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Community Organizing Participatory Action Research (COPAR) in curriculum development

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Abstract

Using Community Organizing Participatory Action Research (COPAR) as the main framework for the multiple data-gathering methods utilized in the study, the researcher addressed the following objectives: (1) to assess the educational needs of the Lumad and peasant communities in light of the implementation of Republic Act 10533, and (2) to develop a curriculum that addresses the needs of the Lumad and peasant communities considering the learning competencies stipulated by RA 10533. Freire's method of education was maximized as participants in the research included men, women, and children who learned to assess their role in their community as agents of change with the goal of achieving social transformation through education. Still adhering to Freire's method of education, the intended curriculum that was designed is simple and easy to understand, integrative, and perceptive of the social realities surrounding the Lumads and other peasant learners. From the state-approved curriculum, the new alternative curriculum ensured the presence of lessons and activities with a positive influence on all the aspects of a child's development: physical, emotional, social, linguistic, aesthetic, and cognitive through the application of the outcomes-based education (OBE) framework. Curriculum design also utilized the Makabayan (nationalist), Makamasa (mass-oriented), and Siyentipiko (scientific) (MMS) orientation, which is based on rooted assessment of the needs of the community learners. The integration of OBE with MMS framework is expected to result in transformative education that can produce lifelong learners who will aspire to be part of national development while promoting their identity and the good of their communities. The research process undertaken proved that community immersion provides an opportunity for self-reflexivity that can result in a more inclusive curriculum design. Lastly, it can be concluded that community organizing in education is a painstaking and endless process of collaborations, which, if purposeful and sustained, can positively impact the communities.

Keywords: *COPAR; community-based curriculum development; MMS curriculum*

1. Introduction

Lumad is the collective ascription of all indigenous people (IP) in the southern island of Mindanao in the Philippines. They are composed of 18 ethno-linguistic tribes. The majority of them are farmers living in the hinterlands, which means their accessibility to basic social services, especially education, is often difficult.

Elementary and secondary schools for the country's indigenous communities are usually located far from their communities. In order to reach these schools, the learners need to endure long and tiresome walks. These learners have long been deprived of education and 90% of them have never attended school (Save Our School Network, 2016).

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2009) observed that the IPs have lived in the periphery of society for countless years and were viewed as 'icons of romanticized past' whose worth goes only as far as participants in cultural celebrations. Despite the progress of the past 20 years where IPs plight have been addressed by United Nation agencies, the intergovernmental framework of finding solutions to address their needs did not elevate their status from being marginalized and oppressed.

The historic abandonment of the government in providing services such as education to the poor and marginalized in the Philippines has pushed communities to persevere in

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order to educate themselves and their children. The most common means to educate the children is through adult community members, who had the chance to attend school, sharing their knowledge to the young ones. They have long practiced the art of sustainable living through the passing of local knowledge from generation to generation, also commonly known as 'traditional wisdom' or 'traditional science'.

Fueled by their boundless dream, combined with their collective effort, these communities established their own schools. As of today, there are 205 community schools providing formal and non-formal education to children of indigenous communities in Mindanao island alone, all of them supported by non-government institutions and church-based organizations from different parts of the Philippines (Save Our school Network, 2016).

However, with the implementation of the Republic Act 10533, most commonly known as K+12 program, it became imperative for these schools to adhere to the new curriculum. Fortunately, Republic Act 8371 or the The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 acknowledges the IPs right to self-determination, which allows them to freely determine and exercise their socio-economic, political, and cultural rights. The Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) (2009) argues that it is through education that IPs, particularly the children, learn to take part in activities that enable them to practice their civic rights and take part in policy-making processes that result in the protection of their human rights.

Arguably, the most challenging part of curriculum development for the IPs is their right to self-determination because of the difficulty in finding a compromise between the learning competencies stipulated in the existing curriculum that aims to produce competitive industry workers and the IPs goal of protecting their land and their identity. Regardless of the number of education frameworks that can guide in curriculum development, a contextualized curriculum requires developers to immerse themselves in IP communities to involve them in the process of identifying and, eventually, addressing their needs. Only then can a curriculum intended to uphold the rights of the IPs can be developed.

With the implementation of Republic Act 10533, or the K+12 program in the Philippines, it is necessary to ensure that the transition from the old curriculum to the new will bring inclusive change to all learners. After all, the shift to K+12 program aims to meet the UNESCO-led global movement Education for All (EFA) (Department of Education, 2013).

With these considerations, this study focused on designing a curriculum for the Lumad and peasant communities in Mindanao. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

- (1) to assess the educational needs of the Lumad and peasant communities in light of the implementation of Republic Act 10533, and
- (2) to develop a curriculum that addresses the needs of the Lumad and peasant communities considering the learning competencies stipulated by RA 10533.

2. Theoretical Background

Community Organizing Participatory Action Research (COPAR) is a widely used framework in public health nursing that aims to empower marginalized communities by giving them the opportunity to engage in the research process where they play an active role as participants (Jimenez, 2008). As a social development approach, it aims to transform poor communities into being participatory and politically-responsive ones

(Hope, 2017). Stinger (1998) notes the significance of action research in today's world as the need for organized, systematic, and reflective investigations increases. With more people becoming aware of their conditions as oppressed and marginalized, action researches prove to be significant as they promote the principles of participation, reflection, and empowerment.

COPAR has registered positive impacts in communities that agreed to take part in health care research in the Philippines. Yntig (2007) assessed its effectiveness in community health organizing in one island in the Philippines and noted significant improvements in the performance of community health organizers and in the well-being of the people involved in the study. She noted, however, the necessity of external assistance in order to sustain the improvements of the status of community health care.

The principles of COPAR transcend health care issues. COPAR has been serving as a tool in community development, which facilitates the education of the people through activities that aim to enhance their capabilities. It puts emphasis on their involvement in the resolution of issues and concerns in the community.

One of the most common concerns among communities is access to quality education. It is a universal belief that education is a reliable tool to empower an individual. Access to education also means access to diverse cultures that enable people to live harmoniously in a world that is characterized by diversity and pluralism. However, McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, and Park (2005) observed that the needs and concerns of cultural minorities all over the world have been left out in curriculum development intentionally in order to protect the interests of the state. In the process, the marginalized become even more marginalized. Thus, the national curriculum of most countries intends to magnify issues and perspectives of colonizers. This only proves that Freire's (1985: 54) observation remains true:

“No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.”

It is imperative, therefore, to hear the voices of the marginalized communities in developing a curriculum that aims to address their needs. Education remains to be at the forefront of social services that can capacitate its beneficiaries to think critically and to make informed decisions for themselves and their communities. There is then a glaring need to apply the principles of COPAR to make education a means to empower rather than a tool to legitimize oppression and marginalization. Reason (1994) also offers related principles of action research that can contribute to the achievement of the goal of empowering the marginalized. These principles include (1) democratization of knowledge production and use; (2) concern toward society and nature; (3) acknowledgement that people has the capacity to reflect, learn, and change; and (4) commitment to nonviolent social change.

Awid (2009) summarizes the relationship among the principles, characteristics, and goals that makes education an empowering tool for the marginalized groups in the Philippines in the figure below:

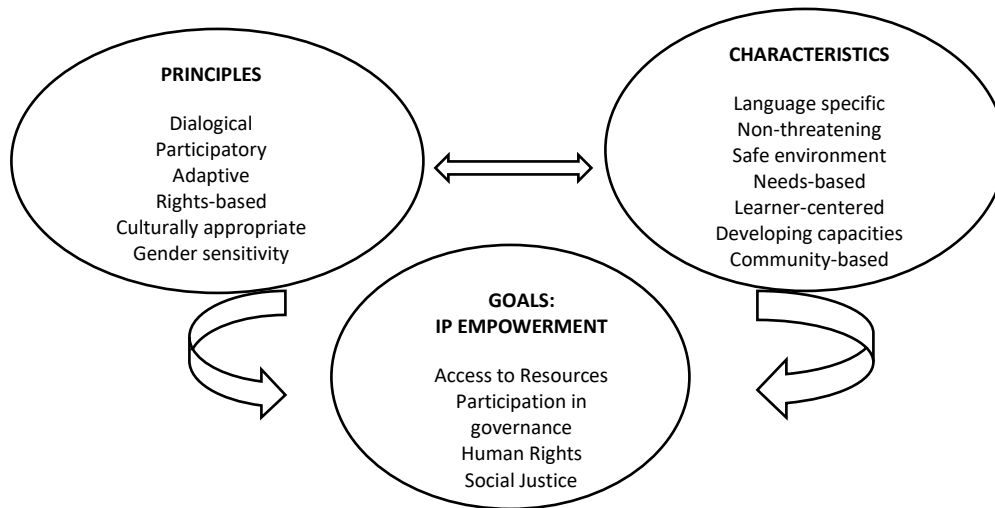


Fig. 1 Literacy Education as Strategy for IP Empowerment
Source: Rooted to Land: Strengthening Indigenous Peoples' Community Processes (2009)

Despite having the goal of producing lifelong learners, the imposed K+12 curriculum is still benchmarked from other countries whose curriculum aims at producing globally competitive workers. It follows the outcomes-based education (OBE) framework that resulted from Delors' report (UNESCO, 1996) that emphasized the need to retrain and learn new skills and/or competencies that would enable individuals to cope with the demands of a rapidly changing workplace. OBE is a designing-down framework wherein learning goals are the bases for strategies and processes that put learners at the center of instruction (Spady and Marshall, 1991). Learner-centeredness and contextualization are two of the highlighted features of OBE, which K+12 also puts premium on (Department of Education, 2013).

However, with a context that is very different from that of the Lumads and other peasant communities, the state-approved curriculum cannot appropriately empower these communities. At the minimum, it cannot even address their basic needs for cultural preservation, ancestral land protection, and development of functional knowledge to avoid displacement. Yunkaporta (2009) offered a cultural matrix that highlights the IPs' ways of valuing, being, doing, and knowing. The matrix presents IPs perspectives on cultural elements that serve as compositions of their pedagogical framework. Combined with Grant's (1998) IP educational framework, the IP curriculum that can serve the needs of the communities is believed to combine protocols, values, processes, and systems with the indigenized content on land, language, culture, time, place, and relationships.

Researches on IP education from other countries revealed that integrating the mainstream curriculum with traditional knowledge proved to be beneficial to learners from both the IP and non-IP communities. The integration results in more inclusive curricula where IP learners learn the processes involved to help them protect their land and culture while non-IP learners learn the role of traditional knowledge in maintaining the sustainability of communities. Le Grange (2007) offers a conclusion from his research on IPs' science education in South Africa to review the binary treatment of traditional knowledge to that of Western science. He suggested the integration of the two arguing that knowledge has always been locally and culturally produced. Integration, according to him, is possible if curriculum developers view science as a performance, which is produced

through social negotiation. This idea supports Turnbull's (2000:27) concept of interstitial spaces, where the localness and being context-specific of knowledge are the only common attributes of knowledge production, which makes it possible for seemingly disparate knowledges to be integrated to form 'third spaces' "through social strategies and technical devices for establishing equivalences and connections between heterogeneous and incompatible components while simultaneously establishing a social order of trust and authority." This provides a solution to Wrigley's observation (2004) on the enculturation of learners whose individual and collective consciousness are 'reworked' by school cultures. The integration paves the way for the improvement of the curriculum that results in mutual respect and understanding between IP and non-IP communities. In addition, it supports equity of access to educational content that welcomes and celebrates pluralism and diversity.

3. Methods

Using the principles of COPAR, the researcher utilized multi-methods data gathering technique in order to design the Lumad curriculum that considers the state-approved learning competencies that match their needs.

The research design that guided the conduct of this study is presented below:

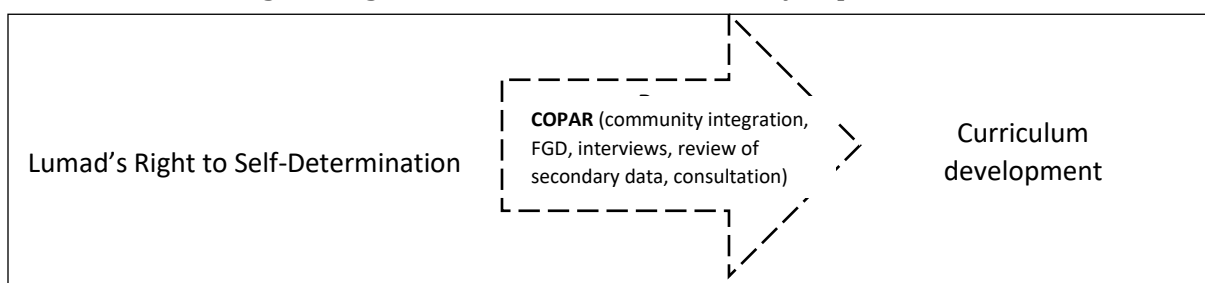


Fig. 2 Research Design

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews participated in by community volunteer teachers were conducted when 2,000 Lumads and peasants went to the University of the Philippines in 2016 to serve as guests in different forums aiming at educating the people from the urban areas, especially those from the academe, of their struggles and causes. The FGDs were facilitated by the researcher and a non-government organization that supports their cause. Twelve volunteer teachers, four tribe leaders, and 20 community learners participated in three FGD sessions. Interviews with textbook developers were also conducted. Questions and discussions focused on the following topics: familiarization of K+12 concepts and competencies, common needs of community schools, available resources in community schools, and external assistance from various stakeholders and support groups.

Figure 3 shows the Lumad learners in their community. Once they returned to their communities, the researcher also visited and lived with them for several weeks. Armed with the result of the FGDs and interviews, the researcher observed community classes to be acquainted with the community processes and the pedagogical techniques utilized in the area. Resources were also considered to aid in designing context-based and community-based activities. In this community integration process, Lumad and peasant learners were also interviewed.

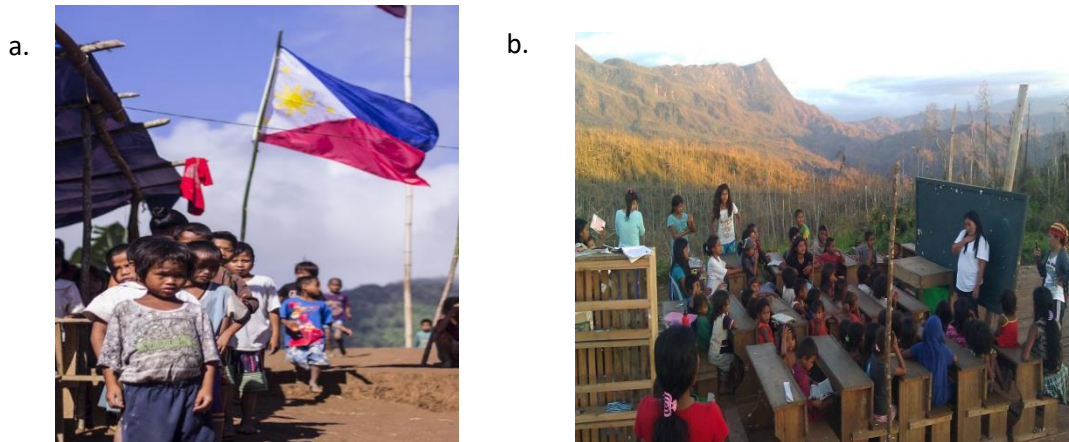


Fig. 3 (a) Lumad learners (b) Lumad community schools
Source: Save Our School Network-Mindanao files

Apart from these sessions, the materials used in their classes were reviewed with the learning competencies analyzed against the required competencies in the state-approved curriculum. Curriculum mapping was done with constant consultation with the learners and volunteer teachers. The intended curriculum was developed through a series of workshops, which involved content and process critiquing. Freire's method of education became the fundamental factor in identifying the consortium competencies for the new curriculum. The workshops were participated in by community leaders, volunteer teachers, and the learners themselves.

4. Result and Discussion

In order to achieve one of COPAR's principles that is for communities to solve their own problems, the community members were first given the venue and opportunity to reflect on the main issues they are facing through an FGD. The community learners and volunteer teachers were briefed on the goal of the project and were asked to orient the other participants. The researcher took on the role of session facilitator whose role involved contextualizing issues that are related to curriculum development when access to education was raised. To maximize community involvement, which is the basic principle of COPAR (Jimenez, 2008), the participants were encouraged to use the language they are comfortable with and were asked to elaborate their input using real-life examples of events that can clarify their claims. After giving a significant number of detailed real-life experiences, their input was mapped and categorized accordingly. In order to follow the internal to external direction, which is COPAR's emphasis (Vera, 2012), the issues were summarized first and the solutions on how to address them were identified. Suggestions for possible solutions were also sourced from the participants.

The common issue they raised is viewed to have resulted from the state's unwillingness to acknowledge the community schools they built because of the supposed non-compliance to the state-approved curriculum. Table 1 summarizes the result of the FGD:

Table 1. Learners' needs according to the identified issues/problems

Issues raised by the community	Needs to be addressed
Forced evacuation that greatly affects their education	Development of a contextualized curriculum that can be taught in evacuation areas
Closure of community schools because of existing DepEd schools in the areas	Establishment of community schools that acknowledges the Lumads' right to self-determination
Non-issuance of permit to operate	Accomplishment of documentary requirements for the application for the permit to operate
Non-compliance to the state-approved curriculum	Understanding the core principles of OBE and integrating the skill-based competencies to the new curriculum
OBE as a foreign concept	Selection of the positive features of OBE and integrating them to the nationalistic, mass-oriented, and scientific framework

From these needs, the research participants were convinced to acknowledge the positive features of OBE as used in the K+12 curriculum and develop a new curriculum that is contextualized to their needs. Utilizing OBE would mean adhering to the approved competencies of the national curriculum and utilizing the context of the IPs in choosing the content. This was assessed to be necessary as the non-issuance of permits to operate for their schools were blamed to their non-compliance to the state-approved curriculum. However, it was reiterated that these issues were only used to hide the real intention of stealing their lands from them. Participants in the FGDs and interviews were able to reflect on attainable solutions that can directly address the existing and pressing problems they are facing. This is important in addressing the observation of McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, and Park (2005) in terms of state-designed curricula that intend to forward the interest of the oppressors instead of that of the marginalized parties.

Identifying the urgent needs of the community was rather easy; however, agreeing on attainable solutions proved to be difficult. There were tribe leaders who wanted to address the problems by focusing on its root, which for them is the government's leaning to neoliberal policies that rob them of their ancestral lands. Although it is in fact the case, addressing this is beyond the capacity of the researcher. Fortunately, a series of consultation and discussions led to the collective decision of acknowledging and, thereby, utilizing the role of education to empower the people by equipping them with the skills needed to protect their lands and to fight for their rights.

Once the community agreed to adapt the designing down framework of OBE, workshops on curriculum development began. Community volunteer teachers, student representatives, and curriculum developers followed the principles of Makabayan (nationalistic), Makamasa (mass-oriented), at Siyentipiko (scientific) (MMS) framework in identifying alternative content for the Lumad curriculum. Consortium topics were also identified with the help of the local community members who took part in the curriculum

development workshop. The sample output from the workshops is found in the table below, which shows the first quarter of the Grade 1 community-based curriculum:

Table 2. Alternative Content and Competencies
based from the State-Approved Curriculum for Grade 1 Learners

K+12 (state-approved) COMPETENCIES	TOPICS	Alternative community-based COMPETENCIES
The learner listens for comprehension, speaks clearly and uses appropriate expressions in talking about oneself, family, and other social context interactions.	I. SELF-IDENTITY II. NATURE APPRECIATION III. COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP	The learner listens for comprehension & uses expressions on oneself, family and community; Reads and writes simple words and simple sentences; Has a growing vocabulary & translation of some words in mother tongue to English; Demonstrates identity and pride as a member of a community and as a Filipino

The skill-based competencies were retained but the content and specific objectives of the new curriculum were according to the needs and context of the Lumad and peasant learners, which highlights identity construction as early as in the learners' first year in community schools. Accordingly, the new competencies aim to immediately address the needs of the Lumads to defend their ancestral lands. With the goal of providing them with strategic communicative competence in dealing with state and private interventions that presents documents in the English language, they saw the need to include vocabulary building in the target language (English). Although there is a goal to attain functional literacy in the target language, they also put significance in taking and demonstrating pride in their identity as members of the community. These two objectives do not necessarily negate each other. Turnbull's (2000) idea of interstitial space is at play here wherein two seemingly incompatible components were integrated to achieve a condition that can be beneficial to the context of the learners. Learning a new language and using them for pragmatic purposes do not rob IPs of their identities; rather, it improves their skill to communicate their rights as legitimate owners of their ancestral lands.

The new curriculum also adheres to the concept of spiral progression, a key feature of the K+12 framework. The Grade 6 Quarter 1 curriculum as shown in Table 3 extends the learners' identity from being IPs to being Filipinos. Moreover, there is a specific target to learn self-expression, which is to serve the needs of the community with social change as the identified topic. Grant's (1998) primary content, land, is also highlighted with additional focus on the four components of IP education framework: protocol, system, process, and values. The topic is given emphasis after the discussion of the current IP

problems and issues and with a qualifier 'defending' to highlight the need for cultural minorities to act on problems they have identified in the needs assessment.

Table 3. Alternative Content and Competencies
based from the State-Approved Curriculum for Grade 6 Learners

K+12 (state-approved) COMPETENCIES	TOPICS	Alternative community-based COMPETENCIES
The learner listens critically; communicates feelings and ideas orally and in writing with a high level of proficiency; and reads various text types materials to serve learning needs in meeting a wide range of life's purposes.	I. CURRENT IP PROBLEMS AND ISSUES II. DEFENDING THE LAND III. ISSUES & PROBLEMS OF THE FILIPINO PEOPLE IV. SOCIAL CHANGE	The learner listens critically; communicates ideas orally and in writing with a high level of proficiency; and reads various text types materials to serve the needs of the community; expresses his opinions and feelings with a wider vocabulary

The IP culture and tradition is also the central source of the topics in the new curriculum with literacy pieces that serve as texts for the literary-based teaching of the skills from the state-approved curriculum and the values from the new community-based alternative curriculum. Grant's (1998) notion of relationship pertains to the perspective of the interaction among humans, nature, and the spiritual ecosystem. These contents, which have been part of the traditional knowledge passed from one generation to the next are still part of the alternative curriculum. However, there is an intended objective of using them in order to strengthen the IP learners' hold on their identity and community values and traditions. The texts serve as the bases for the listening and speaking activities for the entire lesson. The sample literary texts for Grade 1 can be found on Table 4:

Table 4. Sample Grade 1 content

Topic	Competencies	Literary Texts
Self-identity as Lumad	The learner listens for comprehension & uses expressions on oneself, family and community.	Tabunaway and Mamalu, Toglai and Toglilong bagobo creation myth, The Legend of Lake Lanao, Tungkung Langit and Alunsina (creation tale from Panay), Blaan creation myth, The children of the Limokon (Mandaya), The virtue of the coconut, History of Binaton

The intended curriculum was first implemented in 2016. At present, it is still done as a collective act; the community volunteer teachers, learners, and curriculum developers

document the challenges in the implementation of the curriculum for consideration in the assessment at the end of the academic year. The documentation process involves class observation, interviews with volunteer teachers and students, and weekly assessment with the community learners and leaders.

5. Conclusion

Today, the community embraces its role as active participants in decision-making in the continuous development and implementation of the new community-based alternative curriculum. The learning process, thus, begins not only in the implementation of the intended curriculum but in its actual development, which puts the community and its needs at the center of every decision-making process. The execution of COPAR ends neither after the intended curriculum is developed nor after the implemented curriculum is observed. It goes on until the achieved curriculum is assessed and the goal of enabling community members to know and to fight for their rights is realized.

The integration of OBE and MMS curriculum birthed an interstitial space that enables community members to enrich their traditional knowledge by utilizing these contents and contexts in activities that hone the target competencies of the state-approved standardized curriculum. This process ensures the provision to the marginalized not only access to education, but also an opportunity to create an enabling environment for the passing down of traditional knowledge and culture as the necessary contexts for standardized competencies.

Finally, by organizing the community, they begin their journey to empowerment through transformative education.

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