
The challenges faced by educators and schools in informal settlement areas

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Abstract

Learners, educators, parents, and families in informal settlement areas face many challenges. Living in dwellings in informal areas is often detrimental to the well-being of learners. Three aspects need to receive attention in this regard, namely firstly, the environment, secondly the challenges of education, and thirdly a theological evaluation. Empirical research at a Primary School near Phase 7 in Mangaung highlights the challenges faced by learners and educators in informal settlements. The church also needs to reach out to children and educators as Christ did. Empowering the poor, especially the poor child, is essential for the church.

1. Introduction

Schools in and near informal settlements in Mangaung, Bloemfontein, have to deal with very challenging issues. Learners in these areas find themselves in situations that need positive interventions because many are living in abject poverty. The challenges have to be understood. Not only is a policy of education needed, but also an understanding of the relationship between educators and the learners in these dire situations and possible rectification of the situation. Important is also the theological implications of the gospel

in the community to envisage how these churches can help to address social challenges. There are serious challenges for the learners in informal settlements in Mangaung (Bloemfontein).

This article addresses three important aspects of research and their relation to one another. These different aspects have implications for the way in which the future of children in the informal settlements will be addressed. The environment of informal settlements is firstly explained, followed by an evaluation of the role of education in the environments, and thirdly an explanation of the empirical research performed at a school near these informal settlements. Finally, a theological evaluation is entered into.

2. Evaluation of challenges

2.1 Children in informal settlements

The first aspect to evaluate is the situation of the children in the informal settlements—their living conditions and standard, their experiences and their concept of the situation. The role of education and the environment of children in informal settlements are important.

Living in informal settlements is very challenging, especially for children (see Verster 2016:235 ff.). They are often undernourished and the environment is not conducive to education. It is very challenging to study in circumstances where one is not empowered by positive interventions. Different social problems, such as drug addiction, poverty, and crime also challenge parenthood in these areas. The children often have only one parent. Many households even consist of only very young children that have to look after other children, because the HIV/Aids pandemic has claimed their parents. Children also often have to care for sick parents, many suffering of HIV/Aids

People in the informal settlements not only have very little means of support, but the whole environment is also not conducive to child development. Therefore, many suffer from different ailments. Transport and medical facilities are often unavailable. Schools are sometimes far afield and children have to walk long distances to school. They also face many other challenges in their lives, e.g. the relationship with teachers, parents, and community members in the area. Therefore, the challenges of the space in which they find themselves are very important. The children find themselves in spaces that are detrimental to development. It is not easy for a child in these areas to develop positively.

Smit (2016:4-5) explains that there are many instances where children are not welcome or welcomed: “The first context refers to the large varieties of inhospitable households (in a broad sense of the word) that in many ways also characterise South Africa and Africa. The second context is constituted by the risky and often dangerous smaller-scale communities in which children have to live (including schools, neighbourhoods, streets and everyday environments). The third context finally deals with the violent societies of our contemporary world (with violence understood in complex ways, from direct and physical to structural and implicit). The claim is that in these, as it were, ever larger concentric circles – households, communities and societies – many children today may feel abandoned, endangered and threatened, in short unwelcome, in ways that may inhibit the development of their ability to trust.”

Educational challenges in the above-mentioned situations abound. The physical environment is extremely challenging, e.g. if there is a table in the dwelling, it has to be shared for meals, studying, and discussing family matters; the dwelling often has either no lighting or it is very weak, and parents seldom empower the children, because they have not been schooled. It is clear that child education and development in general are under much pressure in these areas.

2.2 Education and the challenges in informal settlements

Education in these areas is very important, because education can help the children to understand their environment better, and equip them to deal with their situation, as well as coping with the challenges. To understand the teachers’ sense of the challenges learners are facing and their handling of such challenges, research was conducted at a Primary school in Mangaung.

Curren (2006) gives a general overview of the philosophy of education from the Socratic movement, through stoicism, the Judaic tradition, the educational thought of Augustine, humanism, enlightenment, and liberalism, to different democratic possibilities, such as critical theory, analytical movement, feminism, and post modernism. Cooper (2006:217) explains that post-modern views entail that it is no longer possible to see education as traditionally conceived. However, a much better way to understand education is to have a reformational approach that can help tremendously in understanding the challenges of education. Van der Walt (1994:534) explains that the following is of importance: “The most important objective of Christian education is to guide people towards discipleship. Discipleship involves two things: to *learn* and to *do*. To learn means to know God’s will

for all things. To do is to respond to God's will. Doing is the response of the disciple or servant to his Master. This response has two sides: (1) caring (taking responsibility) for the self, the neighbour and God's creation; and (2) healing (reconciliation) because everything and everyone is subjected to the corruption of this dispensation."

Very important is a comprehensive worldview approach. Only when education is regarded as empowering the learner to have a comprehensive and sound worldview will it be able to enhance the total living conditions of the learner. Van der Walt (1994:47) writes: "To the extent that a worldview succeeds in correctly understanding this universal order (*God's law order and structure*), it will render to its adherents a sense of security and safety. In spite of what is said by modern irrationalist relativism, worldviews are not the product of mere imagination or subjective whimsy. Each worldview ties in to something beyond subjectivity, historicity and relativity. In spite of all the possible distortions of the mirror (worldview) there is still a life order which it tries to reflect." (italics included from Van der Walt by Verster) In this regard the following should be taken into consideration:

- The learner should be regarded as a whole person and therefore should be empowered for living as total person in this world.
- All relations of the worldview should be taken into account, namely metaphysical, spiritual, physical and natural.
- Education should lead the learner to the understanding of a comprehensive sound worldview so that the learner will be able to develop into a whole citizen.
- Regarding the metaphysical aspect the learner should be empowered to understand his or her relation to God and that it is important to serve God in all relations.
- The spiritual development of the learner is also of high importance. The learner is a whole being and should be acknowledged as such. The spiritual development of the learner in the sense of a comprehensive citizen on this level leads to understanding of the realm beyond the physical. The worldview should thus enhance the relations of the learner to other human beings and to God.
- Body and soul should not be separated. The physical aspect of the worldview is also of importance. It leads to understanding of the learner's place in this world. Caring for the body is part of a comprehensive worldview.
- Regarding nature it is important to realise that this world is a created world. Nature is not coincidental. To have a comprehensive worldview is to live in harmony with nature.

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- From a Christian perspective all comes together in the glorification of Christ in a comprehensive worldview. All aspects should bring the learner in a closer relation with Christ and the Trinitarian God. The meaning of life is all important and can be realised in this relation (See Van der Walt 1994:90-122 and Van der Walt 1999:154 ff).
 - Education leads to new possibilities if it more than providing knowledge, but rather leading the learner to a comprehensive worldview.

It must, however, be acknowledged that the world we currently live in poses many challenges. Malone (2013:128-129) writes in this regard: “Over the past couple of decades education has been undergoing a global paradigm shift. Informed by a growing international interdependence, labour market shifts, changing political dynamics, and increasingly complex social arrangements, the education sector has focused on ways it can respond to external expectations. Although the environmental factors might appear similar on the surface, the culture, historical, economic, institutional, and political realities have moved each nation along a unique path of educational change.”

In this regard it is very important to understand how teaching can empower learners in their different environments. Concerning teaching, Inglis and Aers (2008:189) write: “...while teaching certainly has its special collocations of techniques, it is, at its most resourceful, an art, which is to say that expression of creative power and its communication to other people.”

Scapp (2003:31) explains how education in general has to deal with these challenges: “Teaching these days then is necessarily teaching in an age of uncertainty. This is so not because there is no truth to be discovered, but because of the desire to respect the truth whatever they may turn out to be.”

It is also important to take note of *The General Aims of the South African Curriculum* (2011:3-5). Among others, it states that “This curriculum aims to ensure that children acquire and apply knowledge and skills in ways that are meaningful to their own lives.” It also states the purpose of education as “Equipping learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country;...” and lists the following principles

- “Social transformation: ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population;
- Active and critical learning: encouraging an active and critical approach to learning, rather than rote and uncritical learning of given truths;

- High knowledge and high skills: the minimum standards of knowledge and skills to be achieved at each grade are specified and set high, achievable standards in all subjects;
- Progression: content and context of each grade shows progression from simple to complex; ...”

Graham-Brown (1991:3) writes that there is certainly some hard thinking to be done about the goals and purposes of education and that in many instances the system is only kept afloat. “In such a time that education can hardly be expected to prosper or demonstrate its full potential in social and economic development.” The challenges, especially for poor families, remain high (1991:23). Long working hours and households headed by women with a low income, who have to endure discrimination, increase the challenges. Schools also suffer from lack of empowerment of the poor in areas where there is not much positive economic or other developments. The schools struggle to educate children to eventually become economically independent.

Hunter (1971:154) explains that the teacher has to deal with very specific challenges in teaching, trying to empower children in such areas. He writes that the teacher must take into account and take cognisance of the constraints that exist in that environment and provide ways to deal with those different constraints.

A very important aspect is development in teaching. Inglis and Aers (2008:68) state: “This is a **concept** intrinsic not just to **education**, but to most human **societies** in the modern world. It constitutes a whole body of **theory** and policy studies around the application of economics in areas of poverty (‘underdevelopment’ is the euphemism), and in itself announces the power of the common belief in feasible **progress** central to all policy science.”

Hogan (2004:32) refers to the struggle to obtain freedom without leading to captivity again. Lemmer, Meier and Van Wyk (2006:90) explain that “educator expectations have an important influence on the way educators interact with learners in the classrooms. Educators communicate their expectations of learners’ ability and behaviour through both their verbal and non-verbal communication.”

The question is then how a humane and democratic society, but also a community of respect before God, can be established through education and proclamation of the gospel. Carr (2011:203) is of the opinion that such a democratic society can be reached by rejecting violence and war, by respecting the will of the people, by rejecting racism, sexism and poverty,

and by becoming a more united society. Education is essential in reaching these goals.

3. Possible rectifications

The first issue to be addressed is the issue of the personhood of the learners. The educator should acknowledge that these learners are children in their own right. They should not be looked down on or frowned upon because they are from poor communities. They should be helped to recognise, emphasise, and develop their own skills. Education is therefore a total approach and different educators should be acknowledged in the sense of dealing with the problems and the challenges of these learners.

Secondly, learners in these situations have special needs, and the educator should take notice of this and become conscious of how to deal with these special needs in the current circumstances. They should recognise how to help and empower people concerning these special needs. Educators should therefore be educated and equipped to deal with the learners facing these challenges.

Thirdly, educators should take into account that these learners should experience some vision of the future, some vision of a better situation, some vision of a totally new life and learners should be educated to help them achieve this.

4. Empirical research

Quantitative and qualitative research were used to understand how educators view the situation of the learners they are teaching. Scientific research needs to take certain important issues into consideration. Research should always regard the scientific process as of high importance. One should be very careful of imposing pre-conceived ideas on the respondents. Valuable insights may be found if the research is conducted in a way where the respondents have freedom to express their views. In the scientific process aspects such as relevant data collection and sound evaluation of the data is all important. The researcher's epistemology is also of importance, whether e.g. post-modernist, modernist, or reformed. A reformed vision should be broad and encompassing, taking to account the relation to God, creation and God's law. It should be a vision on all three (Van der Walt 1999:609). Ethical

aspects should be regarded as of high importance. Freedom of expression and no coercion of respondents remain essential. The research should also benefit the community where it was conducted. It should empower the educators. Therefore, educators should realise that they have a definitive task to get involved in the lives of the learners. Babbie (2011:247) explains that relevant questions can be asked to establish a broad base for evaluation. Qualitative research endeavours to deal with the situation and to understand people in their situation (Babbie 2011:242). Evaluation criteria are important and in the questionnaire for this research it was accomplished by discussing each question (Gomm 2008:329). From the research that was done, it is clear that the educators understand the challenges of the communities in which they teach. They are serious challenges and will have to be met. It is, however, not always clear how to deal with these challenges, and in what way the challenges can be approached. The educators have to deal with the challenges and the way in which they deal with these challenges demands serious involvement in the community. Therefore, the educators have to become involved in the lives of the learners far more intensively to deal with the problems of the community and the learners. The learners have to be empowered to understand these challenges and how to deal with them. In that sense, certain issues regarding education, the church's role, and learners' development in informal settlements were addressed.

4.1 Quantitative research

The research was conducted at three schools near Phase 7, an informal settlement area in Mangaung. The purpose was to establish how educators view the situation in the informal settlements and the challenges to the learners. Only one school, a Primary school in Mangaung, responded appropriately. Twenty respondents returned the distributed questionnaires. Not all replied to all the questions. It was totally voluntarily and teachers could exit at any time. The reports were evaluated and the most important replies noted.

Firstly the composition of the respondents is noted:

Gender	Male	4	Female	13					
Age	10-20	1	31-40	5	41-50	9	51-60	5	61+
Speciality	Languages	7	Mathematics	6	Sciences	3	Social sciences	3	
		(14)		(15)		(18)		(18)	

The challenges to life in informal settlements had to be ascertained. The challenges were ranked from very high (1) to low (7). The number of non-responses to the different questions is noted in brackets.

		Rank of challenge							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1	Poverty	15	2		1		1		(2)
2	Unemployment	19	2						(0)
3	Illnesses	4	3	2	3	1			(8)
4	Crime	12	1	5					(3)
5	Lack of services	7	1	3	1	1			(8)
6	Lack of education facilities	6	1	2	1	4		1	(6)
7	Lack of social cohesion		2	2	2	3		1	(11)
8	Lack of the involvement of government institutions	1	1	4	1	1		1	(12)
9	Lack of involvement of the churches	2	3	1	3	1			(10)
10	Feelings of inferiority	5	2		4	3			(7)
11	Past policies	1	1	1	1	4		1	(12)
12	Present policies	1	1	2	1	3			(13)
13	None								

It is clear that the educators see poverty and unemployment as the most challenging aspects in the informal areas. Crime is also regarded as challenging. It is interesting that past and present policies did not score high. The community suffers from the present ailments in society.

Table 3 lists the replies to the question: What are positive about life in informal settlements?

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1.	Own communities	9	2	2	0	2		0	(6)
2	Own settlements	10	0	4	2				(5)
3	Freedom from interference of others	9	1	4	1	1			(5)
4	Family life	10	1	3	2				(5)
5	In charge of own future	10	1	3	2		1		(5)
6	None	6							(6)

The general well-being of the community is regarded as positive. Own communities, own settlements, freedom from interference, family life, and being in charge of own future all scored high. It is clear that life in informal areas can also be positive and rewarding.

Table 4 lists the replies to the question: What challenges do the learners have in their lives in the areas?

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Transport to schools	9	1	3		4					(4)
2	Problems in family life	16	3								(2)
3	Crime	9		2	2						(8)
4	Lack of food	8	6	2	1						(4)
5	Lack of facilities at home	7	4	1	2						(7)
6	None										

Problems in family life scored high as challenges for learners. Crime and lack of food and transport, even though mentioned, are not considered.

Table 5 presents the responses regarding the challenges in informal areas: Are there any positives in the community for learners?

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Family life	13		4							(4)
2	Positive attitude	6	4	5	1						(5)
3	Positive schools	10	6	1	1						(3)
4	Community life	5	3	3	1						(9)
5	None										

Family life also scores high regarding positives in the community. This seems to be contradictory. The solution may be that family life produces challenges but is also important to the learners. The presence of schools serving the community is also highly regarded.

What can contribute to a better situation in the community for learners? Table 6 explains the possible contributions.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Empowerment in cultural life	11	3	1	2	1					(3)
2	Community centres	10	4		3						(4)
3	Jobs	16	1	2	1	1					(0)
4	Economic empowerment	13	1	3	2						(2)
5	Handouts	1	0	3	1	3					(13)
6	Involvement from government	12		3	1	2					(3)
7	None										

Unemployment is a huge challenge. Therefore, better opportunities for employment would assist in helping the community to develop. It is also expected that government should be involved.

Table 7 addresses the question How can the situation be addressed?

Most important contribution to change the situation of learners in informal settlement for the better											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Involvement of teachers	12	1	3							(5)
2	Involvement of parents	18	2								(1)
3	More sport facilities	11	5	3							(2)
4	Food parcels	7	2	1	1						(10)
5	None										

The involvement of parents is clearly not negotiable. Educators realise that parents play an increasingly important role in developing learners. The educators' role is also important.

Individual responses emphasised that the church can play an important role in the community. One respondent replied that the church can “assist in changing people’s way of thinking; automatically their lifestyle will change for the good; participation in church activities will keep children busy and take them away from the streets; food parcels from the church that will be given to disadvantaged families can also drag people to church for them to know how to take care of themselves (healthy living) and the lessons will be open to others.”

Others replied that the church should be involved in youth camps and the empowerment of children. One respondent said: “(The) church can help the youth to take part (in church activities), help them spiritually. (The) youth will not be involved in crime because they will be busy.” The church must also help financially and spiritually, replied another one. The church must give support and comfort. In general the church must be involved in the communities and help the children by being involved in their lives. The church must also work positively with the educators.

Respondents also had a positive view of the future. One replied: “Yes (there can be a better future) as they are saved growing in the world (spiritual minded) will know who they are, will have positive minds, be able to help others, create jobs on their own not depending on the government.”

“Positive thinking doing practical bring lot of changes.”

“Yes there can be better future if they have facilities, education and the better services such as clinics toilets, schools, etc.”

“Big yes, as long as there’s availability of water and sanitation, infrastructure and healthy and proper environment (b) involvement of NGO’s (c) library facilities and sport centres (d) guidance from professional elements.”

Positive relations between schools and communities are also mentioned. The value of the person and that they should be given a change was stated. Development in informal settlements can lead to a better future.

5. Evaluation of aspects

Interventions are needed. Much should be done concerning the environment in which the children find themselves. Poverty, unemployment, crime, and community challenges should be addressed. Schools can be vehicles of empowerment. Educators should also get involved in the community and be present among the people living in the community to better understand their challenges and living circumstances, and how they view themselves. The educator should try to give the learners some hope for the future by introducing them to activities that can be beneficial to their development, such as sport.

6. Theological evaluation

The school is not an entity on its own. It has relations with other community structures. One very important structure is the church. For learners living in informal settlements the church can play a very important role. The church should try to have a link of positive involvement with the educators in the lives of people. Therefore the educators and the church should endeavour to get together and understand what the special needs are of the people to whom they reach out. The educators and the people should then develop a new situation where they can reach out and develop new situations, thus new development for the people.

Turning to the church is important, and the church should emphasise every important issue of how the learner should be empowered. The biblical texts are of the utmost importance for any evaluation of the role of the church in any environment.

For exegesis of the text, close reading is necessary. The actors in the texts and their relation to one another are important for the implications thereof. Van Wolde's (1989) method was used.

Matthew 19:13-15 New International Version (NIV)

The Little Children and Jesus

13 Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them.

14 Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." 15 When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

The important actors are:

People: They are regarded as positive because they bring their children to Christ

Little children: They are positive because they are undeserved

Disciples: They are negative because they rebuke the people

Jesus: Is the extreme of positive because He blesses the children

Conclusion: Kingdom of heaven belongs to these

Also in Mark 10:13-16

Mark 10:13-16 New International Version (NIV)

The Little Children and Jesus

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Luke, other than Matthew, thinks of new born children (Bovon 2013:557). The weakest are brought to Jesus. Bovon (2013:557) asks whether they wanted power from Jesus' touch and says that the disciples were against this kind of mixing religion with magic. The children, however, become an example for the disciples. The essence is the welcoming God (Bovon 2013:559).

Implications of the actors are that in the first place Jesus is regarded as highly positive because He clearly rebukes the disciples who are negative.

Strong admonition by Jesus, the main actor, emphasises the value of the children.

Positive act to bless children is explained.

DeSilva (2004:206) explains that the disciples acted negatively to be brokers of Jesus' power and the gatekeepers of the kingdom of heaven, but Jesus, who acts positively, rebukes them and explains that the roles are turned around to the little powerless.

Luke 18:15-17 New International Version (NIV)

The Little Children and Jesus

15 People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Although Jesus as main actor does not rebuke the disciples as strongly as in Mark, He clearly shows his positive attitude towards the children.

The pericope has implications for the relations of the actors differing from Mark and Matthew.

The conclusion is much stronger.

It is emphasised that the children should be brought to him and that they should be accepted, because they explain the power of the kingdom of God and they explain the fullness of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is especially for those who are like little children who emphasise the relation with God in this regard. In exegesis it is important to ask the question: What is the main emphasis of this text? Jesus brought children to him and He says that the kingdom of God must be accepted like little children. Little children are not questioning, little children are not rejecting the fullness of the Gospel of Christ. The kingdom of God must be accepted and people following Christ must accept the fullness of the Glory of God and the glory of Christ in following him and accepting what He is doing.

This means that children can be examples for adults of how to live according to the Gospel of Christ in this sense, and how also to explain the fullness of the Gospel of Christ in what they are doing and what they are experiencing. What they are experiencing should show the life and the relationship with the Glory of God and the fullness of God.

An important text is also

1 Tim 1:18 where a very important issue is dealt with, but Timothy must live according to the prophecies and he must remember the words and he must fight the good fight. Also important is

1 Timothy 1:18 New International Version (NIV)

The Charge to Timothy Renewed

18 Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well,

Like a father telling his son so Paul admonishes Timothy to be faithful

The actors are Paul and Timothy

Paul admonishes Timothy to keep with the prophecies

Col 3:20, where children are asked to be obedient to their parents, because God expects it from them and the fathers are expected to be in a good relation with the children so that they help them and do not deal with it in such a way that they become despondent.

Colossians 3:20 New International Version (NIV)

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

The actors are God, children, and parents.

God expects a positive attitude from the children towards their parents. (DeSilva 2004:729)

The relationship with Jesus shapes the relationship with those close to us (DeSilva 2004:729)

This obedience is in the realm of love not of power.

7. Implications

What then are the implications? Schools should be involved in the environment of the learners through the help of the church and by using the Gospel to empower children and to help them understand how they should deal with the challenges and the struggles of life, how to be important and how to develop children, but also how to help children to get involved in the community. Schools should also empower other people in society. By becoming involved in the community the learners, who live according to the word of God, can assist in not only developing the people to experience the fullness of life, but also empower the educators. This is not a one-way street. Traffic can flow from the educators to the learners and vice versa.

What are the issues that can be approached in this sense? The respect for humanity can be emphasised by educators and by the church, as well as a love for education, where the educator and the church emphasise that before God we are people of God. We have respect before God and we can

understand this respect before God. It is important that we also understand that Christ is the One that can bring about a new situation. We should thus acknowledge that Christ is not only the glorious King of the church but also of education. It embodies a positive element between the church and the educator. The educator can then also become a vehicle to proclaim the glory of Christ to learners so that the learners can appreciate the love of Christ for them.

8. Conclusion

Educators and the church can play an important role in informal settlements to develop a future in which people can live in harmony. Schools can be beneficial to the learners and the community by developing sound interventions in the lives of these learners. A positive relation with the church can be of much importance for the future of the learners and the community. In this regard real hope in informal areas can be achieved.

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