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Grade R teachers' perceptions concerning parental participation in early literacy development in a disadvantaged context in the Western Cape

Abstract

Parent participation is fundamental to children's early literacy development and later academic success. This small-scale qualitative study located in the interpretivist paradigm utilised semi-structured interviews to collect data from two Grade R teachers' concerning their perceptions of parent participation in children's early literacy development. Findings revealed that teachers had a narrow and limiting understanding concerning parental involvement. Teachers attested to parents not being interested in their children's early literacy due to their socio-economic positions which hurdled their commitments to work. Teachers wanted parents to participate in storytelling but on their terms. These findings have important implications for how policy and practice need to be reconceptualised for a stronger focus on parental participation in children's early literacy and holistic parental participation.

Keywords: *early literacy, engagement, Grade R, parental involvement, participation, perceptions, teachers*

1. Introduction and background

In the South African school system, learning in Grade R (reception year), the entrance year of the Foundation Phase of early childhood education has gained increased attention with regard to how emergent literacy is strengthened. Emergent literacy is a precursor for formal literacy, required for learning in Grade 1 (Department of Basic Education, 2011).

A key factor in the development of childhood literacy is the extent to which parents are engaged in daily, meaningful literacy activities with their children. International research indicates that to strengthen the efficacy of literacy instruction, children and families' cultural, linguistic and personal strengths need to be brought into the classroom (Parsons et al., 2014; Kalyaci & Ergul, 2020). Learning

is most beneficial when it is based on links between children's home lives and learning in preschools. Preschools serve as a pivotal educative space between home and school (Moje *et al.*, 2004).

The South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996) emphasises that parents have a fundamental participatory role to play in the decisions taken about their child's educational future. Regarding emergent literacy, there is an expectation that parents read daily to their children, share family stories, talk to their children, expose children to a range of reading material and encourage reading generally (DBE, 2011).

Although this expectation is in place, parental participation in developing children's literacy may still be a challenge, especially in disadvantaged contexts. In some contexts, teachers are faced with contextual challenges which compromise children's chances of overall academic success and engender lower literacy ratings (Mohangi *et al.*, 2016). For example, many of the children taught by the teachers in this study have English as their Language of Learning and Teaching LOLT (Language of Learning and Teaching) but not as their mother tongue: there are problems with poverty and transport challenges (Mohangi *et al.*, 2016). Although all children in South Africa have the constitutional right to be taught in their mother tongue from Grade R to three, some parents for whom English is a second language choose to send their children to schools where the Language of Learning and Teaching LOLT is English (Stoop, 2017).

The role that parents play in their children's education is fundamental and should begin from the early years. Parental participation contributes to children's initial literacy and later academic success. Many reviews of research indicate that parental involvement results in improved outcomes in overall student learning (Erdener & Knoepel, 2018; Al- Mahrooqi, Denman & Maamari, 2016) and literacy development (Crosby *et al.*, 2015). Rizvi, Iqbal and Waqas (2021) further explain that parental involvement in children's education also improves children's social and cultural capital.

Additionally, there is no policy in South Africa that focuses on the development of family literacy (Le Roux, 2016). While there is an abundance of research that focuses on the positive effects of parental involvement in the development of children's early literacy skills, primarily in advantaged contexts, the research focusing on teachers' perceptions of parent participation in children's early literacy development in Grade R in disadvantaged contexts is limited. Taking into consideration the preceding discussion, the aim of this study is to answer the research question: 'What are Grade R teachers' perceptions about parental participation in children's early literacy development in a disadvantaged context?' For the purposes of this study, 'perceptions' relate to how something is interpreted, understood, or regarded. This paper presents a background and introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, findings and concludes with a conclusion and implications for future studies.

2. Understanding the concept of parental involvement

Parental involvement in a child's education is critical to their academic success (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2013). Understanding how parents should be involved, however, is unclear. As Share and Kerrins (2013) state, there is no agreement as to what the phrase *parental involvement* means in relation to activities undertaken in the early developmental stages of a child's life. Parental involvement is viewed in a multitude of ways. For example, Lareau (2000) defines *parental involvement* as preparing children for school in a manner which includes teaching children the alphabet, talking and reading to children to promote language development, attending school events (e.g. teacher-parent conferences), and attending requests made by teachers.

Lareau (2000) and Jalongo and Nicholson (2011) stress that parental involvement does, however, include more than simply preparing children for school, but active participants in the education process. Parents should ideally be key decision-makers, conversing with school personnel to share information about children's progress, and supporting children's learning through activities other than those undertaken at school (Jalongo & Nicholson, 2011). These ideas embody a parenting paradigm where parents adopt a pivotal role in relation to their children's learning and overall development.

In the South African context, parental involvement tends to be related to financing schooling and volunteering for school events (Lemmer, 2007). Lemmer found that schools seldom offer staff training on how to collaborate with parents. Such a lack of collaboration could explain why parental involvement is often not as intensive as it could be.

Fleisch (2008) emphasises the importance of recognising that South Africa has two types of schools: the first as advantaged, formerly white schools and the second as predominantly disadvantaged and still primarily black schools. Gruijters, Elbers and Reddy (2022) contend that despite the ending of apartheid, the White child still attends a school that is 70% white and the average Black child still attends a school that is 96% black.

In addition to the lack of resources in disadvantaged black schools, parental participation is constrained in these contexts (Msila, 2012). Research carried out both locally and internationally shows that parents' educational level is a socio-economic factor that has a strong influence on how parents involve themselves in their children's education (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004). As such, there are many challenges surrounding parental involvement in the South African school context, which are related to poverty, single parent homes and even child-headed homes, unemployment, and weak familial structures (Karibayeya & Bogar, 2014; Abrahams, 2013). These challenges have a negative impact on parental involvement in school life.

Research differentiates between parental engagement and parental involvement. Evangelou *et al.* (2008) contend that there is a difference between parent engagement in learning – where there is support for an individual child – and parental involvement in schooling. Emerson *et al.* (2012) also insist on a difference between involving parents in school activities and engaging parents in their children's learning. Parental engagement is understood to be a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. It is continuous from birth to adulthood and occurs across multiple settings where children learn (Weiss *et al*, 2010). Berthelsen and Walker (2008) define *parental engagement* as parental behaviour with or on behalf of children with regard to home discussion and supervision, school communication and participation, school choice, involvement in school governance, involvement in teaching and learning and communication with the school. While literature seems to lack a clear defining line between parental engagement and parental involvement, parental participation can be considered a mixture of both parental involvement and parental engagement.

3. Understanding parental participation in the development of early literacy skills

The earlier parents participate in the development of their children's literacy skills, the more positive the results (Serpell, Sonnenschein & Baker, 2005). Research reveals that factors such as parental education, social class, socioeconomic status, home learning environment, school and community all influence a child's literacy development. In South African townships, most parents' literacy levels are low. There is no culture of reading and a basic literacy practice in

township homes is lacking due to the unavailability of texts (Sibanda, 2021). Research shows that literacy practices carried out between parents and children, as well as parental attitudes and aspirations can have a significant influence on children's literacy development (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; McCoy & Cole, 2011). Serpell *et al.* (2005) have summarised parents' participation in promoting early literacy activities into the following eight areas: 1) engaging in shared reading; 2) providing frequent and varied oral language experiences; 3) encouraging self-initiated interactions with print; 4) visiting the library regularly; 5) demonstrating the value of literacy in everyday life; 6) promoting children's motivation for reading; 7) fostering a sense of pride and perceptions of competence in literacy; and 8) communicating with teachers and being involved with the school. Several studies indicate that children's enjoyment of books, comprehension, listening and speaking skills are all influenced by the involvement of parents (McCoy & Cole, 2011; Wood 2002). Learning with parents can be more significant and provide a more enduring impact than social class, socio-economic status or educational level (Pillinger & Wood, 2014).

Reading has been understood as the most important influence on children's early literacy skills (Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Informal literacy experiences in the home can contribute greatly to children's literacy and language development (Morrow & Tracy, 2007). When parents and children read aloud together, the benefits are numerous (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008; Zeece & Wallace, 2009). Sharing storybooks can be understood as one such informal literacy experience (Barnyak, 2011). When parents share storybooks with children, vocabulary expands by engaging children in meaningful conversation (Lornigan & Whitehurst, 1998; Stevensen & Fredman, 1990).

Although research reveals that parental involvement influences early literacy positively, most of these findings are pertinent to children who come from higher socio-economic backgrounds. The educational background of parents and their income and occupation influences their children's early literacy development (Korat, 2009). There is a discrepancy between school practices of early literacy and home-based practices of children for whom English is a second language. Crucially, children from higher socio-economic backgrounds share the same cultural background as the schools when it comes to the development of early literacy skills (Hammer *et al.,* 2005). Consequently, theorists suggest that schools should be challenged to develop practices that are responsive to parent practices (Auerbach, 1995; Anderson, Fagan & Cronin, 1998; Goldenberg, 2001; McNaughton, 2006; Whitmore *et al.*, 2004). Many parents from lower socio-economic groups are poorly understood and considered ill-qualified to promote their children's early literacy due to the many socio-economic challenges they face (Sibanda, 2021)

4. Teachers' understanding of parental participation in developing early literacy

One of the main challenges that teachers face with the success of early literacy is how to engage with parents. Many Grade R teachers might be aware of the benefits of including parents but there is a lack of knowledge of how to marshal parental involvement (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2007). Added to this challenge is the fact that many Grade R teachers do not have the time to engage with parents because of curriculum and recordkeeping demands from the Department of Education (Le Roux, 2016).

The extent to which teachers want parents to be involved or engaged is a contentious issue. Although many teachers may hold reservations about engaging parents, some teachers are ready to include them as partners in their children's education (St George, 2009). Schools should adopt context-friendly strategies, considering parents' challenges, to improve existing relations, particularly in disadvantaged communities (Munje & Mncube, 2018).

5. Parental participation in disadvantaged contexts

There are numerous factors that influence parental involvement, such as socio-economic status and level of educational achievement (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Mansour & Martin, 2009; Walker & Berthelsen, 2010). Additionally, ethnic or cultural backgrounds may differ from the majority norms at a school (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Mansour & Martin, 2009). In some cases, parents may have harboured their own negative experiences of school, which may repel them from participating in the school. Often, there are different expectations and interpretations of what it means to be educationally helpful, ranging from being 'partners' with the child and school to being 'invisible' and not engaged with the school (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Chenhall *et al.* 2011). Parents may lack a sense of self-confidence to help their children succeed at school (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Walker & Berthelsen, 2010). Chenhall *et al.* (2011) warn against indigenous parental engagement strategies based on a culturally deficit model, which involves an 'ideal' parent standard based on a Western middle-class parent archetype. This cultural hegemony invalidates different forms of involvement from across ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, reinforces further marginalisation of non-Western parents, and fails to promote higher standards for these students. Walker and Berthelsen (2010) argue that schools are biased in favour of representing and promoting more middle-class values: something which ostracises many parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Parental involvement can be enhanced when there is strong teacher cooperation, especially for families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Powell *et al.* (2010) confirm that teacher responsiveness is an important element in nurturing parent-school relationships. Parents are motivated to participate in their children's schooling when teachers involve parents. Teachers tend to be less judgemental of less educated, low-income and single parents when they rely on involvement strategies (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker & Aupperlee, 2009). Sound relations, therefore, need to be cultivated between school staff and parents; these are the best indicators of parental involvement. A teacher making a personal invitation to a parent to become involved increases the parent's perception of being valued by the school, and the parent is more likely to participate in educational activities. Such findings demonstrate the importance of including parents in early childhood classrooms (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker & Aupperlee, 2009). Schools need to take responsibility for parental participation: this cannot be the sole responsibility of the parent. A collaborative approach needs to be developed: as with parent participation, schools need to take responsibility for engaging parents (Arnold, Zeljo & Doctoroff, 2008).

Despite the valuable contributions that parents can and should make to literacy development, parental involvement in literacy development in socio-economically disadvantaged contexts is still a challenge. The challenge persists because of factors such as poverty, weak familial structure and broken homes (Karibyeva & Bogar, 2014; Van Loggenberg, 2013).

6. Epstein's model of parental involvement

Epstein conceptualised a meaningful model for parental involvement aimed at supporting parental, family and community involvement and is premised on the idea that parental involvement should extend beyond the school and home. The model is underpinned by internal and external overlapping spheres of influence, which may have positive or negative implications for the experiences of learners (Epstein, 2018). Schools can make choices that are positive or negative in relation to the functioning of the school through bringing them together or not (Epstein, 1995). The model focuses on situating a partnership between homes, schools and communities (Wright, 2009). Epstein (1995) argues that the application of the model can genuinely influence children's attitudes and performance in school.

The model comprises six typologies. The first typology is parenting, which involves parents and extended family members having knowledge of child development and being aware of the child's level of maturity. The second typology focuses on effective two-way communication between parents, community and school. This communication can be related to school events, the child's progress and insight into the home environment (Epstein, 1995). The third typology focuses on volunteering, which relates to participating in activities that are organised by the school staff and parent associations. Fourthly, there is learning at home, whereby information regarding homework, learner performance and strategies to work with children is provided by teachers to parents so that parents can assist their children at home. Decision-making is the fifth level, and includes parents, family members and community members serving on school communities as representatives involved in decision-making. The final typology is collaborating with the community in identifying strengths, services and possible sources from the community to raise funds on behalf of the school. In this study, the levels of effective communication and learning at home had strong relevance, as the findings revealed challenges with communication and, as a consequence, problems with parents enhancing children's early literacy at home.

7. Research methodology

This study was conducted with two Grade R teachers who taught at a public disadvantaged school in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. The participants were purposively selected as they had significant knowledge relative to the study. Selection criteria included that the teachers needed to have an ECD qualification of either a Level 4 or 5 or have a Diploma in Grade R. Ethical clearance was obtained by the Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the Grade R teachers signed a consent letter. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step recursive process. These steps were transcribing, reading, re-reading and becoming familiar with the data, which were followed by the creation of initial codes, identification, naming of themes and writing up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Credibility was assured through asking each participant to check whether the data were accurate and no loss of information was prevalent.

8. Findings and discussion

The research focused on two Grade R teachers' perceptions about parental participation in early literacy development, specifically focusing on teachers' understandings of parental participation, the challenges of parental participation and how Grade R teachers would like parents to participate in their children's early literacy development. To present the research, I focus on three findings based on the data collected. Firstly, I look at teachers' understandings of parental participation, then move to the challenges faced by Grade R teachers regarding parental participation and then discuss how teachers would like parents to be involved. Analysis of data identified the following themes: parents as co-teachers, communication as a challenge of parental participation and parental participation on whose terms.

8.1 Parents as co-teachers

In this study, it was important to gain an understanding of how the teachers understood parental participation in children's early literacy. The teachers who were interviewed understood parental participation in early literacy as parents teaching children at home. In other words, teachers understood the parents' role as co-teachers.

> Teacher A: *I think it is about where parents are involved in teaching children at home. You know that there … Um there is always the problem with reading stories, doing homework ...*

> Teacher B: *Yes, it is about the parents sitting with children and doing the homework and also reading to the children …*

Teachers understand parental participation as relating to parents participating in storytelling and homework, which parents needed to undertake at home. Teachers' understanding of parental participation was limited to parents playing the role of teaching children at home. Teachers in this study only focused on parents supporting their children's learning in a domestic setting. However, parental participation, as already discussed, consists of far more than just parents teaching children at home and doing homework. Berthelsen and Walker (2008) define *parental participation* as occurring when parents engage with, or on behalf of, children with regard to home discussion and supervision, school communication and participation, school choice, involvement in school governance, involvement in teaching and learning, and communication with the school. In her model of parental involvement, Epstein (2018) emphasises the importance of parents being involved in *all* levels of education, from parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community.

Upon further probing, teachers were asked about whether they saw parental participation as strictly parents being involved in assisting their children with homework and reading or whether parents needed to be involved in other ways besides doing homework and reading stories to their children. The following response was typical:

> Teacher B: *Yes, yes, as long as the parent just do homework with the children and read to them, that is sufficient …*

The above quote further confirms that teachers' perceptions about parental participation are narrow and limited to parents only being involved in doing homework and reading to children. Guiding parents about how to encourage their children to learn at home should not be the only form of parental involvement, however, parental involvement will only be meaningful

between the school and parents if the model is implemented in a holistic way, rather than one level privileged over another. Whilst the teachers in this study agreed that parents need to be involved at home in reading to their children and doing the homework, Epstein (2002) highlights that there are other levels of parental involvement – parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community – which are equally important for schools and teachers to implement. Lemmer (2007) warns us of how, in the South African context, parental involvement has been limited to financing schooling and volunteering by parents. This may be due to the fact that schools do not have adequate knowledge about what the characteristics of active parents should be (Epstein 2018) and that there is insufficient understanding of what parental involvement entails. Emerson *et al.* (2012) insist that there is a difference between *involving* parents in school activities and *engaging* parents in their children's learning. As reported earlier, engagement is a shared responsibility between families, schools and communities, whilst involvement pertains to involvement in school governance, teaching, learning and communication with the school.

8.2 Communication as a challenge for poor parents

Since the focus of this study was to understand teachers' perceptions of parental participation in children's early literacy development, it was important to understand the challenges to parental involvement. An important challenge was communication between parents and teachers. The teachers reported that parents were not involved at all.

> Teacher B: *Parents are not involved at all. If you're talking about poor communities, poor um … those children's parents most probably work all the time. They don't come to school. They're not interested; it is difficult to involve them. Okay. So, there is no time for stories and when they come home there is so much to be done and there is no time for stories. Stories are not important.*

> Teacher A: *Yes, yes we send reminders to read to their children And to do homework but they still do not do it …*

The teachers in this study admitted that it was challenging to invite the participation of poor parents in the school programme, because there was a lack of interest from parents. They further indicated that this lack of interest and lack of parental involvement could be related to the possibility of their work demands. In disadvantaged communities in South Africa, parents are often prevented from being involved in their children's education due to commitment to their jobs (Jensen, 2009). Parental involvement and communication with poor communities in South Africa are a widespread problem and are largely caused by poverty, single-parent homes, unemployment and a weak familial structure (Karibyeva & Bogar, 2014; Van Loggenberg, 2013). Whilst Teacher A in this study indicated that poor parents were not involved, and she fully understood the reason was due to parents holding full-time jobs, she also assumed that the parents were not interested.

Lemmer (2007) notes that as schools seldom offer staff training on ways to collaborate with parents, this frequently leads to perceptions like these. Research indicates that low-income families have low-paying jobs which demand long hours, and this has an impact on the family (Fields, 2011) Additionally, it may be that parents are interested in the development of their children's early literacy, but that some poor parents may not feel confident to assist their children with schoolwork because of their own poor literacy levels and socio-economic conditions (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Walker & Berthelsen, 2010). In the context of this study, most parents are drawn from diverse cultural, language backgrounds, although all have some

level of socio-economic disadvantage. This was noted by teachers as a difficulty in enhancing children's early literacy skills. What is of paramount importance is that currently in South Africa, there is no policy that focuses on how schools can implement parental involvement in developing early literacy. In the light of this, teachers need guidance and support in how to work directly with parents (Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan, 2005). Schools need to empower poor parents, as they do have a relatively untouched potential to assist their children. According to Epstein (2002), schools should engender two-way communication between the homes of families and the schools. This can be done in relation to the contextual realities of Grade R as communication should not occur only in terms of homework completion or student progress.

8.3 Parental involvement: On whose terms?

The teachers in this study were asked how they would like to invite parents to participate in the early literacy.

> Teacher A: I used to invite the parents but they hardly *ever came. I am going to try again but I would like some uniformity where everybody speaks the same language and everybody understands what I expect of them …*

> Teacher B: *Yes they need to follow what we ask them to do …*

In the above excerpt, the teacher wanted parents to participate in storytelling, but in accordance with her terms of uniformity where everybody spoke the same language, in this case English, and acted in accordance with her wishes. This teacher indicated that she had made previous attempts at inviting parents to school to show them how to use strategies for developing children's early literacy, but parents neglected to attend these meetings. There are many schools that can prevent parental disengagement and undertake robust and inclusive approaches with parents (Smith, 2006; Msila, 2012). Even though parents did not attend previous meetings on strategies for developing early literacy, the teacher showed an interest in holding another workshop for the parents. However, she felt that this workshop should be on her terms, whereby 'everybody speaks the same language'. Many black South African parents for whom English is a second language choose to send their children to schools where English is the language of learning and teaching (Stoop, 2017). This is because English is considered the universal language of success. It is important that those schools for whom the language of instruction is English realise the need to be more inclusive, and take steps to understand the cultures and home language of the children from their schools. In this study, English was the dominant language of the Grade R teacher, and whilst she wanted to invite the parents to a parent workshop, her desire that it be in her own language and on her terms showed ignorance of the contextual, cultural and language realities of the parents of the children in her class.

Teachers should also steer away from using a cultural hegemony that invalidates different forms of involvement from across ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds and involves an ideal parent model based on Western middle-class archetypes, as this marginalises parents. With this in mind, teachers should familiarise themselves with an African parent archetype, or other archetypes appropriate to the cultural backgrounds of their families, which will allow them to understand the ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds of parents and how this knowledge can build a parental involvement programme that is compatible with the contextual realities of South African life. This demands that teachers think about how they can be more inclusive in their approach (Munje & Mncube, 2018; Msila, 2012; Van

Loggenberg, 2013). Although research states that schools need to take on the responsibility of creating collaborative relationships with parents and families, this is not always successful, as was the case in this study. Although the school made attempts to involve families, teachers experienced non-participation of parents.

9. Conclusion

This study focused on two Grade R teachers' perceptions concerning parental participation in early literacy in a disadvantaged Grade R context. The findings show that Grade R teachers have a limited understanding of parental participation, confined to parents doing homework and reading stories to children. The study also found that the teachers experienced challenges with the involvement of parents in their child's early literacy skills as most of the parents prioritised work commitments due to the socio-economic challenges they faced instead of participating in their children's education. Whilst this was the case, teachers also attested to parents not being interested in their children's education; therefore they did not participate. The third finding shows that teachers wanted parents to participate in storytelling, but in accordance with their terms of uniformity where everybody spoke the same language, conforming to the teachers terms. Teachers need to sensitise themselves to the contextual, cultural and language realities of the parents of the children in their classes. Grade R establishes the foundation for all future learning: it is in this grade that parental involvement should be made explicit in a holistic way, focusing on all levels of parental involvement rather than just on one level that deals exclusively with parents teaching children (Epstein, 2018).

I acknowledge that this was a small scale-study that involved two Grade R teachers and these findings cannot be generalised to other settings. Whilst this is the case the findings of this study has showed the need for larger scale studies to be conducted with Grade R teachers and parents to explore how teachers understand parental participation in their children's early literacy skills and how they invite parents to participate in their child's education. Parents understanding of participation in their children's early literacy skills and education holistically could also be a worthy contribution in a study of this nature. Special emphasis needs to focus on how parents for whom English is a second or third language are supported to participate holistically in their children's early literacy and education.

Secondly, whilst the Curriculum Assessment Policy (CAPS) focuses on what teachers should teach for early literacy, emphasis should also be on how teachers could involve parents as part of a curriculum guideline as this will also be highly beneficial to strengthening engagement with parents. Finally, education programmes that focus on early-childhood qualifications should place strong emphasis on preparing pre-service teachers to understand and invite parental participation for supporting children's early literacy skills. Such courses will provide students with the necessary knowledge to be pro-active in inviting parents to participate in their children's education. Finally, in-service teachers also need to be supported through workshops and additional training on how to support parental participation. Such attempts can have the potential of stronger involvement of parents which can contribute to the improvement of children's early literacy skills.

Acknowledgements

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