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**Enhancing Equity through Curriculum Differentiation
Practice in Nepal****Krishna Bahadur G.C.**

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Abstract

Diversity is an inherent reality of today's classrooms, where students represent a wide range of backgrounds, abilities, and socio-cultural dynamics. The issue of equity has gained significant attention from researchers and curriculum developers as they seek to address such diverse phenomena in the curriculum development process. This study explored the status of equity through curriculum differentiation practice in the school, its major problems, and coping strategies for addressing the challenges. The study was conducted in two different types of schools (public and private) from Kathmandu Valley. Building on a qualitative research approach and case study design, four teachers from the two selected schools were purposively selected to derive the data. In this study, open-ended interviews, non-participant observation, and focus group discussions were used as the data collection tools. The obtained data were analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis procedures. The findings show that there is enough practice of curriculum differentiation regarding the content, strategy and methods, learning environment, and student output in the schools. However, there are rare intentional practices of curriculum differentiation to promote equity in schools. Instead, these practices primarily focus on addressing the equity of the learners related to their learnability. The study also indicates that schools have faced some problems like poor resources, proper training, and collaborative instruction during the differentiation practice of curriculum. Therefore, equity can be enhanced in educational institutions through curriculum differentiation practices by effectively managing resources, providing adequate training, and fostering collaborative instruction. The study suggests that enhancing equity in schools requires not only the efforts of teachers but also the active involvement of administrators, parents, and students.

Keywords: Connectivism, constructivism, curriculum differentiation, equity

Introduction

According to McGee Banks and Banks (1995), equity means making sure that every student has access to the curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and challenges that they require. This is done by acknowledging and responding to individual differences and the sociopolitical context of teaching and learning (Smith & Chestnutt, 2021). Equity reflects social justice and there are various ways for it among them one is the curriculum differentiation practice. Generally speaking, the goal of curriculum differentiation is to accommodate the diversity of students. This is because students in a class typically come from various cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. They also have varying talents, including below-average, average, and above-average skills; they also learn various knowledge, skills, and so on.

Normally in the inclusive classroom, equity is ensured in the institutions. To create inclusive classrooms that improve learning outcomes for all students, the pedagogical approach which is intended to serve the various needs of children is essential (Matiyenga & Ajani, nd). It makes the learning situation inclusive and supports enhancing equity in the process of learning. In the context of learning, every child has a unique learning style and set of coping mechanisms for the challenges of classroom instruction. Individuals categorized as underachievers require specialized remedial instruction to provide them additional time to complete the educational resources. To promote optimal growth, individuals with above-average skills require appropriate educational programs (Adebisi, 2024; Saleh, 2012). Individualized approaches that offer diverse instruction, chances for diverse peer interaction, and differentiated results in a welcoming, inclusive learning environment are necessary for students with learning disabilities. Similarly, students have grown up in case of their learning abilities with the support of the mentor in their learning area as well. If the instructor uses varying talents in the learning process, the equity of the learners is increased on one side and the learning ability also increased on the other. So, curriculum differentiation is one of the techniques to augment equity in the learning process.

Equity is one of the major techniques to enhance the curriculum differentiation process (Kafle & Luitel, 2020). In higher education, the status of equity is increasing through various ideologies i.e. access to higher education, awareness, broader thoughts towards differentiated learners, and so on. Equality is just a framework of justice for every child in education but equity is a reality-based means of justice to them. The curriculum and the instructional techniques of teachers can balance the equity in the learning process. Assessment and the learning environment are also influencing factors to improve equity in the learning process. Curriculum differentiation models are some of the equity management techniques in the education sector (Ronksley-Pavia, 2010). Apart from these techniques, the individualized approaches are more reliable and contextual to enhance equity in the teaching and learning process.

There are various models of curriculum i.e. Kaplan model, Maker's model, and the Williams model (Ronksley-Pavia, 2010). Since there are various models and practices of

curriculum differentiation in the education sector to enhance equity and provide justice for the diversified child, the single technique is not enough. So, there are various ways and techniques of efforts to balance the diversification through the curriculum. In this regard, how equity is improved in the instructional process, and what are the techniques of providing equity in the instructional process raises the problem in this context.

Curriculum differentiation practice is one of the crucial techniques for enhancing equity in the educational arena. There are various tools and techniques for enhancing equity and equality through a differentiation process. Content, strategies, learning environment, and output are some of the dimensions of curriculum differentiation along with the teacher in a pivotal role. To enhance equity, a single technique of curricular dimension is not preferable in the instructional process. Similarly, there are no suitable practices of curricular differentiation for the varying backgrounds of learners. These situations reflect the research gap of the study.

In the present context of Nepal, this study is useful to the policymakers for improving the curricular policy for school-level learners. Similarly, teachers who are now engaged in the instructional process, they are also benefit from this study by analyzing the different models and dimensions of curriculum dimensions. The learners who have no idea about the equity and equality process in education and the curricular differentiation process are also taking advantage of this study. Finally, the researchers have generated their ideas in case the curriculum differentiates practice in the Nepalese context shortly.

Research questions

What is the situation of equity through curriculum differentiation practice?

What are the major problems of curriculum differentiation practice?

How to cope with the challenges of curriculum differentiation practice?

Review of Related Literature

Curriculum differentiation is a way of adjoining varied ability students in the learning process. It has various models and techniques which provide a sense of equity for the various abilities of students in the same places. It is a means of providing justice to every child which supports enhancing equity. To support these arguments, the literature of this study is essential. In this regard, the theory and the empirical review of the study are presented below.

Theoretical review

Connectivism is one of the theories concerning the learning process which deals with the varied ideas in a single platform. There are different ideas of learners from varied socio-cultural backgrounds. They need to connect with other's knowledge and skills in the classroom. In this regard, curriculum differentiation practice including its models may be a better technique that provides justice and enhances equity in case of the diversified abilities of the learners. This is a learning theory because firstly, Siemens (2004) defines connectivism as

the improvement of a student's learning process by the acquisition of knowledge and perspective through the inclusion of a personal network. Only by using these personal networks which the student gain the perspective and range of opinions necessary to develop critical decision-making skills. The learner can share and gain knowledge through teamwork because it is difficult to experience everything. Secondly, a learner cannot possibly know everything required to critically analyze certain situations due to the overwhelming volume of material available. A learner is empowered to pursue additional knowledge when they have fast access to vast knowledge bases. Such an aptitude for learning can help in pattern interpretation and research in case of their varied abilities (Duke et al., 2013). There are connections between varied theories and learning abilities in the classroom especially in the context of digital pedagogy today. So, this is a network that connects the students with their varied knowledge, attitudes, and skills with the others and different theories as well. On one side this theory connects the minds of the learners intra-personally and it can also connect them with their knowledge and skills interpersonally.

Connectivism advocates that learning begins when a learner connects to his/her surroundings and contributes to a learning community, thereby activating knowledge. According to Siemens (2004), "A community is the grouping of related interests that enables communication, sharing, discussion, and collaborative thought (Kop & Hill, 2008). Through the connective process of varied knowledge students have linked their knowledge with the social paradigm and the educational context.

To enhance equity through differentiation in the classroom, the socio-cultural backgrounds of the varied learners must be known by the instructor. The knowledge construction process is influenced by their background (Vygotsky,1978). The learners generate the meaning of knowledge and comprehend it through their ability.

Vygotsky (1978) claims that social and cognitive development are integral components of human growth, and students can engage with classmates the knowledgeable others (TKO) and learn new ideas through their interactions which makes the real practice of curriculum differentiation (Bidari, 2021). The ability and knowledge of the varied learners can support each other to enhance their abilities which makes equity more contextual.

Empirical review

A balance between students' learning potential and experience level must be established to provide a curriculum that both challenges and engages gifted children (Braggett, Morris & Day, 1999). The curriculum diversification models developed by Kaplan (1986) and Williams (1986) show how material, instruction, and learning procedures can be modified to adequately address the educational needs of gifted learners (NSWDET 2003);(Ronksley-Pavia, 2010). Without sharing the knowledge and abilities of the varied learners, the teacher cannot manage the actual differentiated learning environment in the classroom. Different curriculum models of diversification are also helpful to enhance the equity of the learners. There is a portfolio

model that is used these days in which the portfolio of the learners reflects their learnability which makes it easier to ensure equity in their learning areas (Kiel, 2015). In some cases, it supports to generation of the idea of an educational community which is useful for running educational institutions.

In recent years, a variety of inclusive educational strategies have emerged in the world. One of the most well-known inclusion strategies including in developing countries, is differentiated instruction, which modifies education so that all students are included (e.g. Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2018; Tomlinson, 1999; Westwood, 2016); (Nepal, 2021). Differentiated instruction, according to renowned scholar Tomlinson (1999), who is well-known for her substantial work on differentiation, is an approach that gives students multiple options for how and where they can receive and process information to make learning happen. This is something that one-size-fits-all settings cannot do.

Similarly, in case of the equity enhancement through curriculum differentiation, there are different types of practices of instruction by the teachers. In the context of Nepal, they have adopted within-classroom practices known as differentiated teaching to meet the requirements of children at a wide range of academic achievement levels. By using a variety of strategies that adapt curriculum and instruction to each student's unique requirements, differentiation aims to accommodate the diversity of learners in the classroom (Renzulli, 1977; Tomlinson, 2000). Students differ in their aptitudes, passions, and past experiences. By tailoring the curriculum, education, and evaluation to each student's needs and interests, differentiation helps to address this variation and it supports enhancing the equity of the learners (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). In the passion of the teachers within their recent knowledge and practices of skills, they have enough possibility of utilization of differentiated curriculum which makes the equity of the learners better.

To analyze the diversified abilities of learners, the teachers should know their levels of learning, different knowledge, interests, skills, and attitudes. By analyzing the varied abilities of the learner's teacher can manage the appropriate instructional techniques and enhance the equity in the classroom. From the various techniques, teachers can examine how gifted and non-gifted students view diverse curricula and instruction. Generally, they are divided with disparities in the requirements for grades and subject areas; heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings that occur within or outside of the assigned or regular classroom; and execution by the basic classroom teacher or a specially designated specialist, such as a resource teacher, coach, or "teacher of the gifted" (Kaplan, 2022). This is another way to verify the diversified children in the classroom. It supports to analysis of the variation of the learning and their abilities which makes the learning environment equitable and provides justice for them.

There are various dimensions of curriculum differentiation. To enhance equity in the instructional process, the instructor can apply any of the dimensions. Content, instructional strategy, classroom environment, products, and teachers are the major dimensions of

curriculum differentiation practice (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). So, not only a single dimension of differentiation is enough to enhance equity in the educational process.

Methodology

The methodology includes the tools and techniques of the study. Research methods may be understood as all those methods or techniques which are used for the conduction of research work (Kothari, 2004). Generally, it includes the essential tools of information generation, design, and techniques. A qualitative design is used to complete this study. A case study is the approach of this design in which the study area is purposively selected and the study is completed as a case. Four cases (schools) were selected through the purposive sampling method in this study. Among them two schools were public and the rest of them were private. By using an observation checklist, focus group discussion guidelines, and interview guidelines, the information was generated in the study and validated through triangulation and theoretical support. The examination of a case in a current, real-world situation is known as case study research (Yin, 2009). Some refer to case study research as a methodology, a strategy of inquiry, or a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009), despite Stake (2005) stating that it is not a methodology but rather a choice of what is to be studied (i.e., a case within a bounded system, bounded by time and place) (Creswell et al., 2007). So, it is not a simple methodology but a choice of the researchers about what is to be studied. Finally, it is a single case study and it has used the thematic analysis procedure in detail. The subject teachers and the students of different classes were the participants of this study and due to the limited time, resources, and materials, this study was delimited to the four secondary schools of Kathmandu Valley. Focus group discussion guidelines were used to generate the information from students and interview guidelines were used to subject teachers whereas the observation checklist was used to generate the information from the classrooms. Similarly, the collected data were analyzed through thematic analysis with theoretical support.

Results and Discussion

Drawing on the thematic analysis of the data, the results have been presented in the following themes and discussed in relation to the prevalent theories and comparing them to the previous research in the same field.

The situation of equity through curriculum differentiation practice

Curriculum differentiation practice is a way of enhancing equity in the instructional process. There are different ways to enhance equity in the learning process. One of them is curriculum-differentiated practice. Any of the institutions have used any kind of differentiated dimensions of curriculum whichever is appropriate (Ronksley-Pavia, 2010). So, educational institutions can produce and use any of the differentiated techniques and dimensions. Some of the aspects related to the differentiated techniques are awareness, providing training, providing opportunities to varied learners, and so on. Mostly, the curricular differentiated

practice in which contents, strategies, output, and the learning environment can be made appropriate to the learners' level of proficiency and age group. In this regard, the instructor can play a pivotal role in managing the balance of equity through differentiated practice. There are five dimensions of curriculum differentiation i.e. teaching arrangements, learning environment, teaching methods, support materials, and assessment (Roiha & Polso, 2021). In this regard, the major dimensions of curriculum differentiation practices are explored to relate the equity through this practice.

Curriculum content and design

Content and design are some of the major indicators or dimensions of curriculum differentiation to enhance the equity of the varied learners. Teaching arrangement is related to the content and design in which the teacher can arrange the seating management in the classroom along with the related subject matter. Generally, teaching arrangements, allude to different macro-level solutions in how teaching can be organized. Both arrangements that demand resources and structural adjustments as well as those that can be utilized by individual teachers are included in this dimension. In this manner, the dimension expands the duty of distinction to encompass the entire school community as well as the administration (Roiha & Polso, 2021). In this dimension, not only the physical structure of the students be arranged but also the content and the study design in the macro-level solutions can be organized. Some of the pieces of evidence from the field show the real practice of curriculum differentiation in the case of this dimension:

A community school teacher said as :

There is a large reflection of cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom and the teacher can manage the teaching content throughout the multilingualism. Though it is one of the most challenging tasks, the teacher has managed well because of his/her training skills. Seating arrangement is also a managing part but it can be done properly.

This is an argument of community school teachers in which the content and the design dimension are more appropriate for enhancing equity through the differentiation practice. Similarly, a private school teacher has this type of experience;

We have also a strong variation of students from the cultural and linguistic diversity. Though we have a huge number of students in a single classroom, we have managed the content and design dimension through our experience and training in multilingualism. The seating arrangement is one of the best solutions for enhancing equity which we have managed well.

The training for multilingual classrooms and cultural diversity in public and private schools have balanced the practice of curriculum differentiation practice through the teaching arrangement. Teaching arrangement reflects the physical arrangement but it is related to the multilingualism and the content dimension. Connections of the different languages along with the diversified brains and content reflect the well-managed practice of curriculum

differentiation which supports enhancing equity in the instructional process of secondary-level students.

Teaching methods and strategies

Teaching methods and strategies are interrelated and it refers to the learning process. In this dimension, materials can be included. Teaching methods and strategies can play a vital role in delivering the content. In case of the multilingual and multicultural background students, appropriate methods and strategies can be managed to enhance the equity of the learners. Teaching methods should always mirror both the topic as well as the individual needs of the students in question (Roiha & Polso, 2021). In the instructional strategies, teachers can well manage the teaching methods and materials. In the case of instructional strategies, one of the teacher participants from the public school recounted his/her experiences as,

We have a poor training situation for all the teachers to use the appropriate teaching methods and strategies. Similarly, some of the newcomers have used modern, digital, and 21st-century-related techniques, methods, and ideas to deliver the content while the old experienced teachers have just used traditional techniques to deliver the content. In this situation, equity is in shadow from this perspective who have used the teacher-centered techniques.

The view of a private school teacher is,

We have newcomers and sharp teachers to teach the difficult subjects i.e. social studies, science, mathematics, and English and Nepali languages. We have digital practice and result-based teaching-learning practice. Though we have centralized our ideas on passing the examination, we are encouraging students to learn through diverse strategies and methods along with materials. Through these techniques, teachers are more practiced with the new techniques and they have ensured equity in the instructional process.

Instructional methods and strategies along with the materials are crucial dimensions of curriculum differentiation practice to enhance equity in the instructional process. From the socio-cultural and diverse backgrounds, students have learned varied abilities. Through the knowledge of others, they have expanded their knowledge area. The constructivist view of Vygotsky emphasizes the construction of new knowledge through the background of the learners and their knowledgeable others i.e. the surroundings, teacher's peers, etc. So, to enhance equity in the instructional process, the instructional methods and strategies with the relevant materials play a vital role.

Learning environment

The learning environment is another important dimension of curriculum differentiation practice. Learning environments can be broadly divided into physical and psycho-social

environments (Roiha & Polso, 2021). The physical learning environment refers to the physical spaces where learning happens and the tangible objects in them. Similarly, the psycho-social environment refers to the feelings and emotions associated with learning. Regarding this study, the public schools have less managed the learning environment rather than the private schools both inside and outside the classroom. In this regard, the public school teacher stated

“The classroom is fully supportive from its environmental perspectives but resources are partially available which are needed to deliver the content and in the instructional process”.

In the same way, the teacher from a private school is perceived as

“We have well well-equipped classroom and a managerial classroom. We have free Wi-Fi zones in the school area. We have well-managed resources and materials. In the case of the learning environment, private schools have a better situation.

This evidence has shown that private schools are far better at managing their learning environment rather than public schools. Enhancing the equity of the learner's learning environment plays a crucial role but this is well managed in the private schools rather than the public schools due to various causes.

Student outcomes

Student outcomes are another dimension of curriculum differentiation practice. This dimension guides students learning more than any other factor (Hayward 2012; Hodgson & Pang 2012) making its differentiation of paramount importance (Roiha & Polso, 2021). This is one of the important dimensions in which the learners can get feedback from their learning task. It is related to the full and partial achievement of the learners from their abilities. It can be roughly divided into pre-assessment, formative assessment, and summative assessment. They all have an important role in learning and a wide range of methods can be employed in all of them. Regarding this, a teacher from a public school shared,

We have a few practices of assessment according to the needs of students but if we assess them in a formative or corrective way, we must provide feedback. It is frequently used but in the summative assessment, we can't provide feedback because it is the judgmental evaluation or the final assessment.

Likewise, the private school teacher's experience was,

We have formative and summative assessments continuously. We have frequently taken different assessments by the learners which may be supportive to enhance the equity in their learning process. In the formative assessment system, we must provide feedback frequently, and in summative assessment, we can provide feedback but that may be less effective. Though the formative assessment system is more effective we have summative assessment practice in a certain percentage which makes the learners more laborious and hardworking.

This set of evidence provides the assessment system is an important dimension of curriculum differentiation practice but the formative assessment system is better rather than the summative assessment due to its feedback system. Connectivism connects ideas not only intra-personal but also interpersonal. Learners can connect their ideas from their inner minds and hearts, which is more effective in the formative assessment system. They have connected their ideas from one person to another, which is usable to generate or construct knowledge and learn skills. These practices seem to be supportive of enhancing equity in their learning process.

Problems encountered in curriculum differentiation practice

There are some problems of curriculum differentiation practice in the community and private schools in Nepal. Some of the problems of this practice explored through the information have been presented and discussed in the following sub-headings.

Poor teacher training : One of the major problems of curriculum differentiation is poor teacher training to the school teachers. Due to some causes, there is poor training held in the schools i.e. lack of consciousness of the administrative person, poor interest of teachers, political influences, and formality for the career development (which is in the community or the public schools only). Private schools are reluctant in the proper teacher training. Some of the training packages are very important e.g. the differentiation practice on content and the design of the bi-lingual and multi-lingual students. Though the training on the construction of the materials is held as TPD (teacher's professional development) training, it is not properly used in real situations. The information from both schools has supported poor teacher training in the schools which may be a cause of poor differentiated practice of curriculum and its influence in the process of equity of the learners. It seems the teachers are unable to connect their theoretical knowledge with the practical skills of the learners in various cases. That makes the differentiation practice poor.

Lack of resources : Some different resources and materials make the curriculum differentiation practice easy in the instructional process. Due to managing and collecting resources, the schools have faced the problem of curricular differentiation. Some of the materials can be prepared at the local level but the teachers have poor interest in it. Similarly, different agencies have provided a lot of instructional materials in the schools but the teachers have poorly used them. Firstly, there are lack of resources and materials for the differentiated curriculum and secondly, if they have materials, teachers have used them very poorly. This seems to make curriculum differentiated practice very poor which is also hampering the equity of the learners in the process of learning. Constructing knowledge through the use of materials is also not in progress. Both schools have shown a lack of resources in the schools and are rarely used in the classroom.

Inadequate policy support : Policy level support is essential to implement the differentiated curriculum. Though the curriculum is prepared based on the needs and interests

of the learners at the secondary level, it is essential to update frequently. However, this practice is poor in the Nepalese context which raises the problems of the exact differentiated practice of curriculum and it may influence the equity of the learners. The evidence from the field has shown that if the policy for the differentiated curriculum is updated every two years, it would be better for the learners and it ensures equality in the learning process. The three tiers of the government have played a vital role in addressing the policy-wise issue but the federal government and its working speed are so poor they do not capture the aims of differentiated curriculum practice based on the contextual learners' need and their equity in the learning process.

Ways to cope with the challenges of curriculum differentiation practice : To minimize the problems, there are some ways to cope with the challenges in terms of the curriculum differentiated practice. Some of the means of coping with the challenges to enhance equity through curriculum differentiation practice are as

Well management of teacher training : Teacher training is an important tool for the proper practice of curriculum differentiation. Training supports to development of the professionalism of the teacher on one side and it supports proper curricular differentiation which ensures equity. The regular TPD training is not enough for secondary-level teachers. So the evidence from the field has shown that frequent teacher training should be conducted for the better differentiation practice of curriculum.

Proper management of resources : Resources and materials should be properly managed in the schools which is the basic requirement for equity through the curricular differentiation practice. There is lacking of resources and materials in the schools firstly and if there are resources, they are not in use secondly. So, this situation should be improved through administrative support along with the teachers. The evidence shows that community schools have some materials but not in use there are poor resources and materials in private schools but if they are, they are used properly. It seems supports to equality in the learning process. So this situation should be improved in the schools.

Support from the policy formation level : Policy-wise support is also essential to implement the curriculum properly. Though, it is essential to enhance equity through the curriculum, it is not in the control of the teacher and the administrative persons. So, the desire of the teachers of the secondary level of Nepal has reflected the proper policy-wise support to implement the curriculum in a differentiated way.

Collaborative instruction : In the present context, the collaborative instruction is also essential for enhancing the equity through the curriculum differentiation practice. Not only a single teacher is perfect to practice the differentiated curriculum in any subject. So, the evidence from the field has shown that collaborative instruction is essential which makes the equity balance in the learning process through the curriculum differentiation practice. Even parental support also essential for collaborative instruction to manage the materials and resources along with their proper usage.

Conclusion and Implications

One of the major ways of enhancing equity in the learning process is curriculum differentiation practice. Curriculum differentiation refers to the content, strategy, environment, and output of the learning process in which the crucial role is the teacher. To manage social justice and ensure the equity of the learning process, teachers can play differential roles. Such a role of a teacher can reflect the various abilities of learners and secure the equity in which the students can not feel what we do and whatever for it. So, the pivoting role of a subject teacher manage the learning environment to address the diversity of the learners and also ensure equity in the process of learning as a formal institution.

In terms of content and design, public and private schools have better practices because of the bilingualism and multilingualism in the single classroom. Strategy and the methods are well managed by the subject teachers in the schools which ensures the equity of the learners. The learning environment of the schools is well managed in this context which reflects the better curriculum differentiated practice. The output of the students also reflects the well-differentiated curricular practice but it is poor in the summative assessment system of the schools. Lack of proper teacher training, poor resources, and poor policy-wise support are some of the major problems of differentiated curricular practice in schools. To manage the proper training, resources, and materials, policy level support and collaborative instructions are some of the measures to cope with the challenges and it seems well-differentiated practice along with enhancing the equity of the learners.

This is one of the references for newcomers in the field of research regarding the differentiation of curriculum practice. This study does not cover all the aspects of curriculum differentiation and the equity process. So, for the policy level concerns it is applicable to know the information about the differentiation practice of curriculum at the secondary level and it is useful to the teachers and researchers in their concerned field to get feedback around it. Related concerned areas will be being the field of research shortly i.e. the dimensions of curriculum differentiation and its practices, ensuring equity or equality through the differentiation of curriculum, why curriculum differentiation, etc.

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