



Enhancing teaching and learning in schools through instructional leadership: South African perspective

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines instructional leadership's role in enhancing education quality in South African schools, where persistent learner underperformance reflects systemic challenges. Despite the Department of Basic Education's reports highlighting widespread underperformance, limited research explores how school leaders address these issues. Focusing on a public secondary school, the study purposively sampled eight school leaders, employing semi-structured interviews to gather data. Thematic analysis revealed that effective instructional leadership strengthens curriculum alignment and resource allocation, with principals serving as pivotal actors. However, gaps persist in leadership practices, necessitating targeted improvements. Key strategies include adopting learner-centered pedagogies, fostering teacher autonomy, and cultivating supportive learning environments. The findings underscore the urgency of prioritizing instructional leadership to mitigate systemic inefficiencies and improve knowledge acquisition. This study contributes to the discourse on educational leadership in low-performing contexts, advocating for policy and practice reforms to address South Africa's declining education outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The declining quality of education in South Africa over the past decade has raised significant concerns among policymakers and educators alike. The poor performance of South African students on national and international assessments vividly reflects this troubling

reality. The current state of education presents a formidable challenge that directly impacts the nation's development aspirations and future economic prospects. The South African Department of Basic Education (DBE) data corroborates the dire state of many schools, clearly indicating widespread student

underperformance (DBE, 2016). The statistics from DBE (2016) reveal that only 2,631 out of 6,772 schools achieved a pass rate of over 80%, while the majority of institutions had pass rates below 40%. These alarming statistics paint a concerning picture of the present state of South African education and underscore the urgent need for systemic intervention. While socioeconomic disparities and resource challenges persist as significant barriers, instructional leadership has emerged as a critical lever for school improvement. This study aims to comprehensively explore how instructional outcomes can be enhanced through effective instructional leadership practices in education. The strategic adoption of instructional leadership in schools has the potential to transform school environments, foster student and teacher motivation, and ultimately improve learning outcomes.

Instructional leadership has been identified as essential to the successful implementation of curriculum and the enhancement of students' understanding in schools. Instructional leaders bear the responsibility of establishing a conducive learning environment that promotes student-centered pedagogies and improves student learning outcomes (He, Guo & Abazie, 2024). As Cooray (2023) defines it, instructional leadership represents a focused approach that prioritizes the enhancement of learning outcomes throughout school. This leadership approach actively supports and encourages teachers to refine and improve their instructional practices (Hayak et al., 2024). Hayak et al. (2024) further assert

that effective instructional leaders provide targeted professional development opportunities, create a supportive school culture, and ensure teachers have access to necessary instructional tools and resources. Comprehensive instructional approaches encompass multiple dimensions including curriculum design, teacher and student support systems, and the meaningful involvement of stakeholders (Kioup & Voulvoulis, 2019). Given South Africa's unique education challenges, the implementation of robust instructional leadership practices becomes particularly crucial for educational enhancement (Muthumuni & Mokoena, 2024). Developing a clear, nuanced understanding of instructional leadership's influence on schools proves pivotal for providing improved, equitable education across diverse South African contexts.

Despite its demonstrated potential, the South African education system continues to be plagued by complex challenges emanating from apartheid's legacy and its persistent socioeconomic disparities. According to Mncube et al. (2023), schools in less developed communities - particularly South Africa's rural and township areas - frequently lack adequate resources and face chronic shortages of properly prepared teachers. In such challenging environments, instructional leadership has been identified as a valuable mechanism for initiating meaningful change, though its implementation requires careful promotion and support. Sanchez et al., (2024) concur with this assessment, asserting that by fostering continuous improvement, cultivating teamwork, and

promoting professional growth, instructional leaders can empower educators to overcome significant instructional obstacles. Similarly, Brolund (2016) posits that well-executed instructional leadership effectively supports teachers, improves classroom practices, and enhances student learning outcomes. However, some scholars present more cautious perspectives, arguing that while instructional leadership is undoubtedly critical, it does not represent the sole factor influencing educational outcomes (Ng, 2019; Kilag & Sasan, 2023; Sarong, 2024; Munna, 2023). These researchers emphasize that external factors such as education policy frameworks, funding allocation mechanisms, and prevailing societal views about education all play substantial roles, and their potential limitations must be properly acknowledged (Abdallah, 2024). This body of research collectively suggests that instructional leadership needs to be supported by appropriate policies and adequate funding to maximize its positive impact on educational outcomes, as these structural factors often lie beyond the direct control of individual teachers and school leaders.

Extant literature findings consistently emphasize the critical role of instructional leadership in promoting meaningful classroom engagement and improving overall school performance. The effective implementation of instructional leadership in schools remains an essential factor for achieving educational success in diverse contexts. However, it has been observed that recent studies examining the influence of

instructional leadership on schools predominantly originate from Western countries with fundamentally different educational contexts. The context of these Western studies may differ completely from the unique educational context and complex challenges that South African schools grapple with daily. Given South Africa's distinctive socioeconomic environment - characterized by extreme levels of inequality and highly unequal distribution of educational resources - tailored, context-specific strategies for instructional leadership implementation are absolutely necessary. There exists a pressing need for localized research that provides clear insights into how instructional leaders manage these multifaceted complexities to improve school outcomes despite severe resource limitations in South Africa. To address this critical gap in the literature, further study is urgently required to explore context-specific instructional leadership approaches and rigorously assess their effectiveness in under-resourced South African schools. Therefore, the primary goal of this study is to systematically investigate the influence of instructional leadership on instructional practices within South African schools. The central research question guiding this investigation is: "How does instructional leadership influence student achievement and engagement in South African schools?"

Global research emphasizes instructional leadership's importance (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019), yet Western-centric studies inadequately address South Africa's unique inequality challenges. This

gap necessitates context-specific investigations into leadership adaptation under resource constraints. Our study consequently examines how instructional leadership influences student achievement through the research question: "How does instructional leadership influence student achievement and engagement in South African schools? Three research themes emerge:

- The relationship between instructional leadership practices and teaching/learning outcomes (Naz & Rashid, 2021);
- Instructional leaders' role in teacher development and support (Shava & Tlou, 2018);
- The impact of instructional leadership on school climate and environment (Lombo & Subban, 2024).

Implementation challenges persist despite recognized importance. Naz and Rashid (2021) conceptualize instructional leadership through teacher support and resource strategy, while Shava and Tlou (2018) highlight its environmental shaping role - particularly crucial given education's growing national development significance (Shava & Tlou, 2018). Recent reforms consequently prioritize instructional leadership adoption (DBE, 2016), especially addressing poor National Senior Certificate performance (Shava & Tlou, 2018). Township and rural schools face compounded barriers including poverty and infrastructure deficits (Lombo & Subban, 2024), making instructional leadership essential for pedagogical improvement (Musewere et al., 2024).

Global education quality declines similarly concerning researchers. Mahon and Sembuante (2020) identify

contributing factors including socioeconomic conditions, funding shortages, overcrowding, and outdated curricula (Hortat, 2023), disproportionately affecting disadvantaged communities (Farquharson et al., 2024). This places immense pressure on school leaders to elevate quality (Asimiran, Kadir & Basri, 2020), with Liebowitz and Porter (2019) emphasizing their accountability for curriculum implementation. Zickafoose et al. (2024) consequently argue that effective leadership requires nuanced policy interpretation and operationalization.

Instructional leadership's school performance impacts are well-documented (Shava & Tlou, 2018). While external factors matter (Toprak, 2020), leadership remains crucial for improvement (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Munna (2023) notes its limitations against teaching quality, curriculum relevance, and infrastructure gaps, suggesting leaders need systemic support for maximum effectiveness (Asimiran, Kadir & Basri, 2020).

Empirical evidence demonstrates instructional leadership's positive effects. Khan et al. (2020) links it to academic growth through supportive environments, while Anderson (2016) confirms its teaching and learning benefits. Though resource challenges may limit efficacy (Lumadi, 2017), South African township schools show responsiveness (Agyeman & Aphane, 2024), attributed to leaders' adaptive practices (Angell, 2017). Khan et al. (2020) further associate it with positive school cultures and teacher development, supported by Khumalo's (2019) findings

on attitude and performance impacts. Hompashe (2018) conversely attributes many challenges to leadership practice gaps, necessitating deeper curriculum engagement (Agasisti et al., 2018).

Leadership approaches fundamentally determine instructional quality. Banach (2015) correlates specific practices with school success, while Khan et al. (2020) emphasizes style importance for institutional performance. Hallinger's (2005) three-dimensional model (mission, program management, climate) proves particularly relevant for South Africa (Turkoglu & Cansoy, 2018), though Khane et al. note its dependency on stakeholder quality. Namutebi (2019) alternatively stresses climate creation beyond specific styles.

Supportive learning environments remain essential. Lumadi (2017) and Turkoglu and Cansoy (2018) highlight leadership's environmental shaping role, with Tan (2016) identifying four focus areas: learner-centered pedagogy, teacher autonomy, principal engagement, and professional development. Ethical leadership equally matters, with Chetenio and Shindika (2017) demonstrating its behavioral impacts, though Hompashe (2018) notes systemic constraint limitations. Htut (2018) confirms leader modeling's environmental influence.

Leadership selection proves critical for instructional quality (Bhengu & Myende, 2016), especially given frequent policy changes (Mestry, 2017). While Khumalo (2019) emphasizes policy comprehension, Agasisti et al. (2018) advocate innovative adaptation - both crucial for managing change (Turkoglu &

Cansoy, 2018), particularly through clear communication and stakeholder engagement.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the multifaceted role of instructional leadership in a South African secondary school. Qualitative methodology was selected for its capacity to examine complex interpersonal dynamics and contextualized practices inherent to school leadership (Turner, 2016). A single-case design was employed to facilitate an in-depth analysis of how instructional leadership manifests and influences educational outcomes within a specific school setting (Truong & Hallinger, 2017). This approach aligns with the study's objective of uncovering nuanced, context-dependent insights rather than generalizable trends.

The research population comprised school leaders from a South African secondary school, purposively sampled to capture diverse leadership perspectives. Eight participants—including a principal, deputy principal, heads of department (HODs), and school management team (SMT) members—were selected based on their roles, experience, and willingness to contribute (Bryman, 2012). Pseudonyms (LD1–LD8) were assigned to ensure anonymity. Purposive sampling ensured representation of varied leadership tiers and contextual expertise, critical for addressing the study's research questions (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted at times and locations convenient to participants. Open-ended questions allowed for

structured yet flexible exploration of themes, while follow-up probes enriched depth and clarity (Hoey & Kendrick, 2016). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy. This method enabled participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions freely, ensuring rich, contextually grounded data.

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Alshenqeeti, 2014), facilitated by NVivo software to enhance rigor. An inductive coding approach identified emergent patterns, followed by iterative theme refinement through interactive revision (Allsop et al., 2022). This process ensured systematic categorization of data while remaining responsive to participants' narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three key themes: (1) improving instructional practices, (2) enhancing student achievement and engagement, and (3) strategies for optimizing instructional outcomes. Each theme is discussed below, supported by participant quotes and contextualized within extant literature.

Each theme is discussed below, supported by relevant interview quotes highlighting participants' perspectives. The main themes that are considered in this study are as follows:

Theme 1: Improving Instructional Practices

Participants unanimously emphasized instructional leadership's role in refining pedagogy and fostering collaborative environments. Key subthemes emerged:

LD1: "Using instructional leadership in our school ensures strong teamwork among us, the leaders and teachers. This collaboration is needed to enhance lesson planning, classroom presentation, and a conducive environment."

LD4's responses showed that instructional leadership practices in the school have contributed to improving teaching strategies. LD5 said:

LD5: "We adopt instructional leadership to emphasise curriculum development and implementation in the schools. This has helped us to improve the quality of students' engagement in school."

LD3 interestingly observed an improvement in how, through the guidance of instructional leadership, they can ensure learner discipline and improved performance in the school. The participant mentioned that:

LD3: "I have observed an improvement in learner discipline in the school and the classrooms. Learner discipline has helped our school achieve slightly improved results. Despite this, I think it is clear that some teachers struggle to maintain discipline and stimulate students to participate in class actively"

Participant LD7 stated that the school leaders introduce new pedagogies to support and guide teachers. LD7 said:

LD7: "Our principal often shares with the teacher new approaches for enhancing students' understanding of the lesson. However, the large number of students in the class makes it difficult to implement these teaching techniques effectively to motivate student engagement"

Participant LD8 explained how their school leader has ensured the practical design of lesson plans by asserting that.

LD8: "As leaders, we focus on an instructional leadership approach to support and empower teachers to use learning outcomes and lesson plans to present lessons in class. However, most of these lesson plans do not address the gap in real-world applications".

Participant responses indicated that school instructional leadership improves education quality and learning outcomes. Instructional leadership fosters collaboration among teachers and stakeholders, enhancing teaching methods and supporting curriculum development. The study found that strong instructional leaders inspire student discipline, critical for learning and progress. Many participants noted that effective instructional leadership improves instruction and addresses challenges affecting student success. However, some expressed concerns about classroom difficulties that undermine leaders' instructional responsibilities, such as maintaining student engagement, lesson plan implementation challenges, and resource constraints. These findings suggest that while instructional leaders positively impact education quality, other stakeholders must support the principal's efforts.

Instructional leadership is crucial for enhancing students' learning experiences. Research consistently shows its positive impact on student performance, teacher development, and curriculum delivery (Khan et al., 2020; Anderson, 2016). Khan et al.'s (2020) findings align with this by

showing how effective instructional leadership fosters supportive learning environments, provides resources, and promotes professional development. Similarly, Khumalo (2019) asserts that instructional leadership influences teachers' and students' attitudes (Khumalo, 2019). However, challenges can affect educational outcomes (Hompashe, 2018). Promoting ethical leadership and creating a positive school environment are vital for improving pedagogical processes (Chetenio & Shindika, 2017; Htut, 2018). As Khan (2017) argues, instructional leadership boosts school and student performance. However, Banach (2015) and Kadir and Basri (2020) posit that school leaders can use this approach to enhance instruction. Instructional leadership is most effective when aligned with high-performing subordinates and stakeholders. Regardless of the leadership style, school leaders must create a conducive climate and demonstrate positive behaviors to motivate teachers and students (Namutebi, 2019). Whilst theme one emphasizes how instructional leadership positively influences learner performance through collaboration, improved lesson plans and curriculum implementation, theme 2 focuses on how instructional leaders improve the quality of teaching through an improved environment.

Theme 2: The Role of Instructional Principals in Teaching and Learning

Participants' responses showed how leaders influence the quality of education. Findings indicated that principals create a supportive environment for enhanced learning. Participants' LD3 responses

revealed that the principal and other leaders motivate teachers by frequently involving them.

LD3: *"As leaders, we ensure that we actively engage with teachers, from time to time, to motivate them with their work. However, I believe we also need to engage with students to address their issues".*

LD8's response indicated that the school leaders have effectively concentrated on using instruction to enhance the quality of education.

LD8: *"We influence teaching pedagogies and motivate teachers to be committed to the goals of the school. We create an environment where teachers and students receive the necessary support to excel".*

The response from LD1 highlights how leaders are committed to developing the teachers in their school. Participant LD1 stated that:

LD1: *"We provide periodic training and development to support us and the teachers. However, this support seems to focus only on the teachers. It seems that little attention is given to the concerns of students".*

Similarly, LD2's response revealed that while the school leaders support planning collaboratively, more attention needs to be given to the daily challenges that occur in the classroom. The participant pointed out that:

LD2: *"Though we, the leaders, constantly support teamwork and group planning, we seem to pay less attention to the challenges in the classroom that affect students' learning".*

Participant LD5's response emphasized the strong direction provided by the school principal through effective interaction with educators.

LD5: *"As the school management team, we provide a clear vision for the school, which seeks to improve learning outcomes. However, there is a need for us to communicate effectively with teachers, students, and parents, too".*

The participants' responses indicated the critical role of school leaders in improving instructional activities. They agreed that the principal's leadership is significant but identified areas for improvement. School leaders foster a supportive environment for enhanced lesson presentation by engaging educators, offering professional development, and focusing on effective pedagogies. However, some participants felt that leaders and teachers need to address students' needs and concerns better. Findings indicated that principals provide essential direction and support for positive educational outcomes, but participants called for more attention to the daily challenges faced by teachers and students. This suggests that leaders must offer support and interventions to address these classroom challenges.

Instructional school leaders prioritize learner-centered pedagogies, promote teacher autonomy and morale, and engage in instructional activities to create effective learning environments (Tan, 2016). Their approach fosters a positive school culture and supports teacher and student dedication (Tan, 2016). This aligns with Shava and Tlou (2018) and Lombo and Subban (2024),

who point out that effective instructional leadership is crucial for improving educational outcomes, especially in rural and township areas. According to Toprack (2020), while external factors like socioeconomic conditions can influence education quality, strong leadership remains a key driver. In contrast, Liebowitz and Porter (2019) note that external factors affect educational outcomes, impacting the role of instructional leadership. Asimiran, Kadir, and Basri (2020) emphasize that school leaders need support and should focus on instructional leadership practices to address challenges and improve education quality in underperforming schools. Schools' challenges require adequate support for leaders to maximize effectiveness. In support, Musewere et al. (2024) focus on teaching practices and providing a supportive learning environment; Instructional leadership can help address the challenges facing South African schools and improve overall performance. Whilst theme 2 emphasizes addressing the needs of students to enhance the quality of education, theme 3 focuses on measures that can be adopted to improve students' learning experiences.

Theme 3: Measures to Improve Learning in Schools

The theme outlines actions that can be implemented in schools to enhance students' learning experiences. Participants shared different perspectives on strategies used in their schools to boost student achievement.

Participant LD5 explained how an adequate supply of resources allows for an educational plan that is tailored to improve

the needs of struggling students. Participant LD4 said:

LD4: *"The school needs to provide more resources to support students' learning, especially for those with learning barriers, to improve their learning experiences and progress".*

Participant LD1 mentioned that frequent feedback from teachers to students could help them excel in learning by asserting that:

LD1: *"Teachers have to adopt a strategy of providing regular and consistent feedback for students' learning to improve their learning experiences. Such feedback to students needs to be consistent".*

LD6 emphasized the need for the school to have reduced class size and improve the teacher-learner ratio, which improves the quality of education. LD6 said.

LD6: *"As a school, we need to promote smaller class sizes and improved teacher-student ratios, which could positively influence learning outcomes".*

Participant LD3 emphasized that employing technology in classroom engagement encourages students to take an interest in class activities and their education. LD expressed that:

LD3: *"We need to increase the incorporation of technology and electronic devices in the classroom that enhance active student engagement and collaboration. However, the cost for these devices is very high".*

LD8 responded that working together in the school and sharing ideas

about pedagogical practices contribute to the improvements in students' learning and ability to solve problems. LD8 said:

LD8: *"We need to focus on teamwork between the leaders, teachers and students. Such teamwork, collaboration and sharing of ideas are important strategies to improve students' learning and achieve learning outcomes"*.

Similarly, LD2 explained how extra classes and after-school intervention programs can help improve students' performance in critical subjects. LD2 intimated that:

LD2: *"We need to provide well-planned after-school programs that aim at improving certain critical subjects, as well as to help students who are struggling to improve their performance and progress"*.

Theme 3 revealed strategies to enhance student and school achievement. Participants mentioned measures to improve learning outcomes. These measures include resource allocation, student feedback, maintaining an appropriate teacher-student ratio and class size, and incorporating technology for engagement and collaboration. The need for adequate resources for teachers to address diverse student needs was emphasized. Additionally, providing detailed and timely feedback was deemed critical for improving learning outcomes.

Some participants emphasized the need to align feedback with learning outcomes and identified class sizes and teacher-student ratios as factors that affect the quality of education. They preferred improved class ratios to enhance individualized learning and viewed

technology integration as a strategy to foster student collaboration. However, the cost of acquiring these devices was a concern. These findings suggest that schools can implement multifaceted strategies to promote effective instruction.

To enhance instructional activities, schools must prioritize instructional leadership. Angell's (2017) findings show the need to tailor these strategies to each school's specific needs to improve student engagement. Similarly, Turkoglu and Cansoy (2018) assert that school leaders need effective instructional strategies and skills to foster supportive environments. Strong instructional leadership can improve student performance despite challenges (Lumadi, 2017; Agyeman & Aphane, 2024). Given these concerns about school performance in South Africa, DBE (2016) and Shava and Tlou (2018) concur that adopting instructional leadership practices is essential to improve education. Contrastingly, findings from Asimiran et al. (2020) and Liebowitz and Porter (2019) argue that instructional leaders should be accountable for supporting teachers and students to achieve educational outcomes. Similarly, findings from Bhengu and Myende (2016). Sarros et al. (2016) and Mestry (2017) held the view that school leaders must possess the skills to navigate policy changes and create a conducive environment for quality education. Khumalo (2019) and Turkoglu and Cansoy (2018) argue that, by understanding school management principles, leaders can adopt instructional leadership styles that effectively manage the school environment and promote positive outcomes. This finding aligns

with Mistry's (2017) finding, which emphasizes that effective leadership demands targeted training and support. Contrastingly, Bhengu et al. (2016) focus on the need for collaborative and context-responsive leadership in adapting to policy changes over formal training.

CONCLUSION

This study establishes instructional leadership as a critical lever for educational improvement in South Africa's challenging contexts. The findings reveal that effective leadership operates through three interdependent mechanisms: cultivating collaborative teacher networks, enhancing pedagogical planning, and fostering positive school climates. These elements collectively create the foundation for improved teaching quality and student engagement, particularly when supported by systemic reforms addressing resource inequities (DBE, 2023).

However, the research also identifies School principals emerge as pivotal change agents, with their leadership practices significantly mediating educational quality. The study identifies four transformative leadership dimensions: (1) professional development facilitation, (2) implementation of evidence-based pedagogies, (3) relationship-building between teachers and learners, and (4) creation of academically conducive environments. These dimensions align with Asimiran, Kadir & Basri's (2020) framework for instructional leadership effectiveness, particularly in under-resourced settings.

To translate these findings into practice, the study proposes several evidence-informed interventions:

1. Resource optimization: Ensuring adequate allocation and equitable distribution of educational materials
2. Class size reduction: Implementing policies to address teacher-learner ratios
3. Technology integration: Incorporating digital tools to enhance engagement
4. Formative feedback systems: Establishing regular, constructive evaluation mechanisms
5. Enriched learning opportunities: Expanding extracurricular programming

These interventions demonstrate particular efficacy when implemented as an integrated system rather than isolated initiatives. For instance, the study confirms that learner-centered pedagogies—when combined with adequate resources and professional support—significantly enhance both instructional quality and student outcomes. This finding reinforces the need for context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge South Africa's unique educational disparities.

While the study highlights leadership's transformative potential, it also reveals persistent systemic barriers. The theory-practice gap in curriculum implementation, overcrowded classrooms, and historical underinvestment in township/rural infrastructure (DBE, 2023) continue to constrain progress. These challenges necessitate coordinated efforts among school leaders, teachers, district

officials, and policymakers to develop sustainable solutions.

Two critical pathways emerge for future research and practice:

1. Professional learning ecosystems: Developing structured opportunities for knowledge-sharing, peer learning, and collaborative problem-solving among educators. Such communities prove particularly vital in resource-constrained environments, where collective expertise can compensate for material limitations.
2. Context-responsive leadership models: Future studies should employ mixed-method designs with broader stakeholder inclusion (teachers, students, community members) to capture instructional leadership's multidimensional impacts. Longitudinal and comparative research across different school contexts would further elucidate how leadership practices adapt to varying socioeconomic conditions.

The path to educational transformation requires reimagining leadership roles beyond administrative functions to focus squarely on instructional excellence. By anchoring their practice in evidence-based strategies and fostering professional communities, school leaders can overcome systemic constraints and create more equitable learning environments. This dual focus on individual capacity-building and systemic reform offers the most promising avenue for sustainable improvement in South Africa's complex educational landscape. While providing valuable insights, this research has limitations in its exclusive

focus on leaders' perspectives and modest sample size. These constraints point to important opportunities for future scholarship to employ more comprehensive methodologies and diverse participant pools, ultimately yielding richer understandings of instructional leadership dynamics across varied educational contexts.

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