Improvements in mentoring of pre-service teachers: Experiences of field placement

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Abstract

The latest shift in teacher education gives more responsibilities in the preparation of teachers to schools. This places special demands on the classroom teacher who acts as a teacher educator in a mentoring role that requires specialist skills. Though teacher education institutions have attempted to provide some guidance to mentor teachers through workshops and/or seminars there seems to be inconsistencies in the mentoring of pre-service teachers during field placement. This qualitative multi-case study explores how school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers in selected secondary schools in a district could be improved. Purposively sampled three mentoring pair participants were observed and interviewed in action for at least five months from a population of 340 Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students of one university in Zimbabwe. The findings suggest that the participants were of the view that mentoring of pre-service teachers could be improved if schools and the university were to enrich the environment in which mentoring was taking place. Among other measures to be taken to improve mentoring of pre-service teachers was (a) mentor selection, (b) benefits of mentoring, and (c) mentor training workshops. The paper recommends that besides being motivated and selected on some known criteria, mentor teachers needed specialist skills in mentoring.

Key words: teacher education; field placement; school-based mentoring; pre-service teachers; teacher educator.

Introduction and Background

Mentoring of pre-service teachers during field placement in schools is considered a critical component in a teacher education programme (Garza & Harter, 2016; Chien, 2015; Denis, 2015), because pre-service teachers learn how to teach under the guidance of a mentor teacher. The latest shift in teacher education increasingly gives more responsibilities in the preparation of teachers to schools. In the United Kingdom many of the initial teacher education programmes have been school-based since 1992 (Douglas, 2012), with the Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) students spending 24 weeks of the 36 weeks of their programme in secondary schools. Ghana's new teacher training programme implemented since 2004, known as "the In-In-Out programme" has pre-service teachers doing field placement in schools in the "Out" segment of the programme in the final year of the three-year duration of the course (Bukari & Kuyini, 2015: 46). Ramnarian (2015) reports that Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Physical Sciences students at a South African university spend 10 hours per week at a teaching school in their one year of training. In Zimbabwe, the introduction of the so-called "*2-5-2 teacher education programme*" has seen students doing field placement under the supervision of a qualified teacher for five of the nine terms of the three-year programme (Majoni & Nyaruwata, 2015: 3698). It would appear a lot has been written on the increase in the duration in schools for pre-service teachers that has elevated the role of school-based mentors in shaping future teachers' classroom

practice. However, a lot less is known about the mentoring experiences and improvements in mentoring of pre-service teachers during the lengthened field placement in schools in general.

Despite the lengthened duration in schools, teacher education programmes seem not to have adjusted to the current models of teacher preparation (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). As a result, Zeichner (2010) laments the perennial problem of the disconnection between university and practicing schools in teacher education. This is because schools in Zimbabwe provide varied opportunities for pre-service teachers to put theory into practice during field placement (Ngara & Ngwarai, 2012; Majoni & Nyaruwata, 2015). The mentor as the school-based educator would not be aware of some of the university requirements to adequately prepare pre-service teachers as expected by their university (Marimo, 2014). The university would also not be aware of some of the school requirements when they prepare pre-service teachers for field placement. The university supervisors are in schools on the few occasions they visit pre-service teachers on field placement. When they are in schools, the university supervisors rarely see mentor teachers teaching as they have limited time in the field (Shumbayawonda, 2011). This makes it necessary to find alternative strategies to bridge the gap between schools and universities when pre-service teachers are on field placement. This paper sets out to explore how school-based mentoring could be improved especially concerning the kind of collaborations that should exist between practicing schools and teacher education institutions in the mentoring of pre-service teachers.

School-based mentoring could be improved as schools are able to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to put what they learn in their methods courses at the university into practice (Ambrosetti, 2014; Ngara & Ngwarai, 2012). However, Filiz and Durnali (2019) argue that the school-based educators cannot adequately prepare pre-service teachers according to university expectations as they may not be familiar with the university requirements. The university would need to be aware of some of the school requirements so that pre-service teachers are adequately prepared for field placement. When university supervisors visit pre-service teachers in schools, they rarely see mentor teachers teaching as they will be pressed for time to interact with mentors (Ellis & Loughland, 2017). Therefore, there is need to find strategies to bridge the gap between schools and universities. This study, to improve mentoring practices, set out to explore the kind of collaborations between practicing schools and teacher education institutions in the mentoring of pre-service teachers.

Collaborations between schools and universities can be used to narrow the gap between schools and the university. However, it has been acknowledged that the solution to the problem of disconnection between schools and the university is not simply taking the university staff to teach their courses in the schools (Zeichner, 2010). Alternatively, it does not mean taking the school personnel to teach their courses in the university. Wexler (2019) argues for the involvement of the school educators in university courses that prepare pre-service teachers for field placement. For example, when pre-service teachers go for micro-teaching in schools, teachers could be more involved. The school educators could be involved in the supervision of micro-teaching. In addition, it could be more beneficial if the school and university educators jointly supervise the pre-service teachers. Furthermore, before the supervision, school educators could be involved when pre-service teachers are being prepared for micro-teaching. For example, in the presence of school educators, the pre-service teachers and university educators could discuss the scheme and lesson plan formats and then how to develop detailed teaching documents. The formats will have to be compatible with school formats and the school teachers could assist in the lectures for scheming, lesson planning, record keeping, media preparation and assessment. What must be appreciated with this approach is that there would be joint ownership and shared responsibility when pre-service teachers finally go on field placement (Blackley, Bennett & Sheffield, 2018). However, what could be problematic is the timing of such lectures as the school personnel are full-time teachers at their schools and their main responsibility is the teaching of their learners. The current study seeks to establish the extent to which schools and the university can collaborate to improve school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers.

Since the commencement of the updated curriculum in Zimbabwe as from 2017, classroom practitioners were expected to mentor pre-service teachers on the implementation of the updated curriculum. The Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework 2015-2022 has new learning areas at all stages in the school system, including at the secondary level (Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2016). These changes in the curriculum call for mentors whose teaching and mentoring perspectives are compatible with the notion of reform-driven teaching that is consistent with societal needs (Wang & Odell, 2007). However, classroom practitioners have faced challenges in mentoring

pre-service teachers. Some of these challenges include ill-defined duties and expectations for those involved in mentoring, uncoordinated school and college teaching programmes, inadequate training of mentors, and mentees who are not sufficiently prepared for the mentoring process (Musingafi & Mafumbate, 2014). We argue that mentor teachers in Zimbabwe could become more effective mentors of pre-service teachers if there were strong schools-university partnerships in teacher education. This paper, therefore, aims to find out how mentoring of pre-service teachers could be improved in cases where schools and universities collaborate in school-based mentoring.

Using evidence from this study, in a context where the classroom teachers, who are not formally trained teacher educators, are expected to play the role of mentors, the key question to be answered is: What improvements can be made in school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers? In the following section, we focus on the socio-cultural perspective that frames school-based mentoring in this study. Then, we engage with the findings and discussion after describing the research methodology followed. Lastly, we conclude and make recommendations in the last section.

Literature Review and Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory whose tenets focus on social interaction – which plays a critical role in the professional development of pre-service teachers, the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and zone of proximal development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky, a pre-service teacher's mental development appears on two planes. The first level or plane represents the social interaction among classroom practitioners and the second plane is the psychological growth which takes place within the pre-service teacher (Bekiryazici, 2015). The pre-service teachers' experiences enable them to initially depend on others for guidance before they gradually understand the context in which they can apply the knowledge. The social interactions can determine the pace of the professional development which goes on in the teaching career of teachers. In this study, with respect to social interaction data was collected through observations of mentoring sessions and interviews with pre-service teachers and mentors. The main interactions took place during the pre-lesson and post-lesson conferences between the mentor and pre-service teachers. Arguably, the social interactions benefited both the mentor and pre-service teacher as they realised the reciprocity of school-based mentorship benefits. The benefits of mentoring were two-way as both, mentor and pre-service teachers developed professionally (Izadinia, 2016).

In the current study, the mentor teacher was MKO who had superior level of understanding and ability of the teaching and learning process (Shooshtari & Mir, 2014). The pre-service teacher depended on the mentor teacher for support and guidance during field placement. The mentor also assisted with the practical and pedagogical aspects of teaching during field placement as he/she mentor assumed various roles during the mentoring process (Wexler, 2019; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). In all the studied cases in the current study, the MKO who was also the head of department was well positioned to guide the pre-service teacher as they were in the same department and was more conversant with the school culture and practices.

The pre-service teacher operated within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) during field placement. The ZPD was the difference between what a pre-service teacher could do on his or her own and those things he or she could not do even with the assistance of the MKO (the mentor teacher). If the teaching was meaningful, it should not have been on what the pre-service teacher could already do on his or her own. The MKO was expected to take the pre-service teacher to a higher level from a lower level within the ZPD. The MKO was there to provide opportunities to the pre-service teacher to develop his or her teaching competencies during the mentoring process (Shooshtari and Mir, 2014), so as to realise a change in the levels within the ZPD. The mentor did this through scaffolding (Trif, 2015) resembled by the technique of gradual withdrawal of MKO support in the mentoring process as the pre-service teacher gained confidence in the teaching process (Bekiryazici, 2015). Thus, the school-based mentoring process of pre-service teachers can be viewed through the Vygotskian perspective.

Methodology

The study was conducted in one selected district in Zimbabwe using one large university, with a population of 340 Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students who were on teaching practice in their final semester, and their mentors. The participants were three pre-service teachers and their respective mentors who are qualified teachers and heads of departments, and this involved three such

pairs of mentor-pre-service teacher. The purposive selection technique was used to pick from the population of Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students. The selected secondary schools were one rural day single-session, one boarding, and one urban day double-session. The selected pre-service teachers and mentors had lived experiences of the mentoring process and were considered information-rich cases in school-based mentoring (Creswell, 2014).

The qualitative research approach with the multiple case studies as the research design was chosen because it allowed the researchers to carry out the study in the schools (Yin, 2017). Three secondary schools were used as research sites. In this research, the multiple case design was employed to examine the mentoring process in three different schools in which pre-service teachers were attached to mentors. The schools were unique in terms of type, size, location, organisation of teaching and learning programmes. The case study design was chosen as it permitted the research to focus on the critical participants and the mentoring practices in the interactions of mentors and pre-service teachers (Yin, 2017). In addition, the design permitted the researchers to be close to the pre-service and mentor teachers and hear their voices on the mentoring process as we observed the mentoring process in the schools (Clark & Ivankova, 2016).

Mentoring pairs, comprising of mentor and the pre-service teacher, were observed and interviewed to gain insight into the mentoring process for at least five months during school visits. The data collection process also included semi-structured interviews that guided the dialogue and to remain focused on the mentoring process (Creswell, 2014). In addition, school and policy documents were analysed during a prolonged period to gain a deeper understanding of the mentoring process in the three schools and to cross-check findings from interviews and observations as part of methodological triangulation to enhance trustworthiness and credibility in the study (Leedy & Ormod, 2013). Content analysis was done after interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and the observations and participants' responses were coded and classified into categories of different themes. As part of member checking, the researchers reported back findings to the participants, asking for their valued interpretation on the findings and integrating these accounts into the study's findings (Neuman, 2014).

To protect the schools and participants, we took note of ethical issues of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality (Yin, 2017). The Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education also granted us permission to conduct the research in the participating secondary schools.

Findings and Discussion

The main theme that emerged from the findings is enrichment of the mentoring environment of pre-service teachers. The finding was that the mentoring of pre-service teachers could be improved if schools and the university were to enrich the environment in which mentoring was taking place. Among other measures to be taken to improve mentoring of pre-service teachers was (a) mentor selection, (b) benefits of mentoring to mentor teachers, and (c) mentor training workshops.

Mentor Selection

Mentor selection and pairing faced challenges in all the studied cases. The participants were of the view that the university criteria for the selection of a mentor teacher in the Practicum Guide (2017: 4) was not explicit as it states that, *"The school should appoint an experienced teacher to mentor the student teacher for the whole duration he/she is on field placement"*. In case 1, Nhamo and Bertha were of the view that mentor selection criteria needed to be explicitly stated in the university TP documents. Nhamo said that, *"As schools, we could improve the mentoring process by matching the mentor and pre-service teacher on the basis of subject specialisation."* Bertha added that it was important, *"to attach one student teacher to one mentor teacher, preferably teaching the same subject."* The mentoring pair seems to be stressing on the importance of subject expertise in mentoring. In case of Nkomo, she suggested that pre-service teachers needed be inducted first through school visits to familiarise themselves with the school and teaching programmes before they asked for their input in the selection of the mentor. In the third case, Nzuma also suggested that, *"the pre-service teacher could make pre-visits to the respective school before the beginning of the attachment period in schools."* School visits are to be used to expose the pre-service teachers to different mentors before making an informed decision on pairing on the basis of compatibility of teaching styles.

In the current study, pre-service teachers received content specific mentoring (Mukeredzi, Mthlyane & Bertram, 2015). The mentors who were heads of departments were subject specialists as they taught the same subjects with their pre-service teachers. However, the criterion for selection of mentors having the same subject specialisation with the pre-service teacher needed to be explicitly stated for all hosting schools so that mentors would be appointed on this basis not that they will be able to supervise the pre-service teachers since they would be their heads of departments. Subject specialisation could be regarded as the determining factor in all mentor selection at secondary school level if school-based mentoring was to improve (Orland-Barak & Hasin, 2010). However, the onus could be on the university to explain and justify to schools the importance of considering subject expertise in selecting mentors for pre-service teachers. School heads, as administrators, seem to be more interested in appointing a mentor who would be able to supervise the pre-service teacher. This could be understandable as heads of schools would like to see their schools running smoothly. However, the challenge could arise in cases where the head of department oversees a number of subject areas. In such a scenario, the head of department would not necessarily be the best person to mentor the pre-service teacher as they could be teaching different subjects. Hence, the need for considering subject expertise if mentoring of pre-service teachers is to be improved in secondary schools.

The mentoring pairings by heads of schools seem to have considered the importance of subject expertise in mentoring as heads of departments who were subject specialists were selected as mentors for the pre-service teachers. Among previous research with similar findings were the Orland-Barak and Hasin (2010) and Mukeredzi *et al.* (2015) studies. Orland-Barak and Hasin argue that good mentors are sources of subject knowledge and that they are able to use it for mentoring purposes. The good mentors are able to draw on their rich pedagogical knowledge that enables them to represent seemingly complicated problems in a comprehensible manner. In the Mukeredzi *et al.*'s study, student teachers who received mentoring related to subject knowledge got informative guidance that enhanced the development of their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in their areas of subject specialisation. In addition, the mentioned study also revealed that three of the 20 participants who were mentored by mentors without subject expertise noted lack of confidence and effectiveness in their mentors. This was attributed to lack of appropriate subject knowledge. Hence, the need for considering subject expertise if mentoring of pre-service teachers is to improve in secondary schools.

Benefits of Mentoring to Mentor Teachers

In case 1, Nhamo admitted to have benefited from his interactions from Bertha particularly on being exposed to emerging and contemporary issues in teacher education in his interactions with pre-service teachers and university lecturers.

For Nkomo and other teachers in school B, their unexpected benefit of mentoring was that they were informally in-serviced on use of ICTs in teaching. Jacob's mentor and other teachers in the school benefited from his seemingly superior knowledge of the use of ICT tools in teaching. As a result, the school ICT club Jacob had established became popular among both teachers and learners as they wanted to enhance their ICT skills. This finding is consistent with Blais, Motz and Pychl (2016) study findings. Blais *et al.* reported on a student teacher's displayed passion for using information and communication technology that the mentor acknowledged to have brought new content and methodology in his teaching. The study reported how the mentor and the learners had benefited from the use of technology throughout a semester. The study had focused on exploring the advantages of a Mentored-Teaching Programme (MTP) for student teachers and teachers in Canada using the mentor's lenses. The new content that included the use of technology in teaching presented a refreshing approach to learning to the learners and the mentor. The learners were presented with opportunities to learn from an alternative expert who had brought new teaching approaches from university. The mentor had in the process been also in-serviced in the aspects of use of technology in teaching and learning.

The notion of reciprocity in mentoring seemed to make participants expectant in the mentoring process. Each member of the mentoring pair expected to benefit from the process. Nzuma, a mentor at school C, thought he had made a significant contribution in the mentoring of pre-service teachers to merit recognition:

> *I am looking forward to more recognition especially from the university. I hope the university will at least acknowledge me when lecturers visit the school to supervise pre-*

> *service teachers on TP. What I have done in the past three years in mentoring merit recognition by the university. I hope to be enrolled to further my studies at the university as a way of the university showing gratitude to the immense and consistent contribution I have made to teacher education.*

Nhamo seemed to concur when he said that: *"Mentors' contribution needed to be recognised and in the absence of financial rewards, some form of certificates would suffice."* Two of the mentors thought that they deserved to benefit from the mentoring process as they are contributing in teacher development. Mentors were of the view that they could be more motivated if they were certificated as a form of recognition in the absence of financial rewards. This finding is consistent with Hudson, Hudson, Gray and Bloxham (2013) research findings that exalted the reciprocity of benefits in mentoring. Hudson *et al*. (2013) observed that reciprocity in mentoring originated from a 'two-way street' in a mentoring relationship which did not see the benefits skewed in the pre-service teacher's favour. Mentoring benefits were not to be viewed as primarily flowing from the mentor teacher to the pre-service teacher. The mentors expected to also benefit from mentoring pre-service teachers.

Mentor Training Workshops
One major finding of this study was the need to capacitate mentors and mentees through workshops and seminars. Nkomo and Jacob were of the view that university and schools needed to partner to mount capacitation workshops related to mentoring and other cross cutting issues, such as use of ICTs in teaching. In the other case, Nzuma and Oliver expected to see more use of ICT in teaching and mentoring. The workshops could be some form of university-school partnerships to prepare teachers for the dual role of mentor teachers. The mentoring pair of Nhamo and Bertha suggested that mentors needed some form of training to be more effective, especially regarding their roles. This finding can be related to other research findings which emphasise the need to train teachers as mentors (Jaspers, Meijer, Prins & Wubbles 2014; Mukeredzi *et al.,* 2015; Samkange, 2015; Marimo, 2014). Jaspers *et al.* (2014) made recommendations on the need for mentors to be inducted through professional orientated activities for them to fully understand their dual roles. They observed that mentors needed to recognise pre-service teachers as teachers and as well as learners. The mentors had to be capacitated to pay special attention to and sufficient reflection on the development of the teacher and learner roles, and when applicable a differentiation of the mentor and teacher roles.

In this study, it would appear the participants felt that the mentors needed more support to comprehend their mentoring roles that were generally considered as an additional duty. As a result, mentors felt whenever their duties clashed; it was the mentoring task which had to be sacrificed. Consequently, mentoring sessions were scheduled during times they would not clash with the mentors' other responsibilities, such as teaching and supervision of teaching in the departments. However, it would appear the university had not explicitly stated what the mentors were supposed to do during mentoring. For example, there were no set criteria on selection of mentors and how and when mentoring sessions were to be held. As a result, each mentoring pair ended up deciding on when, where and what they did as regards their mentoring activities. The mentoring pair seems to have been guided by existing contexts in their schools and it were the contexts that influenced how the mentoring took place. The pre-service teachers' classroom practices also seemed to shape mentoring contexts as mentors used these practices in their own classes to provide opportunities for learning how to teach to pre-service teachers in future lessons.

Conclusion
This study was aimed at exploring how school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers could be improved especially with regards to the roles of secondary schools and universities, using interviews, document analysis and observations to collect data. Information from the three cases based on the mentoring pair as unit of analysis, were used to explore mentoring process. Findings from this study showed that all the participants expressed the view that university-school partnerships need to improve to enrich the environment in which mentoring of pre-service teachers was taking place by revisiting the mentor selection criterion, benefits of mentoring and mentor training workshops. The participants were of the view that the selection of mentors could be on the basis of explicit criteria that was anchored on subject specialisation to ensure that pre-service teachers were also guided on subject content and other

pedagogical aspects (Filiz & Durnali, 2019; Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). Teacher education institutions were expected to motivate mentor teachers by providing some form of certification or recognition by offering mentor teachers opportunities to further their studies by enrolling them for mentoring related programmes. Such programmes were anticipated to go a long way in capacitating mentor teachers in mentoring as some mentors lacked formal training in mentoring.

The cases studied revealed that pre-service teachers were more comfortable with using ICT tools in their teaching as compared to the mentor teachers (Chere-Masopha, 2018). However, this was contrary to the Vygotskian perspective that expected mentor teachers to be the more knowledgeable others (MKOs) to be able to take the pre-service teachers to higher levels in the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The university and schools were expected to partner in capacitating mentors since they had not been adequately prepared for the new role of teacher educators (Zeichner, 2010). The contexts in which mentoring took place needed to be improved to enhance mentoring practices within the realm of the Vygotskian theoretical framework. The school infrastructure also needed to provide a conducive atmosphere for social interaction, a key tenet of the socio-cultural theory, between the mentors, pre-service teachers and other members of staff.

Even though this current study revealed that the mentoring pairs benefited from school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers, findings indicated that the participants are of the view that the mentors needed some form of workshops to prepare mentors for the mentoring of pre-service teachers during field placement. Some of the mentors in the secondary schools seemed to have relied on the pre-service teachers to be updated on some of the current teaching methods.

This multi-case study was limited to secondary schools in one district in Zimbabwe. As a result, not all contexts and practices of mentoring pre-service teachers in secondary schools were studied as such a study would have required more time and resources than were available for the current study. However, the studied contexts enable one to explore improvements that can be made in school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers, highlighting the commonalities and differences in the cases. In addition, this limitation could be mitigated by conducting a similar study involving more cases, requiring more time and funding to cater for all existing contexts and practices in mentoring of pre-service teachers in secondary schools.

Recommendations

This study showed that mentor teachers needed to be trained in mentoring as they needed specialist skills in mentoring. Though the mentors were experienced and highly qualified teachers in their school subjects, mentor training could have equipped them with other critical mentoring skills to enhance the guidance and support for the professional development of pre-service teachers (Everston and Smithey, 2010). Mentor training could add value to school-based mentoring as the mentor teachers would have a deeper understanding of the contexts in which mentoring takes place and this could, as expected, positively affect their mentoring practices.

This study revealed that mentor teachers were selected by heads of schools. There was no consultation and as a result, all the selected mentors were heads of departments. There could be need for consultation with the teachers in the relevant departments and the pre-service teachers so as to have collective decision-making in the selection of mentors. The involvement of other stakeholders in decision-making could result in a more robust selection process of mentors.

The study found that mentor teachers needed to be motivated as they considered mentoring as an aside in their teaching duties. Universities could offer to staff develop mentors through part-time open and distance electronic-learning (ODe-L) teacher education programmes at subsidised tuition fees as a form of reward for their role in teacher development. The universities would then take this opportunity to introduce mentoring courses as part of the degree modules. ODe-L courses will have the advantage that teachers will be able to learn whilst they were teaching as they would not attend their tutorials during school teaching time. Tutorials could be held during outside school teaching times such as weekends and school holidays.

Future research might consider the extent of help teachers get during interactions with university supervisors during field placement supervision visits as this could provide some form of training in mentorship. These visits could be used to capacitate mentors as teacher educators and could entail that the university supervisors would also need preparation for their new role just like the mentor teachers will. Future research can proceed to investigate how the university supervisors can contribute

in school-based mentoring of pre-service teachers with a view of empowering both the mentor and pre-service teacher as they interact during field placement.

Ultimately, the product of improved teaching and learning as shaped by the mentoring practices is anchored on the mentoring contexts that provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to learn to teach. At the moment, these opportunities may not be the same for all schools and the challenge is to improve these opportunities for all pre-service teachers as they learn to teach under the guidance of trained teachers in different secondary schools in Zimbabwe.

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