Hungarian Educational Research Journal 13 (2023) 2, 262–275
DOI: 10.1556/063.2022.00179

AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

How can the restorative idea survive in schools? Experiences of a professional development programme

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: July 19, 2022 • Accepted: October 6, 2022
Published online: December 19, 2022

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to detect the motivations, structures, and conditions that both promote and hinder commitment and buy-in regarding the implementation of restorative practices in schools. In addition, the components that contribute to the long-term sustainability of the restorative idea in school settings are also identified. The article summarizes the ideas and experiences of the trainers at the International Institute for Restorative Practices who were interviewed within the framework of a research programme. These trainers were responsible for providing professional development for middle and high schools in many states of the United States. As the author concludes, without thorough assessment of implementation readiness, professional development may fail and the restorative idea does not take root in schools.

KEYWORDS

restorative practices, professional development, organizational readiness, sustainability, international institute for restorative practices

INTRODUCTION

Even as recently as a few decades ago, restorative techniques were not widely practiced in the US school system. Twenty years ago, Karp and Breslin still emphasized that "restorative justice in

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the schools is largely an abstract idea" (2001, p. 252). At that time, only three geographical locations represented the ideological and pragmatic centre of the school-based restorative movement. A few years later, Schiff identified California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut as the areas where restorative practices (RPs) in schools existed (2013, p. 9). For their 2016 paper, Fronius and his co-authors labelled restorative justice as a popular approach while emphasizing that it is "viewed as a remedy to the negative consequences of exclusionary punishment and its disproportionate application" (p. 10). Several authors identified the reasons for the growing interest of the schools. They were motivated to embrace restorative techniques primarily because of bullying (Christensen, 2009), crime, and violence taking place in school settings (Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2012). In addition, they were interested in RPs because increasing numbers of young people, especially minority and poor students (Losen, 2014; Welch & Payne, 2012) were being expelled, resulting in the so-called school-to-prison pipeline (Gonzalez, 2012).

Parallel to the growing interest in restorative techniques, more and more research programmes identified the positive impacts of restorative practices in school settings. It has been demonstrated that RPs deepen student-parent engagement (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016). Some studies reported improvement in the overall climate of schools, increased connectedness between students and teachers, and heightened the social-emotional development of students (Armour, 2016; Ashley & Burke, 2009; Gonzalez, 2012; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014; Morrison et al., 2005). Pre-post (Anyon et al., 2014; Lewis, 2009; McCold, 2008; McMorris, Beckman, Shea, Baumgartner, & Eggert, 2013) and quasi-experimental (Simson, 2012) evaluations, along with further studies (Armour, 2013; Baker, 2008; González, 2015; Gregory et al., 2016; Riestenberg, 2003; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010) confirmed that the application of restorative techniques can decrease (in-school and out-of-school) suspensions, discipline referrals, and expulsions. In addition, it can have a positive impact on attendance and discipline outcomes. Although the issue is still debated, some studies underlined that even the suspension gap between the African American and Caucasian student populations can be narrowed by RPs (Gonzalez, 2015; Jain et al., 2014).

Some scholars had methodological concerns due to the quasi-experimental research programmes that "did not assess the sustainability of initial results, and did not specify the mechanisms of impact" (Acosta et al., 2016, p. 3) and also because of the "prevalence of RJ program descriptions rather than evaluation studies" (p. 18). Morrison also underlined that "only a handful of evaluations have currently been conducted, with none carried out at a rigorous level" (2006, p. 335). Still, we have increasing evidence-based information about the impact of restorative-based programmes, including from randomized control trials (Acosta et al., 2016; Acosta et al., 2019; Augustine et al., 2018), and this knowledge continues to expand. However, less attention has been paid to the topic of readiness. Despite the fact that, as Garnett underlined, "implementation readiness must be assessed to determine potential barriers, to configure RP fit within other district priorities, and to address the contextual needs of faculty and staff through PD" (2020, p. 11).

Implementation readiness has already been an area of focus for some scholars. Weiner (2009) treated readiness as a shared psychological state that prepares members psychologically and behaviourally to manage and implement changes in their organizations. Holt, Armenakis, Field, and Harris (2007) also defined organizational readiness for change as a (comprehensive and collective) attitude. Others described implementation readiness as a broader concept.

Lehman, Greener, and Simpson (2002) enlisted motivational readiness, institutional resources, staff attributes, and even organizational climate while describing organizational readiness. A further categorization was given by Scaccia et al. (2015) who identified three components of readiness: motivation, general capacity, and innovation-specific capacity.

Only a limited authors analysed readiness in relation to restorative practices in school settings. Their studies usually described readiness as the motivations, structures, and conditions that foster commitment and buy-in regarding the implementation of restorative practices in schools. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) underlined that readiness is crucial, especially as school staff might be resistant towards restorative practices that represent a new, non-traditional, non-retributive approach to responding to misbehaviour in schools. Greer defined the concept as "the measure of beliefs aligned with foundational restorative justice principles and values" (2018, p. 17) As the author concluded, such commitment can result in stronger buy-in and enthusiasm to implement RP. This disposition increases the chance that RPs will be used in schools.

According to Garnett et al., "there are limited psychometrically validated needs and readiness assessments specific to RPs" (2020, p. 3). This shortcoming is reflected by some researchers who developed implementation readiness assessment surveys and tools. Green et al. (2019) aimed at revealing whether the necessary conditions existed for the implementation and sustained use of restorative practices in 12 culturally diverse US middle schools. They underlined the importance of collecting qualitative data while organizing small group readiness and individual interviews. The researchers were interested not only in the attitudes but also implementation barriers, pragmatic concerns (e.g. staffing, resources), and even organizational factors. While talking about specific tools, the work of Mayworm et al. (2016) should also be mentioned. The team developed a model guiding restorative intervention decisions. The first step of the model is the assessment of the need for change. Another guide was developed by the colleagues of the Relationships First initiative (Vaandering & Voelker, 2018) that supports the implementation of restorative-based, whole-school programmes. The authors also underline the importance of determining the need for restorative education and conducting needs assessment among administrators.

Readiness is strongly connected with sustainability. Without buy-in and dedicated school staff, there is less chance that the restorative idea will survive. Thereby, this article focuses especially on these two issues, readiness and sustainability, while introducing the findings of fieldwork in the United States.

METHODS

Due to the support of the Fulbright Scholarship Program, I had the opportunity to join the team of the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) for several months in 2020. IIRP was established to advance restorative practices and is currently a key actor in providing professional development (PD), graduate education, and educational resources. At that time, a total of 33 licenced consultants supported the work of IIRP. All of them received an email inviting them to take part in the research. Finally, I managed to engage around one-third of this group as altogether 12 interviews were finally conducted in 2021. The interviewees took part in the research project voluntarily. Anonymity was guaranteed to the research participants.

Interviewees were fully informed of the aims of the research. Online interviews were conducted because of the COVID-19 situation. The duration of the interviews ranged between 45 and 90 min.

There were three main topics altogether that were discussed during the conversations. Firstly, we identified the very specific features of the US schools that are dedicated to restorative practices and perceive RP (and the trainings of IIRP) as relevant answers for their needs. The next topic was implementation; I was especially interested in whether school staff are able to implement RP in schools as it was designed and if schools make their own adaptations to achieve a better fit. The third set of questions focused on the features of schools and the essential components of the IIRP training program that enormously contribute to the sustainability of real RP.

The research material of the conversations (questions, answers, comments, notes, etc.) was transcribed and analysed. Systematic assessment of the data was carried out by qualitative content analysis. In order to follow the rules of inductive category development, a system of categories was established based on the transcribed conversations (Mayring, 2000, 2004, 2014). These categories reflected the interviewees' interpretations of acceptability and appropriateness of RP techniques, the way in which schools are able to adopt restorative practices and sustain real RP in school settings. Due to the categorization, it was possible to systematize the empirical material and understand what the licensed consultants of IIRP think of 1) the features of the schools that influence commitment in an early stage of RP implementation, 2) the factors that support the sustainability of RPs in school settings.

RESULTS

Reasons of resistance

Authors (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Hudson, 2013; Johnson, 2019; Sun & Leithwood, 2015; Ylimaki, 2006) state that great school leaders display the clarity of vision and know-how to inspire, motivate, and lead the school staff. Usually, school leaders have priorities about the required professional developments as well. However, leaders might quit after a while and the subsequent principal or head of school will bring in their own vision about training. If staff are not informed about the rationale behind investing in a specific professional development, they may not recognize it as a sensible long-term strategy, but only a fad. This is because they may feel as if they are constantly being pushed to do new initiatives and "all of a sudden, there's like a hurry, let's do this training" and "they're just buffeted by prevailing winds about what's coming up next".

There can be various reasons for the decision at the managerial level to introduce RPs to professional development. Lawmakers may pass a law underlining that instead of expelling and suspending students, schools need to put some sort of restorative process in place. Schools may receive grant money and the district puts pressure on the school to spend on RP-based development. However, if there is a lack of transparency and fairness, and (if the mandates come from up to down) school staff feel forced, there is a higher chance for resistance and distrust towards the administration, and even towards the restorative practitioners who provide the training. As one of the interviewees put it:

> I've literally had people show up in a training, like, I don't even know why I'm here. You know, I just got an email that said, be here on this day. They are not the ones who initiated the event. Someone else initiated it for them, their superintendent, the school board, their principal. […] So, to do it that way, you know, staff don't feel so good about it. They come in and you know, their arms crossed and it's just like I'm not doing it.

Additionally, time is always an issue. Schools are often responsible for many initiatives and school personnel are frequently overloaded with work and administration. In addition, data collection, administration, and activities that support the academic achievement of the students are usually the priorities. Thereby, taking part in the full days of RP professional developments can be a challenge. As a consequence, school staff might be not motivated and enthusiastic towards a new development that requires their time and energy.

Trainers face several misunderstandings and false assumptions towards restorative practices that also hinder involvement and commitment. Schools often do not differentiate between reactive and proactive approaches. They only recognize problems and understand that something is not working, for example, suspensions and disproportionality around suspensions are too high, there are too many fights in the school, test scores are low, etc. They are prone to describe themselves as a problematic school with bad staff and kids that can be healed by RP. All in all, they look at RPs as a reactive tool, a remedy to their needs, or an effective add-on programme, while RP professionals argue for early intervention and pro-active prevention programs. These scholars and practitioners emphasize the importance of developing a whole-school approach (Bunnett, 2021; Fronius et al., 2016; Hopkins, 2004; Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2003; Vaandering & Voelker, 2018) in which all aspects of regulation in schools are evolved and operated restoratively. As one the interviewees put it:

> They think that they're not going to have discipline issues and fights anymore. They think that restorative is going to fix every problem there is. So when I come in, one of the biggest misconceptions or the incongruence, we're not matching up, is that we're talking about building relationships. What we're talking about on our side is really a cultural shift in the system. What the schools hear or think, is that we're going to come in like any other system or, or framework piece rather, to just correct the behaviour. What they think is that they're going to get like the tools, and like tips and tricks and things like that.

Some scholars (Anfara, Evans, & Lester, 2013; Liberman & Katz, 2017) point at one of the regular criticisms of RP: it is perceived as too soft an approach. The trainers of IIRP reported similar experiences. Participants of the training often label RPs as "soft and easy that let kids get away with everything", "soft on crime" that "not going to be tough enough", in addition "it doesn't really offer accountability and doesn't offer consequences". Those who take such a position are often afraid of losing control and believe that "there's not going to be any consequences, kids are going to be able to get into fights and hurt other kids and do all this stuff, and that they're not going to be allowed to suspend kids". For these school personnel RPs are seen as an unrealistic approach, as "if you've got kids who bring like a knife or gun into school, or are incredibly violent, or have consistent behavioural issues, this is not practical". According to the feedback, this attitude is more typical among participants who are accustomed to and rely on the regular, punitive approach. People tend to feel relieved when they understand that there are situations where kids can be suspended in a very restorative manner. However, the "too soft" prejudice can reduce the chance the school staff voluntarily joins an RP development programme.

Reasons for commitment

Some training participants are dedicated to RPs as they read the professional literature and find out the advantages of the approach. They understand that RPs can build community and social capital, help school staff to engage kids and support academic achievements. They realize that the approach can support teachers to improve the skills necessary to manage classrooms. Others did not read articles and reports but heard some rumours about RPs often from their colleagues who have success and positive experiences with RP.

My interviewees identified another characteristic that fosters commitment: self-reflection. It is easier to understand the concept and process of RP if one can think about his/her own feelings and behaviour (and the reasons that may lie behind them). Self-reflection makes it easier to reveal our own feelings, while understanding and accepting the emotions and needs of others. While enlisting personal factors, openness to new ideas should be underlined. The chances of being interested in RPs are higher if participants of a training programme are progressive rather than traditional in their approach and constantly look to improve themselves and their schools. These people typically try to identify new ideas, tools, and approaches.

> as opposed to the type of educator who maybe has been around for 30 years, received their education a couple of decades ago and they feel like they're set. They don't need to learn anything new and they're good until retirement.

It should be mentioned just briefly here that individual competencies and skills are potentially important influential factors of innovation (Hill, Blazar, & Lynch, 2015; Mowbray, Holter, Teague, & Bybee, 2003). If there is a certain level of "psychological factor in change" (Caswell cited by Century & Cassata, 2016, p. 185), there is more chance that one is able to handle uncertainty and risk that goes hand in hand with innovation; just like RP-based professional development programmes.

According to several trainers, RPs might remind the participants of the core values and principles of their profession and underlines that teaching is not only about standards, test scores, and school subjects but even community and relationships. As one the interviewees put it:

> RPs reaffirm people's values and the reason they got in education. So many teachers kind of realize this is what education always has been about. It takes them back to why they became a teacher: to have influence with kids, and to build a better future for kids. And that time they understood what community was, they understood what good teaching and good mentoring were about. And they really quickly forget that and their focus really rapidly changes from the kids to "I'm only here to teach math". But RPs reconnect them to those original ideas and thoughts and experiences once again. We show them that if they want to become a better math teacher the key to that is to build better relationships in their classrooms.

As previously mentioned, a high percentage of the schools want to implement restorative practices as they have already had challenges e.g. there's a level of dissatisfaction with students and outcomes for students, a tension between adults/staff and students. These institutions are usually looking to lower suspension, expulsion, and disproportionality rates and are happy to provide their staff professional development on RPs. However, there are a few schools, usually from small communities rather than from large cities, that follow the proactive approach and get in contact with IIRP as they have a strong desire to prevent certain problems. In addition, they

want to make things more equitable in their schools, build stronger communities and give students more voice.

Preparation of the professional development and the way the leadership team, the administrators, or the district level involve participants is crucial. School staff is much more open to an RP development if there is a process of engagement; i.e. people are invited into the training, there are conversations about the needs, hindrances, and potential benefits of participation, school staff can choose their own and voluntarily join the event.

How to handle distrust?

If the preparation for the professional development programme is not based on engagement and transparency, participants (especially those that were mandated and forced to visit the training) are less motivated. In addition, they might disrupt the learning process and the group dynamic, and even attack the trainer or the topic. Therefore, information about the way trainers react to distrust was also collected during the fieldwork and are introduced here:

1. Invitation of resistance. Some of the trainers give the floor for criticism. Participants can share with each other their ideas and even their doubts about RP. Some of the interviewees even raise criticism themselves, point out the limitations of the approach, and introduce some of the misunderstandings (e.g. it is a soft approach, it makes schools less safe) to provoke debate. Thereby, there is a chance to "separate fact from fiction, because some of the criticisms are very valid and some of the criticisms are not".
2. Invitation of stories about challenges. Others discuss the difficulties that the teachers, counsellors, and administrators face. These trainers underline the drawbacks of traditional and retributive education and, as an alternative solution, emphasize the potential benefits of RP. As one of my interviewees put it:

   > Let's look at some of the students that have had repeated behaviour issues and faced punitive responses. Is it working? And, you know, we have some real honest conversations. Students who are being punished repeatedly will continue to revert to their behaviour because they're not feeling connected. They want to be out of school, so they keep going through the same cycle. And at the end of the day, the heart of the matter is that we want children to learn, we want them to be productive citizens. So then I can educate them about how restorative practices actually help in doing that.

3. Encouraging participation and observation. Some trainers ask the critical and hesitant participants to stay in the group, keep wondering, express curiosity and raise questions when needed. Concerns can still be discussed at the end of the day but there is more of a chance that even reluctant people learn about RPs and identify the way they can incorporate them into their everyday work.
4. Connecting people. If some of the participants have doubts about the practical applicability of RP, some of the trainers offer to connect them with practitioners from the field. These people, who usually work in schools and/or have knowledge and experiences about education, "can tell them how to get it done and how this going to work".
5. Building upon personal experience. According to some of the interviewees, personal experience is the most critical piece. As soon as school staff starts not only talking about RP, but practicing it, and once they see changes in behaviours, resistance suddenly disappears. One of the interviewees shared with me a story about a principal who (as the mandate comes from

the top down) did not want to embrace RPs in her school at all. The trainers decided to invite the principal to a circle with some of the students that, was passionate about and proud of. When her students spoke about how RP was impacting their lives, "she became like the poster child for RP".

6. Connections with other initiatives. Some of the teachers struggle in schools because of a myriad of programmes (e.g. Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports, Social and Emotional Learning, etc.). Some trainers try to identify the similarities and connections between these initiatives and RPs in order to enable teachers "to implement three things very well, and not three things poorly because they're seen as competing commitments".

Sustainability

As it was introduced earlier, readiness is crucial because commitment towards RPs can result in stronger buy-in and enthusiasm to implement RP. Such a disposition increases the chance that RPs will be actually used in schools. All in all, there is less chance for real sustainability without organizational readiness. Yet what are the other factors that may influence sustainability? What kind of schools and faculty can sustain restorative practices? How can teachers, counsellors, administrators, and school personnel implement and use RPs in the long run? These questions were also discussed during the interviews.

The trainers underlined that the schools that are able to produce long-term sustainability are the ones that have the funding and resources to invest in the training and continue with the programme. If financial support is not provided, schools will not be able to implement and sustain RPs on the large scale, in which all aspects of regulations are evolved and operated restoratively. If there are no dedicated resources, even the work of the teachers whose approaches are based on RPs will remain sporadic. Without funding, school staff will not see differences in their relationships and parents' involvement. Schools have various practices to address this issue. Some of them are going to train the least amount of people. Others are interested solely in the training and not in the follow-up. All in all, even schools with limited resources often try to make a change. However, limited support during and following the implementation can be detrimental and may result in poor sustainability.

Besides funding, the importance of commitment by the management to engage school staff and encourage the RPs work to continue in the whole school should be mentioned. When the (district or school) leadership is dedicated to RPs, and this message is explicitly delivered to their staff, students, and families, there is more of a chance for sustainability. However, leadership isn't enough on its own. The programme should not be identified with one person. Instead, a shared leadership role or a group of people on the ground dedicated to RPs should be a necessary component. Without such a supportive background, even the introduction of RP-based professional developments can be endangered. As one of my interviewees recalled a story:

> The superintendent looked me in the eye and said, all of your schools have the focused training days. So I went back to the schools and to the assistant superintendents and informed them about the decision. Right! Let's do it! And it didn't come to fruition. It was the unwillingness of the support of the district to do. If I had run back to the superintendent and complained, he would have said: "I told them to do it." It's something that broke down in the middle. They thought that the city or the district or the state is requiring this, and they just made those decisions and move beyond that.

RP trainers might face difficulties while preparing and implementing professional development if not all of the stakeholders are engaged in the process. Without such buy-in, school staff might recognize RP as a mandatory initiative that just "reinforces the notion of you're a bad school, bad staff, bad students. You're a problem and you need to be fixed. Here's our idea to fix you". As a consequence, the participants of professional development might aim for surviving, enduring the training, and outlasting the initiative. They will not become dedicated to RPs that will die as soon as the leader leaves the school. All in all, there is more chance for a careful, thoughtful, and effective implementation and there is a higher probability of sustainability if all the constituents on board are included from the beginning of the process.

It is important to mention that schools have better success in sustainability if they engage and train not only the school staff but the parents and especially the young people as well. The role of a restorative practice leadership team is also crucial. Members of such a team understand the values of RP and would like to deepen their own learning and understanding of the approach. They are committed to doing restorative work and want to lead the school or the district to implementation. If members of these groups are early adopters, there is less chance that they get drowned out by all other people. It is more likely that even if some team members leave the school, other school personnel and even parents will step in and continue with RPs. There is a higher probability that codified policies, procedures, and written practices will be pervaded by a restorative approach and vocabulary, and the new school personnel inherit the RP-based system. All in all, there is more of a chance that RPs will be on the agenda in the future as well.

Finally, the responsibility of the organization providing RP professional development should be mentioned. Schools have diverse backgrounds with their own challenges and needs. Before organizing the training, it is crucial to assess the readiness and understand the motivations, conditions, needs, and context with which schools identify restorative practitioners as potential beneficial resources. This preliminary assessment helps to be flexible in order to provide tailor-made training. It might be necessary to modify the pre-designed activities and the script – even if the content and the framework may remain pretty consistent.

A preliminary assessment gives the opportunity to communicate, interact and have an influence before restorative practitioners officially hit the ground. The preparatory team might be able to increase readiness and make the commitment towards RP stronger. In addition, they can have an impact on the recruitment of the participants who will take part in the professional development. Selection is crucial as "sometimes a school sends one interested teacher of goodwill. I'm a full-time math teacher. I can't be also responsible for trying to have other people do circles or train them in a restorative way".

Follow-up is also crucial. It can hinder sustainability if a multi-day training programme is provided for the school staff without the necessary reinforcement of the new skills (Adamson, 2020). There might be several reasons why ongoing, long-term support does not take place. Some schools do not have the necessary funding. In other cases, participants can not transfer new skills into daily professional practice because the buy-in of school districts is not strong enough and they are not willing to give access to RP professionals. Other schools might be interested in, or even sign up for follow-up meetings, but participants are not really able to take part, be engaged, and participate effectively due to time constraints. As a consequence, they are just accidentally conveyed the most important messages of RP. However, without deep learning and appropriate additional ongoing support, or reinforcement of what was learned during the professional development, RPs will not be sustainable. As one of the licenced consultants put it:

> There are plenty of schools that just say no, we just want the training. And that's all. We don't want anything else from you guys. In those situations, we try to do our best to convince them of other needs. Because you sat through some training does not mean you have the understanding of how to apply it. And typically, those are the school systems that we see fail in regards to the implementation of restorative practices. So if we don't follow the proper implementation protocol, a lot of times we see failure.

CONCLUSIONS

Restorative practices undoubtedly play a positive role in school life. As several research programmes demonstrated, becoming a restorative school has several benefits for all stakeholders, i.e. for teachers, school staff, students, and parents as well. Thereby, professional development programmes have a great responsibility to assess the readiness of schools carefully and identify the motivations, structures, and conditions that foster and hinder commitment and buy-in towards the implementation of RP. Without a thorough assessment of readiness, PD may fail and the restorative idea does not take root in schools.

Although the practitioners who were interviewed face certain doubts and dilemmas concerning the way RP professional development should be delivered and the content that should be introduced, it was still possible to chart a deeper knowledge of the factors that contribute to sustainability. As the article summarized, proper funding and resources, commitment of the management and a shared leadership role of people on the ground dedicated to RPs should also be a necessary component. In addition, the engagement of all stakeholders – including parents and students – in the school is required as well. These actors could act as a restorative practice leadership team who are committed to doing restorative work and want to lead the school or the district to implementation. The paper pointed at the responsibility of the organization providing RP professional development as well and underlined that preliminary assessment to provide tailor-made training and follow-up are also needed.

If professional development programmes build upon this knowledge and experiences, school staff can be encouraged and empowered to embrace restorative practices in their everyday work not only today but also tomorrow and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report would not have been possible without the generous support of the Fulbright Fellowship Program. At the same time, I would like to express my gratitude to the colleagues of the International Institute for Restorative Practices who genuinely cared for my professional growth and well-being as well during my stay in the United States.

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