



Supporting learners with autism spectrum disorders in Lesotho primary schools: Challenges and possible solutions

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Abstract – Supporting learners with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in schools is one of the vital responsibilities of teachers. This paper focused on exploring the challenges encountered by teachers in fulfilling their role of supporting learners with ASD within mainstream primary school settings in Lesotho and designing strategies that can overcome these challenges. This qualitative study draws on a purposive sample of fourteen participants (two principals, six teachers, and six parents) who have experience working with learners with ASD within two primary schools that practice inclusive education in Lesotho. Data were collected with individual interviews and observations to conduct an in-depth investigation of the study. Thematic results showed that inadequate knowledge in managing the behaviours of learners with ASD, negative attitudes towards learners with ASD, lack of parental involvement, and lack of access to physical, human, and financial resources in primary schools as the significant challenges faced by teachers when supporting learners with ASD in Lesotho regular primary schools. Hence, the paper recommends continuous professional development training workshops and seminars for teachers. Also, there is a need for more autism screening tools and academic resources, as well as effective collaboration among teachers, parents, and professionals to enhance adequate support for learners with ASD in mainstream schools.

Keywords: Mainstream classrooms, Primary teachers, Autism spectrum disorder, Lesotho

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I. INTRODUCTION

SINCE education is a fundamental human right of every person regardless of his/her gender, age, and economic status (Ahmad et al., 2021). The government of Lesotho has made remarkable strides in enhancing its education system since 1987 (Masana & Kgothule, 2022). For example, the country, as a signatory to the United Nations on the Rights of the Child, enacted several educational, human rights, and human development policies such as Universal Primary Education and Education for All (EFA) policies in the 1990s (Mosia, 2014; Ramatea & Khanare, 2024) to embrace the right to quality inclusive primary education of all learners.

The country further introduced the Lesotho Education Act 2010 to make primary education free, compulsory, and inclusive for all learners from the age of six to twelve, regardless of their ability or disability (Monyane & Kgothule, 2023), despite being one of the poorest countries in the world. This ideology was informed by the need to increase the admission of learners with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), in Lesotho primary schools. This was a call for teachers with high self-efficacy to address the diverse needs of learners with ASD on an equal basis with their neurotypical peers in their classes.

ASD has become a major concern for developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries since the condition was first described by Leo Kanner in 1943 as one of the most common childhood neurodevelopmental disorders that typically affect one's social, communicative, and behavioral development (Centers for Disease

Control and Preventions [CDC], 2015; Laari et al., 2021). Moreover, the condition is usually considered a "spectrum disorder" because it varies significantly in type, character, and severity of symptoms.

One would wonder whether the inclusion and support of learners with ASD in Lesotho as smooth sailing they are as should be. According to Hashim, Yunus, and Norman (2021) and Portes et al. (2020), with the disparity in developmental features and the instructional demands of meeting the social, behavioural, and academic needs of learners with ASD, teachers often face considerable challenges in appropriately supporting and meeting these needs, especially in the primary school years. This study explored teachers' challenges in supporting learners with ASD within mainstream primary school settings in Lesotho.

Over the past two decades, the prevalence rate of learners with ASD has grown more than tenfold worldwide (Denning & Moody, 2013). Statistically, 1 in 54 births are children with ASD in developed countries like the United States of America (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention [CDC], 2021; Maenner et al., 2020). McConkey (2020) states that nearly three-quarters (70%) of the 180,000 learners with ASD are educated in mainstream settings in England. It was noted that the high frequency of ASD among sub-Saharan African children with developmental disorders in Egypt and Tunisia was documented as 33.6% and 11.5%, respectively (Seif et al., 2008). However, Lesotho still lags in terms of formal statistics on ASD (Mosia, 2019; Tseeke & Rakolobe, 2024) due to a lack of interest, expertise, and appropriate tools to carry out research in this area. This may make it difficult for learners with ASD to access basic services.

Current challenges in supporting and implementing inclusive quality education for learners with ASD in Lesotho mainstream classrooms are poor resource allocation, large size of classes (Khumalo

& Mosia, 2023), poverty, and a lack of legal obligation to warrant the provision of the right to access equitable education for these learners (Tseeke & Rakolobe, 2024), which cause them to drop out of school. These challenges are further compounded by delay in diagnosis of ASD, improper ASD learner placements, and poor teacher salary increments (Mosia & Tseeke, 2021; Taylor, 2022). The circumstance requires additional resources such as adequate material (Mosia, 2014), funding, proper infrastructure, and collaboration with external organisations to develop adaptive skills for learners with ASD in all primary schools, as a matter of urgency.

According to Cook and Ogden (2021), many teachers have little confidence in their capacity to support learners with ASD. Due to a lack of knowledge, teachers fail to understand, accept, and manage the behaviours of learners with ASD. Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012) indicate that learners with ASD frequently appear socially awkward, leading to marginalisation and rejection by their peers and teachers (Heng, Song, & Tan, 2021; Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Strogilos & Lim, 2019) and, in turn, their right to quality education is denied. In addition, teachers are not well-capacitated in implementing relevant teaching strategies and support services for ASD (Taylor, 2022; Thwala, 2018).

Furthermore, primary school teachers working with ASD learners reported feeling overburdened with many daily roles and responsibilities (work overload) (Cook & Ogden, 2021; Sumbane, 2021). For example, a teacher is mandated to plan teaching and marking the subjects for the entire class, adapt a curriculum, modify activities, and provide one-on-one support to learners with ASD in a way that best fits their needs in the classroom (Busby et al., 2012), creating a lot of stress for them. This implies that teachers feel over-loaded in facilitating teaching and learning for learners with ASD with non-autistic learners in the same class alone.

As Mosia and Tseeke (2021) affirms, teachers must change their practices and attitudes to adapt to the changing education system. As such, they can better bring about significant changes in the performance of learners with ASD. Importantly, teachers need to be knowledgeable about ASD as a crucial first step in creating support services for learners with ASD. On the other hand, they need to work together with assistant teachers, parents, and professionals (Al Jaffal, 2022; Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, 2013; Lumina & Hodgson, 2023; McDougal, Riby, & Hanley, 2020; Ndunguru & Kisanga, 2023) in making sure that all consider the autistic learners' education.

Much is not known about the increasing challenges faced by Lesotho primary school teachers when supporting learners with ASD, hence the need for this article in Lesotho to explore the challenges that teachers encounter in fulfilling their role of supporting learners with ASD in mainstream primary schools and how these challenges can be addressed. This reflects an urgent need for researchers in Lesotho to rise and develop knowledge and interest in ASD research to expand the evidence base.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is found to be the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study. SCT proposes that learning occurs in the dynamic interaction between the social environment, personal factors such as the learners' affect and cognition, and the behaviours (Zimmerman, 2019), as outlined in Figure 1.

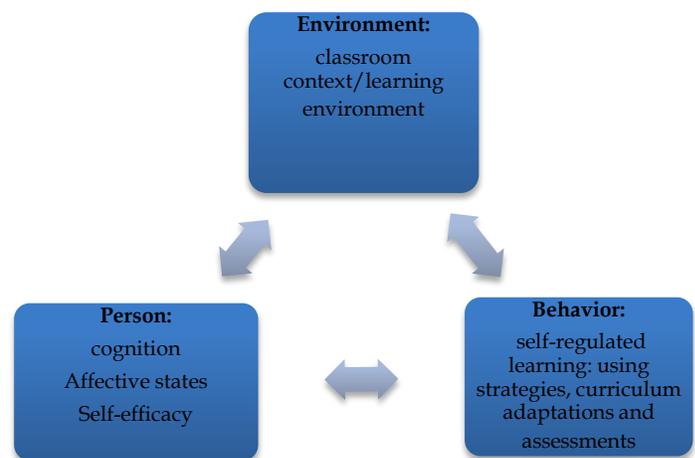


Figure 1: A triadic reciprocal causation model Adapted from Bandura (1989)

According to Figure 1 above, the most basic tenet or the notable feature of Bandura's (1986) SCT is the concept of reciprocal determinism, which is visualised and presented demographically triangularly. However, SCT's primary determinants and focus on reciprocal determinism are goals, self-efficacy, and self-regulated competency within a social context (Bandura, 2012).

This theory highlights the importance of 'self-efficacy' in school settings. Firstly, learners with ASD who have positive self-efficacy are more likely to engage in self-regulatory behaviors and seek assistance from other learners and their teachers (Attwood, 2020; Rogers, 2019), whereas those who are not are less likely to feel motivated. Secondly, teachers with a high sense of efficacy plan for learning learners with ASD set goals for themselves and these learners, identify strategies to achieve them, and show a willingness to implement innovative teaching methods (Guskey, 1988). Additionally, teachers with a strong sense of efficacy should include activities carried out both inside and beyond classroom environments, such as leading discussions, probing learners (Saloviita, 2020), reviewing teaching and learning materials, listening to and assessing learners (Rytivaara, Pulkkinen & Palmu, 2021).

This denotes that SCT is relevant in this intended study, for it helps the researcher understand a teacher's human qualities and behaviours, which is necessary for designing strategies to overcome the challenges when teaching learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms. By spending much time with learners with ASD, teachers must know the learners, the classroom (Zimmerman, 2000), and the school environment to accommodate learners' needs (Pripas-Kapit, 2020) and welcome diversity. This means that proper teaching in mainstream schools should be naturally inclusive.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study explores teachers' challenges in supporting learners with ASD in Lesotho primary schools. It explores the challenges of supporting learners with ASD in primary schools. It develops strategies to overcome the challenges of supporting learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms.

IV. METHODS

Research approach and design

This study adopted a qualitative approach within the interpretive paradigm because it allowed the researcher to focus on meaning-making (Ralejoe, 2019). The interpretive paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed (Mosia & Phasha, 2020) as participants express their interpretation of the challenges of supporting learners with ASD in Lesotho. The study adopted an exploratory case study design as a methodological research approach to explore strategies to overcome these challenges when supporting learners with ASD in mainstream

classrooms. It sought a deeper understanding of a contemporary issue and phenomenon in a bounded system (Coombs, 2022). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a case study is bound by time and place.

Participants

Data were elicited from a purposive sample of fourteen participants to understand better the challenges teachers encounter in supporting learners with ASD and the strategies teachers use to overcome those challenges in two selected primary schools in the Maseru District of Lesotho. Purposive sampling is a technique for identifying and selecting examples that efficiently utilise limited research (Palinkas et al., 2015). These primary schools enrolled children with ASD. The participants were principals, teachers, and teachers with experience providing care and support to children with various abilities, including learners with ASD.

Data collection instruments

Individual interviews and observation methods were employed to collect data (Cohen & Miguel, 2018; Van Staden-Payne & Nel, 2023). The researcher observed the classes of six teachers in two primary schools; each class lasted 45 to 60 minutes. The participants who participated in the individual interviews, which lasted 45 minutes to an hour (Thwala, 2018), provided detailed data concerning challenges and strategies for supporting learners with ASD in Lesotho schools. Individual interviews were tape-recorded, and note-taking was done with the participants' agreement.

Data analysis

The thematic data analysis was used in this research using a coding method. According to Braun and Clarke (2022), thematic analysis is a method that systematically identifies, organises, and offers insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The researcher found thematic analysis appropriate for this study because it blended with the theoretical perspectives and research interests. The themes, descriptions, coding, and reading data presented a map to generate findings (Creswell, 2014). The following four criteria were considered as the ways a researcher could ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2022), trustworthiness is known as validity in qualitative research and refers to how researchers ensure their findings truly represent the participants' experiences. This study ensured trustworthiness by eliminating bias and being consistent when collecting data and asking questions (Basson & Mestry, 2019). The researcher asked participants to check (member checking) the transcribed data to see whether it presented what they intended to say.

Ethical considerations

Before conducting the research, the researcher applied for ethical clearance from the University of the Free State, with clearance number UFS-HSD2022/0632/22. He also approached Maseru's Ministry of Education and Training office to request study permission. After that, the participants were allowed to view the informed consent letters. The researcher informed us that their participation was voluntary (Padayachee, 2021) and that they had the right and freedom to withdraw from the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It was also pledged to teachers, parents, and principals that their experiences and viewpoints would be handled with confidentiality and anonymity during interviews and observations.

V. RESULTS

The participants were coded and named using A and B to indicate the schools in School A (Principal A1; Teacher A1, A2, and A3; Parent A1, A2, and A3). In School B: (Principal B1; Teacher B1, B2 and B3; Parent B1, B2 and B3).

Challenges faced by teachers in supporting learners with ASD Inadequate knowledge of ASD among teachers

Study findings have revealed that inadequate knowledge and related skills in supporting learners with learners with ASD is a challenge. Teacher A2 believed:

"I do not feel confident in my teaching ability anymore because I have too

little knowledge about ASD."

Another teacher asserted had this to say:

"The learners with ASD themselves come with massive social challenges that affect their behavior in class, and we are not trained to deal with that. They play, have a meltdown, cry, and avoid doing my tasks..." (Teacher B2)

The participants above agreed that learners with ASD are unique, and their behaviours vary immensely. They, therefore, think that disruptive behaviors such as playing in class, having a meltdown, crying, and avoiding doing tasks within the classroom compromise the provision of effective support to learners with ASD in classrooms. Hence, Al Jaffal (2022) contends that teachers are not prepared to deal with learners with ASD because they lack basic knowledge about ASD. As a result, learners with ASD are likely to fall behind others in this process.

Negative attitude towards learners with ASD

The teachers' negative attitude is one factor that the participants identified as being a challenge to fulfill their role of supporting learners with ASD. Teacher B1 expressed her view thus:

"I fail to provide notes in appropriate format because I consider learners with ASD to be the poor performers, and I sometimes consider them to be hopeless, uneducable, and the weakest learners who always leave the questions in any subject or test that they are not sure of unattended..."

Similarly, parent B2 mentioned that:

"Teachers seem to force themselves to support the learners with ASD. They are even indifferent and intolerant to these learners."

The above quotes indicate that attitudes affect how primary school teachers think about and act toward learners with ASD. The above finding aligns with Ben-David's (2011) argument that one of the major teachers' pervasive negative attitudes includes focusing on the learner's disability rather than the individual learner's abilities.

Lack of parental involvement

Most of the participants in all the interviews saw a lack of parental involvement as one of the main problems in supporting learners with ASD in schools. One participant asserted this:

"Parents are not cooperative with the teachers of their children. When the teachers call them, they tell them there is nothing wrong with their children. They are just slow" (Parent B1)

One of the participants shared:

"...there is no need for me to talk to the teachers because I do not think my child can perform better than the way he is already doing because he has a disability" (Parent A1).

These views imply that parents are not serious about the education of learners with ASD. This resonates with the findings by Mohale (2020), which reveal that today's parents are often preoccupied with the distractions and problems of their everyday lives. It was clear that busy parents did not discuss their children's challenging behavior with teachers and seemed to hide information.

Inadequate physical, human, and financial resources in primary schools

Most participants in this study also indicated that lack of resources or support poses a severe challenge to the teachers to fulfill their roles of supporting learners with ASD in regular primary schools in Lesotho. These challenges include lacking physical, human, and financial resources, as presented below. One participant narrated that:

"As you can see, our working atmosphere is not conducive. The physical state of classrooms is very poor. Some doors and windowpanes are broken, and we are getting cold in winter. When it rains, the roofs leak, and classrooms are always wet. I just sit down and stop teaching... We move very slowly" (Teacher B1).

This finding is also consistent with prior studies by Khanare (2015), who reported that teaching can be less effective in dilapidated classrooms, and learning can become inhibited. Similarly, parent A3 also revealed that:

"We like this school, but it does not have appropriate learning equipment to provide for our children's (learners with ASD) needs in class."

It proves that the parents understand that teachers who work with learners with ASD need concrete material, but they do not mention the

type of materials that will best suit them to support inclusive education. One of the participants alluded to the fact that insufficient funds also impinge on their roles of supporting (financial resourcing) learners with ASD. Teacher A2 said this:

"...Every primary school except private schools are given the money called...utility grant. The challenge is that this money does not come even after taking all the necessary steps to get it, and our school suffers a lot... I sometimes must provide from my pocket."

This finding resonates with the study by Ralebese (2019), which identified that no funds are available to buy things needed for the new curriculum in Lesotho. Another participant was worried because his school functioned in isolation, as MoET did not involve professionals and teacher Aide to contribute towards assisting teachers with assessment or placements of learners with ASD in schools.

Teacher A1 put forward that:

"Currently, there are no teacher aides or specialists who are essentially trained and hired to guide teachers in assessing, identifying, and managing learners with ASD before they enter the regular classrooms."

As with these comments, the participants expressed high levels of agreement that teaching and learning resources for supporting learners with ASD encompass physical but also financial and human resources. The study by Lebona (2023) notes that due to the lack of these resources, teaching is considered ineffective.

Strategies and supports needed to overcome the challenges

Despite the above drawbacks faced by primary school teachers in trying to support learners with ASD, the results of this study present the possible strategies that could be used to overcome the challenges when teaching learners with ASD.

Empowering teachers through capacity-building programmes

What participants found particularly helpful was that teachers of learners with ASD should be empowered through capacity-building programmes. This can be considered as a solution to (1) inadequate knowledge of ASD among teachers and (2) negative attitudes towards learners with ASD in mainstream classrooms. Teacher B3 stated that,

"I think teachers should be empowered through Basic Autism Awareness and Understanding programmes. This should be compulsory for all initial teacher training courses in the Lesotho College of Education and the National University of Lesotho..."

The work of Senoo et al. (2024) confirmed this finding as they reported that teachers must be equipped with high-quality training opportunities and preparation programs to acquire the skills to teach learners with ASD.

Strengthening collaboration between schools and parents is a possible solution to the lack of parental recognition and involvement

The participants' responses underscore the importance of engaging parents in regular primary schools for support and gathering data about learners with ASD, echoing the findings of Ndunguru and Kisanga (2023), which found effective collaboration between teachers and parents as a crucial factor in identifying successful supports and strategies of learners with ASD. Principal A1 articulated that,

"Parents should often be consulted and engaged in identifying and coordinating supports and any consultations in parents' meetings, parent-learner picnics, and other social unity promoting activities."

Maximising supporting infrastructure and educational resources is a possible solution to the lack of resources

Most participants mentioned that maximising supporting infrastructure and educational resources is another strategy to overcome the challenges when supporting learners with ASD. Teacher A2 opined that,

"...if our school can have enough quality classrooms, we can have a sizable number of learners per class, and this will reduce our workloads."

Similarly, Teacher A1 suggested,

"We must be provided with material such as autism screening tools and visual aids (textbooks, comprehensive guidebooks, manuals and picture books)."

Principal B1 expressed a different opinion. She posited that teachers need support from paraprofessionals,

"...there should be experienced paraprofessionals such as pediatricians and/or child psychiatrists, occupational therapists, clinical and educational psychologists, nurses, mentors, and professional counselors who have a good heart to enhance teachers' teaching prowess to meet the needs of learners with ASD."

Enhancing academic resources, collaboration, and additional support can assist in providing quality teaching and learning for learners with ASD in Lesotho primary schools.

VI. DISCUSSION

The present study explored the challenges teachers in Lesotho encounter in supporting learners with ASD. It highlighted the possible ways to overcome these challenges in the primary schools. Study findings in all individual interviews and observations have revealed that teachers lack the knowledge and skills to effectively support learners with ASD. This is consistent with the findings of Senoo et al. (2024). According to the participants, the primary teachers are not properly trained to teach learners with ASD, and, as a result, they do not feel confident and have a political will to deal with the challenging behaviours of these learners, such as meltdowns, crying and avoiding doing tasks, among others. More so, teachers are judged as 'indifferent and intolerant' to learners with ASD in class, "which was related to teachers not understanding their child and/or their needs" (McDougal et al., 2020:7). Hence, this paper advocates for the necessity of educating teachers to support learners with ASD effectively.

Furthermore, the participants pointed out that their school classrooms were very poor, particularly regarding broken doors and windowpanes. These windows allow cold in winter, rain, and excessive light in the class, creating obstacles for learners with ASD and disrupting their learning. Hence, Tseeke and Rakolobe (2024) found that learners with ASD in Lesotho have minimal chances to get enrolled and stay in regular schools. Few schools can accommodate learners with ASD in Lesotho (Mosia & Tseeke, 2021). The participants revealed that mainstream primary schools must consider building enough quality classrooms, raising funds (Ralebese, 2019), and creating a more conducive environment for these learners.

The participants emphasised the urgent need to provide teachers with material such as autism screening tools and visual aids as essential resources to enhance accessibility and enablement for learners with ASD, echoing the findings of Lindsay et al. (2013) and Pienaar and Dreyer (2023) which found that lack of facilities for teachers directly affects their ability to manage autistic learners' challenging behaviors and planning individual lessons in schools. In addition, the participants mentioned that teachers received little collaboration from parents of learners with ASD. This demonstrates that parents lack commitment to the education of their children when they have ASD. Interestingly, the participants in the present study suggest that it may be beneficial for schools to consult parents to learn more about learners with ASD and improve the value of their education.

This study underscores the indispensability of deploying teacher aid to support teachers of learners with ASD in day-to-day tasks and intervene if learners are nasty to one another or put one another down. The study has shown that learners with ASD need adequate support from all stakeholders, being pediatricians and/or child psychiatrists, occupational therapists, clinical and educational psychologists, nurses, mentors, and professional counselors outside the school to enhance their learning. These professionals can collaborate to overcome some of the challenges like emotions, stress, depression, and low self-esteem experienced by teachers and learners with ASD. More importantly, this school based support team is a pre-requisite for building teachers' self-efficacy, trust, and relationships (McDougal et al., 2020) to support learners with ASD and improve their knowledge and overall school experience.

VII. CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the study indicated several challenges, among others, a critical shortage of resources, lack of knowledge about ASD, and lack of professionals and parental involvement that hinder teachers from fulfilling their role of supporting learners with ASD and meeting their demands to achieve quality education. According to the participants, teachers never attended any training based on ASD support; hence they had negative attitudes towards teaching and minimising stimuli or sensory triggers that overwhelm these learners in class. These challenges seemed to be common in all the two cases from which data was collected.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study, therefore, strongly recommends:

The findings suggested that teachers received inadequate training to support learners with ASD. It is recommended that the government of Lesotho invest in and redesign both regular pre-service capacity-building programmes and in-service training workshops aimed to provide strategies for adapting and enabling learning environments that better suit the needs of learners with ASD. It is also recommended that the Government of Lesotho should modernise and expand existing regular primary schools to reduce class size. Besides that, the new schools should be built closer to where learners with ASD live. The MoET should also provide mainstream primary schools with funds, materials, teacher aides, and professionals for teachers to successfully develop individualised education plans, promote autism awareness campaigns to build a deeper understanding and acceptance of ASD, and support the success and growth of learners with ASD. Conducting a study within a different context, such as a private school, would be interesting.

IX. LIMITATIONS

This study is qualitative, which enabled the researcher to generate rich data. The participants selected for this research study included principals, teachers, and parents of learners with ASD in two primary schools in Maseru District, out of many schools in Lesotho. Therefore, the findings may not be generalised to reflect the experiences of all the Lesotho primary schools. This study was conducted in two mainstream public primary schools in Maseru District.

X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researcher is thankful to be the author of this article. He wishes to acknowledge the principals, teachers, and parents who made themselves available in this article.

XI. CONTRIBUTION TO THE ARTICLE

This article's contribution is to presumably assist Lesotho primary school teachers in recognising the individual differences of learners with ASD when they prepare lesson plans and deliver their lessons, with the assistance of the government in facilitating training workshops.

XII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The researcher declares no potential conflict of interest.

XIII. CONSENT STATEMENT

All participants voluntarily consented to participate in this article and were over 18 years old.

XIV. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that has been used is confidential.

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