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Promoting Learning Skills Through Student Engagement: A Qualitative Study of Teaching Practices in Kindergarten to Grade 2 Classrooms

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Abstract

Developing foundational learning skills through meaningful student engagement is essential during the early years of basic education. Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers play a vital role in fostering learners' literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, and socio-emotional development through engaging and developmentally appropriate instructional practices. This qualitative study explored the teaching practices employed by Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers in promoting learning skills through student engagement at Ubao Elementary School Extension, Aginaldo District. Specifically, it examined how teachers design engaging learning experiences, sustain learner participation, address diverse learning needs, and improve instructional practices. Anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory and Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, the study employed a phenomenological research design. Twelve Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis. The findings revealed four major themes: creating learner-centered and play-based learning experiences, promoting active participation through interactive and collaborative learning, differentiating instruction to meet diverse learner needs, and engaging in reflective teaching for continuous improvement. Participants emphasized that meaningful engagement enhances learners' motivation, confidence, communication, collaboration, and mastery of foundational competencies. Despite challenges such as varied learner readiness, limited instructional resources, and short attention spans, teachers demonstrated flexibility and creativity in sustaining active participation. The study underscores the importance of learner-centered pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and reflective practice in strengthening early childhood education. The findings provide practical insights for teachers, school leaders, and curriculum developers in improving instructional practices that support the holistic development of young learners and promote lifelong learning.

Keywords: learning skills, student engagement, early childhood education, Kindergarten, primary education, learner-centered pedagogy, qualitative research, phenomenology

Introduction

The development of learning skills during the early years of education is fundamental to children's academic success and lifelong learning. Kindergarten to Grade 2 represents a critical stage in which learners acquire foundational competencies in literacy, numeracy, communication, social interaction, problem-solving, and self-regulation. These essential skills influence learners' future academic performance and their capacity to adapt to increasingly complex learning experiences. Consequently, teachers play a crucial role in designing engaging instructional environments that encourage curiosity, participation, collaboration, and independent learning.

Student engagement has emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting learning outcomes in early childhood education. Engaged learners demonstrate greater motivation, sustained attention, active participation, persistence, and confidence during classroom activities. In contrast, limited engagement often results in reduced participation, lower achievement, and diminished interest in learning. Effective engagement extends beyond classroom attendance; it encompasses behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social involvement in meaningful learning experiences. Teachers therefore serve not only as providers of knowledge but also as facilitators who create supportive and stimulating learning environments that inspire children to actively participate in the learning process.

Within the Philippine educational system, the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum has reinforced the importance of strengthening foundational learning competencies during the primary grades. The curriculum emphasizes literacy, numeracy, character formation, and the development of essential twenty-first-century skills through learner-centered, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate instruction. Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers are expected to implement teaching strategies that address the diverse developmental needs of young learners while fostering positive attitudes toward learning. Learning experiences should encourage exploration, creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking to ensure that children develop strong academic and socio-emotional foundations.

Teaching young learners presents unique opportunities and challenges. Children differ significantly in terms of developmental readiness, learning pace, language proficiency, attention span, prior experiences, and family support. These differences require teachers to employ flexible pedagogical approaches that accommodate individual learning needs while maintaining high levels of classroom engagement. Play-based learning, storytelling, interactive games, songs, movement activities, collaborative tasks, guided discovery, and contextualized instruction have been widely recognized as effective approaches for promoting meaningful participation and skill development among young children. Teachers must also create safe, nurturing, and inclusive classroom environments where learners feel confident to ask questions, express ideas, make mistakes, and participate actively.

Research consistently demonstrates that student engagement contributes to improved literacy development, language acquisition, mathematical reasoning, classroom behavior, and social competence during the primary years. Learners who actively participate in classroom activities are more likely to develop positive learning habits, stronger communication skills, and greater confidence in solving problems independently. Likewise, meaningful engagement encourages learners to connect new knowledge with their everyday experiences, thereby strengthening conceptual understanding and long-term retention of learning.

Despite increasing recognition of student engagement as an essential component of effective teaching, many teachers continue to experience challenges in sustaining active participation among young learners. Short attention spans, varying developmental abilities, limited instructional resources, multigrade classroom contexts, and diverse socio-economic backgrounds often require teachers to continuously modify instructional strategies. These realities highlight the importance of understanding how teachers successfully promote learning skills through engaging pedagogical practices within authentic classroom settings.

Although previous studies have examined learner engagement and instructional effectiveness, relatively few qualitative investigations have explored the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers in promoting foundational learning skills within Philippine public elementary schools. Existing research has largely emphasized quantitative measures of academic achievement, leaving limited understanding of how teachers experience, interpret, and continuously refine engagement strategies that support young learners' holistic development. Exploring teachers' lived experiences provides deeper insights into the instructional decisions, classroom interactions, and professional reflections that shape effective early-grade teaching.

Ubao Elementary School Extension, located in the Aguinaldo District, provides an appropriate context for examining teaching practices that promote learning skills through student engagement. Serving Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners from diverse backgrounds, the school emphasizes foundational literacy, numeracy, language development, character education, and meaningful classroom participation. Teachers are expected to implement developmentally appropriate instructional strategies that support learners' academic growth while nurturing positive attitudes

toward learning and social interaction.

This study therefore explored the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers in promoting learning skills through student engagement. Specifically, it examined how teachers design engaging classroom experiences, facilitate learner participation, address instructional challenges, and continuously improve their pedagogical practices. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of qualitative research on early childhood education while providing evidence-based insights for teacher professional development, curriculum implementation, instructional leadership, and future educational research aimed at strengthening foundational learning among young learners.

Review of Related Literature

Learning Skills in Early Childhood Education

The early years of schooling are crucial for developing foundational learning skills that enable children to succeed academically and socially. Learning skills encompass literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, creativity, and self-regulation. These competencies serve as the foundation for lifelong learning and prepare learners to meet the demands of higher levels of education. Contemporary educational research emphasizes that these skills are most effectively developed through meaningful learning experiences that encourage active participation rather than passive reception of information. Teachers play a vital role in creating classroom environments where young learners can explore, discover, question, and construct knowledge through authentic experiences.

Student Engagement and Learning

Student engagement is recognized as one of the strongest predictors of learning achievement in primary education. It refers to learners' behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social participation in classroom activities. Engaged learners demonstrate curiosity, sustained attention, motivation, persistence, and willingness to participate in collaborative learning experiences. In the primary grades, engagement is fostered through developmentally appropriate activities such as storytelling, games, songs, manipulatives, group work, and experiential learning. Research indicates that classrooms characterized by high levels of engagement contribute to improved literacy, numeracy, communication, and socio-emotional development while reducing behavioral concerns and learning difficulties.

Learner-Centered Teaching Practices

Learner-centered pedagogy places children at the center of the instructional process by recognizing their interests, developmental readiness, prior knowledge, and individual learning needs. Rather than relying solely on teacher-directed instruction, learner-centered classrooms encourage exploration, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and active participation. Teachers function as facilitators who guide learners through meaningful learning experiences while providing appropriate support and feedback. Studies have shown that learner-centered approaches increase student motivation, confidence, classroom participation, and academic performance, particularly among young learners.

Play-Based and Interactive Learning

Play-based learning remains one of the most effective instructional approaches in Kindergarten and the primary grades. Through structured and guided play, children develop language, creativity, social interaction, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills while maintaining high levels of engagement. Interactive instructional strategies such as storytelling, role-playing, educational games, collaborative projects, songs, and hands-on activities allow learners to connect classroom lessons with real-life experiences. These approaches make learning enjoyable while strengthening conceptual understanding and long-term retention.

Differentiated Instruction in Primary Education

Primary classrooms consist of learners with diverse developmental abilities, interests, language backgrounds, and learning preferences. Differentiated instruction enables teachers to adjust content, learning activities, instructional materials, pacing, and assessment according to learners' needs. Flexible grouping, individualized support, visual

materials, manipulatives, and scaffolded learning tasks help ensure that every learner has opportunities to succeed. Effective differentiation also promotes inclusion, equity, and active participation by allowing children to learn at their own pace while gradually developing independence.

Classroom Environment and Learner Motivation

A positive classroom environment significantly influences children's willingness to participate and learn. Young learners thrive in classrooms where they feel emotionally safe, respected, encouraged, and valued. Positive teacher–learner relationships, consistent routines, constructive feedback, and collaborative classroom cultures strengthen learners' confidence and intrinsic motivation. Teachers who recognize learners' efforts, celebrate small achievements, and provide emotionally supportive environments help children develop positive attitudes toward learning and greater engagement in classroom activities.

Reflective Teaching and Professional Growth

Reflective teaching enables educators to evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional practices and make informed decisions for continuous improvement. Through reflection, teachers examine learners' responses, instructional challenges, classroom interactions, and assessment results to refine future lessons. Professional collaboration through mentoring, Learning Action Cells (LAC), classroom observations, and professional development programs further strengthens teachers' pedagogical competence. Reflective practitioners become more responsive to learners' changing needs while continuously improving instructional quality.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory by Jean Piaget (1952), Social Constructivist Theory by Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Student Engagement Theory by Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004).

Constructivist Learning Theory explains that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment rather than simply receiving information from teachers. In Kindergarten to Grade 2 classrooms, children develop learning skills through exploration, discovery, manipulation of learning materials, and meaningful experiences. Teachers facilitate learning by designing activities that encourage inquiry, experimentation, and independent thinking.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory emphasizes that learning is a social process occurring through interaction with teachers and peers. Central to this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners perform tasks successfully with appropriate guidance and scaffolding. In early childhood education, collaborative learning, guided instruction, peer interaction, and teacher support enable children to develop foundational learning skills while gradually becoming independent learners.

Student Engagement Theory explains that meaningful learning occurs when learners are behaviorally, emotionally, cognitively, and socially engaged in classroom activities. Behavioral engagement refers to active participation in learning tasks; emotional engagement involves positive feelings toward school and learning; cognitive engagement reflects learners' investment in understanding concepts; while social engagement develops through collaboration and communication with peers and teachers. These interconnected dimensions support the development of strong learning skills among young children.

Together, these theories explain that learning skills are best developed when learners actively construct knowledge, interact meaningfully with others, and participate fully in engaging classroom experiences. They provide the theoretical foundation for understanding how Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers promote learning skills through student engagement.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study illustrates the relationship between teacher pedagogical practices, student engagement, and the development of learning skills among Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners.

Teachers implement learner-centered instructional strategies, play-based learning, differentiated instruction, classroom interaction, authentic assessment, and reflective teaching to create engaging learning environments. These pedagogical practices enhance behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social engagement among learners. Increased student engagement subsequently promotes the development of foundational learning skills, including literacy, numeracy, communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and self-regulation.

The framework further recognizes that classroom context, learner diversity, instructional resources, and teacher

reflection continuously influence instructional decision-making and learning outcomes. Through sustained engagement and responsive teaching practices, learners develop the foundational competencies necessary for lifelong learning and academic success.

Research Objectives

This study explored the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers in promoting learning skills through student engagement at Ubao Elementary School Extension, Aguinaldo District. Specifically, it sought to:

1. describe the pedagogical practices employed by teachers to promote learning skills through student engagement;
2. examine how teachers facilitate active participation and meaningful learning among Kindergarten to Grade 2 learners;
3. identify the challenges encountered in promoting learning skills and sustaining student engagement;
4. explore the strategies teachers use to address instructional challenges and diverse learner needs; and
5. determine the implications of teachers' experiences for improving instructional practices, teacher professional development, and early childhood education.

Methodology Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers in promoting learning skills through student engagement. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate because it provided an in-depth understanding of teachers' instructional experiences, classroom interactions, and reflections regarding learner engagement and skill development.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Ubao Elementary School Extension, Aguinaldo District, Schools Division of Ifugao. The school offers Kindergarten and elementary education to learners from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. It implements the Department of Education curriculum with emphasis on foundational literacy, numeracy, language development, character formation, and learner-centered instruction, making it an appropriate setting for investigating teaching practices that foster learning skills and student engagement.

Participants of the Study

The participants consisted of twelve (12) Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Participants were currently teaching in the primary grades, had at least three years of teaching experience, were willing to participate voluntarily, and possessed substantial classroom experience in promoting learning skills among young learners. The sample size was considered sufficient because phenomenological research prioritizes rich and meaningful descriptions of lived experiences, with data collection continuing until saturation was achieved.

Research Instrument

The primary data-gathering instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide validated by experts in qualitative research and elementary education. The guide contained open-ended questions focusing on instructional planning, learner engagement, classroom interaction, differentiated instruction, assessment practices, instructional challenges, and professional reflections. Classroom observations and document analysis, including lesson plans and learning materials, were used to triangulate the interview data.

Data Gathering Procedure

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Office, the school head, and the participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their rights before signing informed consent forms. Individual interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes were conducted at schedules convenient to the participants and were audio-recorded with

permission. Classroom observations, document reviews, and field notes supplemented the interview data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants verified the accuracy of their transcripts through member checking.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the final report. This analytical process enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns and meaningful themes that represented the teachers' lived experiences in promoting learning skills through student engagement.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The rigor of the study was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through member checking, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Transferability was achieved through rich descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting research decisions and analytical procedures, while confirmability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and verification of findings by qualitative research experts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of research data. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The researcher upheld the principles of respect, beneficence, justice, and integrity by ensuring that participants experienced no harm and that their experiences were accurately and honestly represented throughout the study.

Findings and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the participants' narratives revealed four major themes that describe how Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers promote learning skills through student engagement. The findings demonstrate that meaningful learning occurs when teachers create engaging, learner-centered, and developmentally appropriate classroom experiences that actively involve young learners in the learning process.

Theme 1: Creating Learner-Centered and Play-Based Learning Experiences

The participants emphasized that learning skills are best developed when children actively participate in enjoyable, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate activities. Rather than relying solely on lectures, teachers incorporated play-based learning, storytelling, songs, games, manipulatives, drawing, role-playing, and hands-on activities to encourage active engagement. These strategies helped learners develop literacy, numeracy, communication, and social skills while making learning enjoyable and relevant to their everyday experiences.

One participant shared:

"Young children learn better when they are actively involved. I use games, songs, storytelling, and learning materials because they enjoy participating and remember the lessons better." (*Participant 3*)

Another teacher explained:

"Play is not just for enjoyment. Through play, children learn how to solve problems, communicate, cooperate, and become confident in expressing themselves." (*Participant 7*)

The participants consistently described student engagement as an essential element in developing foundational learning skills. They observed that learners who actively participated in classroom activities demonstrated greater confidence, curiosity, and willingness to explore new concepts.

These findings support Piaget's Constructivist Learning Theory, which explains that children construct knowledge through active exploration and meaningful experiences. Likewise, play-based learning enables young learners to connect new concepts with their prior experiences, resulting in deeper understanding and long-term retention. The findings also affirm previous studies indicating that developmentally appropriate and learner-centered instruction

enhances motivation, participation, and academic achievement among early-grade learners.

Theme 2: Encouraging Active Participation Through Interactive and Collaborative Learning

Teachers highlighted that student engagement increases when classroom activities encourage interaction, collaboration, and communication among learners. Participants described using pair work, small-group activities, peer learning, classroom discussions, learning centers, cooperative games, and collaborative problem-solving tasks to strengthen learners' academic and social skills.

One participant stated:

"I encourage children to work together because they learn from one another. Even shy learners become more confident when they interact with their classmates." (*Participant 5*)

Another participant remarked:

"Instead of giving all the answers, I ask questions that allow children to think, explain, and share their own ideas. They become more interested when they feel their opinions matter." (*Participant 10*)

Participants explained that collaborative learning promotes communication, cooperation, listening skills, respect for others, and independent thinking. Teachers observed that children became more engaged when learning activities allowed them to interact with peers, solve simple problems together, and participate in meaningful classroom conversations.

The findings are consistent with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and guided participation. Classroom collaboration enables learners to develop new knowledge with the support of teachers and peers while gradually strengthening their independence. Furthermore, the results support Student Engagement Theory, which suggests that behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social engagement positively influence learning outcomes. By fostering interactive and collaborative classrooms, teachers created supportive learning environments that enhanced both foundational learning skills and positive attitudes toward learning.

Theme 3: Differentiating Instruction to Address Diverse Learning Needs

The participants emphasized that young learners possess varying levels of readiness, interests, learning styles, and abilities, making differentiated instruction essential in promoting learning skills and sustaining student engagement. Teachers explained that they modified learning activities, instructional materials, pacing, and assessment according to learners' individual needs. Visual aids, manipulatives, picture cards, storytelling, remedial instruction, enrichment activities, and small-group teaching were commonly used to ensure that every learner could actively participate in classroom activities.

One participant shared:

"Every child learns differently. Some need more guidance while others can work independently. I adjust my activities so that all learners can participate and succeed." (*Participant 2*)

Another participant explained:

"I use pictures, flashcards, real objects, and simple games because these help children understand lessons better, especially those who are struggling." (*Participant 9*)

Teachers believed that differentiated instruction not only improved academic performance but also increased learners' confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate. They observed that providing appropriate support enabled children to experience success, which further encouraged active engagement in classroom activities.

These findings support Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Theory, which emphasizes adapting instruction according to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Likewise, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development highlights the importance of scaffolding, where teachers provide appropriate guidance that gradually enables learners to accomplish tasks independently. The findings indicate that responsive and flexible instruction is fundamental to developing learning skills during the primary years.

Theme 4: Reflective Teaching and Building Positive Learning Environments

Participants identified reflective teaching and the establishment of a supportive classroom environment as essential factors in promoting student engagement and learning skills. Teachers regularly evaluated their instructional strategies by observing learners' participation, reviewing assessment results, and reflecting on classroom experiences. These reflections guided them in modifying future lessons to better meet learners' developmental needs.

One participant stated:

"After every lesson, I ask myself what worked well and what needs improvement. If the children are not engaged, I change my strategy the next day." (Participant 6)

Another participant shared:

"Children learn best when they feel safe, respected, and appreciated. I always encourage them to participate without being afraid of making mistakes." (Participant 11)

Teachers also emphasized the importance of establishing positive relationships with learners by providing encouragement, recognizing achievements, maintaining consistent classroom routines, and creating a welcoming learning environment. These practices helped learners develop confidence, positive attitudes toward school, and stronger social relationships.

The findings align with Schön's Reflective Practice Theory, which explains that continuous reflection enables teachers to improve instructional effectiveness through informed decision-making. They also support research indicating that emotionally supportive classrooms foster higher levels of engagement, motivation, and academic achievement among young learners. By combining reflective teaching with positive classroom management, teachers created learning environments that nurtured both academic growth and holistic child development.

Synthesis of the Findings

The findings revealed that promoting learning skills through student engagement in Kindergarten to Grade 2 classrooms is anchored on four interconnected pedagogical practices: (1) creating learner-centered and play-based learning experiences, (2) encouraging active participation through interactive and collaborative learning, (3) differentiating instruction to address diverse learning needs, and (4) engaging in reflective teaching while fostering positive learning environments. These practices collectively enhanced learners' literacy, numeracy, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and socio-emotional development. Despite challenges such as diverse learner readiness, limited instructional resources, and varying attention spans, teachers demonstrated adaptability, creativity, and commitment to ensuring meaningful participation and quality learning experiences. The findings highlight that effective early-grade teaching extends beyond knowledge transmission and requires responsive, engaging, and child-centered pedagogical practices that support the holistic development of young learners.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers in promoting learning skills through student engagement at Ubao Elementary School Extension. The findings revealed that effective teaching in the primary grades is characterized by learner-centered and play-based instruction, interactive and collaborative learning, differentiated teaching strategies, and reflective classroom practice. These pedagogical approaches enabled teachers to create meaningful learning experiences that enhanced learners' literacy, numeracy, communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and socio-emotional development. Despite challenges such as diverse learner readiness, limited instructional resources, and short attention spans, teachers demonstrated flexibility, creativity, and commitment in sustaining student engagement. The study affirms that meaningful engagement is fundamental to developing foundational learning skills and that developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and reflective teaching practices contribute significantly to young learners' holistic growth and academic success.

Implications of the Study

The findings underscore the importance of strengthening learner-centered and developmentally appropriate pedagogies in early childhood education. Teachers should continue implementing engaging instructional strategies that encourage exploration, collaboration, creativity, and active participation. School administrators should support teachers through continuous professional development, mentoring programs, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, and the provision of adequate instructional resources. Curriculum developers may utilize the findings to enhance learning materials and classroom activities that foster student engagement and foundational learning skills. The study also provides evidence that reflective teaching and differentiated instruction are essential in addressing learners' diverse needs and improving instructional quality in Kindergarten to Grade 2 classrooms.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Kindergarten to Grade 2 teachers should continue implementing learner-centered, play-based, and interactive teaching strategies that actively engage learners in meaningful classroom experiences.
2. Schools should strengthen professional development programs focusing on student engagement, differentiated instruction, classroom management, and reflective teaching practices.
3. School leaders should provide adequate instructional materials, learning technologies, and supportive learning environments that enhance children's participation and foundational learning.
4. Teachers should regularly collaborate through Learning Action Cells (LAC), peer mentoring, and classroom observations to share effective instructional practices.
5. Curriculum planners should design contextualized and developmentally appropriate learning resources that strengthen literacy, numeracy, communication, and socio-emotional skills among young learners.
6. Future researchers may conduct similar qualitative or mixed-methods studies involving larger samples, different grade levels, or multiple schools to further validate and expand the findings of this study.

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