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Teacher perceptions of the instructional leadership roles of the cluster teacher leader: A case of Masvingo district, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The concept of teacher leadership is relatively new in the instructional leadership discourse and is scantly publicized and practiced in developing countries. This paper seeks to trouble the terrain of teacher leadership much as it appears in inter school collaboration settings. Thus, the paper aims to capture the views of teachers and heads on how they perceive the instructional leadership roles of the cluster teacher leader. The qualitative study of two Better schools clusters of Zimbabwe (BSPZ) interviewed six teachers and two principals all purposively selected. The interviews focused on how such a leader should be selected, his /her roles as well as what local education authorities should do to promote teaching and learning in the cluster. The study established that participants conceive of a meritocratic leader, who is dedicated, innovative and command the respect of stakeholders. The study recommends that local authorities should find ways of motivating hardworking teacher leaders if they are to influence positively instructional leadership in schools. The argument of the paper is that effective clusters instructional leadership can only be realized once both the teachers' and teacher leader's perceptions are established.

Key words: *school cluster; cluster resource teacher; Teacher leader; instructional leadership; distributed instructional leadership; perceptions*

Introduction

The effective schools movement between 1970 and 1980s has given impetus to leadership for learning (Hallinger,2009;Printy,2002).This has brought about international reforms such as the "No child left behind", " Inter school collaboration", with a view to improve the quality and efficacy of education. Efforts to improve teaching and learning have often been considered within the purview of instruction leadership (Hallinger & Lee, 2012).Whilst several studies have focused on the roles of school principals as instructional leaders (Dimmock & Walker, 2005, Blasé & Blasé, 2004) others have also explored instructional leadership roles for district personnel(Rorrer., Skrla & Scheurich.,2008).Few studies have looked at instructional leadership in inter school collaborations or school clusters. Most of the studies that have tried to explore school clusters have looked at the roles and significances as well as challenges of these inter school collaborations (Giordano,2008).While inter school collaborations take different forms and nuances their utility to teaching and learning has always been a source of debate and contestation. Aipinge (2007), Pomuti and Weber (2012) have advanced that school clusters have been established to improve on the administration and pedagogical knowledge of schools with focus on administration, supervision and professional development. Jita and Mokhele (2012) argued that institutionalization of school clusters has brought with it challenges in South Africa. Very few studies have been carried out on how school clusters engage in their instructional leadership practices and the effect there of on student achievement. Makaye, Jita &Mapetere (2014) in their study on how autonomy and control play out in school clusters revealed that BSPZ clusters have been given the space to do whatever they deem necessary to improve their teaching and learning by their Local education authorities. It also surfaced that success of their instructional leadership practices depends largely on the initiative, political will and ingenuities of the cluster leadership. In another study on school clusters Makaye(2016) established that school clusters in Zimbabwe are potential sites for teaching and learning provided the local authorities give them the leeway and leverage to do so. The study observed with dismay the low level of support by local authorities in incentivizing these inter school collaboration teacher infrastructures. These studies however skirted around the role of the cluster teacher leader who appears to be the link pin in these school clusters. The current study therefore is premised to

problematise the Better schools programme (Zimbabwe) cluster leadership as key driver of instructional leadership in clusters. Thus, the assumption brought by this paper is that with effective leadership clusters can live to their mandate of improving the quality and efficacy of education in schools. Every cluster is synonymous with the cluster resource teacher who is the teacher leader. The major question to be answered by the study was: What are the teachers' perspectives of the cluster teacher leaders. The sub questions were: What caliber of teacher leaders do teachers and heads expect to coordinate cluster activities? What roles should teacher leaders play in school clusters? How can the cluster or Local education authorities(LEAs) improve on the instructional leadership roles of the teacher leaders?

Background of the Better schools programme (Zimbabwe) cluster.

The Better school programme of Zimbabwe (BSPZ) cluster was borne out of the realization that the quality of education can only be improved when stakeholders come together to discuss, share and find solutions to problems they encounter as locals. The philosophy behind was that as iron sharpens iron so man shall sharpen each other. With the paradigm shift from quantitative to qualitative education adopted by the government soon after independence and Zimbabwe being a signatory to the Jomtien Declaration of education for all, Zimbabwe adopted the Better schools programme (Zimbabwe). The first phase of clusters witnessed school heads within the same geographical area meet together and share their administration skills with each other with the hope that the learnt skills will trickle down to teachers as the school is as good as its leader. However, this did not go well as expected and the second phase launched in 1995 was to take on board all stakeholders with teachers and community included. The idea being that teachers who are on the chalk face if they are allowed to cross pollinate ideas with others in the cluster teaching and learning will improve. This phase saw the appointment of teachers assuming leadership in the posts of District and cluster resource teachers (DRTs & CRTs) to coordinate the programme at district and cluster levels respectively. Madungwe, Mavesera, Moyana, & Seremwe (2000) outline the roles of the teacher leaders as to coordinate and organize in-service training for teachers, organize for the development of teaching learning material, carryout action research and manage the resource centres. Initially, the programme was funded by the Royal Netherlands which helped establish district resource centres, funded in-service training of teachers organized at district and provincial levels. The agreement was that with time the government of Zimbabwe would take over this responsibility from the funding partner. Funding of cluster activities was a prerogative and responsibility of stakeholders-teachers and the community.

After the donor period expired in 2003/4 Zimbabwe experienced some economic meltdown which affected negatively on cluster activities as stakeholders could not swallow the cost sharing concept by the government. In most districts the DRTs who were on secondment were posted back to their posts as school teachers leaving the programme in the hands of the District Education Officer (DEO) and the District Management Committee (DMC) to coordinate. BSPZ activities at the cluster were negatively affected and of those clusters which seemed to be on course their effectiveness would always be a source of controversy. Makaye (2016) established that BSPZ clusters could be potential sites for instructional leadership. However, how cluster leadership stirs its activities and how stakeholders perceive its leadership more so when the leadership is in the hands of a mere teacher needs scrutiny. Whilst participation in cluster activities is anchored on the will and capacity of the leadership which is doing this on voluntary basis, the overarching question of this study is; how is this leadership perceived by the teachers if at all activities are to influence student learning? What are the teachers 'expectation of the instructional leadership roles of the teacher leader and how can the current situation be improved to impact on teaching and learning. Understanding this would assist clusters conform to their expectation of improving teaching and learning as well as assisting the government and other nations to improve on their dispensation to change the education terrain using the initiative of clusters.

Conceptual Framework and Literature

Three conceptual pillars namely school clusters, instructional leadership and teacher leadership helped us frame and understand the perceptions of teachers of the instructional roles of the cluster teacher leader.

The cluster phenomenon assisted us understand the context within which teacher leaders operate. Whilst there are different nuances and forms of clusters, Giordano's (2008) conceptualization of clusters as groups of schools for educational and administrative purposes was adopted. Undergirding the definition of clusters Lieberman (2008), Jita and Ndlalane (2008) provided the background and different nuances of clusters

which made the understanding of the Better schools programme in Zimbabwe(BSPZ) cluster easier. All the previous authorities acknowledge that school clusters are predicated on mutual cooperation and collaboration amongst stakeholders for the common good of its members. Delport and Makaye (2008) bring to the fore the structure, rationale, and different roles which BSPZ clusters should accomplish in its pursuit to improve teaching and learning. Cluster activities, such as collaborative monitoring and evaluation, professional development, instructional resource mobilization and peer class or school supervision were viewed as critical in enhancing teaching and learning. As alluded to in the background the success of cluster activities are hinged on its leadership amongst which the cluster resource teacher is one. This teacher cadre coordinates the cluster activities with help of the cluster coordinating committee chaired by a school principal. The concepts of collaboration, teacher leadership as encapsulated in resource teachers, and the social interaction of stakeholders to enhance student achievement, aptly provided a lens for studying instructional leadership in clusters much as it is perceived from the teacher leader's perspectives.

The Instructional leadership phenomenon provided another theoretical lens through which teacher leadership roles can be better understood. Acknowledging that instructional leadership is conceptualized differently we explored varied views and frameworks. For instance, those of Hallinger (2012), May (2010), Jones (2009) and Lineburg (2010) were studied. All activities or actions performed by school leaders to improve teaching and learning or more aptly, student achievement are conceived of as instructional leadership (Hallinger, 2012). Hallinger's (2012) model provides the bedrock upon which instructional leadership is founded. The model advances three dimensions of roles with ten activities namely as follows; Defining the school's mission: this involves framing the goals and communicating them; managing the instructional programme: which entails supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress and promoting a positive school learning climate which involves protecting instructional time, maintaining high visibility, promoting professional development, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning. May's (2010) conceptualization emphasized on collegiality, shared vision and enabling environment and total commitment as constituting instructional leadership. Jones (2009) proffers a more or less set of practices similar to Hallinger and May but however warns that no single practice can improve the teaching and learning practices alone. Lineburg (2010) argues that student achievement is a result of a web of both the principal and teacher's practices. However, emphasis was given on the following strategies principals can employ to influence teachers' instructional practices; communicating goals; supervising instruction; promoting professional development; providing resources and providing incentives. Trudie (2010) argues for professional development which is needs driven and embedded in the daily teacher's realities. These practices provide us with a fertile ground on understanding the kind of activities constituting instructional leadership which teacher leaders may use in inter school collaboration settings.

The use of instructional tools or artifacts was considered greatly in the study of instructional leadership. Spillane (2003) argues that material artefacts and tools constitute leadership practice components and influence how leaders approach tasks. Artifacts such as designed programmes, regulations and policies, classroom observation checklists, and other important documents can aid learning (Martinez, 2007).These artifacts and others can be used in school clusters to promote teaching and learning.

Whilst most of the reviewed practices place more responsibility on the school principal as the sole centre of instructional leadership authors such as Harris and Muijs (2005), Spillane (2003), Firestone and Martinez (2007) have brought in teachers in leading teaching and learning. Harris and Muijs (2005) view teacher leaders as peers with no authority over others but whose role is to improve practice. These can be formal or informal. The rationale for teacher leaders is to include those involved in the centre of teaching and learning leading. Supovitz, (2008), York-Barr & Duke (2004) argue that most of the information to improve must reside in those who deliver instruction and not who manage. Teacher leaders can operate as full -time classroom teachers at their own schools or can operate across stations. Some of the formal roles can be heads of department, Cluster resource teachers, departmental chairs, etc meant to decentralize structures, empower individuals and professionalize teachers (Firestone & Martinez, 2007).Their selection however has to be carefully done if ever they are to be effective the (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins,2009). Teacher leaders' roles are diverse ranging from administration duties, such as setting standards for student behaviour, budgeting, and addressing personnel issues. Some teacher leaders act as liaisons between administrators and teachers on matters of curriculum and instruction and help their peers improve their own teaching. Harris and Muijs (2005) postulate that formal teacher leadership can be manifested in modelling methods of teaching, serving in advisory capacity to others, coaching, mentoring beginning teachers, studying aspects of classroom life, jointly developing the curriculum, structuring problem identification and resolution, developing instructional materials, and strengthening school-home relationships. However, the effective operation of teacher leaders may depend upon the support they get from both the school authorities and their peers. Kiranli(2013) posits that teachers taking leadership roles can be hindered by school culture and climate. Their effectiveness can be greatly influenced by the support they get from the school principal (Margolis, 2008). In another study Chikoko (2007) established that

school heads were insubordinate to the leadership of the BSPZ cluster resource teachers who in this study is considered to be the teacher leader. On the other hand Supovitz (2008) reported that teachers were more likely to turn to informal leaders. Such controversies need to be interrogated if ever the leadership of the cluster resource teacher is to influence teaching and learning. The concept of teacher leaders in the clusters is crucial for ensuring effective instructional leadership in schools. However, how they enact their roles and how they are perceived by other teachers were the overarching questions of the present study.

Methodology

The study used the qualitative research approach in which two clusters were used as case studies. Creswell (2012) views a case study as an in-depth analysis of a case or unit. In this case the two clusters were purposively selected on the basis that they would give reliable data pertaining to teacher leadership as they have been engaging in inter school collaborative activities. The selection of the clusters was based on the basis of their being active. Most of the BSPZ clusters became dormant and inactive after the withdrawal of the donor funding and the situation became worse with the economic meltdown in 2008.The two clusters understudied were some of the active clusters as perceived by the District education office. Six teachers, three from each cluster were purposively and conveniently selected. Patton (2003) holds that purposive sampling ensures that subjects rich with information are chosen. In this case, these teachers were familiar with cluster activities. They did not only hear about clusters but were actually immersed in inter collaboration practices. To complement data from teachers, two school heads were chosen for the interviews. All heads were in the cluster management committee. One of the heads was the cluster chairperson. The study used a semi- structured interview for all the participants. These were pre planned and follow a logical order addressing our problem. The advantage of these interviews was that participants were free to give their views on how they perceived of their teacher leaders in terms of his/her roles, what he does , how he does it and how his/her roles could be improved and the interviewers were also free to probe them further on these issues.. Participants were made to consent their participation in interviews by signing the consent form which spelt out the study aim and ethics to be adhered. They were guaranteed of protection from any physical or emotional harm and would withdraw at their own free will. The interviews lasted for not more than any hour. The collected data were coded, translated and presented in narratives for analysis. Thick descriptions of participants' responses were used to validate the findings. For reasons of confidentiality and anonymity pseudonyms will be used.

Findings

The study revealed a myriad of findings on how teachers perceived of the roles and expectations of the teacher leaders. There was a general consensus from participants that the cluster resource teachers' role was critical in the effective operation of the clusters. One head had this to say, "Everything is done with the CRT. He identifies the teachers' needs. And mind you being a teacher himself is better positioned to know the challenges they encounter and how they can be solved". Another teacher had also this to say,

> Precisely speaking there is need for someone to lead the cluster activities. We appreciate the position of the CRT as he represents the majority of those who are curriculum implementers, that is teachers. He is approachable, more approachable than school heads.

The excerpts underscore the important role of the cluster teacher leader (TL) or cluster resource teacher in coordinating cluster activities. Considering that the TL is a teacher him/herself who knows quite well the challenges and intricacies of the trade teachers encounter and what they need to improve on teaching and learning. Responses above particularly from the teachers may suggest that the TL is more open to them confirming Borden's (2011) assertion that teachers tend to like leaders who appear to be 'peers' and not 'boss', leaders they associate with and feel are in the same 'trenches'.

Probed further on how such a leader should be appointed, almost all the participants felt that such an appointee should be by meritocracy. Mr. Beto the school principal explained, "We advertise the post. This is what we did. Since we want someone to coordinate both primary and secondary school activities, the interview is rigorous." From the interviews it appears as if both clusters were happy about their CRT. We also learnt that both cluster resource teachers were primary school teachers. The overarching question was, how did they appeal to both secondary and primary sectors? One participant clearly indicated that ; " …we are happy with the CRT. He is approachable and at the end of the year he sends a needs analysis form to schools where we indicate our

training needs. We then prioritize our needs vis-a-vis our resources." One head has this to say' "everything is done in consultation with the CRT. He knows everything teachers need and we ratify every activity at an annual general meeting."

The narratives indicate that teachers expect a teacher leader who consults with others and that teacher may not necessarily be a subject specialist to coordinate the cluster. This concurs with Vanderburg and Stephens's (2010) argument that teachers perceive TL as useful when they direct their attention to teachers' instructional needs. Kiranli (2013) argues that teacher leaders do not necessarily need to be subject specialist. Accessibility and approachability are key ingredients of cluster teacher leadership. The CRT should be with the stakeholders. Harris and Muijs (2005) say that teacher leaders are teachers with no authority over other teachers whose role is to improve teaching and learning. However, such teacher leaders who can effectively influence positive learning among others need to be carefully chosen (Chappuis et al., 2009)

On the roles of cluster teacher leaders participants indicated that teacher leaders should organize professional development for teachers, coordinate peer supervision of teachers, organize the setting of tests and sporting activities. One teacher had this to say; "we want someone who can coordinate staff development workshops. You see with time we tend to forget what we would have learnt at college so the CRT(TL) should organize more workshops." Another participant echoed the same sentiments that CRT should organize more workshops for teachers. Professional staff development has been cited by Jita and Mokhele (2008) as one of the key roles of clusters. Makaye (2016) and Madungwe et al.(2002) assert that Professional development is one of the key roles of clusters. Whilst clusters are premised on research, materials production, monitoring and evaluation, most participants reiterated professional development. It was learnt that some of the professional developments ranged from ECD to Secondary. Teachers expressed satisfaction on how they were invited to the workshops. One of the teachers said, "…Invitation to cluster workshops is meritocratic. Relevant teachers are invited. If it's for primary schools, relevant teachers are invited." We also enquired on some of the workshops which were held during the year understudy. One participant had this to say:

> We have so far held workshops on ECD, conditions of service for teachers and teaching compositions. The strength of the cluster leaders was on the identification of facilitators. In most cases facilitators are drawn from the local. For instance we had one facilitated by teachers from the local secondary school. It helps in strengthening our relationship and promoting collegiality among cluster members. The one on condition of service was facilitated by members from the district. Rubbing shoulders with the district personnel reduces that tension and negative perceptions of the district which in most cases is conceived of authoritarian, aloft and snooper vision.

One School Head could not hide his feelings when he said, "I tell you we had one of the best workshops facilitated by our local secondary school!"

From the excerpts above we could infer that teachers welcome clusters leaders who are sensitive of their needs. After all cluster activities should address the immediate needs of the members. Only stakeholders know their problems and the best methods to solve those problems. Jita and Mokhele(2012) and Hammond et al.(2009) argue that cluster workshops should not be traditional and far- fetched from the needs and realities of the local people. Trudie (2010:548) sums it all by saying "… effective staff development is embedded in daily practice, is needs based and is linked to learner needs and tailored to meet specific circumstances or contexts of teachers". It is only through the astute leadership of a cluster resource teacher that the professional needs of the teachers can be addressed.

Participants also alluded to peer supervisions organized by the clusters. Although this was more laudable in one cluster than the other, teachers tended to adore it. The opportunity for teachers to observe each other teach, correct each other's mistakes is one good practice of improving teaching and learning. The same cluster in which this practice was common also engaged in demonstration lessons. "Our cluster also engaged in supervision of lessons whilst school heads do inspect the school in general. You know the atmosphere is more relaxed than being observed by school heads. Vanongotyisa[They are frightening]!", says one teacher. The practice where teachers supervise each other and so are the school principals seems to have a more enduring effect on the improvement of teaching and learning. Whilst this was a common practice in one cluster the other cluster had its supervision done by school heads. However, the bottom line was that teachers would expect their cluster leaders to organize supervision of lessons particularly where feedback will be given to those observed. The post lesson observation discussion is critical to teacher development.

The other important role of cluster leaders which came out from participants was coordination of the setting and writing of tests. “We would expect the cluster resource teacher to organize the writing of cluster examinations. You know these actually help our schools particularly the disadvantaged ones such as ours (satellite schools). We have benefitted a lot. Pupils are afforded to respond to their individual papers similar to the one they will encounter at grade 7.We no longer have to write the tests on the boards…’, echoed one participant.

In support of the tests one deputy school principal said; “ ... the practice of school clusters has helped raise the pass rates of schools such as Marula[pseudonym] which has for years registered low pass rates. This school however is unfortunate that the school head is not supportive of the clusters activities”

The narratives revealed the critical role of tests as organized by the cluster and cluster teacher leader. The fact that these tests have contributed significantly to the improvement of student standards actually is indicative of the good quality of the tests. More important was how the cluster and teacher leaders ensure that the tests meet the grade. One of the teacher leaders had this to say; “…you know tests are set by schools teachers. For our grade 7 tests we allocate schools to set a particular paper thereafter we analyse the papers as a team and whenever a paper falls short of the grade we ask the school to correct or set another one. And this is in most cases done by ZIMSEC examiners so in terms of quality musatityira (don’t worry for us)”, emphasizing the point. The quotes above also raised albeit outside the scope of the study focus, the issue of ‘dynamics of school principals’ participation in cluster activities’. Some heads play second fiddle to cluster participation at the expense of student achievement.

Participants also felt that the cluster teacher leader should coordinate and organize sporting activities for the cluster. “…h/she should organize sporting activities. The new curriculum demands that we should have CASAF(cluster Arts & sports awards festival) hence the resource teacher should be on the lead of these, of course with others. Schools can’t talk of these minus the CRT, it can’t.” said one participant.

Having captured the participants’ views on the roles of the teacher leader I went on to find out what other teachers and the school principals would want the cluster or school authority to do for the CRT. “The clusters cannot operate effectively without the leadership of the CRT. The heads cannot do the running. Precisely speaking varume vaya [these men] should be given an allowance for the job. Remember they are in the same grade with us so they should not dig from the family coffers. That’s not fair…”, said one teacher participant. One head , who happened to be the cluster coordinator echoed ;

> …definitely Mr. …works hard and we don’t know what the ministry should do because they are a force to reckon. I don’t do much for this clusters you see. He is the one who does the running. Pamwe tomboti veduwee ngatimbobatsira mwana uyu zvikuru sei nepetrol [sometimes we say lets assist our child with fuel] but definitely the ministry should do something.

The responses above indicate that the CRT does not get any remuneration from the responsible authorities nor the clusters. He/she depends on the good will of the cluster members to give him/her support on transport .Whether this is support or not isn’t clear since schools should fund for the mobility of the TL. Cluster schools are so dispersed with some about 10 to 15 km apart and hence schools should support the movement of the TL and not capitalize on his good will. Instructional leadership studies by Hallinger (2012), May (2010) and Jones(2009) acknowledge the importance of incentives as a driver to teaching and learning.

Discussion of findings

Findings from participants unmasked interesting but important views on the caliber of person and personality of the cluster teacher leader , the instructional leadership roles enacted and what participant also felt about what school authorities should do to support the teacher leaders hitherto cluster activities. There was consensus from all participants that the appointment of cluster teacher leaders was based on meritocracy. There was no politics of patronage in the appointment of them and that alone gives them the legitimacy to hold such a post. The incumbent has to pass through an interview for appointment and this practice formalizes their appointment. This supports and confirms Chappuis et al.’s (2009) assertion that teacher leaders need to be carefully selected. Whilst cluster teacher leaders’ appointment has been formal their position is not an authority one and this could be the reason for their large followership.

Whilst both CRTs for the clusters studied were primary school teachers our major assumption was that they would meet resistance from their secondary school counterparts. On the contrary the findings revealed that most participants had no problem with the set up. This implies that the educational sector from which the teacher leader belongs may not influence his/her work as a cluster coordinator. Interestingly, further probing with a view to get an understanding of the quality of such a teacher leader established that the cluster TL should be versatile and knowledgeable about his trade. This confirms the view that cluster activities are based on collaboration and good collegiality. The incumbent of such role should appeal to members of the cluster.

How the teacher leader performs his/ her role and the nature of the roles was worth investigation. It was established that the teacher leaders organize professional development, peer classroom supervision, organise the setting and administration of tests as well as organizing sporting activities in the cluster. Whilst some of the roles were prescribed in the handout for school clusters their effective implementation was the bone of contention amongst most clusters in Zimbabwe. The visibility of the roles particularly by teachers is something commendable. From my experience quite a number of clusters only operate in theory confirming what Jita and Mokhele' s (2012) argument that it's not the name cluster which matters but what it does. Clusters should ' walk the talk'and not only exist in theory. The visibility of the operations and / roles of the teacher leader can also be conceptualized in terms of autonomy and support. Margolis (2008) point out that success of teacher leaders to implement the instructional practices depend on how much support he/she gets from school principals. Where colleagues and administrators are encouraging teacher instructional leadership activities flourish and school results improve. Contrary to Chikoko's (2007) observation of the school principal' s insubordination of the cluster teacher leader's leadership the school principals from the clusters studied indicated that they were working so well with their teacher leaders. " We plan together and whatever we do is done by Mr…" affirmed one of the school principal participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the above findings and literature cluster teachers, practitioners and school principals hold with esteem the role played by the cluster teacher leader (cluster resource teacher) and actually conceive of it as indispensable. The effectiveness of cluster operations hitherto instructional leadership is dependent upon the visionary and astute leadership of the teacher leader. Leadership which is embedded in the stakeholders, sensitive of their professional needs and dynamic in terms of balancing the needs of both the primary and secondary school needs. Moreso, such a meritocratic leader requires the support of colleagues and local school authority. The study recommends that the school authorities or the ministry should come up with a policy to remunerate or incentivize these teacher cadres and clusters if effective instructional leadership activities are to be realized.

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