

What Untrained Practitioners in ECE Centers Understood Play and Learning in Childhood

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to find out how the children's play was understood by untrained practitioners in early childhood education (ECE) centres in Malaysia. Research on infants' and toddlers' play in ECE centres shows many benefits for children's development including learning about social interactions with peers. This study uses Super and Harkness' (1986) notion of the psychology of the caretakers as an essential component of the child's developmental niche. By considering the practitioners' perceptions of children's interactions through the lens of Super and Harkness's concept, it becomes possible to see that the practitioners' perceptions can have an influence on children's social interactions with peers. This study sits within a social constructivist worldview and uses a case-study approach. Ethical concerns were outlined and approved by the Human Ethics Committee. In collecting the data, this study interviewed untrained practitioners from three ECE centres in Malaysia. The findings of the study show that the complexity of children's learning experiences remained hidden to the practitioners until they took part in this study. It provided the practitioners to deepen their thinking about children's social interactions and to begin seeing them as linked with learning through play. The practitioners perceived that (i) sharing resources; (ii) communicating with peers; and (iii) understanding peers' intentions, needs and emotions constituted important learning for children during playtime. A lot of opportunities for free play at the ECE centres should be encouraged so that children can benefit from the richness of learning that happens when they play together with peers.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Ece, Practitioners, Social Interactions.

Introduction

When children play with each other, their social interactions grow. Children-to-children interactions have many benefits to a child's development. Adults can help children by facilitating their social interactions through play. This may take understanding what is play and learning in the first place. The views practitioners hold about young children in their care can guide the practitioners to enhance children's learning experiences. Unfortunately, not understanding about play and learning can constrain the children's experiences too (Salamon & Harrison, 2015; Salamon et al., 2016). Mussati et al (2017) have argued, there is still a lack

of research on practitioners' perceptions, knowledge and children's experiences with peers in ECE contexts. While literature says young children are capable of independent learning, it also says children need adults' intervention and involvement in their learning (Salamon & Harrison). As children spend a great amount of time at ECE centres, it is important that the practitioners are aware of the social interaction that is going on between the children, how to support and encourage it, and to be conscious of the connection play have to learning social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997; Davis & Degotardi, 2015; Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Williams, Mastergeorge, & Ontai, 2010).

Practitioners' perceptions of children's social interaction

According to Salamon and Harrison (2015) and Williams, Mastergeorge, et al. (2010) practitioners often have their own perceptions about how young children should interact with each other and these are often reflected in how they respond to children's behaviour at their ECE centres. Practitioners' perceptions thus impact children's engagement with other children. This suggests that the practitioners' understandings of children's social interactions can influence the opportunities they provide for the children to engage in social interactions. Some researchers have argued that the practitioners' perceptions of social competence very much depend on the practitioners' educational level, working experiences and culture (Han, 2009; Jung, 2014; Mashburn, Hamre, Downer & Pianta, 2006). The researchers reported that the untrained ECE practitioners was connected with lesser commitment to social competence relative to academic goals and with the perception that supporting children's social competence is easy and that parents should influence the children in their social competence. Taken together, these studies show that what is considered important by practitioners will be the focus of their teaching (Jung, 2014).

Encouraging and supporting children's social interaction

Much research makes the point that practitioners have their own beliefs about how young children should interact with each other and their beliefs may reflect how they support the children's behaviour (Kemple et al., 1997; Williams, Mastergeorge, et al., 2010). However, evidence that practitioners' beliefs are often contradicted by their practice (e.g., Verma & Peters, 1975; Williams et al., 2010) exists equally as much as evidence that the practitioners' beliefs are consistent with their classroom practice (Caruso, Dunn, & File, 1992). Arthur, Bochner and Butterfield (1999) and Greve (2005) noted that it is the role of the practitioners in ECE centres to give opportunities for children to interact with peers because children need to be guided in this behaviour but Goodfellow (2014) argued that practitioners might have little knowledge about the best way to support children's social interactions.

Research shows that practitioners encourage and support children's social interactions in a variety of ways (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2003). Williams, Mastergeorge, et al. (2010) studied the strategies practitioners used to scaffold and guide infants in their interactions with their peers by observing them in the mornings during free play periods for 30 minutes over three days. The study showed that the practitioners used 12 types of social scaffolding in guiding infant social interactions which then were grouped into three categories: adult-centred; child-centred and group-based strategies. Among these three categories, it was found that infants who received more adult-centred and group-based scaffolding were less sociable with their peers six months later. However, infants who received more child-centred scaffolding showed positive social interactions with peers. The researchers concluded that adult-centred scaffolding could limit infants' behaviour towards peers because infants rely on

practitioners to facilitate their social opportunities. Providing early childhood practitioners with the skills, supports and resources they need to successfully promote children's positive social-emotional development has been recognized as critical to children's well-being (Green, Malsch, Kothari, Busses & Brennan, 2012). The aim of the study is to find out how untrained practitioners in ECE centres in Malaysia understood play and learning for children under three years old.

Methodology

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative research method where practitioners from three ECE centres in Selangor, Malaysia were interviewed. This study sits within a social constructivist worldview and uses a case-study approach. Ethical concerns were outlined and approved by the Human Ethics Committee. The interviews were done via individual semi structured interviews followed by a focus group interview. A total of 12 practitioners were involved in this study. These practitioners were not educationally trained at any higher institutions. They do not have any formal ECE knowledge at the start of their career and they all have less than 4 years teaching experiences at the ECE centres. The practitioners care for children under 3 years old at their respective ECE centres. The interview sessions made the practitioners deepened their thinking on young children's social interactions. They were prompt with the questions, "What learning is happening here?" and "What did the children learn during the play?" repeatedly.

Data Analysis

The analysis in this article is underpinned by Super and Harkness' (1986) concept of the 'Developmental Niche'. The 'Developmental Niche' by Super and Harkness (1986) is a theoretical framework that attempts to explain child development in terms of three sub-systems that work together with other features of a given culture to mediate the child's experience. The developmental niche has three components, which are: (1) the physical and social settings in which the child lives; (2) the customs of childcare and child rearing; and 3) the psychology of the caretakers. This study draws on the third component of the developmental niche: the psychology of the caretakers, and uses this as a way of explaining how the practitioners within the children's childcare setting mediated the children's experience. By considering the practitioners' perceptions and responses of children's peer interactions within their setting through the lens of Super and Harkness's concept of the developmental niche, it becomes possible to see that the practitioners' perceptions and responses can have an influence on children's peer interactions. Thus, this study focuses on the untrained practitioners' understandings of social interactions towards children's learning and how this can influence the children's social competence. The data was analysed through iterative and inductive analysis, generating categories and codes from the interview with each practitioner. We began with a close reading of the data corpus and carried on with recursive analysis, looking for patterns and repetitions of the practitioners' words. Based on this analysis, we formulated three themes: (1) sharing resources, (2) communicating with peers and (3) understanding peers' intentions, needs and emotions. These are discussed in the following section.

Findings and Discussions

The idea that play is an important part of childhood and contributes to learning in a myriad of ways was a dominant theme in how the practitioners perceived social interactions among

the children. As numerous theorists and researchers have said, play enables children to learn about and explore the world around them (Aureli and Colecchia, 1996; Elkind, 2007). Mayall (2002) views children's engagement in play as leading to the construction of knowledge, ideas and meanings. Tahmores (2011) said that play is important for the children's mental development because when children play they learn to communicate, solve problems as well as have a chance to develop their creativity. In a study conducted by Aureli and Colecchia (1996), preschool children who attended ECE centres were found to play and interact more with peers when compared to the children who did not attend any ECE centres. The sections below describe and discuss what the practitioners in this study perceived as important learning for children during playtime with their peers in their childcare centres.

Sharing Resources

According to Blandon and Scrimgeour (2015) and Williamson, Donohue and Tully (2013), the infant and toddler years are crucial for the development of prosocial behavior such as sharing, helping, comforting and cooperation. Wu, Hursh, Walls, Stack and Lin (2012), Hay (1994) and Hogan, Scott and Bauer (1992) similarly stated that prosocial behaviour for toddlers includes: joining other children for play; following rules; helpfulness; empathy; turn-taking and sharing toys, which can all contribute to the development of social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The practitioners in this study recognised that when children play together, they develop a number of social skills, including sharing their toys with peers. They believed that sharing is a learning task that children achieve as a result of being at the centre for a period of time

Amy: The positive outcome of playing together is that they can share their things with others. When Anna was a new child at the centre, she didn't know how to share. She likes pink you see. So when there were pink things around she said they were hers and she would not let anyone touch the things. I keep telling her that we have to share things here. After a while of being here, I can see that she can share, even pink things. She knows they are not hers but they are for everyone to use... Two days ago, Anna shared a toy with Willy without fighting. They shared a pink teapot.

Amy reported having seen some changes in the children's behaviour as they spent more time at the centre. She gave an example of Anna who did not like the idea of sharing when she first arrived at the centre, but, over time, Anna learned about sharing as a result of social interactions and Amy's verbal reprimand. Amy's statement of "I keep telling her that we have to share things here" indicated that Amy gets herself involved in the children's learning by repeatedly reminding the children about social rules. Amy saw playing with peers and reminding them about social rules as ways for children to become prosocial and she was obviously happy with the change in Anna's behaviour. Amy's behaviour is consistent with the idea promoted by Super and Harkness's (1986) concept of the developmental niche in which it is argued that the psychology of the caregivers, including their beliefs, influence the way children develop. This idea can be seen in the way Amy's belief about sharing being part of prosocial behaviour led her to constantly remind the children about sharing. Similarly, Amy's colleague, Fifi, reported that children learn to share resources as they play with peers

Fifi: The children learn to share when they play together. Like books over there (pointing to a bookshelf). They have a few favourite ones that they like to read over and over again. Before this, when one was reading, another came and snatched the book. But after several times of telling them to share, they don't snatch as often anymore. They learn to look at the book together instead.

Like Amy, Fifi saw telling children about social rules as a way for the children to learn about sharing. Here, it is evident that Fifi's belief about social rules was reflected in her approach to the children. Fifi also pointed out that the children did not snatch as often anymore, thus indicating that snatching or conflicts were behaviours that the practitioners sought to eradicate among the children through constant reminders.

Practitioners from the other two centres reported a similar approach: they taught children how to share objects by telling and giving instructions about sharing:

Elina: The children learn to share and give toys to their friends when their friends want to play with them. Sometimes they fight over a toy and when I see that I usually ask them to stop fighting and share the toy instead. They share more than they fight now. Sometimes they fight over me too because they are jealous for my attention. Like last week Saleha sat on my lap. Then Rafiq came and frowned at us. So I said to Rafiq you have to share me and then he smiled. One child sat on my left leg and the other sat on my right leg. They were both happy then.

Like the other practitioners above, Elina perceived that when children played together, it could help them learn to share their toys. Elina's comment also suggested that she saw it as her duty as a practitioner to tell the children to share rather than fight over objects. She clearly perceived that telling children what to do teaches them to do it and she seemed happy to see the children doing what they are told. Again, this shows how a practitioner's belief leads her to espouse particular actions.

Another practitioner highlighted that taking turns with the toys was important because there were not enough resources for everyone to use at the same time:

Nadia: During outdoor play, one child plays with a tricycle and then others want it too. They'll be snatching and screaming. So we have to teach them to share by telling them there's only one and you have to wait for your turn. So they wait and share the tricycle after their friends are done with it.

Nadia's comment on teaching the children to share shows how she perceived it as the role of the practitioners to teach the children to be socially competent and take turns when they were playing together especially when there was only one object of interest at that time. Nadia's comment suggested that she too saw telling or giving instructions as a way to educate the children about sharing.

These comments by the practitioners illustrated their views that peer interaction is more than just playing together. The practitioners saw learning to share as deriving from playing together under the social guidance of the centre's adults. This is in line with what Hurwitz (2003) and Pellegrini and Smith (1998) said, that play allows children to learn how to share and work in groups. The practitioners' comments above also indicated that children may come to the centre without the will or ability to share – as in Anna's case – but as they live

their daily lives at the centre, they were expected to learn to share their toys with others. The practitioners perceived that repeated reinforcement, such as telling the children to share, could change the children's behaviour from snatching to sharing.

Communicating with peers

Apart from learning to share toys as an outcome of play, the practitioners valued play as a way for children to communicate with each other. The practitioners highlighted that children like to listen to each other and imitate their peers' words as they communicated. For example, Rozita explained that

It's very normal for the children to imitate each other. I think imitating one another is how they interact too, a kind of communication. They imitate their friends' words. I think it's because they have limited vocabulary, so they imitate what others say. It's their way of learning the language too. When they are together, they have a chance to learn and practise language.

Similarly, Elina said

Children talk among themselves when they play together. Adults don't understand what they are saying but they seem to understand the message their friends are giving. They listen to their friends' language and they repeat it and laugh together.

Clearly, both Rozita and Elina recognised that children used imitation to communicate with each other. The practitioners perceived that imitating others' speech is a way for the children to learn the language. Rozita used the word 'learning', which indicated that she acknowledged what communication could bring to the children's cognitive development. This is in line with what Catron and Allen (2008) said, in other words that play is a powerful tool for language learning because in play children expand their vocabulary and improve their receptive and language skills as they are forced to communicate with their peers. While Elina did not provide more details on what it could mean for the children's development, her description implied that children enhance their language through communication with peers.

Other practitioner mentioned that imitation between peers could initiate a game or conversation between the children

Amy: Playing together is good for their communication skills. They get to communicate when they play and start a game. Like Willy the other day, he kept saying '*Apa khabar?*' (how are you?) to his friends. Then Ali and Roy copied him and kept repeating '*apa khabar?*' to everyone they passed by in the centre, both to children and adults. The three of them greeted people that morning and everyone replied by saying something to them and then the boys laughed about it together.

Amy's comment about the significance of play for the development of children's communication skills was illustrated with the example of how Willy used the phrase, '*apa khabar?*' to his friends and opened up a game to the children: he started a trend of greeting everyone who passed by, as well as provided a chance to communicate with other people. This is in tune with Kyratzis' (2004) statement that games are major speech events for forming alliances with peers. When the children played the game together, they had fun and at the

same time learned something about communicating with others such as receiving responses. Similarly, another practitioner, suggested that a game can start a conversation:

Husna: The children copied each other when they played together like copying body movements... like dancing and they also copied each other's words. Like when one child listened to her friend's word and then she copied the words. The others soon followed her and from there sometimes they laughed and they started talking to each other.

Husna's observation that children's imitation of each other's words led them into starting a conversation with each other echoes Eckerman and Didow's (1988) insight that in friendship that imitation plays an important role in achieving social coordination. Husna's comment clearly shows that the children achieved social coordination when they successfully communicated with each other even though she herself did not explicitly state this.

Beyond imitations and using words to communicate, some practitioners recognized that children used body language when they wanted to communicate. They said that the children became aware of their peers' emotions as a result of playing with peers every day at the childcare centres as is evident in the comments below

Khalila: Not all under three year olds know how to talk. It's more about babbling or single words right? So when they are playing together and interacting, there are also a lot of gestures, sounds and movement. That's how I see social interactions at this age. So when they don't use words, they use objects or body movements but they are able to understand each other.

Maria: The children who don't know how to talk yet use different ways to communicate. Like Omar, if he wants his friend to play with him, he usually goes to the friend and pulls the friend's hands. Sometimes pulling the clothes too... That's his way of saying I want to invite you to play with me... usually his friends understand him.

Fifi: Sometimes the children don't talk when they play together but they interact by looking at each other.

Husna: Everyday they come and play with each other. Sometimes they just use signals when talking to each other. Not words, just hand movements but they understand each other and can play together. When friends are sad or angry, they understand that too and give comfort to them.

Amy: The children do understand each other. For example last week Anna hit me. She wanted a toy but I said no. So Anna was angry and hit me. I pretended to cry and called Willy's name. Willy looked at me and came near and then he started to say things to Anna. I didn't understand what he said but Anna looked like she understood him. I think Willy understood Anna's anger at me and he was trying to calm me down or something. After that both of them walked away from me and played with some other toys on their own.

These statements by Khalila, Maria, Fifi, Husna and Amy show that they recognized that communication among peers is multimodal and that there are other ways to communicate with each other when language is limited; in other words, they recognized that the children expressed their needs by using body language and their peers seemed to understand them. According to Eckerman, Davis and Didow (1989), toddlers used nonverbal gestures in relating

their actions to their peers like how Maria described Omar pulling his peer's hand as a way of inviting the peer to play with him. The practitioners further emphasized that the children understood the emotions of their peers and that the children were capable of giving comfort to their peers when needed. The practitioners' comments reflected how they saw play as bringing the children together and gave opportunities for them to communicate and understand their peers. According to Canning (2011), children not only explore their sense of self but their understanding of others also grows when they play together. Khalila, Maria, Fifi, Husna and Amy were aware of the nonverbal communication the children displayed with their peers and this indicated that the practitioners were quite observant of the children's interactions with each other.

All of the practitioners above highlighted how peer interaction through playing together can lead children to communicate with each other, thus making play a medium of communication. Communication is not just talking by using language but also non-verbal means such as eye contact and body language. In a study by Vickerius and Sandberg (2006) on parents' perspectives on children's play, they found that parents too viewed the benefits of play as increasing children's language learning. In the parents' view, children develop the language faster when they have peers to communicate with. Vickerius and Sandberg (2006) further explained that when children play together, they learn about expressing their needs, compromising, negotiating, listening to other children, solving problems and making decisions which were all aspects of communication that the practitioners in this study also commented on.

Understanding peers' intentions, needs and emotions

The practitioners also perceived that when children play together, they could understand each other's intentions, needs and emotions and that this would not happen if they did not play and interact with peers on a daily basis. In this view it is necessary for children to interact regularly to develop an understanding of relationships with others, an argument made also by Davis and Degotardi (2015). According to Svetlova, Nichols and Brownell (2010), children's ability to understand the goals, desires and emotions of their peers increases during the second year of life because in the first year of life, infants are beginning to understand positive and negative emotions expressed by others (Phillips, Wellman and Spelke, 2002). Similarly, Vickerius and Sandberg (2006) argued that children learn about others' feelings when they play, and develop empathy and understanding about others' needs. The practitioners indicated an awareness of this dynamic

Elina: When playing together, the children also understand what each other wants. Maybe they are used to their friends because they meet everyday. Like when they play with something, for example just now Rafiq threw his teddy bear in the air to Saleha and Saleha laughed. If Saleha didn't understand, she might think Rafiq wanted to hurt her but actually they were playing in the same way that they might throw confetti in the air. They play like that regularly.

Jamilah: I can see that the children who cannot talk yet sometimes scream at their friends. But not all screams are negative. It depends on the situation. Screaming is fun for Omar. Sometimes his screams attracted others' attention and suddenly other children come and play with him. So I think that means his friends know what he wants and that his screaming might mean I'm inviting you to play.

Both Elina and Jamilah commented that they saw understanding peers' needs as an outcome of play. They perceived that because the children were used to one another as a result of coming to the centre everyday, the children were able to know and understand what was going on with their peers. In Davis and Degotardi's (2015) study, they found that interactions with peers regularly help children to develop an understanding of others. Clearly, both Elina and Jamilah acknowledged this. Jamilah also recognized that communication relies on more than words noting that Omar's screaming was an invitation to play rather than making chaos. Due to this recognition, the practitioners let the children carry on with their play without any intervention. This is an example of how a practitioner's belief can affect his or her teaching approach in an ECE centre, which is consistent with Super and Harkness' (1986) notion of the psychology of the caregivers.

Other practitioners also highlighted how the children can understand each other when they play together and that the practitioners were happy to see children cooperating in their games. The following comments during the interview illustrated this

Fifi: Children are playing cooking and they must understand what is going on because they are playing together, looking happy and cooperating in the game. Adults can watch and make guesses on what they are playing but only they know the truth to their game. Playing together makes them understand what each other wants in a game I think.

Khalila: These children play together all the time. Sometimes we don't even know what they are playing but they look very involved with each other, that means they understand each other as they play their games, laughing, screaming and running around. They look happy so that means everything is well. Even though we don't understand what they are doing or playing, as long as they understand each other, that is fine. They are happy, adults are happy too.

Nadia: When Ahmad pretends to be a tiger... a tiger chases the others. The others run away... Ahmad is the tiger and the others are getting away from the tiger. But who knows? Only they know what's happening in their game. When they are having fun and happy, we can relax a bit.

Fifi, Khalila and Nadia recognized that even though adults may not understand what was going on between the children as they played together, the children themselves were able to understand their games and this is evident through their laughter, squealing and how they respond to each other. Fifi's comment that the children must know what was going on in their play since they played together, Khalila's comment that the children looked very involved and Nadia's comment that only the children knew what was happening in their game indicated that they understood the children's ability to create their own play themes and that children do understand each other as they play. The practitioners' comments reflected an understanding that children create their own peer culture even though the practitioners may not recognize this term. Other researchers have documented this understanding also; for example Corsaro (1985) argued that children are always constructing their own peer culture when playing with peers. They have their own rules, values and understandings that are unique to them as a group.

In addition, the practitioners also highlighted that as long as the children were happy, the adults were happy too which indicates that they valued children's happiness as they played together. Children's happiness is important as it is linked to their well-being (Moore & Lynch,

2017; Langton & Berger, 2011; Jutras & Lepage, 2006) and understandably this was of concern to the practitioners. However, their statement could also mean that the adults were happy because they did not have to deal with conflicts and Nadia's statement of 'we can relax a bit' gave that clue. Clearly, the adults were happy to see the children cooperating in their game and they found things less stressful when things were going well between the children.

Conclusion

Taken together, the comments from the practitioners above indicated that when stimulated by Interview questions of social interactions, the practitioners' discussions showed that they were in fact quite observant of the children's understanding of peers' intentions, needs and emotions as they played together. Their comments showed that they recognized that children who attend childcare centres have the benefits of developing understanding of others, and that they not only can learn to read others' cues but they can also cooperate when playing games, which gave delight to the practitioners as the environment became happy. Furthermore, the practitioners focused on how children understood messages and cues that their peers were sending or showing. The excerpts of children's behaviour presented in this section illustrate how children formed relationships, created peer culture, and learned about the social world as they played together while the practitioners' statements reflected their understanding that children have their own 'peer culture' even though they did not use this term.

All things considered, in reference to Super and Harkness' (1986) notion of the psychology of the caregiver as a key influencer of a child's developmental niche, it would seem that the perception that play is beneficial for children was an important component of the practitioners' psychology and this was evident in the way the practitioners focused on the benefits of play and discussed how play can lead children to learn about sharing, and about communicating and understanding each other. Furthermore, the fact that the practitioners were able to think deeply and discuss this subject when prompted with questions suggests that when given a chance to reflect, they can open up their thinking about the children's learning as they interact with peers. Not all children under three years old could talk but the practitioners commented that this did not hinder them from playing together as they used non-verbal communicative tools to interact.

Implications for Practices in Ece Centres

When the children play together, they find ways to communicate even though some children do not talk yet. Pre-verbal children learn to use their non-verbal communicative tools to interact. Thus, play isn't just play. It is an interaction between children to understand others (Davis & Degotardi, 2015). These are important skills in developing the children's social competence (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). The children need to interact with peers so that they can learn to be effective during interactions. It is through play that children engage and interact in the world around them. During reflections through interviews, the practitioners in this study commented that through play, children learn how to share resources, communicate with peers and learning to understand the peer's intentions, needs as well as peers' emotions. Hence, practitioners should give a lot of opportunities for the children to do free play at their childcare centres so that the children can benefit from the richness of learning that happens when they play together with peers.

Practitioners often find managing a childcare setting difficult, especially managing or caring for very young children under the age of three years. The findings from this study indicate

that children's social interactions are so much more complex than what the practitioners perceived them to be. Thus, this finding can help practitioners see what is important to the children and at the same time help the practitioners improve on their classroom practices. Classroom practices like supporting the children's learning through play and scaffolding the children's social interactions may help the children in their everyday interactions with peer not only to be effective in interacting with peers at the childcare centre but also to develop their social competence, which are useful throughout life.

Areas for Future Research

Much research has been conducted on children's social interactions but not many peer interaction studies have focused on children who are under three years old. The need for further research in this area is therefore still strong. Future research is needed to look at the children's social interactions across a greater number of childcare centres all over the country. A study could also be undertaken to investigate qualified (as opposed to untrained) practitioners' perceptions of children's social interactions and find out how they support or encourage children's social interactions at their childcare centres. The findings can give insights on the type of training needed for practitioners prior to their career.

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