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Leadership and management in public schools: Opportunities and challenges faced by school leaders in Punjab

Ishra Batool^{1*}, Seema Arif², Samaira Zulifqar Ali¹, Sofia Jabeen¹

¹ Punjab School Education Department, Pindi Bhattian, District Hafizabad, Pakistan

² Ex-Associate Professor of Education, University of Management & Technology, Lahore, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Punjab has been undergoing radical changes in transforming school education. Especially the governance structures (school being unit of analysis for improvement) influencing school and learning atmosphere. The proposed study focuses on scrutinizing these changes regarding school leadership in the era of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in Pakistan. Leadership is concerned with how Head Teachers (HTs) promote, manage, and monitor the teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and skills using ICT to support student learning. These structural changes have created an engaging, prolific, and fruitful rationale for researchers to discuss how the policy-mandated initiatives impact leadership for learning mainly in primary schools. A qualitative case study of district Hafizabad opted as the methodology. Thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted, twenty-five with the HTs, seven with Assistant Education Officers, and the district supervisory staff. Thematic analysis was applied to reduce data and reach conclusions. There was an improvement in teaching-learning practices in school, but the pace of development could be faster. As a precursor to further research, this article highlighted gaps in policy and implementation for school improvement.

Keywords: *Accountability; Leadership; Management; Quality improvement; Information Communication Technology*

*Corresponding Author: Ishra Batool, Email: missbatool4@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Several strands, including different collaborators and interdependencies, contrive school education. However, students are considered the heart of any reform program's focus (Khachatryan & Parkerson, 2020). Reform initiatives can be successful only when different stakeholders sit together on one page and are reinforced to deliver change (Tian & Huber, 2021; Ylimaki & Wilmers, 2021). Teachers, Head Teachers, and education managers at different administrative units are essential to the education process. Together, they can frame any policy and concentrate on developing quality education woven into the fabric of every prosperous society (Spillane, 2004; Yasmeen et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, School Education Department manages primary (1-5) elementary (6-8) and secondary/higher secondary (9-10/12) education institutes. Assistant Education Officer (AEO) is the field officer responsible for supervising schools of a *Markaz* (cluster of schools 10-14). HTs are nominated by AEOs, which is a big challenge in the administration and management of primary schools and the focus of the research study. It is observed that hardly any teacher is willing to be nominated as HT of primary schools since they would have to perform teaching and management tasks. Most schools still act as mixed classrooms structure, one teacher, one classroom extended to a maximum of 3 classrooms, but students up to grade 5. Such schools need the essential staff (*Peon, Sweeper, Mali*), which is mandatory for managing school activities.

Moreover, these primary schools need more basic digital resources like computer labs and computer teachers. Although, these schools are also accountable for results in Literacy and Numeracy assessments being conducted in each primary school for grade three students using the online test. This is a big issue in the non-availability of digital resources like computers, tablets, and network facilities. Moreover, primary school heads are equally responsible for performing all other tasks which need digital appliances like elementary and secondary schools. However, primary schools are provided least resources and staff. Nawab & Asad (2020) indicated that school leaders are overwhelmed by increasing school needs, the concern of parents, teachers, district and state requirements, and much paperwork, attending school visitors, and officers. In such a situation, supervising teaching and learning activities becomes an additional challenge in primary schools.

In this situation, leadership qualities help to manage in a better way. "Instructional leadership" is quite famous for effective school management (Matthew, 2020; Rehm et al., 2021). The direct impact of teaching and learning on student achievement is measured through instructional leadership. However, lately, the transformation of

instructional leadership has taken place; its reincarnated form is known as "leadership for learning." This theory holds that teachers are self-responsible adult learners and need support and clarity of concepts like any other learner. The teachers can improve their pedagogical skills with feedback and learn from other stakeholders like teachers, HTs, and mentoring officers like AEOs. In the case of primary schools, AEOs are responsible for supervising teaching and learning activities and mentoring teachers if they need help delivering content knowledge.

Content knowledge in this era of digital technology opens new horizons for learners. Accordingly, digital technology has become a needed appliance to furnish this objective. It helps minimize economic and societal differences and provides more opportunities for inclusion. Likewise, in other countries in Pakistan, it also has become a source of promotion and progress. Advancements in technological tools have become an attractive aspect of changes being adopted in this society, impacting every aspect of human life. In this situation, it becomes necessary to incorporate this digital technology into the teaching process and to learn to experience rapid change (Abbas & Yaqoob, 2009; Huilla, 2020; Vargo et al., 2021).

ICT usage in the School Education Department (SED) has become a common practice, especially in Mobile Learning and E-Learning. Now, it has become a primary source of communication and conveying orders and reporting implementations (Rieber & Welliver, 1989; Lawrence & Tar, 2018; Camacho & Parham, 2019; Ylimaki & Wilmers, 2021). HTs are accountable for uploading a lot of information daily using School Information System (SIS application software). Student and teacher attendance, new enrollment, and school census forms are now updated on SIS from the school tablet. Similarly, teachers apply for online leave applications and update their data on Human Resource Management System (HRMS Profile).

For the professional development of teachers Innovative Teacher Support Package (ITSP) App has been launched, which is a collection of recorded videos and lesson plans for teachers to teach in classrooms to enhance pedagogical content knowledge and promote digital literacy. Digital literacy is also taking place in public sector schools, opening new horizons of challenges both for teachers and school leaders due to limited resources. How the digital skills of the nominated head teachers contribute to the quality improvement of primary schools in Punjab needs to be discovered. It is evident from the above discussion that the school leadership (including AEOs, teachers, and Headteachers) is exercising the leading role in meeting the objectives of the new governance structure; hence, they are the key informants of this study.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Much of the literature on quality education and leadership for learning is still being determined to justify school leadership traits as factors that effective schools can benefit from for better performance. Instead, the focus is on improving the content matter knowledge of teachers. School leadership is an essential pillar of school improvement and quality education. The nature of challenges and requirements varies in different contexts. Especially in the context of Pakistan, where exist other problems also. Adopting digital literacy, especially in backward rural areas, is a challenge. The study aims to highlight the prominent gap in our comprehension of how school leadership affects leadership for learning and promoting quality education. Moreover, in the absence of qualitative data that includes the critical viewpoint of school heads, especially at the primary level, the assessment of quality education would not be accurate. The study explores how school leadership successfully adopts these changes, which in turn can support school improvement by connecting the findings of this study with national aims.

Research Questions

The below-mentioned questions grounded the study.

1. whether the new governance structures encourage or hinder a practical approach toward leadership for learning
2. What is the coping regime of school principals in this process of change?
3. How is the change process adding to overall quality improvement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership for learning entails approaches that school leaders use to achieve school targets with a specific focus on student learning (Carter, 2016; Ehren et al., 2020; Brady & Wilson, 2021). Leadership is enacted within an organization. The challenges and expectations within school boundaries and the external environment formulate it. It is also affected by the people's personal attributes related to the school organogram (Nasrullah et al., 2020; Qureshi & Kalsoom, 2022). Personal beliefs, knowledge, and experience are excellent sources of variation in leadership impacts (Shaukat & Chowdhury, 2020; Abbasi et al., 2022). Although its impact is not visible in student learning, its influence is arbitrated by school-level circumstances. Leadership influences and is influenced by the school-level atmosphere (Al-Mekhlafi & Osman, 2019; Munala & Ondiek, 2020; Halai & Durrani, 2020; Zafar et al., 2022).

Good-performing school leaders comprehend the importance of conceptual learning, which demands administering a myriad of enterprises and initiatives according to new demands (Munawar et al., 2020; Karimi et al., 2020). These activities and initiatives cannot be stable and uniform for all schools unless continual reflections and changing practices are guided by school aspirations and leadership (Brown & Flood, 2020; Brady, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2019). Too many changes and reforms have occurred in the past few years. Among them were new strands, new accountability approaches, new terms and conditions for teaching, feedback, and challenges. The concept of leadership for school improvement varies in different geographic contexts (rural & urban) and community contexts (socioeconomic status, literacy rate, religion, and gender) (Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Cosner et al., 2018).

Successful schools also have more twenty-four hours daily than those who fail to achieve desired goals. But the difference is only they make better use of available resources, time and staffing (Crawford & Cowie, 2012; Crowley & Hauser, 2007; Huilla, 2020). Empirical results showed a more significant impact where there was effective leadership and learning culture. (Camacho & Parham, 2019; Hanushek & Raymond, 2005; Schildkamp, 2019; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005).

In order to promote a learning culture in the era of standards-based reforms and educational accountability, teaching all students to achieve high-level scores, there is a big challenge of equity across schools (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008; Bartlett & Burton, 2010; Abbas et al., 2019; Norberg, 2019; Venter & Viljoen, 2020). Equity of resources, primarily digital technology, to ensure access of all students to precise curriculum and skilled professional teachers; there is the condition of the physical environment to support new equipment in order to deliver and promote quality teaching-learning (; (MacBeath, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020; Mahfouz et al., 2021).

In promoting quality teaching and learning, designs of the school building, decoration, and maintenance make sense to its incumbents and the local community. The aesthetic attributes can strengthen loyalty which successively initiates passion for learning (Jacobson, 2011; Cosner et al., 2018; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Parveen & Tran, 2020). Managed cosmetic items such as the painting of school buildings, digital equipment, proper care, decoration of classrooms, and classroom furniture positively impact student achievements as substantial effects of a school building are the visible conditions that assist effective teaching and learning (Hanif et al., 2018; Bashir & Afzal, 2019; Kennedy, 2000; Hartiwi et al., 2020).

Lawrence & Tar (2018) supported that the school environment (an assessment of the social dynamics) plays an intervening role in the quality of school infrastructure on student learning. They revealed that standard education facilities enhance learning and inadequate facilities are detrimental to student achievement. The behavior and attitude of teachers are also coupled in adopting technology to support learning (Hashmi, 2015; Benedict, 2020; Phuc et al. 2020). Teachers with low resources need more passion for their profession and work beyond expectations for student success when teaching in mediocre schools, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate facilities (Jan 2018; Norberg, 2019; Vargo et al. 2021).

In spite of all above-said facilities, technological changes are also mandatory. These technological changes are geared toward global access and influence (Quraishi & Aziz, 2018; Munala & Ondiek, 2020). When all information is accessed easily using web pages and Youtube videos, there is a need to alter our teaching strategies to meet the demand of students. When content-related material is available online, teachers need to step in and make lessons more exciting and thought-provoking for deep and lifelong learning (Schildkamp, 2019; Parveen & Tran, 2020). This new scenario demands a change in the role of the teacher from mere instructor to mentor. They should arrange their teaching strategies from what to think to how to think and learn (Shah et al., 2019; Jamil, 2021).

As Matthew (2020) also concludes that "that professional development has to serve a purpose, and that purpose is to raise pupil achievement and contribute to school improvement". The role of the teacher is coupled with current development in education. Innovative teaching and learning also increased stakeholders' demands (Ali, 2017; Afzal et al., 2018; Venter & Viljoen, 2020). In this situation, leadership for the learning culture of schools can support teachers to enhance their capacity through sharing knowledge, joint practice development to share day-to-day experiences, and digital technology. This can help nourish a growth mindset for teachers and students for effective learning (Akram et al., 2013; Amir et al., 2020; Asad et al., 2021).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was an exploratory and qualitative case study in nature. The exploratory case study type was used to scrutinize situations where the analyzed inferences have no precise results (Fahy, 2013). The exploratory nature of qualitative studies furnishes an excellent time to comprehend better understanding in the field of education (Abbas & Yaqoob, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

This case study intended to provide an independent interrogation of leadership and management of HTs of primary schools in the presence of digital technology in public sector education. How are HTs coping when there is a lack of infrastructure and digital resources in school? How are AEOs succeeding in developing a culture of learning, sharing,

collaboration, and participation among HTs and other staff members? District Hafizabad was selected as the population of the research study, being marked low in ranking according to the Roadmap ranking issued by the Program Monitoring & Implementing Unit (PMIU) in the previous two years, 2018-2020. It is located in central Punjab and has two Tehsils, namely Pindi Bhattian and Hafizabad. The main occupation is agriculture. The literacy rate is good in urban areas but needs improvement in some rural areas. With the diverse condition of literacy, it is worth studying. The case study was the opted method for this study because it provides a deep understanding of the actual situation, which varies in different contexts. Qualitative data explores experience of primary HTs and AEOs for school management, pointing out challenges and hopes in this era of modern technology with a global concept of education. There are many areas in policymaking and implementation where HTs' voices can benefit greatly. Moreover, the more significant number of primary schools for mandated education increases its importance (Hooper & Rieber, 1995; Parveen et al., 2021).

An interview protocol was prepared to administer in-depth interviews of HTs and AEOs about leadership for learning, their coping regimes, and their contribution to quality education. It was concentrated on two crucial aspects internal validity and generalizability. The researcher used this tool more systematically and comprehensively by checking the issues needing explanation (Parveen et al., 2022). This study's interview protocol was constructed using different sources, including a conceptual framework, research questions, literature review, and post-data analysis of survey research. One interview protocol was designed for HTs, and the 2nd for AEOs. According to the first objective, three questions supported the study.

- 1) Do your officers facilitate you in managing teaching-learning activities in schools?
- 2) What type of interference are your officers in managing school activities?
- 3) Is the role of officers supportive in coping lack of digital resources, and how much are you satisfied with their guidance?

According to the second objective, the following questions supported the study:

- 1) What type of problems are you facing in managing school activities?
- 2) How effectively are your officers' visits promoting leadership qualities in you?
- 3) Are you coping quickly with all the problems? If not, why? What type of problems are you facing?

According to the third objective, one question navigated the study:

- 1) Do you think your officers helping you in quality education?

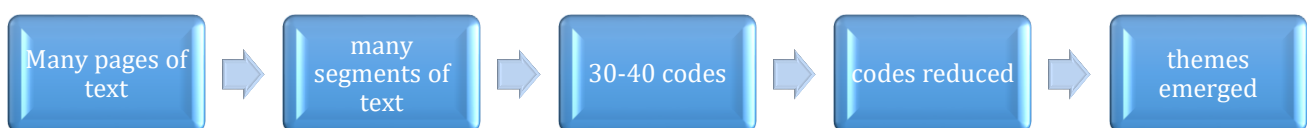
In the second interview protocol of AEOs following questions led the study:

- 1) Are you satisfied with the performance of HTs in coping with digital resources?
- 2) What types of problems are you facing during your visits?
- 3) Do HTs improve themselves in promoting leadership for learning?
- 4) How much of your visits are effective for promoting quality education?

The main objective was to collect rich information on standard practices and differing perspectives.

A list of schools was collected from the official website of the SED. A simple random sampling technique was employed, and every other school was targeted from both tehsils comprising urban and rural, male and female schools. A criterion sampling technique was used to select participants for the interview. The purpose of the research was discussed with Chief Executive Officer (Education), and he asked for permission for data collection. An invitation letter was sent to 50 HTs of primary schools where research objectives were mentioned clearly. Out of which, twenty-five HTs from twenty-five schools accepted the invitation and showed their willingness for an interview.

Similarly, seven AEOs were approached via mobile call, research purpose was mentioned. They accepted the invitation. A total of 32 (25 HTs & 7 AEOs) were selected for interviews. Once the individual file work was completed, the researchers went through the transcripts and began coding the data under various themes emerging from the data (Eisner, 1998). The following model was adopted for the coding process of data.



(Creswell, 2013)

After completing individual work, cross-analysis was done for common emerging themes. This helped to manage a complete and vigorous analysis and to evolve research memos that guide the core themes of the findings of the study. All ethical considerations which were mandatory for research were followed.

RESULTS

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was done on the open-ended questions asked to capture their opinions about the facilitation of the system in leadership for learning, coping regime, and overall contribution to providing quality education as perceived by HTs of primary schools in District Hafizabad. For cross-checking and data validation, AEOs were also asked to draft their reflections about satisfaction with school HTs' performance, problems they faced during visits, whether HTs were ready to accept the change and their satisfaction with performance. This analysis was informed by the view that "coding is a deep reflection about, and, thus, deep analysis and interpretation of the data meanings" (Batoool et al., 2021).

Table 1: Themes emerged from the opinions of HTs and AEOs according to the defined Objectives of the Study

Objectives	Themes Responses of HT	Themes responses of AEOs
Objective 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The role of AEOs is to be supportive Officers are monitoring, not mentoring. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on a commitment, not compliance Focus on professional growth
Objective 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paucity of digital resources The Voice of the primary HT is not heard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HTs lacking effective implementation strategies Capacity building issues
Objective 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The focus is on quantity, not quality Decision-making authority is limited. Technology entered schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The focus is on rote learning rather than the application of concepts. The pace of development could be faster. The use of technology is in practice.

FINDINGS

- Overall new governance structure (reducing AEOs span of control for ensuring quality education while observing teachers in classrooms, how they were teaching and discussing methodological issues in Teacher Forum Meetings (TFM) conducted twice a month) is adding to enhancing quality education. Most teachers considered it effective that at least they were doing something to teach the students learning. Otherwise, they remained indulged most of the time in managing other school affairs. AEOs considered it was challenging for themselves because some of the teachers needed more capacity to adopt it.
- Due to the paucity of resources including Human Resources (HR), they need help to adopt learning objectives in the true sense. As a result, most teachers considered it a burden for them. While some of the HTs were managing it in a better way despite all these issues. They complained that their issues were not heard and they needed to be guided on how to solve problems, but only orders were delivered to listen only compliance report.
- Overall, this change process is adding to quality education, but the pace of progress could be faster.

DISCUSSION

Most of the HTs opined that the role of AEO was not supportive; they were threatening us about consequences every time. Their supervisory role could have been more encouraging in management and teaching activities. Teachers reported that their schools were visited twice by AEOs in a month. Higher authorities/ Deputy District Education Officers (Dy. DEO) visit a school only once or twice a year. Two of the HTs said that their schools were not got visited by Dy. DEO throughout the year. It was never visited by District Education Officers (DEOs) or Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). This reflects that only AEOs were visiting schools regularly. Nevertheless, the question was; whether only visiting or monitoring is sufficient. When AEO's span of control is minimized (10-14 including elementary schools), their prime responsibility is to ensure quality education while mentoring teachers and enhancing the capacity building of staff as well.

HT of one school reported,

"AEOs were just visiting schools and playing an authoritative role; they provide only instructions, ordered to do this or that but did not guide how to do it."

One more HT from another school opined,

"Our officers are not mentoring; they came, provided some instructions, checked lesson plans, observed classrooms, and left the ordering to improve things on their next visit. They are monitoring us, not mentoring".

According to the job description of AEOs vide notification No. SO(SE-III) 5-226/2017, they are mobile administrators and managers responsible for ensuring the delivery of quality education through coaching, providing professional supervision, guidance, and support to teachers in the quality delivery of lessons. Managing performance of all schools assigned to them collectively called *Markaz*.

One HT from one school reported,

"Most schools are suffering from a paucity of resources; these are Human Resources or digital resources. We are two teachers, and we have to manage six classes. Much of our time is spent maintaining discipline issues; due to multi-grade teaching, we cannot pay proper attention to each student".

Jamil (2021) supported that teachers who spend more time maintaining discipline negatively impact quality education and practical learning. Many researchers advocated that a low number of students in class enhances students' success, minimizes behavior problems, and ensures long-lasting benefits to both students and teachers (Jan, 2018; MacBeath, 2019; Barazon, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2020).

One of the HTs discussed,

"Our teaching-learning activities are badly affected when we struggle to update our school information for the whole day due to poor network issues. In primary schools, as all teachers were of the same scale, staff members did not bother to obey. Moreover, there is no designated post for HT. HTs work with uncertainty to be replaced at any time with the issuance of just one letter of withdrawing authority of nomination of HT. No one is willing to work as HT."

One of the HTs replied,

"We were suffering many problems when nominated as HT. We did not have enough training in managing financial matters. Even our Co-Chairperson (Joint account holders of NSB) did not agree to cooperate with us and was unwilling to handle financial matters. We had to request our co-chairperson to go to the bank whenever we withdrew money. We did not have legal authority; we were fragile pillars. Our voices were not heard".

Study findings of Levin & Datnow (2012) and Khan (2022) also highlighted the same issue that authority uncertainty negatively impacted student success and school improvement. Similarly, Machado & Chung (2015) and Humayun (2022) revealed that a lack of capacity to use resources, according to a rule, created depression among HTs.

Moreover, in some cases, a personal capacity to effectively use available resources could have been improved. Providing quality acquirements for students, teachers, and administrators was the top agenda of the government of Punjab. However, previous data and test results indicated that our students were still underperforming in most literacy and numeracy skills, as most efforts were concentrated on uplifting student enrollment and improving number games.

One more HT from one school said,

"Our performance was going to be judged on the achievement scores of test results of students neglecting the other variable which are directly affecting student performance, e.g. socio-economic status of parents and impact of learning facilities etc."

All the data regarding personal information and school data would be computerized. Now our HTs were familiar with the use of technology.

One HT from one school opined,

"Now technology use was friendly. Once, we did not know how to operate WhatsApp numbers or groups. Even previously, we did not have Mobile Phones. However, now we have Mobile Phones and school tablets. We are aware of how it saves our time and resources. We are no more afraid of using technology. Now technology and we have friendly relations with us".

Many researchers, including A'mar & Eleyan (2022), and Raman & Thannimalai (2019), focused that technology integration is critical for the success of school leaders.

Discussion on Responses of AEOs

Most of the teachers got motivated after coaching, but they needed to be more self-motivated; we had to set the tone of the work of staff extrinsically. Staff showed their willingness and got the work done as directed. They showed compliance, not commitment.

Department was focusing on the professional development of teachers, so many initiatives were in progress; teachers were regularly going to be mentored during classroom and lesson observations. Problematic and complicated concepts were addressed in Teacher Form Meeting (TFM), which was conducted monthly.

In primary schools, HTs administrative training was lacking as HTs of elementary and high schools were focused on capacity-building like School Leadership Development Programme conducted by Quaid e Azam Academy for Education Development. They needed to learn how to maintain records properly or handle financial matters. They

were lacking in administrative skills. Still, most of the teachers were matric /PTC or FA. They had capacity-building issues and needed help to cope with new pedagogical and assessment demands.

One of the AEOs opined,

"Our teachers and students had become so used to rote learning, even when they were going to be mentored for active learning, they did it in the same fashion as they were doing previously. Teachers were now using online resources, although they were not using it to equip their lesson planning and improve pedagogical skills, at least they were aware of its utility".

CONCLUSION

By observing thematic analysis, it was accomplished that change was there in our school system, but the pace of development was languid. Still, there were barriers to improvement at the implementation level, and so many variables adversely affected the quality of education. One principal was the need for more digital resources and infrastructure accordingly. Much work was going to be done for quality improvement. However, in the name of quality, the focus was still on quantity. School leaders may be the process's keeper, not the process's outcomes. AEOs claimed they were mentoring to enhance the capacity building of teachers, while teachers demanded that they would need to be appropriately guided. Primary school leadership was a missing element. It may be a policy priority as it is the basic building block of teaching-learning. Leaders need to both set expectations and create conditions for professional growth. Sophisticated skills of "adaptive" and "transformational" leadership are required at the school level. Traditional use of technology was not adding anything to quality improvement. It may be upgraded on an urgent basis with proper facilitation.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Some suggestions are visible related to the purpose of the study to furnish an addition in the area of school improvement in the public sector, considering education a social and moral endeavour. Schooling asks questions such as: for what, whom, who, and which conditions? Successful HTs regularly plan to make a positive connection between government policies and outer demands from society to manage changes so that they can be integrated with the purpose of schooling. The HT can contribute only when s/he has an active and positive link with staff, parents, and the community. Future research is needed about the effectiveness of the leadership role of HTs for school improvement to mediate students' achievement.

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