty.

Lastly, reflection on the Theory of Change introduces a conceptual framework that is useful for developing impact-oriented policies and practices. Although elaborated in different fields, this perspective appears particularly relevant to custodial contexts as well, where educational planning requires explicit and assessable models capable of linking actions, expected outcomes, and long-term transformations.

Completing the issue, the review of the volume *Understanding Micro-Credentials in Non-Formal Adult Learning and Education: Making Learning Visible* by Giulia Biagi further broadens the scope of the debate by highlighting the theme of visibility and recognition of learning outcomes achieved in non-formal contexts. The issue of micro-credentials directly concerns the penitentiary field as well: making the competences acquired during detention visible, certifiable, and transferable represents a crucial lever for supporting pathways of reintegration and social inclusion.

Taken together, these contributions broaden the scope of the issue, strengthening its theoretical and methodological framework. They confirm that reflection on the educational dimension of penal execution cannot be confined within the boundaries of prison alone, but must engage with the broader questions of contemporary pedagogy that this issue brings to the attention of its readers.

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