

Children's peer interactions in the classroom:
A review of literature, an empirical illustration,
and some implications for teacher's practice
Le interazioni tra pari in classe:
Una review della letteratura, un'illustrazione empirica
e qualche indicazione per le insegnanti

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the risks and opportunities of classroom peer interactions on the basis of previous literature and of data from video-ethnographic research in two primary Italian schools. As regards the former, the article reviews previous academic literature, arguing that several studies on peer group work neglected the *process* of children's mutual engagement. Conversely, other studies managed to offer a thorough description of the practices that might develop in the peer group, highlighting how peer interactions (a) entail significant opportunities for children's learning and development, but (b) are also a locus where children might exclude other classmates. This recognition is further demonstrated through an empirical illustration based on data collected during the ethnographic research. Setting out from this appraisal of previous literature and empirical data, the article outlines the pedagogical relevance of peer interactions in the classroom and delineates its implications for teachers' professional practice.

L'articolo è incentrato sui rischi e sulle opportunità di apprendimento che si possono sviluppare all'interno del gruppo dei pari in classe. La discussione si basa su una disamina della letteratura esistente e sui dati raccolti nel corso di una ricerca video-etnografica in due scuole primarie dell'Italia del Nord. L'analisi della letteratura rivela che molti studi nel settore hanno adottato una prospettiva focalizzata esclusivamente sui risultati del lavoro tra pari, tralasciando il processo che ne è alla base. Altri studi si sono invece focalizzati sulle pratiche concrete all'interno del gruppo, sottolineando come le interazioni tra pari (a) siano potenzialmente ricche di opportunità di apprendimento e (b) non siano estranee a pratiche di rifiuto ed esclusione. Attraverso un'illustrazione empirica, l'articolo sottolinea questa 'doppia valenza' delle pratiche tra bambini e quindi la loro rilevanza pedagogica. L'articolo propone infine alcune indicazioni per la pratica professionale delle insegnanti.

KEYWORDS

Peer group, Peer tutoring, Classroom, Social interaction, Teacher's professional knowledge

Gruppo dei pari, Tutoraggio tra pari, Classe, Interazione sociale, Sapere professionale dell'insegnante

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The Author declares no conflict of interest.

1. Introduction

In Italy, public schools face a chronic lack of resources that has by now become part of our common-sense reasoning. Dealing with insufficient spaces and school personnel, teachers struggle to provide meaningful pedagogical opportunities to a strikingly heterogeneous student body (Eurydice, 2019). In this challenging context, the peer group is often seen as a resource that can help teachers overcome the problems of everyday didactics.

Specifically, academic literature has underlined the potential of peer mutual engagement, promoting various forms of peer tutoring and group work (see among others Agosti, 2006). Nevertheless, these studies often provide indications for teachers' professional practice on the basis of the *outcomes* of peer group work. Measurements of students' performance at the end of group work are displayed as evidence of the benefits of peer interaction. These insights from scientific research are reflected in institutional policies and teacher training courses: for example, in the schools involved in an ethnographic research project (see below), more than one teacher reported that the peer group is nowadays conceived of as a sort of panacea, a cure-all solution to every structural problem that Italian public schools face.

In a context of widespread confidence in the positive value of peer interactions for children's development and learning, studies that focus on the concrete unfolding of local interactions among children seem to complicate the picture. By looking at the *process* of peer group work, this line of research underlined the multifaceted character of children's peer interactions, highlighting the potential problems that unsupervised practices among children entail. For instance, there is now increasing evidence that peer interactions (a) do not have the impact that was once thought (Walsh, 2011) and (b) are germane to practices of exclusion between children (Goodwin, 2006).

This article briefly reviews studies that showed how the peer group entails both opportunities and risks for children's development and well-being at school. The recognition of the 'dual' nature of peer interactions is further developed through an empirical illustration, which is based on video-ethnographic research in two primary schools. On the basis of this appraisal of previous literature and empirical data, relevant implications for teachers' professional practice are proposed. The paper has two main aims. First, it seeks to provide a thorough description of the practices that possibly take place within the peer group at school. Second, it aims to outline the relevance of this knowledge for teachers' everyday practice in the classroom.

2. The children's peer group in the classroom

Although academic research has mainly focused on the role of the teacher, a crucial part of children's everyday life at school unfolds within the peer group and in interaction with other classmates. In the classroom, children engage with their classmates in various activities that might range from verbal play to gossip (see Kyrtzis & Goodwin, 2017). Notably, these activities are at times bound to the didactic task at hand: during the execution of exercises and tasks, children interact with each other and possibly co-operate to fulfill the expectations of the institution. In this regard, academic research has long stressed the role of the peer group in children's ability to solve tasks effectively.

Although the idea of peer cooperation can be found in some early publications (Maller, 1929), its systematic appraisal as a teaching/learning method was first advanced in the second half of the XX century (Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Sharan, 1980; Slavin, 1980; see also Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996; Topping & Ehly, 1998). These studies focused on children's collaborative work on a shared task, trying to promote positive interdependence and mutual help. An underlying notion was bound to neo-Vygotskian perspectives on education (see Daniels et al., 2007): scholars assumed that, with the help of a classmate, a child could solve a task that s/he could not solve alone. These methods seem to be considered quite successful in contemporary educational institutions and ideologies, as they are promoted and cited in academic publications (Agosti, 2006; Lamberti, 2010; Serbati & Grion, 2019; Abed, 2019), in institutional policies (see Portera, 2020) and in teachers' everyday discourse.

These studies are often based on research that analyzed the learning outcomes of peer group work on a specific task. Peer tutoring and cooperative learning are thus promoted on the basis of the *results* of the activities, which analysts measured according to their specific research aims. Crucially, the *process* of learning together in a certain context is often neglected, making of peer interactions a sort of black box: the teacher gives the instruction, children work somehow together, and the final results are collected and measured. Conversely, studies that focused on the concrete unfolding of children's mutual engagement have highlighted the various practices that might develop *within* the peer group. These studies offer a more nuanced perspective on the complex and multifaceted character of children's peer interactions, providing a picture that seems to complicate our straightforward understanding of these practices. How does this picture look like?

2.1 Interactional studies on children's peer practices

The first studies that considered children's peer interactions from a situated perspective date back to the 1970s and 1980s. Some of these studies focused on their relevance in terms of development, highlighting the role of children in their own socialization and acquisition of communicative competences (Ervin-Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977; Garvey & Berninger, 1981). Other studies left developmental issues in the background in order to focus on children's practices from a synchronic perspective: this stream of research underlined the set of practices through which children daily (re-)construct their social world and their local peer cultures (Cook-Gumperz et al., 1986; Corsaro, 1985). Notably, these latter studies already showed that the children's social world should not be understood as a direct imitation – in smaller scale – of the adult world. Children reproduce adult messages, values, and ideologies in creative and possibly unpredictable ways, constructing

peer cultures that can be variously (mis)aligned to the adult world (see the notion of *interpretive reproduction*, Corsaro, 1992).

The legacy of these early attempts is still very influential in contemporary academia and have led to the study of children's peer practices in various institutional and non-institutional contexts (see Kyratzis & Goodwin, 2017 for an overview). Within this milieu, it has been recently proposed that peer interactions serve as a "double opportunity space" (Blum-Kulka et al., 2004), allowing both children's acquisition of social and linguistic skills *and* the local co-construction of their social organization. This recognition is central to grasp the situated and multifaceted nature of peer learning and development. Children learn and acquire new competences in specific contexts and social situations, which influence and shape the learning outcomes. In the peer group, what children learn is tied to the characteristics and aims of that specific social group, and thus strictly intertwined with issues of identity and social organization (Kyratzis, 2004).

In the classroom, the children's peer group mediates the learning process in various ways. Several scholars have analyzed peer learning initiated by an adult prompt (Allen, 1976; Carrasco et al., 1981; Cazden, 1979). More recently, other authors have underscored children's ingenuity in autonomously framing their learning activities: parallel to institutionally programmed tasks, children are able to find (or create) spaces to initiate pedagogically-significant interactions (see Kyratzis and Johnson, 2017). This ability to shape the learning environment allows children to socialize their classmate to the local expectations of the institutional context. These expectations might regard appropriate ways of behaving (Cobb-Moore et al., 2009, Nasi 2022a) or of using the second language in the classroom (Blum-Kulka & Gorbatt, 2014). Moreover, learning opportunities might arise during argumentative events among children, as highlighted by several authors (Ehrlich & Blum-Kulka, 2010; Pontecorvo et al., 1991). As mentioned above, this socializing work is bound to children's social relationships and might be functional to the negotiation of valued identities and group membership (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2012; Evaldsson & Cekaite 2010): while introducing their classmates to a specific context, children might also index and construct their respective position of power and subordination.

Notably, this negotiation of valued and despised positions in the peer group can lead to practices of exclusion. For instance, novices might have difficulties in gaining social acceptance from competent peers (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2012; Nasi, 2022b; Pallotti, 2001) and might need to pass a certain communicative threshold before being able to participate to everyday interactions as 'accepted', ratified participants (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017; Blum-Kulka & Gorbatt, 2014). Moreover, several authors have recently begun to problematize a too optimistic view of peer interactions: for instance, there is now increasing evidence that dialogue between peers does not have the impact on (second) language learning that was once supposed (Foster, 1998; Rampton, 1999; Walsh, 2011). Peer interactions seem thus 'not enough' to reach an adequate level of competence, as they do not necessarily provide sufficient opportunities for children's mastery of a certain language or discipline (Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017).

Summarizing the insights of several decades of interactional research on the peer group, it seems that children's peer dialogue has a sort of 'dual' nature. On the one hand, it provides ample opportunities for children's development and acquisition of social and linguistic skills. On the other hand, these opportunities are limited and intertwined with children's local identities and social relationships. In this regard, it is *also* a locus where practices of exclusion might possibly arise. This point is further developed through the following empirical illustration, which il-

illustrates the multifaceted character of children's peer interactions on the basis of two emblematic sequences.

3. The dual nature of children's peer interactions: An empirical illustration

The sequences are part of a corpus that was collected during video-ethnographic research that lasted 9 months. The research involved two primary schools in Northern Italy and considered both the ordinary and the Italian L2 class. The schools are attended by a large number of non-native children, or children who cannot always count on a solid and supportive familial background. In this context, teachers often relied on the peer group for the accomplishment of everyday activities. The research focused thus on peer interactions and adopted participant observation, informal interviews, and videorecording of children's 'natural' practices in the classroom as its main data gathering methods.

As regards the analytical approach to data, the videorecorded interactions were analyzed with the analytical instruments of Conversation Analysis, which allowed to underline the constitutive character of social interaction for children's social world and to track single instances of peer learning (Koschmann, 2013). Apart from that, the analysis of the video also relies on ethnographic information (Maynard, 2006). This combined methodology has been extensively deployed to analyze children's peer interactions and is here mobilized to describe two specific instances of peer dialogue in the classroom. These two sequences illustrate the 'dual' nature of peer interactions, highlighting both the risks and opportunities of children's mutual engagement in the classroom.

3.1 Two emblematic sequences

The first sequence was recorded in the ordinary classroom during group work. Four children sit around a table, working on a shared task: they are expected to draw one of the teachers and to write a brief text that describes him. As we join the interaction, Yassin is drawing the teacher and the other children observe him.

Extract 1

- 1 Yassin ((draws the teacher on a sheet of paper))
2 Melek MA CHE È?! fallo un ^po' più bene,
WHAT IS THAT?! do it a ^little bit more good,
3 ^((picks up the eraser))
4 [non ha i capelli lunghi,
[he doesn't have long hair,
5 Elanor [non si di:ce più bene.
[you don't sa:y more good.
6 si dice (.) o bene, o più.
you say (.) either good, or more.
7 Sharif o meglio.
or better.
8 Elanor, ((look at Melek)) [Fig. 1]
Sharif

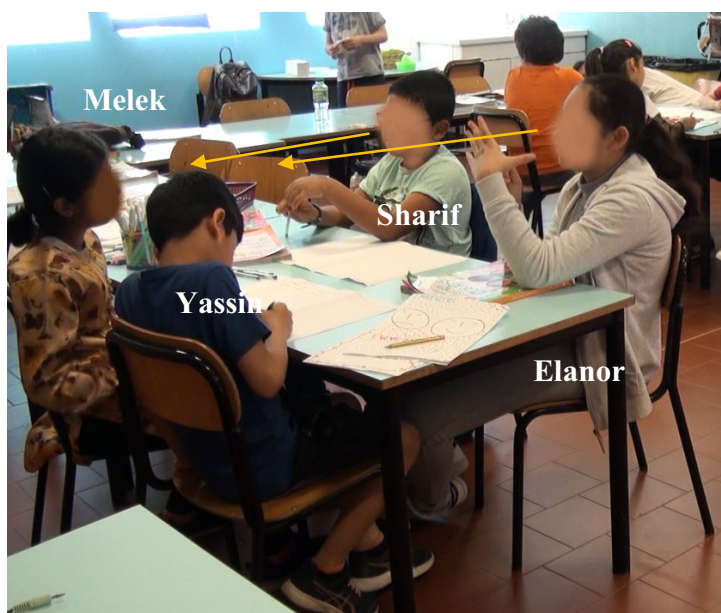


Figure 1. Elanor and Sharif look toward Melek after the correction.

At the beginning of the sequence, Yassin is drawing on the paper and the other children are closely observing him. In line 2, Melek starts questioning Yassin's drawings (*what is that?!*) and invites him to put more effort in the task (*do it a little bit more good*, line 2). Melek's turn entails a grammatical mistake in Italian, as the adjective 'good' (*bene*) cannot be paired with the quantifier 'more' (*più*). Elanor immediately sanctions this grammatical mistake, reproducing a rule that was introduced by the teacher (*you don't say more good*, line 5). Apart from this initial prohibition, Elanor further specifies the rule by stating the incompatibility of the two elements (*you say either good or more*, line 6). At this point, Sharif joins the conversation and indicates an appropriate way of expressing what Melek inferably intended (*or better*, line 7). After this joint correction, both children look at Melek in a V formation that 'singularizes' her in the group and underlines her responsibility for the infringement of the linguistic normativity of the classroom (Galeano & Fasulo 2009).

In this first extract, children socialize each other to a specific grammatical norm, introducing a classmate to the appropriate ways of speaking Italian in the classroom. In this regard, the sequence is potentially relevant for children's acquisition of sociolinguistic skills, as Melek possibly learned how to use the adjective 'good' in the correct comparative form. Nevertheless, the sequence is also relevant to children's negotiation of their respective positions in the group hierarchy. For instance, Elanor and Sharif assume an epistemically-superordinate role by displaying their knowledge of the rule (Melander, 2012), whereas Melek is constructed as non-competent. Thus, by correcting Melek the two children form an alliance of two-against-one that possibly marginalizes her in the group (Garcia-Sanchez, 2014).

The strict intertwining of learning and children's social relationships is also visible in the second extract, which revolves around non-native children who have recently started to attend the Italian school. The extract was recorded in the Italian

L2 classroom and involves three children: a girl, Ying, and two boys, Ahsan and Ramil. All children are non-native and have been attending the Italian school for less than a year and a half. Ramil and Ying are more competent and often socialize Ahsan, who has a more limited repertoire in Italian, to the appropriate ways of speaking in the classroom. Specifically, Ex. 2 shows *how* the two children introduce Ahsan to the expectations of the context: Ying and Ramil correct their classmate's mistake and jointly mock him.

Children are sitting around a table, working individually on a task (they are expected to write some sentences which start with "I like..." or "I don't like..."). As we join the interaction, the teacher has been asking children to tell *in plenum* their sentences.

Extract 2

- 1 Teacher ahsan hai scritto?
ahsan have you written?
- 2 Ahsan sì
yes
- 3 Teacher non mi piace?
i don't like?
- 4 Ahsan ubare.
teal.
- 5 Ramil ubare hhhhh[hhh
teal hhhhhh[hhh
- 6 Ying [rubare! (.) rubare
[steal! (.) steal
- 7 Teacher ma intendi rubare tu o quando
8 **do you mean when you steal or when**
ti rubano a te le [cose?
others steal to [you
- 9 Ying [ru ru (.) r. u. (.) ru
[st st (.) s. t. (.) st
- 10 (0.5)
- 11 Ahsan loro
they
- 12 Teacher loro.
they.



Figure 2. Ramil and Ying look toward Ahsan after having mocked him.

At the beginning of the sequence, the teacher asks Ahsan to read aloud one of his sentences. The teacher uses a designedly incomplete utterance (Margutti, 2010), prompting Ahsan to complete the sentence (*i don't like?*, line 3). Ahsan indeed completes the sentence with an element that fits the structure of the exercise – the verb 'to steal'. However, he mistakenly pronounces the verb without the initial consonant (*teal*, line 4). Ramil immediately picks up Ahsan's mistake, recycling his turn and overtly laughing (*teal hhhhhh*, line 5). Notably, Ramil makes no attempt to help or correct the classmate: he is simply mocking him for the (apparently hilarious) mistake. Ying also joins the conversation soon after; in overlap with Ramil, she corrects Ahsan by formulating the appropriate way of pronouncing the verb (*steal! steal*, line 6). The repetition and the exclamative intonation contribute to constructing Ahsan's mistake as serious and surprising.

At this point, the teacher tries to change topic and stick to the task, asking Ahsan for a clarification (line 7). However, Ying reiterates the correction by repeating the initial syllable of the word numerous times (*st st*, line 8). Again, this prolonged repetition is indexical of the seriousness of the mistake, which is constructed as a failure that should not happen again. Notably, the repetition of a single syllable is a typical way of speaking of teachers in this classroom. In this case, Ying is thus reproducing teachers' practices and their orientation to language normativity. Ahsan does not ostensibly react to the correction and, after a brief pause, answers the teacher's request for clarification (*they*, line 9).¹

Overall, in Ex. 2 Ying and Ramil correct Ahsan for a mistake, negotiating at the same time their respective positions in the peer group. Specifically, Ramil and Ying showcase their competence and attempt to achieve a superordinate position in the group hierarchy. Conversely, Ahsan is constructed as non-competent and re-

1 In the extract, the teacher's 'posture' is worth noting. Faced with Ramil's and Ying's problematic way to correct Ahsan, she adopts a strategy that can be brought back to the "work of doing nothing" illustrated by Hugh Mehan (1979): she does not comment upon the correction, treating Ying's and Ramil's contributions as not relevant and adopting therefore a mild form of sanction.

proachable for not doing his 'duty' (and thereby reach an adequate level of competence). As a result of this exchange, Ahsan has possibly learned how to correctly pronounce the word 'steal', but he has been ascribed a subordinate position that can hinder his ability to build meaningful social relationships in the classroom.

4. Concluding discussion

The illustration has provided further empirical evidence to previous studies on children's peer interaction, focusing on two examples of the kind of dialogue that can unfold among children in the classroom. Specifically, the analysis confirms previous insights on peer interactions as a "double opportunity space", serving as an arena for children's development and for children's negotiation of their social organization. In this regard, learning opportunities in the peer group are strictly intertwined with children's local identities and social relationships: children's acquisition of relevant knowledge (e.g. a grammatical rule, see Ex. 1, or the pronunciation of a certain word, see Ex. 2) happens in and through interactions that are *also* germane to the negotiation of children's respective positions in the peer group. For instance, in Ex. 1 children correct their classmate by constructing a formation of two-against-one that possibly marginalizes her in the group. In Ex. 2, a child performs an aggravated correction that involves mockery of the classmate who has done the mistake. In this regard, the empirical illustration shows how a failure to meet the social expectations of the group can lead to the ascription of an out-group identity and to the local exclusion of a child that is not able (or willing) to conform to group normativity. This recognition seems to complicate our understanding of the role of the peer group in children's development. Even though a part of the academic literature and several school policies adopt a rather unproblematic posture with regard to children's peer work, there are potential risks that need to be considered. In this regard, the opportunities for children's sociolinguistic development should be counterbalanced by an awareness of the possible risks that children's unsupervised interactions can entail. Setting out from this insight, the next section outlines few implications for teachers' professional practice.

4.1 Implications for teachers' professional practice

As a significant number of studies has figured out, in the peer group there are significant opportunities for children's development. Children are quite ingenious in creating their own environment for learning: next to the didactic tasks that the teacher intentionally plans, children can co-construct opportunities for learning in the peer group. This insight could raise teachers' awareness regarding the potential of peer interactions for children's acquisition of sociolinguistic skills: when children are interacting with each other, they are not just 'disturbing' the lesson and there might be significant learning opportunities at stake. These opportunities might regard task-oriented interactions (Mökkönen, 2012), mundane conversations on various topics (Maybin, 2014) and conflictual events (Nasi, forthcoming). Even though these peer interactions do not provide children with enough opportunities to reach an adequate level of competence, they do play a role in children's development. In this regard, further studies (e.g., based on a larger corpus and/or longitudinal data) might highlight which competences are more likely to be lear-

ned and developed in the peer group. This kind of knowledge could help systematically integrate peer group interactions into a structured program of language and social development.

Nevertheless, as I have empirically illustrated and other studies maintain, the analysis of the process of children's group work provides knowledge on *how* children's peer practices concretely unfold, offering a more nuanced understanding of the issues at stake. This knowledge can raise teachers' awareness in relation to what happens when children interact with each other in the classroom context. Teachers might thus acquire a deeper knowledge of this 'hidden' dimension of classroom everyday life, which usually remains in the shadow of the official business of the lesson. In turn, this expertise can allow teachers to calibrate and refine their everyday strategies and practices in the classroom: an increased awareness of children's peer practices might help teachers make more informed choices when faced with events of difficult interpretation (such as two children who argue animatedly).

Broadly, interactional studies underline the 'dual' nature of children's peer interaction, suggesting a certain caution with regard to children's autonomous work: even though children might acquire a wide range of social and linguistic skills by interacting with their classmates, exclusionary practices might possibly develop among peers (e.g., aggravated corrections, mockery, exclusion from the ratified participants). Notably, when these problematic peer practices occur in the institutional setting provided for formal activities, they might assume the status of (silently) institutionally-ratified practices. But what can a teacher do?

A first, crucial aspect regards teachers' displayed orientation to mistakes and classroom normativity. Apart from the empirical illustration in this article (see Ex. 2), several studies have shown how children reproduce teachers' practices, values, and educational ideologies in the peer group. Therefore, teachers' stances and actions in the classroom gain an even more decisive role, as they might have far-reaching consequences in terms of their creative reproduction and re-interpretation by children. Specifically, classroom normativity and teachers' ideologies of 'correctness' might be especially relevant for children's co-construction of their local peer order: children might index and construct exclusion on the basis of a strict interpretation of classroom normative expectations. In this regard, teachers should be aware of the impact of their actions and possibly attempt to construct an environment (a) in which mistakes are not necessarily deemed as personal/moral failures and (b) that allows a certain degree of flexibility and tolerance in relation to the range of expected ways of acting and speaking in the community.

Despite this 'posture', teachers' efforts might not be enough to avoid and preempt the possibility of exclusionary practices in the peer group. This recognition is relevant to a critical appraisal of widely promoted teaching methods such as peer tutoring and cooperative learning. As mentioned above, these methods are often promoted on the basis of the learning outcomes of peer group work. Nevertheless, the analysis of the process of peer co-operative work provides a more nuanced, thorough understanding of the possible risks and opportunities inherent in these teaching methods. For instance, the analysis illustrates how several peer practices are potentially problematic from an educational perspective, problematizing thereby an acritical view of children's mutual engagement. As a matter of fact, the role of the teacher appears crucial in steering children's peer practices according to a specific institutional and deontological mandate: the adoption of teaching methods based on the peer group should be thus accompanied by an

awareness of the centrality of an adult *supervision* of children's practices. Notably, the need for an adult, pedagogically-oriented supervision does not mean that children should be constantly under the watchful eye of the adult: teachers will need to find a balance between exigencies of control and children's autonomy, the latter being necessary for children's development of competences to manage their social relationships (see Fabbri, 1996 on dilemmas in education).

To sum up, recent research on the concrete unfolding of peer interactions illustrates their multifaceted character and the risks and opportunities of children's mutual engagement. These insights suggest a certain professional caution with regard to children's autonomous work, as it may lead to local practices of exclusion. Overall, the role of the teacher in steering learning opportunities toward a pedagogically-meaningful direction, as well as his/her role in supervising potentially problematic practices appears crucial. Despite a widespread emphasis on learners and on their practices and competences, the teacher still seems an irreplaceable figure in the classroom.

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