

**Illuminating Cultural Understanding:
Empowering Elementary School Teachers to
Effectively Engage with Muslim Students**

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Illuminating Cultural Understanding: Empowering Elementary School Teachers to Effectively Engage with Muslim Students

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Abstract:

This study addresses the knowledge gap among elementary school teachers, particularly in Dayton and the U.S., concerning their young Muslim students. The lack of familiarity with the culture, background, and traditions of these students is due to teachers from various subjects lacking comprehensive understanding. Consequently, interactions between teachers and Muslim students often lack effectiveness, influenced by media-driven misconceptions about Islam. This research aims to equip educators with insights to confidently engage with Muslim students, focusing on Fairborn Primary School in Ohio. Employing qualitative research, it examines teachers' awareness of essential aspects such as religious holidays and dietary considerations. The study gathers data from 30 teachers via the Monkey Survey tool, revealing that while many teachers lack Islamic knowledge, their effectiveness increases when adequately informed. Results indicate that understanding Islamic basics enhances teachers' confidence in handling Muslim students and parents. This research advocates for further exploration of how teachers' Islamic knowledge affects their effectiveness in teaching Muslim students. The study underscores the importance of integrating minority issues into teacher education programs and enhancing teacher-student relationships. Despite limitations, such as a small sample and potential online survey glitches, this research emphasizes the significance of understanding diversity for improved teaching and student engagement.

Keywords: Basic Information, familiarity, culture, background.

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إلقاء الضوء على التفاهم الثقافي: تمكين معلمي المدارس الابتدائية من

التعامل بفعالية مع الطلاب المسلمين

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المستخلص:

تناول هذه الدراسة الفجوة المعرفية لدى معلمي المدارس الابتدائية، في مدينة دايتون بالولايات المتحدة، فيما يتعلق بطلابهم المسلمين الشباب، يرجع عدم الإلمام بثقافة هؤلاء الطلاب وخلفيتهم وتقاليدهم إلى افتقار المعلمين من مختلف المواد إلى الفهم الشامل وكيفية التعامل مع هذه الفئة من الطلاب، ونتيجة لذلك فإن التفاعلات بين المعلمين والطلاب المسلمين غالباً ما تقتصر إلى الفعالية، متأثرة بالمفاهيم الخاطئة التي تحركها وسائل الإعلام حول الإسلام، ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تزويد المعلمين بالرؤى اللازمة للتعامل بثقة مع الطلاب المسلمين، مع التركيز على مدرسة فيربورن الابتدائية في أوهايو، ومن خلال استخدام البحث النوعي، فلقد البحث استهدف استقصاء مدى وعي المعلمين بالجوانب الأساسية مثل الأعياد الدينية والاعتبارات الغذائية، تم جمع بيانات الدراسة من ٣٠ معلماً عبر أداة المسح Survey Monkey، وتكشف أنه في حين أن العديد من المعلمين يفتقرون إلى المعرفة الإسلامية، فإن فعاليتهم تزداد عندما يكونون على دراية كافية، وتشير النتائج إلى أن فهم الأساسيات الإسلامية يعزز ثقة المعلمين في التعامل مع الطلاب المسلمين وأولياء الأمور، ويوصي البحث بإجراء المزيد من الدراسات الاستكشافية لكيفية تأثير المعرفة الإسلامية للمعلمين على فعاليتهم في تعليم الطلاب المسلمين، كما تؤكد الدراسة على أهمية دمج قضايا الأقليات في برامج تعليم المعلمين وتعزيز العلاقات بين المعلمين والطلاب، وعلى الرغم من أوجه القصر الموجودة في البحث مثل صغر حجم العينة ومواطن الخلل المحتملة في الاستطلاع عبر الإنترنت، فإن هذا البحث يؤكد على أهمية فهم التنوع لتحسين التدريس ومشاركة الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معلومات أساسية، معرفة، ثقافة، خلفية.

Introduction:

Diversity in public schools became an important and critical issue that educators have to deal with. Those kids who attend the public schools came from different backgrounds, religions, languages, and countries. Teachers should be knowledgeable about diversity issues, and educated about how to interact within such diverse students. Islam is one of the increasing minority religions in the U.S and Muslim students began to attend the public schools in growing numbers. Teachers struggle with diversity especially Muslims' kids because there are some important issues that should be clear for those teachers.

Teachers know that diversity in schools is something that they should appreciate but there is not enough information for those teachers or pre-service teachers about religious diversity in their schools especially about Islam. Understanding religions of the students will help those teachers to get the knowledge about the relationship between those students and their attitudes. Islam is one of the most misunderstood religions in public schools; therefore, some studies tried to give the teachers a clear view about Islam and Muslims (Subedi, 2006).

Information about religions that provided to teachers in teaching schools is rare. Only little exploration has been doing for Islam and Muslims in the public classrooms. Many teachers in public schools need more information about how to deal with their kids who are from different religions. On the other hand, Hoot, Szecsi, and Moosa(2003) claims that the intention of knowing about Islam has been increased since the September, 11 event. Also, the Council on Islamic Education (CIE) reported that there are many requests for resources and information about Islam after that event. In addition, this helped to give some useful information about Islam and it followers so the teachers can contact easily with their students without any ignorance, prejudice, or discrimination. Going through the literature, many studies talked about the beginning of Islam in America. Muslims are not newcomers to America but they were one of the first groups of people who came here and became citizens of the U.S. The number of

Muslims is increasing which means many Muslim students in public schools; now there are about 2.6 million Muslims in America (Pew, 2011; Kazi, 2013). So, the teachers' role is to help their students to live peacefully and in harmony together and accept the religious diversity (Jackson, 2014). In addition, there are some necessary changes to accomplish this goal, such as change –as needed- the teacher education curriculum and develop better policies about religious issues in schools. (Jackson, 2014).

Some of the studies talked about the important information about Islam that each teacher should know especially in elementary schools. This information was about: The Five Pillars of Islam, Which are:

1. Believing in one God and that Mohammad is the final prophet.
2. Praying five times daily at Dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, after the sun set, and after night fall. These prayers must be done in time if possible.
3. Giving Alms to poor.
4. Fasting in Ramadan.
5. Pilgrimage to Makkah. Once in a life time.

Other information was provided about other important issues in as well, such as the holidays, dietary issues, clothing and modesty, and the importance of separating the two sexes. Also, some of those studies mentioned the differences between the Muslims themselves and explained how they are from different countries, speak different languages, have different traditions, and backgrounds. “Our public school teachers need to better understand this diversity and how to work with diverse populations of students”(Sleeter, 2001, Mastrill, 2001, P.156). This basic information-in those studies- about Islam was conducted as necessary to all teachers to make a good understanding for their Muslim children's needs.

Why do teachers need to know about Islam?

Mastrilli and Brown made a study on some pre-service teachers to know what those future teachers know about Islam. Their study was to give a survey of 20 questions to 218 pre-service teachers to know how much knowledge they gained about Islam through their college

study. The survey showed how lack of knowledge about Islam those teachers were. The responses of those teachers indicated that there is a limited exposure between them and Muslims. The results that the researchers found showed that most of those future teachers do not know about the real number of Muslims in America, some identified Islam as war or terrorism, the majority of those teachers relate violence with the concept of Islam without knowledge about the fundamental beliefs of Islam, and few responds were about how those teachers intended to make their students understand that not all Muslims are terrorists. It is better to mention that this survey was in 2001 a month after the September, 11 event. “The survey responses do indicate that many of the pre-service teachers in the sample lack a rudimentary knowledge as to the nature of Islamic religion”. (Mastrilli, Brown, 2001, P.159).

Almost all the reviewed resources reported that the teachers should know about Islam so they will be able to address diversity issues in a way that enhance the learning environment and promote a good understanding of the meaning of democracy in this country. As stated by Subedi (2006) there are many cases had happened to Muslim students and Muslim teachers that educators should be aware of. She mentioned some “scenarios” such as a scenario about a Muslim teacher, after September 11th, has been asked by a third grader student: “What side are you on?” (Subedi, 2006, P.227). Talking about growing numbers of Muslims in the U.S, made some researches curious regard the Muslim students in the public classrooms. In a study for (Hoot, Szecsi, Moosa, 2003), some Muslim parents were interviewed about what experiences that their children face in their schools; the parents responses were about some anti-Islamic attitudes. The need to clear issues about religious diversity and Islam –in particular- has been critical.

Most of the studies talked about how Islam has been represented in the public schools. Most states require, for social studies, that a student should take a course about Islam in the middle school and another one or two in high school, which is not enough to make them understand Islam. Another area is when Islam is compared to other

large religions in the world. Then, some information about basic things in Islam such as the five pillars, the prophet, and the Quran. The last thing is the appreciation for the achievement of the Islamic civilization. So, as Jackson stated that these information come in historical and geographical framework but the educators have responsibility toward their students by helping them to know about Islam to eliminate the thought of terrorism about it “we shouldn’t rely on the media to teach our students” (Patricia, 2013, P123). In another study for (Barack, 2013) teachers have to gain some background about Islam as one of the increasing religions in America. The researcher talked about the importance of teaching about Islam in schools and educated the teachers specifically. In another study, the First Amendment that state the separation of church and state will not be violated when educate teachers about Islam or allowing Muslim students to practice their faith duties. Islam is different from the concept of “religion” that is defined in the American society because Islam is a way of life (Patricia, 2013). In addition, when a teacher possesses knowledge about Islam, he or she will create an environment where Muslim students feel welcome and integrated in the classroom. Non-Muslim students, on the other hand get the accurate facts about Muslims which is important for elementary school children. Also, the teacher who gain that knowledge can easily intervene when there is a conflict or teasing between a Muslim and non-Muslim student (Hoot, Szecsi, Moosa, 2003). Children in elementary school age ask many questions, they may ask the teacher about their Muslims peers so those are important points that teachers should be ready for (Kazi, 2013).

How can the teachers educate themselves about Islamic issues?

Teachers, pre-service and in-service, can get information about Islam and Muslims from many resources, but they should make sure that those sources are valid and accurate. In different studies, educators with various fields as well as teachers are advised to be educated and well-informed about religions. Marshall (2004) stated that teachers are model for their students on how they should be

educated and morally concerned citizens. Haynes (1998) mentioned The Council on Islamic Education as a national and scholar based resource that provides knowledge and information about Islam especially to educators. Hoot, Szecsi, Moosa (2003), Mastrilli and Brown (2001) also reported many methods that help teachers to gain the exact information that they seek. There are many Islamic councils and centers in every state that teachers can ask for information. Some of the studies stated that the parents of Muslim students can be an easy and available source. In addition, a teacher can read a translated Quran and “Sahih A-Buhkari” (a book that gather the sayings of the prophet Mohammad) www.bestteacherusa.net/muslim.htm. Barack (2013) mentioned some books and programs that are made for kids and easy to understand; teachers can use these books or some internet websites to seek the information that they need, For example, www.morningsidecenter.org. Mastrilli and Brown (2001) suggested that teachers can do their research and read to educate themselves; they mentioned some different approaches such as “guest speakers, field experiences” and add “independent research projects and subsequent peer teaching of new-found information, as well as readings on the topic” (Mastrilli, Brown, 2001, p 160).

How should the teachers deal with the Muslim students?

As the best teacher website recommend, a teacher with Muslim students should put in her or his mind that Muslims are not terrorists or believe in terrorism. Rossi (2004) referred to the President Clinton released religious expression in public schools in 1995, which give all people from different religions the right to practice their religious duties. That was “A statement of principles-guidelines on promoting the free exercise of religion in schools without endorsing a particular faith” (Rossi, 2004, p 16). Reading policies and laws make a good teacher take care of their students’ needs and see if there any accommodation needed. While most studies stated how children in Islam do not have any religious duties, those studies explained that some children like to participate in some of those religious practices sometimes. That made some researchers suggest some ideas about how a teacher can help his or her Muslim student practice their

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religion without any harassment. Some of the suggestions were for the prayer if a child wants to pray in the school hours. Haynes (1998) suggested that the teacher should let the child do the prayer on time and in a clean, quiet, and safe place. There will be one or two prayers during the school hours which need short time to be done and that may take place in the break or lunch time. It is recommended that the teacher make her or his student feel comfortable to do the prayer and keep other children away so they will not annoy him or her or maybe teasing that child after finishing the prayer. (Hoot, Szecsi, Moosa, 2003; Kazi, 2013. Muslim Students' Needs in Public Schools, ERIC1998).

Some suggestions were made for children who fast during Ramadan (the month of fast) the teacher can send the fasting students to a resource room or the library so they will not be surrounded by food in the cafeteria. (Rossi, 2004). The teacher who supports her or his students during fasting will gain their respect, love, and the parents respect as well.

Dietary, Modesty, mixing sexes, holidays were mentioned as well and were on the top of the basic information that teachers need to understand and deal with their Muslim kids. Teachers in American public schools do not have enough information about Islam and most of them are rarely exposed to Muslim people. Educate teachers, pre-service and in-service, about religions will promote some of the goals of education about diversity. Teachers must not ignore the Islamic faith of their students; therefore, teachers should be aware of the basic concepts of Islam. Education departments in all colleges should prepare the pre-service teachers by helping them to know about diverse issues and Islam specifically to eliminate any feeling of prejudice or discrimination (Reiter, & Davis, 2011).

When a Muslim student enrolls in American public school, teachers ask what that child is allowed to eat or do in school activities and what he or she is not allowed to. Some of the teachers do not know that Muslims do not eat pork so they ask if there is some kind of food that those kids cannot eat. Also, the teachers ask if there are

some activities that Muslim kids are not allowed to participate in. Another thing that some teachers may wonder about is why Muslim girls try to avoid playing or working with boys students. Some classroom activities need kids to work in groups so how can a clever teacher do about this situation (Khalifa, & Gooden, 2010).

Deficiencies in the evidence:

Some elementary school teachers do not have enough information about Islam or Islamic culture, so they may feel confused about which way is suitable to interact with Muslim kids in classrooms. The teachers need to know some information about those kids so they will be able to understand them better. Before Sep.11 Muslims used to live in harmony with others but after that event people started to change their opinion about Muslims (Subedi, 2006). The media was not neutral and caused bad treatment for all Muslims which made them feel sad. The Media and stereotyping made it worse to accept Muslims; therefore, information about Islam must be clear for everyone (Jackson, 2001).

Definition of Terms:

- A Muslim: is an adherent of Islam, monotheistic Abrahamic religion.
- Fairborn Primary School: is a school in Fairborn, Ohio that accepts kids from preschool to third grade. It has around 1,653 students and 79 teachers.
- The Quran: (the holy book of Islam), the literal word of God revealed to Mohammad through the angel Gabriel.
- Sunnah: the sayings and actions of the prophet Mohammad.
- Ramadan: the month of fasting.
- The holidays: Eid Al-Fitr (which celebrated after Ramadan), Eid Al-Adha (the festival of the Sacrifice).

Purpose and Problem of the Research:

This study is to help the teachers in elementary schools to understand and better connect with international Muslim students. All teachers need to know and appreciate the diversity in their schools, so they need to understand not only their Muslim students but also all other students from different backgrounds. Islam is a life style religion

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which means that Muslim students need some help and support from their teachers to make them feel that they are included in the classroom. Some teachers feel confused while others may feel frustrated or afraid of dealing with Muslim students. The hope is to give these teachers an idea about this group of new comers that will affect, in a positive way, both sides.

Many elementary school teachers in the U.S. and Dayton specifically do not know much about their young Muslim students. Those teachers with different subjects that they teach do not have any idea about the Muslim students' background, culture, and tradition. Those teachers feel confused about how to deal with those kids in an appropriate way. The media give people a wrong idea about Islam so those teachers may feel afraid of interacting with the children or their families. A good teacher should understand his or her students so he or she will know exactly what to do with their students.

Parents of Muslim students can see how teachers are confused and uncomfortable when having some international students from Muslim countries Hoot, Szecsi, Moosa (2003). This research will help teachers and other educators to feel confident when they have some Muslim students in their classroom or in the school building. Educators (teachers, principals, and school staff) would be able to understand those kids and know exactly how to deal with them and their parents as well. So, teachers will feel comfortable to do their job through this study.

What do elementary school teachers in Fairborn Primary School, Ohio need to know about teaching Muslim students? How can those teachers be more effective in teaching Muslim students?

The present research is delimited to Fairborn Primary School where some Muslim students are studying there. This study, on the other hand, will help many teachers in America to see how is it important to educate themselves about religions diversity and understand its effects on the school culture. Elementary school Muslim kids in specific way do not differ from other kids; Muslim students in elementary school still young and do not have enough

information about their religion so they need help from the teachers to guide them and watch what they eat in the cafeteria.

Methodology of the Study:

The research is going to take the approach of Qualitative research which is the methodology design that has been chosen. As in the definition of the qualitative research: “qualitative research is a method of inquiry employed in many different academic disciplines, traditionally in the social science” (Educational research,p.462). The reason for this method is the need to know what a group of teachers in an elementary school do know about their Muslim students; their holidays, dietary issues.

A survey was the method of gathering information that most fit the need for the purpose of the study. The purpose of the research can be accomplished by making an understanding for a group of teachers or some chosen individuals who share some values then collecting some data for this reason. The qualitative survey was the best way that would help to provide a theme that need to be addressed. The culture-sharing group is sharing some patterns that represent a large group so understanding the types of patterns is very important. A researcher should know and understand the different types of patterns that shared in the particular group; the Ideal: what should have occurred, the Actual: what did occur, and the Projective: what might have occurred.

Research Participants

The teachers who are teaching or had taught Muslim students in Fairborn Primary School have given an online survey. There are 30 teacher took this survey. The site is essential to the researcher because it is the place where the participants work or live; in another word it is the place where those people interact. The site that has been chosen is Fairborn Primary School, and the participants are the teachers who have Muslim students.

The Monkey survey is the type for data collection where the participants provided that data. The forms of data included some close-ended questions. Monkey Survey is an online tool that helps researchers to create surveys and analyze the findings.

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The sample in this study is a purposeful sampling which will include some teachers in a public elementary school. Those selected people help to understand the phenomenon in that study; therefore, the type of purposeful sampling will be the “theory” or “concept” sampling. The size of the sample should be small unlike the quantitative studies. There are some permission needed for working with this sampling; a researcher must gain this approval before beginning any step.

Research Procedure

First, the researcher got permission to start the research and to distribute the survey on the teachers. Second, the researcher emailed the survey to the teachers. Next, collecting the data and gathering it through the way that the researcher had chosen. Then, these data should be prepared for analysis and that can be done by:

- Develop a matrix or table.
- Keep duplicate copies.
- Prepare data for and or computer analysis. (the power point copy, p.2)
- Organize material by type.
- Transcribe data.

Next, the researcher has to read through data because reading the data for many times will help the researcher to develop a deeper understanding. After that, coding the data where the researcher segments and labels the texts to narrow them into few themes or descriptions. There are some steps for coding texts that may help any researcher when follow them. Then, represent and report the findings, and finally, interpret those findings.

Data Collection

The researcher in this study is a mother of Muslim students who attend an elementary public school. The sample in this research is group of teachers who might need help to understand the Muslim students in their school. The researcher is going to take permissions to start this study, and willing to accept and respect all different views. Some of the ethical issues are talking about some religious issues in a public school. Also, the teachers are not Muslims while the researcher is which may give some misunderstanding for the purpose of the

study. Some teachers may feel frustrated, shy, or afraid of participate in the study.

Methods of Validation:

How can a researcher make sure of the accuracy of the findings? The strategies are:

- Member checking. Or asking a knowledgeable friend.
- Triangulation
 - External audit.

It is better for the researcher to use at least two strategies to validate the findings because “the intent of the validation is to have participants, external reviewers, or the data sources themselves provide evidence of the accuracy of the information in the qualitative report”. (Educational research,p.262).

Results of the Study

The survey contains different questions that took the close-ended style. The collected data by the survey had reviewed by the researcher and analyzed for more understanding. The questions that used in the survey helped the researcher to understand the different levels of teachers’ information about the material of the research.

The research question was: what the teachers need to know about their Muslim students, and how they can become more effective in teaching those students. That what is shown in the table below:

The elements	No	Yes	A little
Do you know some Islamic basics?	46.67%	23.33%	30%
Does your knowing about Islam will make your Muslim students more comfortable?	14.29%	57.14%	28.57%
Do you feel confused when dealing with Muslim parents, students?	51.85%	25.93%	22.22%
If you know more about Islam, would you feel more confident?	40%	45.19%	14.81%
Do you think you need information about Islamic basics?	14.81%	55.56%	29.63%
If you know Islamic basics, would you feel more comfortable with the parents, students?	33.70%	44.07%	22.22%
Do you think you need to know about teaching Muslim students?	19.23%	61.54%	19.23%

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As a result, there is a need to do more study about the effect of knowing about some Islamic basic information and the teachers' effectiveness in teaching Muslim students. This kind of study will help both teachers and their Muslim students to understand each other in a better way.

Discussion of the Results

From the given data, the researcher found that teachers do need some information about basic information on Islam. Also, knowing about the Islamic basics would help the teachers to be more effective in teaching their young Muslim students.

On the other hand, the third element surprised the researcher which is "Do you feel confused when dealing with Muslim parents, students?" 51.85% answered "No", while a big number answered "Yes" for both 4th element and 6th element which indicate being confident and comfortable. This means that those teachers are not confused when dealing with their Muslim parents and students but they would feel more confident if they got some information about Islam.

Implications and Limitations

After conducting and analyzing the results of this study, it's obvious that teachers differ in their general knowledge about Islam. This may not affect the way they teach their Muslim students but being knowledgeable about minority issues will help both sides to improve in their relationship that go to the achievement benefit. The next recommendation is to teach pre-service teachers about some background of the minorities in the public American schools.

The limitations for this study were only few but the important one were that the teachers were feeling confused toward such issue. Also, the number of the teachers was less than the researcher thought where 30 teachers had answered this questionnaire from 79 teachers in the school. Another thing, conducting the survey by online to the teachers may face some electronic problems.

Recommendations of the Study

- **Teacher Training:** Incorporate training sessions for elementary school teachers to enhance their understanding of diverse cultures, including Islam, enabling them to better connect with their Muslim students.
- **Curriculum Enrichment:** Develop curriculum materials that incorporate diverse cultural perspectives, including Islamic basics, to create a more inclusive learning environment that promotes understanding among all students.
- **Parent-Teacher Collaboration:** Facilitate workshops or meetings between teachers and Muslim parents to foster communication, mutual understanding, and support in creating a positive educational experience for Muslim students.
- **Cultural Sensitivity Workshops:** Organize workshops for teachers, focusing on increasing their cultural sensitivity, debunking misconceptions about Islam, and equipping them with strategies to effectively teach and communicate with Muslim students.
- **Diversity Education:** Integrate diversity and cultural education into pre-service teacher education programs to equip future educators with the necessary tools to engage with students from various cultural backgrounds.
- **Student Ambassadors:** Establish student ambassador programs that pair Muslim students with their peers, allowing them to share their culture, traditions, and experiences with fellow classmates, fostering a sense of inclusivity.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the research findings, the following six research directions are suggested to expand upon the insights gained from this study and further enhance our understanding of effective teaching practices for Muslim students in diverse educational contexts.

- Longitudinal analysis of the impact of cultural education on elementary school teachers' understanding of Islam and effective teaching practices.

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- Comparative study of cultural education approaches: enhancing teachers' competence in understanding Islam and connecting with Muslim students.
- Perspectives of Muslim students: examining the effects of teacher cultural education on student engagement and sense of belonging.
- Collaborative efforts for inclusion: investigating the role of teacher-parent-student partnerships in creating culturally diverse classroom environments.
- Cultural awareness and academic achievement: exploring the influence of teachers' cultural competence on Muslim students' educational outcomes.
- Teacher confidence and culturally inclusive practices: the relationship between teachers' confidence levels, self-efficacy, and implementation of inclusive strategies for Muslim students.

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