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Research-Based Behavior Management Practices: Assessing Teacher Preparation Programs' Curricula in Eight African Countries

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Abstract

Schoolteachers worldwide continue to encounter challenging behavior in their classrooms. As a result, teacher preparation programs are receiving more scrutiny regarding how well they are preparing their teacher candidates to effectively address challenging behavior especially in line with the principles of whole schooling. The overarching purpose of this research was to identify the extent to which pre-service teacher preparation programs in eight African countries provided training in classroom and behavior management. The study was predicated on the premise of accentuating the scope of the teacher preparation experience in addressing critical research-based features of classroom and behavior management. Curricula from 11 teacher preparation institutions from across eight African countries were collected and analyzed to explore the extent to which the programs were addressing research-based practices in classroom and behavior management in the preparation of their teacher candidates. Results indicated that only three of the programs offered courses that were specific to behavior and classroom management and only one of the programs addressed some of the specific research-based practices—and very minimally so. This study highlights the need to further examine teacher preparation programs in the different countries with the goal to incorporate and promote research-based practices in behavior and classroom management.

Key Words: Challenging behavior, behavior management, classroom management, classroom organization, research-based practices, teacher preparation

Introduction

Since the Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education, thereafter, referred to as the Salamanca Statement, was adopted in 1994, there has been an international push towards inclusive education. The Salamanca Statement was guided by the principle of inclusion and the need to embrace the concept of schools for all where schools would embrace all students regardless of their differences (UNESCO, 1994). In practice this would mean that all schools would seek to meet the educational needs of every student including students with special needs who had been previously relegated to self-contained special education settings. This shift resulted in vastly diverse classrooms challenging both teachers and researchers to identify effective pedagogical practices that would allow every student to flourish regardless of their unique educational needs (Chitiyo, 2013). One of the areas that has received great attention is how to address challenging behavior to maximize educational outcomes for all children.

Challenging behavior, a common occurrence in schools around the world, can be defined as “any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults” (Smith & Fox, 2003, p. 6). Like their counterparts elsewhere, schoolteachers in Africa often encounter different forms of challenging behavior such as fighting, disruptiveness, bullying, stealing, vandalism, using abusive language, and being disrespectful to teachers as common challenging behaviors in school. Such behaviors have been reported in schools in different African countries including Ghana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (Chitiyo et al., 2021; Marais & Meier, 2010). If these behaviors are not addressed appropriately, they can have both immediate and long-term negative consequences for students as they create learning environments that are not conducive to learning.

Specifically, challenging behavior can interfere with students’ learning and social emotional development (McGuire & Meadan, 2022; Nelson et al., 2004; Smolleck & Duffy, 2017) and if not addressed well, can negatively affect the child’s overall wellbeing. According to Metzler et al. (2001) children can experience short- and long-term consequences “including school failure, delinquent behavior, problem drinking, and drug use, and precocious or risky sexual behavior” (p. 449). To maximize educational outcomes for all students, teachers therefore need to consider the whole schooling approach, which emphasizes the use of research-based

practices that support the whole child (Whole Schooling Consortium, n.d.). According to the Whole School Consortium, the whole schooling approach is guided by eight principles namely, creating learning spaces for all, empowering citizens for democracy, including all in learning together, building a caring community, supporting learning, partnering with families and community, teaching all using authentic, multi-level instruction, and assessing students to promote learning. These principles are designed to ensure that all children flourish in inclusive schools regardless of their vast differences (Whole Schooling Consortium, n.d.).

In line with the principles of whole schooling that emphasize the use of research-based practices to create learning spaces for all, researchers are calling on schools to adopt evidence-based strategies that make school environments safe for all students to support learning and maximize educational outcomes (Oliver & Reschly, 2010; Riden et al., 2021; Simonsen et al., 2008; Thompson, 2011). Such school environments are characterized in part by effective classroom and behavior management. In fact, effective classroom and behavior management promotes healthy classroom and wider school ecologies that support wholesome development for all children (Mitchel et al., 2017; Parsonson, 2012).

Unfortunately, schoolteachers often feel inadequately prepared and therefore ineffective in addressing challenging behavior (Flower et al., 2017; Westling, 2010). Not surprisingly, challenging behavior has been linked to teacher attrition (Gilmour & Wehby, 2020; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012). It, therefore, behooves teacher preparation programs to adequately prepare pre-service teachers in the use of research-based practices in classroom and behavior management.

There are several behavior management strategies whose efficacy has been demonstrated through research. Oliver and Reschly (2010) summarized some of these strategies, which include setting of clear classroom behavioral expectations, explicitly teaching classroom rules and routines, promptly responding to challenging behavior, being consistent with consequences of appropriate and inappropriate behavior, establishing specific routines for tasks, reinforcing appropriate behaviors, and monitoring students' behavior through data collection. There is consensus among researchers that schoolteachers would be more effective in managing challenging behavior in their classrooms if they practiced these strategies (Oliver & Reschly, 2010). Sadly, evidence seem to point to inadequate preparation for schoolteachers in different

African countries in terms of classroom organization and behavior management (Chitiyo et al., 2021; Chitiyo et al., 2019a; Makwinja, 2017).

Recent studies conducted among in-service schoolteachers in Ghana, Malawi, Namibia, and Zimbabwe found that schoolteachers across all four countries felt underprepared to address students' challenging behavior and therefore they needed more professional development in classroom and behavior management (Hughes et al., 2016; Chitiyo et al., 2019a; Chitiyo et al., 2019b). Aside from this self-reported need by schoolteachers in these countries, until now, it is unknown if teacher preparation programs in these African countries address the use of research-based strategies identified by Oliver and Reschly (2010).

Oliver and Reschly (2010) used an Innovation Configuration (IC) model developed by Vanderbilt University's National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality to investigate the extent to which special education teacher preparation programs in a Mid-Western State in the US included critical features of classroom organization and behavior management in their coursework. IC models have been used in the implementation and evaluation of educational interventions for over three decades (Reschly, Smarrt, & Oliver, 2007) and they list and describe the critical features of an innovation, which will be "assessed along a continuum of configurations ranging from nonuse to ideal implementation practice" (Oliver & Reschly, 2010, p.192). The critical features in the IC that Oliver and Reschly used were identified based on a review of the literature on classroom management. These critical features include "(1) Structured environment, (2) active supervision and student engagement, (3) schoolwide behavioral expectations, (4) classroom rules, (5) classroom routines, (6) encouragement of appropriate behavior, and (7) behavior reduction strategies" (Oliver & Reschly, 2010, p 192). Using the same instrument, this current study was designed to replicate Oliver and Reschly's (2010) study in selected African countries by examining the extent to which teacher preparation programs in the countries included critical features of classroom organization and behavior management in their preparation of schoolteachers. The following research questions guided this current study:

1. To what extent do pre-service teacher preparation programs provide training in classroom organization and behavior management?
2. To what extent do teacher preparation programs address critical research-based features of classroom organization and behavior management in their teacher preparation coursework?

Method

Sample and Procedures

This study was approved by the University of North Carolina Greensboro's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as an exempt study. Data for this study came from 11 teacher preparation institutions across eight African countries. The 11 teacher preparation programs were selected because at least one of these researchers had contacts at each of the institutions. After receiving IRB approval, the researchers solicited programs of study (list of courses) and syllabi or course modules from each of the institutions. Table 1 indicates the teacher preparation institutions that participated in the study by country and the type of data received from each institution. While all 11 institutions provided their programs of study, only six institutions provided course syllabi or modules for the courses listed on the programs of study. Thus, data from all 11 institutions were analyzed to answer the first research question while the second question was addressed by reviewing the course syllabi from only six programs from the six institutions—representing four countries—that provided syllabi or modules.

Instrument

The instrument used for this study comprised of a rubric that was developed by Vanderbilt University's National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality based on the IC format (Hall & Hord, 2001). The rubric comprises of a table that features 18 critical components of research-based behavioral interventions and a rating scale indicating different but increasing levels of implementation of these components: "0" (No evidence that the component is included in the syllabus); "1" (Syllabi mention content related to the component by listing it (e.g., classroom environment, structure)); "2" (Syllabi mention the component and require readings (at least two, either textbooks or journal articles) on topic); "3" (Syllabi mention the component, require readings, and have either an assignment, project, or test on the topic); and "4" (Syllabi mention the component, require readings, have assignments, projects, or tests and supervised 88% of the syllabi that were rated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements and multiplying that by 100. Based on this formula, the IRR for the rating of the syllabi was 87% which is considered strong (McHugh, 2012).

Table 1

Number of Teacher Preparation Institutions and Type of Data Received from Each Institution

Country	Number of Teacher Preparation Institutions	Focus of Teacher Preparation Program	Type of Qualification	Data Received from the Institutions	
				Programs of Study	Course Syllabi/Modules
Ghana	1	Early Childhood	Bachelor of Education	X	
Lesotho	1	Primary Education	Bachelor of Education	X	X
Malawi	3	Special Education Primary Education Secondary Education	Bachelor of Education	X*	X*
Namibia	1	Primary-Secondary Education	Bachelor of Education	X	X
Nigeria	1	Primary-Secondary Education	Bachelor of Education	X	
South Africa	1	Primary-Secondary Education	Bachelor of Education	X	X
Togo	2	Special Education Middle Education	Bachelor of Art	X*	
Zimbabwe	1	Secondary Education	Bachelor of Education	X	

*Refers to all the institutions

Data Analysis

Since the purpose of this study was to find out the extent to which pre-service teacher preparation programs were preparing their candidates in the use of research-based classroom/behavior management practices in their teacher preparation coursework, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. More specifically, these researchers analyzed the frequency with which components of the IC featured in the teacher preparation coursework for each program.

Results

Only three of the 11 programs offered a specific course in classroom organization and behavior management. Of these three programs, one offered one class in classroom organization and behavior management while the other two offered two classes. These courses include

introduction to behaviorally disturbed children, classroom management for special needs population, classroom management in geography, classroom management in social studies, and teaching skills for lower primary.

Six of the 11 programs provided course syllabi or modules while the remaining five provided just a brief catalog description of their training curriculum; thus, these five were not included in data analysis for the second research question. Table 2 presents the IC component ratings of the six programs. According to results presented in Table 2 each of the six programs scored zero on 14 of the 18 IC components. Only one program received a score of one (meaning syllabi mentioned component) in each of the following four IC components:

- Classroom rules are systematically taught, reinforced, and monitored within the context of the classroom.
- Procedures to encourage appropriate behavior at the group level.
- Procedures to encourage appropriate behavior at the individual student level.
- Antecedent strategies to prevent inappropriate behavior.

Figure 1 presents a graphical representation of the seven essential IC component categories scored by the number of degree programs. According to Figure 1, only one program received a rating score of one across three categories (i.e., *classroom routines, encourage appropriate behavior, and behavior reduction strategies*) of the seven IC components. This means only one of the six programs was rated as having mentioned the identified components in their syllabi. Aside from the one program mentioning these components in their syllabi, none of all the six programs required readings and/or tests/quizzes, assignments or projects for application, or teaching application with feedback related to these IC components.

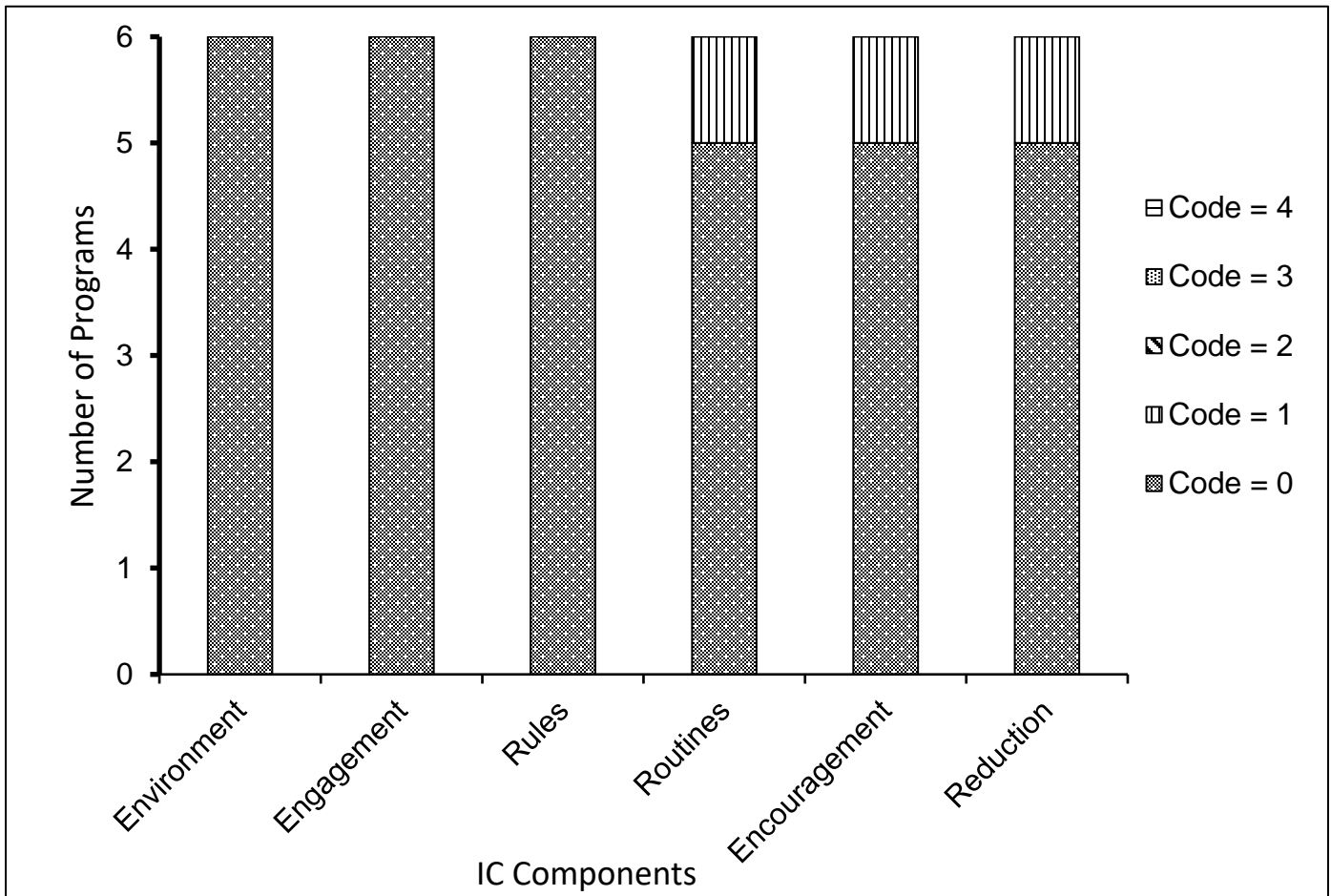


Figure 1: Number of Programs Rating 0 to 4 on the IC Components

Figure 1 Alt Text: A bar graph showing number of programs and how they were rated across the six IC components. All six programs received a rating of zero for the components environment, engagement, and rules and five programs were rated zero while one was rated one for each of the components—routines, encouragement, and reduction.

Table 2
Percentages of Programs by Each Essential Classroom Management Component Rating

IC Component	Rating				
	0	1	2	3	4
<i>Structured environment:</i>					
Predictable routines established and taught.	100	0	0	0	0
Environment arranged for ease of flow of traffic and distractions minimized.	100	0	0	0	0
<i>Active supervision and student engagement:</i>					
Teacher scans, moves in unpredictable ways, and monitors student behavior.	100	0	0	0	0
Teacher uses more positive to negative student teacher interactions.	100	0	0	0	0
Teacher provides high rates of opportunities for students to respond.	100	0	0	0	0
Teacher utilizes multiple observable ways to engage students.	100	0	0	0	0
<i>Schoolwide behavioral expectations:</i>					
A few positively stated behavioral expectations posted, systematically taught, reinforced, and monitored.	100	0	0	0	0
<i>Classroom rules:</i>					
A few positively stated behavioral rules linked to schoolwide expectations.	100	0	0	0	0
Posted systematically taught, reinforced, and monitored.	100	0	0	0	0
<i>Classroom Routines:</i>					
Classroom rules are systematically taught, reinforced, and monitored within the context of the classroom.	83	17	0	0	0
<i>Encourage appropriate behavior:</i>					
Procedures to acknowledge appropriate behavior at the group level.	83	17	0	0	0
Procedures to acknowledge appropriate behavior at the individual student level.	83	17	0	0	0
Data collection on frequency of appropriate behavior within the classroom environment.	100	0	0	0	0
<i>Behavior reduction strategies:</i>					
Antecedent strategies to prevent inappropriate behavior.	83	17	0	0	0
Multiple procedures to respond to inappropriate behavior.	100	0	0	0	0
Procedures to teach replacement behaviors and to re-teach appropriate behavior.	100	0	0	0	0
Differential reinforcement.	100	0	0	0	0
Effective use of consequences.	100	0	0	0	0

Note. Values are rounded percentages of degree programs scoring at each Innovation Configuration (IC) level. 0 = no evidence, 1 = syllabi mentioned component, 2 = required readings and/or test/quizzes, 3 = required assignments or projects for application, 4 - teaching application with feedback.

Discussion

Results of this current study demonstrated that only three out of the 11 teacher preparation programs offered courses that were specific to behavior or classroom management. This means many teachers in Africa are graduating from their teacher preparation programs without the requisite knowledge to effectively address challenging behavior in their classrooms. This is worrisome because it may be an indication that behavior or classroom management is not considered important enough in these programs to warrant having at least a course dedicated to it. The result further raises questions about the extent to which teacher preparation curricula in the African countries are informed by research. Unfortunately, this is happening against a backdrop of growing research documenting the prevalence of challenging behavior in schools across Africa. For example, in South Africa, Marais and Meier (2010) reported that disruptive behavior had become a national concern and a major challenge for educators. In Nigeria, Uzochina, et al. (2015) stated that challenging behavior was on the rise among secondary school students. Similarly, Chitiyo and colleagues (2014; 2021) reported the prevalence of challenging behavior in Ghanaian, Malawian, and Zimbabwean schools. These studies highlight the need for effective classroom and behavior management across African schools. Unfortunately, schoolteachers across these countries are not well-prepared to effectively address challenging behavior in their schools (Dwarika, 2019; Gunu, 2018; Nanyeleet., 2018), which seems to be confirmed by this current study indicating that most teacher preparation programs do not appear to have coursework specific to behavior or classroom management.

Additionally, results of this study demonstrated that the selected teacher preparation programs provided no-to-little preparation in the IC components. This is disconcerting, but not surprising. Previous research, both in Africa and elsewhere, has identified classroom and behavior management as an area that has not received enough attention in teacher preparation (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Chitiyo et al., 2016; Chitiyo et al., 2017; MacDonald & Speece, 2001; Westling, 2010). This is despite accumulating evidence indicating that students' challenging behavior is inversely associated with academic achievement (Lane, Barton-Arwood et al., 2008; Kremer et al., 2016). These findings highlight a potential threat to successful inclusion in African schools as UNESCO (2023) has identified quality of teachers as a potential barrier to inclusion. Effective inclusive education teachers know how to positively influence students' behavior, something they can accomplish using evidence-based behavior management

practices for which there is a ballooning body of literature (Reschly et al., 2007; Simonsen et al., 2008).

To maximize student achievement and to promote the child's overall wellbeing in line with the principles of whole schooling (Whole Schooling Consortium, n.d.), schoolteachers need to be competent both in their subject matter as well as classroom and behavior management. To this effect, extant research has identified effective classroom and behavior management practices that effective schoolteachers need to master. These practices have been discussed earlier and include: (a) structured environment; (b) active supervision and student engagement; (c) schoolwide behavioral expectations; (d) classroom rules; (e) classroom routines; (f) encouragement appropriate behavior; and (g) behavior reduction strategies (Reschly et al., 2007). Since schoolteachers who are considered effective at classroom and behavior management were found to be knowledgeable about these practices (Oliver & Reschly, 2010; Westling, 2010), it behooves teacher preparation programs in the African countries to include these important competencies in their curricula. The programs should include comprehensive courses dedicated specifically to covering the seven components with emphasis on implementation of research-based, developmentally appropriate, preventive behavior management techniques, that are culturally responsive and relevant (Sørliie, 2021; O'Neill & Stephenson, 2012; Oliver & Reschly, 2010).

Furthermore, the countries should consider providing professional development opportunities in classroom and behavior management for in-service teachers. With a growing body of research on effective behavior management, schoolteachers now have more tools in their arsenal. Even so, "the separateness of the research and practice communities...the failure to articulate manageable research-validated interventions, and the weak opportunities for professional development" continue to haunt the field of education (Greenwood & Abbott, 2001, p. 276). To help close the gap, researchers and practitioners must work in consort to detail the theory of change of the interventions (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). According to Joyce and Cartwright (2020, p.1045) this means making sure that research studies go beyond just addressing the claim of "it works" to focusing more on "this intervention will work here." The latter requires demonstration of the effectiveness of the intervention across a wide range of contexts. Thus, we argue for more research production in the African countries to facilitate the applicability of the research-based practices in the African contexts. Coupled with more

professional development focusing on the application of these research-based practices, it is anticipated that such an approach would help to disseminate and promote the use of these practices.

Ultimately, results of this study are important as they highlight the challenges that may interfere with successful implementation of inclusive education in the African countries. It is important to address these challenges to ensure that all children receive an appropriate education that promotes their wholesome development (Parsonson, 2012). According to the Whole Schooling Consortium (n.d.) teachers need to create safe and caring learning environments that support the welfare of the whole child. To this effect, these authors encourage teacher preparation programs in African countries to consider recalibrating their teacher preparation curricula in line with the principles of whole schooling to make sure that all children flourish in inclusive educational settings.

Finally, this study is not without limitations. First, these researchers relied on information gathered from programs of study, syllabi, and/or modules to determine the extent to which the teacher preparation programs prepared their teachers in the use of research-based practices in behavior and classroom management. While this may be a reliable approach, it negates that not everything that instructors cover in a course may be captured in course syllabi or modules. Secondly, while the teacher preparation programs included in this study could be considered representative of teacher preparation programs in the respective countries, since they all mostly follow the same accreditation requirements, there could still be variation in the programs in each country. Findings of this study should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Conclusion

The study sought to find out the extent to which pre-service teacher preparation programs were preparing their candidates in the use of research-based classroom/behavior management practices according to their teacher preparation coursework. The following conclusions were derived from the findings of this study. Firstly, it is disturbing that only three out of the 11 programs had a clear-cut course in classroom and behavior management despite extensive prior research on the prevalence of challenging behavior amongst students across schools in Africa. Secondly, it can be concluded that teacher preparation curricula in most African countries on

classroom/behavior management is not informed by research given the limited infusion of research-based practices in classroom and behavior management in pre-service teacher preparation programs.

Thirdly, the over-increasing forms of challenging behavior in African schools such as fighting, drug abuse, graffiti, hyperactivity, disruptiveness, bullying, stealing, vandalism, using abusive language, and being disrespectful to teachers could be mitigated by empowering pre-service teachers in the use of research-based practices in classroom and behavior management.

Fourthly, it can be concluded that most pre-service teacher preparation programs are predominantly conservative by not embracing contemporary and best practices needed for promoting quality pre-service teacher preparation. These researchers recommend deliberate education policy for quality education through the embedding of research-based practices in classroom and behavior management for pre-service teacher preparation programs to foster capacity building in managing challenging behavior.

Additionally, further research in the context of African countries is recommended to facilitate the applicability of research-based practices, especially on student behavior management. Finally, further research could focus on how technology can be harnessed to help schoolteachers to manage challenging behavior among their students since the Covid-19 pandemic era has pushed schools around the globe to continually embrace hybrid teaching and learning, which demands a new cohort of preservice teachers who understand the importance of technology in the classroom.

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