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## **A thematic analysis of teachers' experience in inclusive physical education teaching**

**Agus Sumhendartin Suryobroto<sup>1\*</sup>, Caly Setiawan<sup>1</sup>, Udon Nampai<sup>2</sup>, Agus Susworo Dwi Marhaendro<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Departement of Physical Education, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Indonesia, <sup>2</sup>Satit Kaset IP, Kasetsart University Laboratory School, Thailand

\*Corresponding Author: [sumhendartin@uny.ac.id](mailto:sumhendartin@uny.ac.id)

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### **ABSTRACT**

The current research aims to investigate physical education teachers' experiences in practicing inclusive physical education and the meaning attached to those experiences. The study focuses on the thematic analysis of participants' experiences represented in the collected qualitative data. 12 physical education teachers participated in in-depth interviews and photo elicitation interviews. Verbatim transcripts were obtained from all interviews. Using the tenets of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021), the analysis included data familiarization, open coding, theme construction, theme review, theme naming, and report production. The analysis process yielded four themes of teachers' experiences including (1) the roles of background knowledge and skills, (2) teaching various types of disabilities, (3) inclusive pedagogy approaches, and (3) facilitators and barriers to teaching inclusive physical education. The meaning of the experiences includes the meaning of inclusion, inclusive physical education, and inclusive physical education teaching. We conclude that experience is important in delivering inclusive physical education, especially in teachers' development of pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as in dealing with challenges in their teaching approaches. Added to this, the meaning of inclusive physical education teaching is reflected in in-depth engagement with this caring profession.

**Keywords:** thematic analysis, photo-elicitation, teaching experiences, inclusive physical education

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education has increasingly gained its central position in the current educational discourse in developing countries. The global movement for inclusive education such as *Salamanca Statement* has played important role in promoting the institutionalization of inclusive education. One of the central assumptions is that all students have a fundamental and equal right to education in mainstream schools (UNESCO, 1994). In Indonesia, the *Salamanca Statement* has been stipulated in government regulation (National Education Ministerial Decree No. 70/2009 about Inclusive Education). This policy has become an important bedrock that facilitates current educational programs and practices. In fact, the policy provides legitimation of inclusive program development in mainstream schools and more importantly becomes the outset of a non-discriminatory perspective about students with special needs in society.

Ensuring this fundamental right and equality in any way seems to be challenging in day-to-day classrooms, including physical education (PE). The case in the UK, for example, shows that National Curriculum for Physical Education (NCPE) has been designed to specifically accommodate inclusive physical education. Nevertheless, some teachers cannot achieve the expectation of NCPE (Haycock & Smith, 2010). NCPE contains competitive characteristics with a curriculum structure dominated by team sports (Fitzgerald & Kirk, 2008). This structure is

inherently exclusive. The failure to achieve the goals may negatively affect disabled students' learning experiences in PE despite the good intentions the teachers have designed. In other words, physical education may potentially magnify the marginalization of students with disability. Not only in the UK, but PE teachers in some other countries also make preparation prior to actual in-service teaching (Braksiek, 2022; Koh, 2018), and are less confident in teaching students with disability (Hodge et al., 2009; Nanayakkara, 2022), perform multiple efforts to ensure inclusiveness (Petrie et al., 2018), and show the importance of teaching stance (van Doodewaard & Knoppers, 2021). In Malaysia, PE teachers tend to be less competent in delivering inclusive PE (Bari et al., 2011).

Other studies show that teachers perceive physical activity for students with disability, especially the enabling, emphasizing, and affecting factors. The researchers found that factors determining disabled students' involvement in physical activity include: (1) the students enjoy fun and non-structured PA, (2) parents' support is important, and (3) home-school relation is close. PE teachers' positive behavior has been an important key in ensuring disabled students' learning experience is more meaningful (Haegele & Sutherland, 2015). This meaningful learning can be achieved by modifying and accommodating the learning process, creating a disabled students-friendly environment, and providing choices for inclusive or separated learning environments. In addition, the study investigating PE teachers' behavior in teaching students with disability in Shanghai inform that the interaction between teachers and students with disability tended to be more verbal than physical (Wang et al., 2015). Teachers' efforts to improve learning also include pairing students. Moreover, teachers modify instruction and equipment to maximize participation.

Ineffective efforts to implement policy in practice levels can potentially produce oppression through educational institutions (Freire, 2010). Within the context of physical education, physical activity and sport may lead to new practices of marginalization and discrimination of students with disability. Even, within curricula specifically designed for inclusion, such as NCPE, students with disability experience physical activity where they are being singled out from other students. Fitzgerald & Kirk (2008) emphasize that classes that reinforce social injustice in physical education may lead to negative impacts on disabled students' dignity and confidence in physical education. A study underpinned by critical theory informs that teachers' experience is unique in teaching inclusive PE (Petrie et al., 2018). Such teaching is a multifaceted solution toward inclusion. In the case of their studies, the teachers perform a series of actions including being reflective, familiar with the students, and receptive. The participants also use imagination to rethink the nature of learning in the PE context. Finally, the teachers share ownership of the class with their students in terms of the curriculum design and learning process.

Literature has documented important knowledge describing the status and condition of physical education in inclusive schools (Goodwin et al., 2022; Makopoulou et al., 2022; Neville et al., 2020; Thorjussen, 2022; Tristani et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the context of most studies has been in Western societies, despite one way or another reflecting the Indonesian context. Scholars have indeed begun to focus on inclusive physical education. However, such studies tend to be sporadic. Therefore, little is still known about teachers' actual experience of delivering inclusive PE. The current research focuses on PE teachers' experiences in teaching students with disability and the meaning attached to those experiences. The current study attempts to enrich the literature where the purpose of the study is to investigate physical education teaching experienced by the teachers who work in inclusive school curricula.

## **METHOD**

The research utilized a phenomenological approach in qualitative methodology that described experiences (Moustakas, 2010). We adopted some aspects of the phenomenological method and modified them based on the characteristics of the collected data. More specifically, we took into account the thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021; Terry et al., 2017) in approaching data about the teachers' experience.

Twelve PE teachers participated in the study after signing informed consent. These teachers taught students at all educational levels. The recruitment criteria included having experience working with disabled students for at least 1 academic year. This aimed at ensuring the meaningful learning experiences being investigated. Table 1 provides brief demographic information of the participants. For confidentiality, all participants' names are replaced with pseudonyms.

**Table 1. Brief demographic information of the participants**

Participants	Gender	Educational Title	Teaching level, certification	Teaching experience with disabled students (years)
Niri	Female	B.Ed.	Middle school, not certified	1
Dina	Female	B.Ed.	Elementary school, not certified	5
Sri	Female	B.Ed.	High school, not certified	15
Heriani	Female	B.Ed.	Elementary, certified	15
Rohim	Male	B.Ed.	High school, certified	20
Doni	Male	B.Ed.	All levels, not certified	7
Jarod	Male	B.Ed.	Elementary, certified	4
Okin	Male	B.Ed.	Elementary, not certified	1
Tikno	Male	B.Ed.	Middle school, not certified	7
Tho	Male	B.Ed.	High school, certified	10
Amat	Male	B.Ed.	Elementary, certified	15
Sarju	Male	B.Ed.	High school, certified	12

Informed The researchers employed three steps of interviews. First interview investigated participants' early experiences of teaching students with disability. After completing the interviews, the participants were asked to take pictures of their teaching and send them electronically to the researchers. Five to seven pictures were printed for each participant to be discussed further in the second step of the interviews. Integrating photo-elicitation into the interviews could stimulate the description of real immediate phenomena (Schwandt, 2007) and detailed information about participants' experiences of teaching students with disability. The last step of the interviews involved another photo-elicitation technique using artistic photographs (Richard & Lahman, 2015). Unlike the ones in the second interview, all the images did not represent physical education teaching. The researchers interviewed participants by metaphorically eliciting the meaning of their experiences from artistic photographs. We obtained these photographs from online sources under a creative commons license.

Data analysis included the steps through which earlier work of Braun and Clarke (2006) became the bedrock of the analysis. The first step was to familiarize with the data by reading carefully the interview transcripts prior to the initial coding. The second step is to generate codes. In this process, the data deemed to be meaningful to answer our research questions were coded. The coding was carried out as inductive as possible through which significant meanings were labeled in-vivo or empirically using participants' own language. Third, Braun and Clarke suggested analysis to move toward constructing themes. The themes were constructed by categorizing similar codes and began to think more deductively. The next step was to review potential themes as we worked to look for relationships among categories. Once we had a solid mind map of categories, we did the fifth step by defining and naming themes. The last step was to produce reports as we wrote the draft of this manuscript.

As Braun and Clarke suggested, researchers considered their latest works by taking into account the thematic analysis that affirmed the big Q approach. This approach was underpinned by constructivism (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Terry et al., 2017). As a result, we derived this philosophical standpoint into some analytic strategies, including predominantly inductive and semantic approaches to analysis without leaving the possibility of deductive and latent approaches

in the analysis. The following section describes the results of our analysis.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **Finding**

The analysis shows two major themes including the experiences of PE teaching in inclusive schools and the meaning attached to those experiences. Also, sub-themes of teachers' experiences were constructed including background knowledge and skills, pedagogical experience, and barriers and facilitators to inclusive PE teaching. The meaning of inclusive PE teaching consisted of several sub-themes, such as the meaning of inclusion, teaching students with disability, and inclusive teaching in PE. Each theme is presented as follows.

### ***The experience of inclusive PE teaching***

Three sub-themes describe teachers' experience of working with disabled students. They include the roles of knowledge and skills, pedagogical experimentation, barriers, and facilitators of inclusive PE teaching. First, the roles of knowledge and skills are important for the teachers in this study. They acknowledged that their prior knowledge and skills played important roles in teaching inclusive PE. This knowledge and skills had been developed during their pre-service education. The courses offered them to learn a wide range of physical activity contents along with teaching methods. In turn, it helped them teach PE to disabled students. Mrs. Niri stated, "I got the understanding when taking classes. We learned the theories and practiced the activities. We watched videos about teaching the contents. Then, we practiced in groups so that we knew how to teach different students. That was really helpful".

Most of the participants also identified specific courses that helped them prepare to teach disabled students, such as adapted physical education. The classes helped them to develop some basic knowledge about disability and its physical activity pedagogy. Nevertheless, teachers in this study felt that they did not learn much about disability from the sociological lenses through which they could see bigger pictures of disability issues in society. This was particularly true for social justice issues that came alongside disability. In addition, the classes also delivered learning processes that assumed teaching PE in special schools in which the students had the same type of disability. In fact, their current works include students with disability in mainstream schools where they are treated equally with other students. They also complained that the courses were limited to introducing only some types of disability. For example, Mrs. Dina mentioned, "the adapted PE class I took was only related to teaching low vision and blind students."

The teachers did not learn about a different type of disabilities before ranging from physical to mental disabilities. Mr. Tikno said, "I teach those with wheelchairs and deaf. In other schools, I teach low vision and hyperactive students." Another example was Mr. Jarod's experience with a blind student. He asked the student to perform the task and the student's response was "it's not whether I could do it or not, sir! The thing is that I can't see." Mr. Tho taught students with autism and shared, "if they want to swim, they only want to swim. If they don't like the activity, they can't stay on task for even a few minutes." They suggest that PE teacher preparation programs should include course content for various types of disabilities.

Teachers' learning through professional development activities is essential to their knowledge and skill development. Some senior teachers in this study develop their knowledge and skills of teaching inclusive PE through professional development activities. Topics covered in the activities include the concepts of inclusive education in general and various types of disability. Mr. Okin stated, "I learned about inclusive pedagogy for some disabilities from my professional development activities." Despite this knowledge being important, the participants complain about limited professional development programs that can improve their inclusive PE pedagogy. Mr. Amat considered himself an enthusiastic teacher to learn about inclusive education. He said, "I need training about: here are autistic children and this is how to teach them PE, like this. Here are slow learners and this is how to teach them PE, like this."

The second sub-theme is pedagogical experimentation in teaching students with disability. This experimentation might, in part, be the result of the gap that the teachers felt between their

professional preparation programs (and professional development activities) and their actual teaching situation. In other words, since what they studied does not quite represent the real condition in schools, the teachers tend to develop their own pedagogical experimentation when teaching the types of disabilities that they are not familiar with. For example, Mrs. Sri stated, “I recently taught deaf students and just got the idea of using videos. I asked them to watch the activities so they could do the activities without giving the instruction.” Also, the participants felt less prepared to teach students with disability in mainstream school contexts. Data show that the participants experiment with their inclusive pedagogy through (1) situating disabled students equally with other students, (2) adapting the contents and environment, (3) focusing on participation, and (4) administering modified assessments.

Third, the participants identify some barriers and facilitators to teaching inclusive PE. Analysis reveals that most teachers complain about their ability to deal with a specific type of disability. Therefore, they expect to have professional development opportunities specifically for teaching students with disability in mainstream schools. Mr. Jarod stated, “I feel that my teaching is underdeveloped, mainly because I never had training or a workshop related to teaching, like blind students, very specific. I really, need that kind of workshop.”

Data also show that some facilitators include leadership support, equipment and facilities, and teacher incentive. Mr. Onik stated, “my principle is very supportive. He comes to my gym and gives support. He always advises me: be patient with the kids.” Mr. Jarod informed that his school administrators had facilitated “table tennis for the blinds.” In addition, Mrs. Sri explained that teachers’ incentives to teach students with disability became important facilitators to her job. She stated, “we got a good salary as a teacher working in an inclusive school so we have to be responsible.”

### ***The meaning of inclusive PE teaching***

The analysis also enables the researchers to have insights into the data about the meaning of inclusive PE teaching. The researchers perform the analysis from photo-elicitation interviews with artistic images. The analysis identifies the meaning attached to their experiences. Three sub-themes revealed from the data include inclusion, inclusion in PE, and teaching students with disability.

The first sub-theme is the meaning of inclusion. The term inclusion can simply be defined as treating everyone equally. For some of the participants, the inclusion process requires specific attention to those with special needs. They acknowledge that their students are different, but their differences should not determine their status in society. Mr. Jarot picked a picture representing peasants who were harvesting rice. He explained metaphorically that society might consist of castes. Despite this social stratification, all members of that society had actually equal status. He stated:

*“For me, inclusion is like peasants who are harvesting this rice. These peasants have different castes from the farmers who might have a higher caste. But they are all the same, they work together. They are all harvesting rice. They essentially have the same social position with only a little difference. It’s the same here with students with disability and the rest of my students”.*

Mrs. Sri’s meaning construction about inclusion emphasizes Mr. Jarod’s. She chooses a photograph describing a woman who is traditionally shorting the rice on a bamboo tray. She continued to explain that inclusion is an effort to build equality and equality. The inclusion process is to place all the children central without differentiating them. Students with disability have potential and they need help to be at the center of life lessons.

*“Like in this picture, inclusion is like the process of shorting the rice. Here is the mixed rice on the tray. The peasants are tossing the rice to make the good rice in the center and then separate the good ones from the fruitless rice. Eventually, they have all good rice as*

*the process of inclusion. Teachers help students with disability in the center of life so that their lives become more meaningful.”*

Second, the analysis constructed another sub-theme namely inclusion in PE. The meaning of inclusion in PE includes the process of accommodating those with special needs. For some of the participants, this accommodation means the identification of disabilities that they consider one of the most difficult efforts. Mr. Onik, for example, selects a group picture of children showing big smiles. He illustrates that:

*“The kids in this picture get the style. But if we look into them, they’re not always normal. There must be one kid with special needs. Children are hard to identify if they have disabilities only through seeing them. But if we closely look at them, we will know by observing the way they learn and they do stuff. You will know. But when they are playing like this, it’s hard to differentiate.”*

Some other participants said that the meaning of inclusion in PE was to include students with a disability equally in PE classes. For these teachers, their students have no differences from others yet their needs and learning are different. Mrs. Sri metaphorically explored the meaning of inclusive PE with the image of rice fields.

*“My special kids are like the rice. If we harvest them, they can potentially be high-quality rice. However, we have to do it slowly, small step by small step until it gets harvested. They become good quality rice, all the family members can consume, or we can sell it. But we have to do the process slowly and can’t be in rush.”*

Mr. Harno also metaphorically expressed the same meaning. For him, including students with disability in physical activity contexts means delivering slow-paced instruction. In the interviews, Mr. Harno picked a picture of a close-up hand pouring water out into a glass. He compared inclusive PE and the action of pouring water by stating, “I use this analogy from this picture by which water is my students with disability, so I have to pour the water into the glass little by little.”

Third, the sub-theme is teaching students with disability. Data showed that teaching PE meant to motivate students with a disability so that they could be independent and successful. This effort needed special attention and passion. In addition, some of the participants seemed to agree that the meaning of teaching PE was also to ensure a safe environment.

*“A psychological approach is really important to ensure that you are capable. You have something different, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do stuff. This requires passion. Then, they need to feel safe too. In PE, whatever the contents we are teaching, we have to ensure their safety (Mr. Amat).”*

Furthermore, participants consider their teaching as a noble effort by which they became part of coloring the students’ lives. Choosing an image of an artist working on canvas painting, Mr. Jarod illustrates his students on a white canvas.

*“Teaching these kids are like painting on a white canvas. So, I would say that kids are like a plain canvas. They know nothing. Then I paint is slowly; very slowly so it won’t make bad scratches in order to make a good painting. So, we have to be into those kids. We have to know their characters. What are the characters of the paper, the brushes, and the acrylics? We have to know about those things to make our painting or our teaching will meet the goals.”*

The meaning of teaching students with a disability involves deliberate and mindful care. Most of the participants maintain this understanding. They consider themselves as lacking

inclusive pedagogy. But their meaning of inclusive teaching represents an essential resource to work with those with disability.

The meaning they attach to their experiences implies a hard job. This is expressed by Mr. Onik who metaphorically explains that teaching students with disability is like the picture of an off-road vehicle loaded with heavy baggage.

*“This heavy baggage is my student and I will slowly take it into (the wilderness). Let’s say, climbing the mountain, ok? Little by little, I will take this heavy baggage. I will take them to the summit no matter what. Here I won’t differentiate my abled or disabled students. They all have to get to the peak.”*

Mr. Onik’s description indicates a goal-oriented adventure (summit) and rough trip along the way (off-road trails and heavy baggage). Despite the journey being considered uneasy, the teachers in this study tend to believe that their teaching will positively impact student learning. Eventually, the teachers have set up the goals of their PE teaching and they seem to be optimistic that they can help all of their children meet the goals.

## **Discussion**

Teachers’ experiences in teaching inclusive PE are one way or another influenced by teachers’ capacity in dealing with disabled students. For example, their background knowledge and skills have been an important foundation for inclusive teaching. Hodkinson (2006) states that successful inclusive education partly depends on teachers’ competencies in delivering inclusive learning. Furthermore, Hodkinson emphasizes the importance of teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive education. In addition, literature has documented the roles of teacher preparation programs in helping the development of such attitudes. A study confirms that the more intensive pre-service PE teachers are in contact with disabled students, the more likely they develop their attitude and self-efficacy toward inclusive PE (Braksiek, 2022). The development of knowledge and skills of inclusive PE teaching can be supported by the use of media, acknowledging the fact that the topic of inclusive PE is complex and contextual for undergraduate PE students (McNamara & Haegele, 2021). In short, PE teacher preparation programs serve as an important pathway to experiencing meaningful inclusive PE when they are appropriately and carefully designed.

The experiences and the meaning of inclusive PE teaching described in this study represent how teachers tend to be open-minded with the new policy (inclusive education) and implemented it professionally despite the perceived barriers. This positive attitude, according to Haegele and Sutherland (2015), indicates that PE teachers’ action becomes one of the important keys to ensuring that disabled students’ learning experience becomes more meaningful. A study by Nanayakkara (2022) informs that although PE, teachers tend to be unconfident in delivering inclusive PE, support from the leadership and solid policies could facilitate their delivery. Observing this potential, Penney et al. (2018) argued that the articulation of visions regarding inclusive PE in international policy and curriculum guidelines became eminent in the actual practices of the inclusiveness of this school subject.

It is prominent within the participants’ experience of teaching inclusive PE that continuing professional development (CPD) programs become central in improving their inclusive pedagogy. This result of the analysis is aligned with the work of Morrison and Gleddie (2021). Their study informs that professional development programs specifically designed for inclusive physical education are rare. Indeed, the existing programs related to inclusion for teachers are too general. Some other PD programs are short, one-day-long workshop that has been debated in the literature on their impact on teachers’ professional development. But these are the ones available to the teachers in this study. Despite being criticized, Makoppoulou et al. (2021) demonstrate that short-term CPD programs can be promising in developing teachers’ self-efficacy toward implementing inclusive PE. This is mainly because the impacts of such programs lay on various teachers’ personal factors and perceptions. The participants continue to strive for further information independently to sharpen their understanding of the program contents and apply it in

PE settings. In other contexts, some teachers prefer to take advantage of consultancy and collaborate among them (Morrison & Gleddie, 2021).

One should also pay close attention to aspects within such programs to make the experience of inclusive PE teaching more impactful. Details on program design will require careful consideration to be geared toward the development of knowledge and skills. For example, a study by Makopoulou et al. (2022) shows that the providers of professional development programs contribute to the extent to which PE teachers will understand inclusive pedagogy. In fact, the program providers tend to aspire to the conceptualization of inclusion about ability and ability grouping. It is rare to happen that they critically reflect on their current inclusive practices. Since the critical role of professional development providers in developing inclusive PE pedagogy, relevant stakeholders may want to be more selective in deciding who will become the facilitators of the programs. In such a program, relevant stakeholders may consider multiple aspects that eventually facilitate teachers to implement inclusive PE (Tristani et al., 2022).

Participants also articulate inclusive pedagogy, although they have done it through trial and error. Their main teaching goal includes students' participation in fun and enjoyable physical activities. This aligns with the study conducted by Downs et al. (2014) The researchers find that special needs students basically enjoy physical activities, especially fun and unstructured ones. Their pedagogical experiences also show how they adapt teaching to ensure meaningful learning. They want to suit their students' levels of ability and needs through the accommodation and modification of the learning environment Wang et al. (2015).

This study also reveals the meaning of the participants, including inclusion, inclusive PE, and inclusive teaching. Despite their conceptual framework having been developed through in-service experiences, their inclusive ideology seems to be aligned with the theory of inclusion. For example, the teachers in this study state the importance of equity and equality for those with disability in receiving educational services. This is one of the main ideas of inclusion (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). As scholars suggested (e.g., Nanayakkara, 2022), the efforts to enrich teachers' experience and develop more in-depth meaning about inclusive PE might require the reinvention of teachers' training programs and continuing professional development designed specifically for inclusive teaching.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current research reveals the experiences and meaning of teaching physical education in mainstream schools. Critical to experience includes background knowledge and skills necessary to teach children with disability. Teachers' experiences are also filled with experimentation of what will likely work and also barriers or facilitators in teaching inclusive PE. In addition, teachers in this current study attach their experiences with meaning in which their efforts to teach inclusive PE have been anchored. Their experiences have been colored by the meaning of inclusion, inclusive PE, and inclusive PE teaching. Despite barriers and challenges, these meanings seem to help them navigate the profession required to work with disabled students.

This is the information generally neglected in the literature despite a few exceptions existing (see, for example, Morrison & Gleddie, 2021). Since we focus on investigating experience, our method is inspired by the phenomenological approach. Adopting this approach, it allows us to depict two overarching themes including participants' experiences and the meaning of inclusive physical education teaching. Within the first theme, the PE teachers' experiences consist of sub-themes. These are roles of background knowledge and skills, inclusive pedagogy, teaching various disabilities, barriers, and facilitators to their teaching. The second themes include meanings constructed upon their experiences encompassed by sub-themes: the meaning of inclusion, inclusive PE, and inclusive teaching. This thematic analysis produced important knowledge regarding the practices of inclusive PE which may otherwise be difficult to accomplish using other analytical strategies. Finally, further studies may be followed up to specifically use phenomenological study in which the procedure will fully be designed to examine experience thoroughly following tenets in phenomenology.



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