



Teachers' Perspectives on Using Play-based Learning for Inclusive Early Childhood Education Classrooms

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) has grown significantly over the years. It has been prioritized as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations under inclusive education. Under Sustainable Development Goals, goal 4 outlines inclusive, equitable, and quality education with lifelong learning opportunities for all. To ensure that inclusive education is achieved in Early Childhood Education programmes, teachers need to have the right skills necessary for teaching and supporting learners with neurodiversity. This qualitative study is lensed under interpretivism paradigm and framed theoretically by the Play-based Learning curriculum to understand teachers' perspectives on the use of play-based learning for Early Childhood Education inclusive classrooms. The study was conducted in one Early Childhood Education centre for learners with neurodiversity in Botha-Bothe, Lesotho, where six teachers were purposively selected to take part in the study. Data was generated through face-to-face interviews guided by an interview schedule. To analyse data, thematic analysis was relevant for this study to unpack the experiences and perspectives of teachers across a data set. The findings revealed that teachers advocate for the use of play-based inclusive pedagogies to teach learners with neurodiversity; they understand the importance of using appropriate teaching methods which address learners' needs and believe in their ability to teach and support the learners. Some of the challenges highlighted by the findings of the study point to lack of parental involvement and in-service training for teachers. The study concludes that further research is required to understand the gaps in teacher training and the support they need to fully support learners with neurodiversity.

Keywords: Early childhood education, equity in education, inclusive education, neurodiversity, play-based learning

Introduction

Inclusive education revolutionizes the way teachers perceive and offer education to learners with special education needs (LSEN). If national governments do not effectively implement inclusion policies in schools, children with disability are at risk of missing out on Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Grill, Devabhaktulab, Butchera, Arokiarajb, Dasb, & Andersona, 2019). ECE has grown significantly over the years. It has been prioritized as one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN). SDG goal 4 promotes inclusive, equal, and quality education with learning opportunities for all learners. Target 4.2

speaks to young people to have accessible, quality early childhood development and pre-primary education provided by well-trained teachers (UN, 2015). On the same note, the African Union Agenda 2063 commits all member states to expand and make universal quality early childhood education accessible and recognises pre-school education as the foundation for future learning and training. It further notes better investment in ECE as the next frontier if Africa is to realize sustained quality education and training (African Union, 2021). All these pronouncements acknowledge Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as a powerful means for inclusive education. Mahadew (2022) suggests that inclusive education forms an important facet of quality ECE because it

encourages equitable access and participation for all children in education. For effective ECE, Coury and Ortiz (2021) encourage an approach to curriculum that emphasizes effective interaction between the teachers and children. It should incorporate pedagogical practices that are adaptable to the context of children. For Ackah (2022), early childhood educators support and enhance equal learning opportunities and development results for all children through the provision of fruitful ECE services, with identification and response to children's individual capabilities, strengths and interests. For children to have support tailored to their own abilities, teachers need to have the right skills and knowledge to carry the inclusive education mandate in their classrooms so that children reach their potential (Wolf et al., 2019; Author 2025). Besides that, they must adjust the curriculum and employ inclusive teaching strategies that respond to children's diversity in their learning environment (Tomlinson, 2017).

Learning through play is central to quality, inclusive ECE. According to Dewi et al. (2022), playing is an inherent activity, and children enjoy it. Mahadew (2022) explains that play pedagogy offers opportunities for teachers to create inclusive ECE classrooms. Play-Based Learning (PBL) is an instructional approach suitable for inclusive classrooms since it involves playful learning and child-directed elements (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Thus DeWitt (2020) suggests that in the ECE context, it is important that teachers centralize learning around play with an inclusive educational practice that is adaptable, practical, participatory, and experiential and recognises children's cultural experiences in all facets of learning. PBL is a critical perspective that fosters social, cognitive and emotional development in ECE (International Development Research Centre, 2024). However, play-based activities do not simply offer play opportunities in the classrooms, they also challenge children to take close reflection on their own understanding, interests and talents for the development of their self-efficacy (Prioletta & Pyle, 2017).

The kingdom of Lesotho has ratified international protocols to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to quality and

inclusive education by adhering to international charters that include: The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (MOET, 2018). Continentally, Lesotho adopted the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (MOET, 2020). The Constitution of Lesotho makes provision for equality and forbids all forms of discrimination against people with disabilities (Kingdom of Lesotho, 1993). More specifically on education, the Lesotho Inclusive Education Policy 2018 aims to rectify all forms of exclusion problems that children with disabilities have always faced in the mainstream education system. LIEP attest to the right to education for all, with emphasis on equal opportunity and has access to inclusive education (MOET, 2018). The Lesotho government is committed to implementing Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG), target 4.2. which states that all children should have quality ECCD in preparation for primary schooling (UN, 2020). In 2021, the government of Lesotho developed the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Curriculum Guide which supports children's progress through a play-based learning method to practice. PBL means that teachers acknowledge children's development and that every child learns at their own pace (MOET, 2021). International conventions on inclusive education proclaim that teachers' practices should support learners with neurodiversity in inclusive classrooms thus it is important that they use play-based learning to address the needs of learners. However, many teachers are not familiar with play-based practices and activities to fully integrate play-based curriculum in their classrooms. In light of these arguments, the study aims to fill that gap and provide a clear framework of how best teachers can use play-based learning for ECE classrooms and contributes to the body of knowledge in enhancing inclusive pedagogies and create a strong education foundation for learners with neurodiversity. This study underscores the vital role of PBL in building inclusive ECE classrooms. It examines teachers' perspectives in their adoption and facilitation of PBL and participatory pedagogies as key methodologies for their

inclusive classrooms at the early childhood education level.

Research questions:

The following questions guided this study:

- a. What are teachers' perspectives on using PBL for inclusive ECE classrooms?
- b. What role do teachers play in supporting diverse learners?
- c. How do teachers implement play-based learning in an inclusive classroom environment?
- d. What are the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching learners with neurodiversity disabilities?

Theoretical framework

The study is framed within the Play-based Learning (PBL) curriculum to examine teachers' perspectives in creating an inclusive environment for learning in ECE by using play-based activities and participatory instructions. According to UNICEF (2018), a play-based curriculum is characterised by meaningfully, actively and joyfully engaging and interactive social activities. PBL is categorised into free and guided play, games and direct instruction (MOET, 2021). Learning through play is more than just playing; it is purposefully planned and supported by a set of play activities (MOET, 2020). Play-based curriculum helps teachers to conceptualise their teaching by recognising that children are different and as such, they should develop inclusive learning environments that respond to all children in pedagogically suitable approaches. Play-based curriculum advocates for opportunities for involvement, engagement, and achievement in the learners' learning environment (Ainscow, 2020). In inclusive-based learning activities, the teacher adjusts the curriculum, learning approaches, and strategies in line with the needs of all children and their age (Dewi et al., 2022). This article reports on teachers' perspectives on using PBL for their inclusive classrooms. In order to facilitate a participatory learning environment which stimulates maximum achievement for all children, teachers have to offer classroom pedagogies that

respond to children's culture and social backgrounds (Mahadew, 2022). Teachers are responsible for offering classroom practices that stimulate and engage children to explore and experience new activities and, in the process, form new relationships and engage with materials. Learning through play approach, children are offered rich experiences that meet their holistic development (MOET, 2021). This theory is relevant for this study because it guides teachers' pedagogic practices and provides more insights into teachers' perspectives in using play-based learning for inclusive early childhood education classrooms.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a qualitative research approach and utilised a case study (Yin, 2018) to explore teachers' perspectives on using play-based activities for inclusive classrooms (Makateng & Mokala, 2025). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) point out that qualitative research is a multi-method that focuses on and involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach. A case study design was suitable for qualitative research because it allowed the researchers to do a detailed study on the phenomenon of interest in a natural setting (Yin, 2018). This study underscores the vital role of teachers' pedagogic practices in ensuring that all learners are afforded equal opportunities in their classrooms. In undertaking our study, we used the interpretivist paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017) based on examining teachers' perspectives on using play-based activities in teaching neurodiverse learners in their classrooms.

The study used purposive sampling (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to select teachers who could potentially offer comprehensive data and detailed accounts of their perspectives on play-based activities based on their experiences. We purposefully selected six teachers who teach learners with diverse learning needs from an ECE inclusive school situated in Botha-Bothe, Lesotho. Data was generated through face-to-face interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010) which were guided by an interview schedule and all interviews with teachers were audio-recorded. To ensure trustworthiness, the study took into

consideration the four principles: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba, 1985). The captured data was read repeatedly to ensure that the gathered information reflected the views of teachers.

Thematic analysis was relevant in this study because it assisted the qualitative researchers in understanding experiences, thoughts or behaviours across a data set (Kiger & Varpino, 2020). Braun and Clarke (2017) define thematic analysis as a method that analyses data to search across a data set to identify, analyse and report patterns. In this study, the aim was to examine teachers' perspectives on using play-based learning for inclusive ECE classrooms in achieving the objectives of the curriculum. To

apply thematic analysis, we followed six steps as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Firstly, we familiarised ourselves with the data and generated codes. This was followed by the identification of themes. Furthermore, we defined and named and narrated these themes and produced a detailed report of analysis and findings.

Ethical considerations are important for the protection of participants. The researchers obtained permission and informed consent from the District Education Office to have access to the school. Information sheets and consent letters were given to participants to sign that they voluntarily participate in the study. To ensure the confidentiality and privacy of teachers, pseudonyms were used (BERA, 2018).

Results

Table 1: Demographic details of research participants

Participants	Teaching Experience	Qualifications	Gender
Teacher A	15	Degree in Education	Female
Teacher B	5	Diploma in Education	Female
Teacher C	7	Diploma in Education	Male
Teacher D	4	Degree in Education	Female
Teacher E	3	Certificate in Education	Female
Teacher	6	Certificate in Education	Male

In this section, we report on the ECE teachers' perspectives on using PBL for their inclusive classrooms. The findings showed that the teachers create inclusive classroom environments in their ECE classroom by adopting play-based and participatory instructions. Teachers explained that in their classrooms, they have learners with diverse abilities; they have those that they regard as fast and slow learners, autistic learners and those with physical disabilities. Thus, they regard play as an important strategy for their inclusive classrooms. In that case, they cannot teach without play pedagogies. The study aimed to understand teachers' perspectives on using PBL for inclusive ECD classrooms. The analysis of data revealed the following themes as captured in table 2.

Teachers' beliefs in PBL

Teachers demonstrated in their responses that they believe in PBL because it allows for an interactive class where every learner, regardless of their diverse needs, can take part in their learning. Teacher A had this to say: *It is the best approach to learning because the child starts playing at home, they learn how to live with others and develop their social skills.* While for teacher C, *through play, children learn intellectual, physical, emotional and social development skills. For example, if I want to assess hearing, I must do a sensory activity to see if the child will react to that.* Another participant said: *I also believe that the child learns easily and can be very creative through play-based learning. Children do not need*

fixed learning where teachers keep them in the classroom all day. Play allows critical thinking and develops vocabulary because when they play, they do a lot of talking. This also develops their communication skills (Teacher B). After playing, they always want to narrate these activities, what they were doing and even name these games themselves. They go as far as initiating the games to play, especially when they have enjoyed them. So as a teacher, you pick social and leadership skills and the ability to share because they take turns in playing (Teacher F). Indeed, the teachers emphasised that in their school, they believe that

taking children outside to play is important for their education. According to Kanyopa (2019), teachers’ beliefs and attitudes contribute immensely to the success of inclusive education. Learning through play ultimately encourages children and teachers to actively engage in the learning process together in a learning environment that is designed to ensure maximum opportunities that encourage children to be creative, interact socially with others and love play-based activities for learning (African Union, 2021).

Table 2: Themes that emerged from the findings of the study

1. Teachers’ beliefs in PBL
2. Play-based activities for inclusive classrooms
3. The role of the teachers in supporting diverse learners
4. Teachers’ challenges in using play-based
5. Support that teachers need for effective implementation

Play-based activities for inclusive classrooms

Teachers narrated that they use different play activities to teach literacy, numeracy concepts, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills. They also clarified that they use both free and guided play. Free play allows language development, while in guided play, they use it to teach certain concepts in their classrooms like numeracy or other social skills. Teacher A explained that, *in free play, they narrate many stories that even happen at home where as teachers, we get to learn about their backgrounds. And from their stories, they also learn discipline, distinguish between right and wrong.* Another participant added: *Sometimes, through play, they learn social skills; they take turns in playing. We see them learning how to share and thinking out of the box. In guided play, when we want to teach certain concepts, we use guided play activities. For example, in teaching the alphabets, we put the alphabets together with numbers and other irrelevant objects for them to identify the correct alphabets we want them to learn for that lesson. It becomes so chaotic because they enjoy finding them (Teacher F).* Teacher E indicated that, *in the jump and kick game, the objective is to stretch their muscles, while in social activities, we develop sharing skills. For cognitive development, we used*

games like building blocks, identifying their sizes and building them appropriately, considering which block has to come first because of its size. Teacher D said: *We use many play activities to teach different concepts in literacy and numeracy. In numeracy, we use ball games where they score into the net and learning how to count in the process. They also learn how to identify colours through colour games. We ask them to run and throw an item into a certain bucket and ask them to identify the colour of the bucket. They identify colours and at the same time stretch their muscles.* For teacher A, *we also do sensory games where the objective is to see, feel and touch and in that game, we develop pre-writing skills as well as fine motor skills.* Teacher B said: *we have found that play develops language as well. One can even analyse from the play their strengths; some like to guide, some are problem-solvers when conflicts arise. Others like to coach, while others lead activities to be done.*

Allee-Herndon and Roberts (2021) advise that the goal of guided play is to bring certain learning goals together with children’s freedom to choose what they like and is highly influenced by constructivist theory. This can happen when teachers acknowledge that content and play instruction open learning spaces that are

intentional and allow interaction, investigation and personalised interests and needs. Also, they must support knowledge discovery and the ability to make connections to prior learning (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). To maximise literacy learning in ECE, Prioretta and Pyle (2017) contend that children must be offered concrete materials for literacy learning experiences in their reading and writing lessons. According to the African Union (2021), ECE is characterised by rich learning classroom lessons that visually stimulate learners' needs and interests. Through this, children can express themselves, acquire language and use it for communication that is meaningful (African Union, 2021). Play activities also offer opportunities for coordination and motor skills. Good quality ECE is beneficial and provides for children, families and communities in many ways. ECE programmes offer children safe spaces to grow; it supports their social, physical, cognitive and emotional growth.

The role teachers play in supporting diverse learners

The findings reveal debates around the importance of using relevant teaching approaches which address the range of learning needs learners have. The teachers explained that their role is to teach learners in a way that addresses their needs and their learning styles. According to the teachers, the use of appropriate teaching methodologies is the first step in fulfilling their role as teachers. Teachers believe that children are different and learn differently. As such, one teacher clarified that; *We do not want the children to be given instruction all the time. We want them to learn in their comfort zone. For learners with disabilities, we resort to guided play whereas teachers can support them in the activities, hold them, and instruct them on what to do* (Teacher C). To ensure that they are not left behind, teacher D said, *we also take them on a one-on-one session to ensure they understand concepts. In a class with learners with disabilities, there are two teachers, one will take in the other group, and the other teacher ensures that those with disabilities are also at par with others. They have the child's portfolio where they record the progress of each child. We report weekly progress to see what they have achieved, what they are still developing and devise plans to help them achieve that. The report also*

helps us to identify their strengths, weaknesses and their learning interests.

It is evident from the responses that teachers understand their role and the importance of using a range of appropriate teaching methods to address learners' needs. A study by Mokala (2021) emphasises a need to use a range of teaching methods to address the diverse needs of learners in special schools. Dewi et al. (2022) also advise that for assessment, teachers should identify the strengths and weaknesses of children's learning outcomes, which are used as points for consideration in the future. Dewi et al. (2022) propose that play-based learning strategies for inclusive classrooms should use the centre model. The Centre model is principled within inclusive education in early childhood, which considers that children can play together for one goal and to better accommodate children with disabilities.

Teachers' challenges in using play-based learning

According to Teacher F, *the parents do not understand their children's needs, they expect a lot, we cannot change the child. They do not understand the problems of their children in learning. Parents' expectations are too high; they think that using play-based activities in the classrooms is a waste of time which could otherwise be used in formal teaching. They think we must be in the classroom all the time teaching, their children must write. As teachers, we know learners are making good progress in all the activities. The parents do not cooperate with us, they expect too much and are not patient with how their children learn, they expect overnight progress. They think play-based learning is wasting time; it is just play. They do not understand that through play, teachers also teach* (Teacher A). Parental involvement in ECE programmes is still limited for parents of children with neurodiversity (Ackah-Jnr, 2021). Thus, increased parental involvement is necessary for effective ECE (Epstein, 2018). Parental participation is regarded as a key factor that sustains early learning opportunities (International Development Research Centre, 2024).

Teachers admitted that since they also have technology tools such as tablets to help in

their classrooms for teaching and learning, there are some teachers who struggle to use them because they are not trained and equipped with skills on how to use them and integrate them within their lessons. Some teachers have no formal training for inclusive education. Teacher B said: *Learners with disabilities enjoy using tablets because they produce sounds which they can imitate. So that means they develop communication skills.* For Teacher E: *Some teachers are struggling to adapt their lessons to an inclusive setting to the needs of all learners because they have not done inclusive education.* Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024) assert that teachers are expected to implement inclusive education by adapting the curriculum to support services for all learners. International Development Research Centre (2024) asserts that effective implementation of ECE faces challenges of incompetent teachers who are not confident in their delivery of play-based instruction. As such, it is recommended that teachers must be regularly mentored and for long term improvement, there is a need for ongoing continuous professional development. This is further emphasised by Mokala (2021) whose view is that ongoing teacher training does not only equip them with necessary skills for teaching learners with special needs but also boost their self-esteem to believe in their abilities to teach such learners.

The support that teachers need for effective implementation

Teacher A proposes that every training must be tailored to the needs of their learners. *We also need to be passionate about inclusive education and play-based learning. We need more training sessions so that everyone can understand it. Once we understand it, we can effectively implement it. Training comes twice a year, at the beginning of every session.* Another participant said: *Sometimes the school brings an expert to train us and offer refresher courses. While in some situations, we meet up with other teachers from ECE who share the same vision as us and share ideas and experiences* (Teacher C). Teacher D said: *training will help perfect our roles. If one is trained in autism, they must focus on autistic learners alone; this will perfect their skill as a specialist teacher and become experts in the field.*

Just like the findings, Ledwaba and Sefotho (2024) acknowledge that district education personnel's support is always limited and compensate for this limitation. They encourage that school-based support should be strengthened to support teachers in the use of inclusive teaching methodologies.

Discussion

This paper discusses teachers' perspectives on using PBL for inclusive early childhood education classrooms. According to the framework guiding the study, play-based strategies foster analytical and emotional learning by helping children to have fun in the learning process and at the same time, learn new skills. Additionally, children become actively engaged in PBL compared to when teachers use didactic instructions (Parker et al., 2022). Play-based pedagogies benefit learners in different ways. One of the immediate benefits of PBL is the development of academic skills (Karakoç et al., 2022). Game-based teaching pedagogies are further recommended for learners with neurodiversity disabilities such as autism as it attracts learners' attention, thus enforcing desired learning outcomes (Karakoç et al., 2022). Play-based pedagogies are effective in creating meaningful learning experiences for children, as well as actively engaging learners to develop new skills while having fun (Parker et al., 2022). Previous research has shown that teachers must create welcoming learning environments by using inclusive teaching practices that embrace everyone's unique character (Mohoebi, 2023; Mokala, 2021; 2025; Molala & Mokala, 2025).

Another finding that emerged from the study is teachers' understanding of their role as teachers of learners with neurodiversity disabilities in an inclusive school. Teachers have revealed that they are aware that they need to use appropriate teaching methods which address the learning needs and keep the learners engaged. These findings affirm previous studies which revealed that teachers have positive views about their role and the expectations they have for learners with neurodiversity disabilities (Rodríguez, Saldana & Moreno, 2012). Also, Ralejoe (2019) has the view that Basotho teachers are generally confident about their inclusive

teaching practices. Contrary to this finding, a study by Mosia and Kotelo (2024) on teacher training for inclusive education in Lesotho found that the majority of the teachers hold a strong view that they lack inclusive skills and the necessary knowledge to teach learners with special education needs, since their training did not prepare them for such classes. This poses a threat to the successful implementation of the “country’s inclusive education policies leading to 2030 and beyond” (Mosia & Kotelo, 2024, p.7). This is further complicated by the country’s Ministry of Education and Training’s limited efforts to provide training for teachers (Mosia & Kotelo, 2024).

The study’s findings have revealed that since teachers understand their role and what is required of them, they use different teaching practices which are learner centred. These findings confirm Ralejoe’s findings that incorporating a range of teaching practices helps teachers to address diverse classrooms and address their educational needs (2019). Drawing from teachers’ views, the use of visual teaching aids assists learners with neurodiversity disabilities to understand, get more engaged and interested in their classroom activities. Previous research on teachers’ pedagogic practices for inclusive classrooms reports that it is important to use various teaching methods in order to address and accommodate different learning styles. This is in line with the principles of the play-based framework which advocates for engagement of learners in classrooms, therefore, learner-centred pedagogies. This is bearing some theoretical reflections of the study, which advocates for teaching practices that are engaging, interesting and holistic in their approach. Inclusive education advocates for learner-centred teaching pedagogies.

Teachers in the current study expressed that one of the challenges they face is a lack of parental support, which poses a threat to the successful implementation of inclusive pedagogic practices. The author of the previous study indicated that parents are important in advocating and contributing to curricula activities and programmes that align with their children’s interests. It is of utmost importance that parents get involved in all aspects of their children’s education, as this fosters collaboration between the

teachers and the parents (Mahlo, 2017). Adopting Mogashoa’s (2019) view, when parents are actively involved in their children’s schoolwork and show an interest, this will help them to strengthen their learning and recognise their children’s academic progress and strengths.

Teachers reported feeling they need more training. This finding affirms Van Der Steen, Geveke, Steenbakkens, & Steenbeek’s (2020, p. 6) view that teachers feel that “they would like to feel more confident/secure in their contact with students with disabilities.” Thus, training will equip them with the specialist knowledge and skills required to provide full support to learners. Literature acknowledges insufficient training for teachers as one of the challenges hindering the full implementation of the inclusive education framework in Africa (Lehloa, 2019; Mosia & Kotelo, 2024; Author, 2021). Research shows that when teachers are not trained properly to teach learners with diverse learning needs, they see themselves as incompetent and struggle to respond to the special needs of their classrooms. We hold that teachers would feel more empowered and equipped with the necessary skills to teach and support learners with neurodiversity. The findings indicate that teachers need more training, so that they can be confident to teach and support learners accordingly. Contrary to the findings of the current study, Mosia and Kotelo (2024) found that teachers are not confident that they can carry out the inclusive education agenda, as they have low self-efficacy. We contend that lack of proper and ongoing training for teachers therefore renders “the benefits of inclusion unattainable” (Rodríguez, Saldana, & Moreno, 2012, p. 6).

Conclusion

Teachers’ positive beliefs on the use of play-based inclusive pedagogies and the importance of using relevant teaching approaches are highlighted as some of the important aspects that teachers must practice when they teach learners with neurodiversity. The study has highlighted issues such as a lack of proper training and parental involvement as prominent challenges teachers face in implementing inclusive play-based teaching practices in Early Childhood Education Classrooms. This study concludes that

ECE centres should foster strong relationships with parents to enhance inclusive pedagogies and create strong education foundations for learners with neurodiversity. Drawing from the findings, the study recommends for parental involvement to fully support the education of their children with neurodiversity both at school and home. Also, teachers must be engaged in continuous in-service training to fully equip them with skills to support learners with neurodiversity.

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