

Are School Leaders in Tanzania Effective in Fostering Instructional Change? Unveiling This Black Box from the Feedback Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Feedback is among the most powerful influences on learning a new skill. Surprisingly, very little attention has been given to studying this issue in relation to interactions between school leaders and frontline teachers particularly during the adoption of educational changes. This qualitative study provides findings on feedback provided to teachers by school leaders in relation to the adoption of a new Tanzanian curriculum. The data were collected from teachers and leaders in three schools using document reviews and individual interviews, and were processed through thematic analysis. Findings revealed various technical issues with regard to feedback method, timing, and quality. Factors that influenced these and their likely influences on the professional growth of the teachers are discussed within the context of reviewed literature. Recommendations for policy and practice are provided.

Keywords: Curriculum, Feedback, Instructional Leadership, Tanzania

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I. INTRODUCTION

Engaging in a task is central to learning. Nevertheless, Hattie and Timperley (2007) remind us that the ancient aphorism “practice makes perfect” is imperfect. Researchers (e.g., Brookhart, 2008; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015; Jug *et al.*, 2019) show that for any person including teachers to learn, she/he should be reflective. Being reflective is critical for learning necessarily involves questioning personally: What are the goals? What progress have I made towards the goals? What should I do to ensure better progress? (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Teachers ask themselves these questions throughout their professional life and particularly when they deal with educational innovations, when required to change their deep-rooted instructional related practices and/or beliefs. As teachers do such reflections, they often bump up against what they do not know. Feedback, information from others (e.g., leaders, other teachers) concerning aspects of one’s performance or understanding of something (Jug *et al.*, 2019, Winstone & Boud, 2019), is useful in answering such queries. The purpose of this study was to look at this issue regarding teacher-leader interactions in schools. It looked at the specifics of feedback given to teachers by school leaders regarding the adoption of the new Tanzanian curriculum and how successful it was in encouraging teachers to embrace this curriculum.

In the early 2000s, Tanzania launched a thorough secondary school curriculum reform, which culminated in the 2005 Tanzanian Constructivist Curriculum (2005TCC) (MoEVT, 2007). The former curriculum was condemned for its design, with critics claiming that its concentration on academic knowledge resulted in graduates lacking skills needed in the 21st century (Mkimbili, 2018). To transform the schooling process and ensure production of skilled graduates, the design of the 2005TCC necessitates the use of constructivist instructional pedagogies (MoEVT, 2007). There is no doubt that this transition triggered substantial concerns amongst teachers who had previously used teacher-centred practices. If teachers are to adopt a new curriculum such as this, Hall and Hord (2020) emphasise that they must learn how to do it and the management of is this process is essential.

As informed previously, a central part of the management of any instructional change is giving feedback to teachers to inform their practice and progress. Despite this importance, a few studies that have looked at the instructional leadership process in Tanzania (Manaseh, 2016; Urio, 2016; Musumi & Mkulu, 2020; Mushi & Ye, 2021) have not addressed the specifics of feedback given by leaders to frontline teachers. This inquiry intended to fill this gap. This study is timely given that teachers in Tanzania are still attempting to implement a curriculum adopted from the western world. The study was guided by the following questions:

- How do school leaders in Tanzania get informed about teachers’ implementation of curriculum?
- What is the nature of feedback that school leaders provide their frontline teachers while leading the curriculum implementation in Tanzania?

- What issues influence the provision of instructional-related feedback in Tanzanian schools?

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

All of us do remember how important the feedback from our parents and immediate others was in learning new things (e.g., speaking, walking, eating). We similarly need reflections of others throughout our lives particularly when attempting to change our long-established ways of doing things, when struggling with difficult working challenges. Westberg and Jason (2001) remind us that even world-class soccer players or athletes skilled at self-assessment need reflections of their coaches. Feedback is equally important to teachers (Ing, 2010; Ärlestig & Törnsten, 2014). In the absence of feedback, teachers like other humans only form personal hypotheses about their own practice (Westberg & Jason, 2001). They may conclude that they are not doing well while they may actually be. Or they may assume they are doing well while, in fact, their performance is below the standard. Importantly, teachers can interpret events differently (Westberg & Jason, 2001). Even when watching videos of their own instructional processes, teachers hardly know fully the way they are perceived by their students. They need feedback to understand this. Most importantly, without feedback, teachers' mistakes remain uncorrected, ending up developing bad teaching habits.

A. Characteristics of Effective Feedback

The literature presents an array of suggestions as to what effective feedback encompasses and several conceptual models for good feedback practice have been proposed (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hounsell, 2007; Brookhart, 2008; Panadero & Lipnevich, 2022). Generally, academics agree that the success of feedback is influenced by the feedback strategy and content (Westberg & Jason, 2001; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Next is the discussion of each of these aspects

1) Feedback strategy

Feedback strategy (method) encompasses three issues: timing, modality, and audience (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Brookhart, 2008). Timing in this context entails when and how often to provide feedback. Most researchers (e.g., Mulliner & Tucker, 2015) recommend that appraiser provide feedback while appraisees are still mindful of the event. This, nevertheless, is not always a rule for there are circumstances when it is best to postpone feedback. A case in this later point is when a teacher has just completed a highly stressful classroom experience. Perhaps more importantly, some people are happy to wait slightly longer for feedback if this increases the feedback quality (Mulliner & Tucker, 2015; Özdemir, 2020). On these grounds, both immediate and delayed feedback can be useful depending on the context.

Modality refers to means of providing feedback. Some activities benefit from written feedback while others require oral feedback. However, most academics (Borup *et al.*, 2015; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015; Lowenthal, 2021) commend oral feedback than written ones. Unlike written feedback, which is a mere depiction of the transmission instructional paradigm these scholars opine that oral feedback provides opportunity for dialogues; thereby allowing both feedback provider and receiver to reflect on and discuss what happened during the event and steps to be taken to improve the implementation. In so doing, issues of specificity and clarity of feedback, which most providers of written feedback fail to observe (Borup *et al.*, 2015; Brookhart, 2008), are addressed. Perhaps more importantly, the continued oral feedback practice, according to Mulliner and Tucker (2015) and Lowenthal (2021), nurtures a trustworthy relationship that prevents teachers from 'editing' what they reveal to their leaders. Despite these arguments, the study by Borup *et al.* (2015) reveals that some people prefer written compared to oral feedback. Considering these reports, Lowenthal (2021) and Howard (2021) recommend leaders augment their written feedback with dialogues.

Feedback audience entails whether to provide feedback in groups or individually. The audience choice guarantees that the feedback reaches the right individual. Brookhart (2008) and Mulliner and Tucker (2015) recommend feedback on specifics of work be directed to the person who did it. If information concerning a particular individual is disclosed in public, it makes appraisees feel highly embarrassed (Brookhart, 2008) and may influence them to stop listening to the supervisors. Giving group feedback is only advised when several people have the same concern.

2) Feedback content

Feedback content refers to 'what to say' (Brookhart, 2008). Choosing feedback content entails determining the desired function and focus. Most appraisers, according to Hattie and Timperley (2007), fail to discriminate between the task-related, process-related, and self-related feedback. They further insist that self-focused feedback is least effective while process-related feedback is most valuable. Academics (e.g., Lowenthal, 2021; Mulliner & Tucker, 2015) commend feedback about the process because it educates the appraisees how they handled the task, how their actions affected the quality of their performance, and what steps they might take to improve. In spite of this reality, previous research (e.g., Lowenthal, 2021) indicate that most appraisers are unable to determine which type of feedback they should provide, ending up failing the entire mission.

B. Realities in Giving Feedback

Although the value of time, modality, and quality in providing feedback is well known, offering constructive feedback remains a challenging task (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This difficulty is largely linked to the psychological implications of disclosing information about oneself and/or one's actions to others (O'Brien, 2019). Absolutely, when educators provide feedback, they are in the likelihood of making appraisee feel upset and may react in some way. Giving feedback is especially harder in competitive environments where self-disclosure is perceived to be risky. Given that every one of us want to look good to others and the world, we try to conceal information that runs counter to our desired image. Perception such as this is equally exhibited by teachers. When there is no trust within a school, especially with many perfectionists, teachers prefer to hide rather than reveal anything concerning themselves for the fear they will be viewed incompetent.

Such psychological concerns to feedback, according to Jug *et al.* (2019), can only be overcome by being mindful of the physical space (i.e., where feedback occurs), the nature of interpersonal relationship, and the language quality (i.e., tone of the message). This implies that only leaders with extraordinary experience and expertise can provide feedback in a constructive way.

III. THE METHOD

This study relied on the participants' own views and experiences to understand the phenomena as it occurs in its natural context. Therefore, a qualitative approach to the research was deemed very appropriate. This study involved participants from three secondary schools that had demonstrated consistent differences in academic performance for the past three consecutive years: the Lower Performing Secondary school (LPSSc); the Medium Performing Secondary school (MPSSc); and the High Performing Secondary school (HPSSc). All schools were within one town, Morogoro, and at equal distance from the town centre. The study hypothesised that the students' consistent academic performance in each of these schools was attributable in part to the extent to which teachers implemented the 2005TCC, which was likely owing to the curriculum leadership (thus, feedback) afforded by the leaders in each of these schools. This configuration of schools was not for comparative purposes; rather, it was only to allow capturing of the investigated experiences from diverse school staffs.

From each school, the study invited seven participants: four teachers; the overall Teacher Leader who in Tanzania is known as a General Academic Master or Mistress (GAM); the Head of one of the Departments (HoD); and the School Principal. Informed by Fullan (2014), the researcher was cognisant that teachers who were new to a school (those who were recently employed or relocated from another school) could not have much experience working with the leaders of the investigated schools. In view of this, the study employed a snowball strategy to identify and invite teachers who had been at the investigated schools for at least three years by the time this study was launched, believing that this period was sufficient to experience the leaders' feedback practices. The inquiry observed all research ethics, including the use of pseudonyms for the participants and schools in which they worked.

The study collected data through one-on-one interviews and document reviews. The researcher interviewed each participant once, and each session lasted for about half an hour. The collected data were thematically analysed. At first, the researcher transcribed and read the data repetitively to gain the overall sense of the data. Then, he coded them to establish the data map, from which he developed categories. The researcher finally checked cross-school patterns of the findings as recommended by (Yin, 2014), a stage at which he established the final themes.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed some concerns regarding the way in which leaders collected information about teachers' instructional practice and their feedback. The competence of leaders and lack of trustworthy relationship within schools in part influenced these processes.

A. Monitoring of instruction

Most of the school leaders recognised the need of gathering information regarding the teachers' instructional practices to give appropriate guidance. Most of them shared the views of Amina, one of the participant teachers in the HPSSc, who stated, "*To guide them, it is vital that we constantly seek information about their lesson delivery*". Leaders capture such information by means of walkthrough observations, inspection of teachers' program documents and through questioning students and teachers themselves. The use of these strategies seems to be common in Tanzania as they are also reported by Urio (2016) and Manaseh (2016).

Inspection of documents was the foremost method employed by the leaders to get information about the teachers' curriculum implementation. The leaders believed that document inspections helped them significantly to reveal abilities and mistakes their teachers exhibited in dealing with the 2005TCC. Their focus in such reviews were on the overall flow of the planned teaching process and the use of teaching aids. Bakari, the GAM in the MPSSc, exemplified some of the concerns they uncovered through inspection of Lesson Plans and Scheme of Works. He stated,

Many teachers fail to organise their presentation. You can note this issue in their Lesson Plans. One section in the Lesson Plan, for example, demands teachers to indicate how they will assess student's competences during teaching. Now uh! My friend; everybody does it differently. (The GAM-MPSSc)

The fact that this strategy was given substantial consideration by leaders in these schools was strengthened by the frequency with which leaders conducted such inspections. Leaders collected such documents for inspection regularly. Teacher Beatrice informed, "*We are required to collect Lesson Plans and Logbooks on every Friday*". Further evidence was from the documents. The reviews of documents revealed that leaders signed the teachers' documents at least twice every month.

The second most applied strategy the leaders employed to get information about the curriculum adoption practice was that of questioning teachers and students. Leaders did not lock themselves in their offices waiting for information regarding the teachers' instructional practices. Bertha, one of the teachers in the MPSSc, informed, "*The Principal sometimes visits our office to inquire us whether we get problems in implementing this curriculum*". At other times, the leaders gleaned such information from informal conversations, particularly which arose unexpectedly as they did their regular paperwork in their offices. Bernard, the HoD in the HPSSc informed:

As we discuss various issues while working in our office, those related to teaching evolve as well. If one mentions about a challenge s/he ever experienced, others support the discussion. One would say like "I had the same challenge last week or yesterday". From these chats I know the nature of teachers' challenging in dealing with this curriculum. (The HoD-HPSSc)

Knowing the importance of such information sources, leaders stated that they cleverly instigated such stories to get information about what transpired in classrooms.

Students were also a good source of information concerning the teachers' instructional practice. The leaders often questioned students about how they were taught. The leaders were of the view that this strategy helped them to garner substantial information about it. The GAM recalled, "*Students tell us many things. They tell us how they are engaged in learning and the kind of hands-on-activities they are assigned by their teachers*". Recognising students' potential as a source of such information, leaders introduced what Alex (the GAM in the HPSSc) referred to as "*Class-Talks*", which were meetings that involved leaders and students of a specific grade to discuss about teachers' instructional practices. The leaders, nonetheless, pointed out that some students had no confidence to appraise their teachers publicly. To capture information from such students, Alex stated that they prepared Opinion Boxes into which students could put their views about their teachers' instructional processes. Anna (the HoD in the HPSS) informed the same and emphasised, "*If you walk past our school compound, you will see such boxes*". The leaders were unanimously of the views that students preferred using Opinion Boxes and that "*It is already a well-established culture here*" [Anna] because some students presented their opinions even when they were not asked to do so. Similar findings where students are used by leaders as their source of information about teachers' instructional practice is reported by Urio (2016).

Conducting observations was another technique leaders employed to collect information about instructional practice. The participants' descriptions suggested different observation approaches. Some leaders specified that they observed teachers as they prepared themselves for teaching. "*As someone prepares him/herself for a teaching session, I passively observe what and how s/he does it*" (Anna, the HoD in the MPSSc). Other leaders attempted to carry out classroom observations. They sometimes walked around to observe how teachers fared their lesson. Many of the school leaders were of the view that observations helped them to get the information they sought for. Teachers verified the claim that leaders employed this technique. Beatrice, one of the teachers from the MPSSc, for example, shared her own experience. She stated:

One day, I saw him [the principal] standing outside the classroom while I was teaching. I am told by colleagues that he often stands by the classroom windows. And that is where I saw him. However, he just spent a few minutes and disappeared. [Teacher Beatrice-MPSSc]

Based on the teachers' opinion, it was clear that 'walkthroughs' was the primary observation technique the leaders employed. The leaders merely walked past classrooms to observe how the teachers implemented the curriculum but without notifying teachers their intention to observe instruction. These findings are a reflection of what was previously reported by Ärlestig and Törnsten (2014), Manaseh (2016) and Mngomezulu (2015).

The frequency with which the leaders collected information about instruction was a noteworthy finding. While the leaders recognised the need of garnering instructional information for them to give appropriate guidance, this awareness did not appear to dictate their behaviours and actions. The teachers informed that leaders conducted classroom observations and document inspections of only during the beginning of the term. "*But let me tell you, I am not saying that the principal does it every day. No., it just happens. It could be once or twice per term*" Batuli, a teacher in the MPSSc, informed. Knowing that the leaders had to sign every time they inspected the teachers' documents, the researcher looked at Lesson Plans and Scheme of Works. This analysis revealed that the leaders signed in these documents only during the first two weeks of the term, signifying that their instructional leadership was periodic. The leaders' agreed to this finding, defending that it was because they lacked time. "*I think you will agree with me that we [the leaders] are tight*", the GAM in the LPS insisted. Such practices is also reported by Ärlestig and Törnsten (2014) and Urio (2016).

B. The Feedback Process and Detail

Evidence indicated that leaders provided feedback and guidance both orally and in written form. Giving oral feedback to teachers was carried out individually and in groups. However, evidence indicated that leaders preferred giving feedback to groups of teachers than to individuals. All of the participants agreed that leaders often convened meetings during each term to inform teachers about various issues about instructional improvements. Bakari, the GAM in the MPSSc, stated, "*Concerns raised by students about teaching are presented to the staff meeting*". Christina, the GAM in the LPSSc, echoed and emphasised that they used such avenues to announce problems exhibited by teachers and suggest how to improve. All school leaders justified their preference for group feedback, claiming that it was an attempt to allow the entire staff to discuss and exchange opinions on the instructional critiques and suggestions made by leaders. Occasionally, leaders attempted to provide individual teachers with the opportunities to describe issues complained by students. Bakari, the GAM in the MPSSc, detailed the situation.

At the beginning and end of each term, we convene a meeting. During these meetings, we inform our observations about factors that are preventing teachers from implementing successfully this curriculum. We discuss about it and suggest ways to go forward. [HoD-MPSSc]

Leaders' use of oral feedback indicates that they attempted to shift away from the mere transmission of comments towards a more dialogic focus on teachers' engagement.

The leaders also provided feedback in written form. They primarily did so by commenting on the teachers' documents which they reviewed. "If we realise any issue in the Lesson Plans, we put a comment for them to improve. And our comments have been very helpful", Christina, the GAM in the LPSSc, stated. The analysis revealed gaps between the leaders and the teachers in relation to their satisfaction with written feedback. Leaders believed that their feedback was understandable and constructive whereas teachers did not. Teachers unanimously complained that written feedback was occasional, and its quality was poor. They complained that much of the leaders' comments were insufficiently descriptive or precise to be useful. They mentioned such of these comments and they included, "*This is not the appropriate style*" (Andrew, a teacher in the HPSSc); "*Improve it*" (Beatrice, a teacher in the MPSSc); and, "*The planning of your lesson is not professional*" (teacher Chiku in the LPSSc). Referring to such comments, teacher Alice questioned, "*How could you understand comments such as these?*". Perhaps more importantly, the teachers complained that their leaders never appreciated the little progress they had made. Most teachers echoed Adrew, a teacher in the LPSSc, who stated, "*Even if our performance is not of high caliber, I think they should provide us some amount of praise*". Such comments imply that teachers were not satisfied with the nature of comments that the leaders had made in their documents.

Westberg and Jason (2001) remind us that teachers cannot derive much constructive benefit from such ambiguous feedback. Özdemir (2020) adds further that the teachers are less likely to engage in professional learning activities and classroom practices if they regard the evaluation process as less valuable. Reactions shown by the teachers who participated in this study reflect the opinions of these academics; and thus, are not surprising. Despite their best efforts, leaders shared relatively little knowledge through such feedback.

C. Feedback Milieus

1) The timing issue

To be of practical value, Mulliner and Tucker (2015) recommend offering feedback immediately after revealing the problem. Despite searching for information about their teachers' classroom practices, leaders did not inform immediately teachers of their findings, and when they did, they did so with much delay. As a result, some of the teachers remained ignorant of information their leaders collected and why they collected it. Most of them echoed the opinions of Beatrice, one of the participant teachers in the MPSSc, who stated, "*I am really not sure what he [the principal] looks for when he walks around during teaching sessions*". Even a few teachers who reported receiving feedback complained about the timing issue. Amina, one of the teachers in the HPSSc, stated, "*What I do not like, though, is their habit of telling us today the issues they found during the previous semester*". These findings compliment those of Mulliner and Tucker (2015) who revealed that the largest proportion of staff preferred prompt feedback.

Findings indicated that such practices had adverse impacts in the investigated schools. Majority of the teachers perceived classroom observations, for example, as worthless. "*How could you value it [classroom observations] if leaders do not tell you issues which they find?*" Batuli, one of the teachers in the MPSSc queried. Due to the lack and/or delay of feedback, some teachers even believed that observations conducted by leaders were only for checking whether, or not, teaching occurred. Generally, such findings are alarming. Hattie and Timperley (2007) remind us that such passing thoughts and feelings, which were at risk of being lost due to the delay of feedback, are essential 'clues' of the teachers' level of functioning, and are a base around which effective feedback can be provided. It is clear that the leaders in these three schools were not aware this fact. And as Ing (2010) concluded, because of the lack and delay of feedback, the observations conducted by the leaders in the investigated schools had very little impact on the teachers' instructional improvement.

D. The Feedback Atmosphere

It was critical to look at the reasons that influenced the leaders to delay or even fail to feedback teachers about their curriculum implementation. The study revealed that the leaders believed that their teachers liked neither inspection of their curriculum enactment nor its feedback. Alice, the GAM in the MPSSc, stated that even though they often reminded teachers to communicate their instruction-related concerns, most of them did not do it. Bernard, the HoD in the MPSSc, echoed these perceptions. As he explained why they never offered descriptive written feedback, he said, "*Our teachers are not happy about it*". In fact, teachers themselves agreed with leaders' views in that they wanted their instructional problems to be discussed privately. Unlike findings reported by Mulliner and Tucker (2015) in UK (where the majority of the staff preferred individual typed feedback because they perceived to be more effective), teachers in the current study preferred for individual typed feedback because they felt it made them less vulnerable. This inference is made in the light of comments such as "*I think every teacher would be happy if dialogues about such issues occur in privacy*" from teacher Alice in the LPSSc. Teacher Batuli in the MPSSc echoed and defended their preference for individual feedback, arguing that it was hard to communicate their instructional concerns publicly as this could unnecessarily expose one's weakness to other teachers. As Westberg and Jason (2001) point out, such findings show that the teachers in the investigated schools were uncomfortable being the bearer of criticisms.

Such findings are not surprising in the context of schools. Little (1990) reminds us that the world of teachers is characterised by the norm of privacy. He adds further that even schools with high levels of 'collegiality' may still harbour a few teachers who choose not to share their issues with others. They feel it is their responsibility, and theirs alone, to solve their instructional concerns. Likely, it is this posture that influences them to demand privacy. According to Jug *et al.* (2019), the privacy attitude is also fuelled by the leaders' lack of transparency in their words and actions as well as their inauthentic representations of themselves to teachers. Therefore, even though the teachers in this study did not openly say they mistrusted their leaders, which was possibly out of fear that such information would be used against themselves if leaked, their demands for privacy were most likely attempts to avoid being viewed as inept by their leaders.

This atmosphere had negative impact on the leaders' instructional change-leadership practice. All leaders agreed with Bakari, the GAM in the MPSSc, who stated that he circumvented observing and providing teachers concrete feedback for their reactions to these processes denoted the "*Is he sceptical of my capabilities?*" mindsets. Calvin, the HoD in the LPSSc, echoing the same view, stated:

When you observe somebody, the message is that you do not trust her/him. I guess it is very difficult for all of us to approach someone and tell her/him that s/he is not teaching well here.
(Calvin, HoD-LPSSc)

In the light of these comments, it is likely that giving feedback was hard because the teachers could not separate change-guidance from judging someone as a person. This finding echoes those by Moswela (2010) in Botswana. In such circumstances, it is desirable for the leaders of these school to begin using the ‘sandwich’ approach to providing feedback advised by Jug *et al.* (2019). That is, beginning and ending feedback with positive comments, putting the negative ones in the middle.

V. CONCLUSION

This study looked at the technicality of feedback to frontline teachers and its effectiveness in promoting the use constructivist pedagogies by teachers. Generally, the lived experiences of the participants in this study opens the world of possibilities of improving instructional leadership in Tanzania. These findings may be applied by leaders not only of the investigated schools, but also from other schools with comparable characteristics to evaluate themselves and their actions as feedback providers, and subsequently improve their instructional leadership skills in leading instructional improvements. More importantly, these findings alert the Tanzanian Ministry of Education regarding the need to retrain school leaders on the issue of feedback provision and instructional leadership in general.

However, the transferability of these findings is highly limited. Readers should take note that the three schools investigated were not typical samples. They were typical settings chosen from a wide variety of Tanzanian secondary schools in order to allow for in-depth investigation and the collection of worthwhile data on the feedback process. Considering this argument, even teachers and leaders in schools with equivalent features should apply these findings with caution. Given the significant disparities between schools in different regions of Tanzania as well as between urban and rural areas, it is critical to know if the findings of this study would be different or the same in secondary schools in other parts of the country. Further studies may also employ the quantitative paradigm. This understanding will help in developing interventions that are appropriate for a wide variety of Tanzanian schools.

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