Engagement in At-Risk Students Trajectories: Perspective From The Levels of Approach To The Student

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Abstract

Student engagement within education has been an area of increasing interest over recent years as one of the factors that needs to be taken into consideration when addressing one of the main issues in education - school dropout. The objective of this paper is to provide oversight of how being engaged in the educational trajectories of young people who are at risk takes place. This will involve applying the theory of life course as the main driver of the research. A qualitative method is used which adopts a biographical and narrative approach via semi structured in-depth interviews. The main results have revealed that: 1) there are stages in which events that facilitate positive or negative engagement are more predominant; 2) generally, there are more negative critical events that result in a decline in the quality of student engagement; 3) there are several factors that stand out in each of the stages of the student trajectories.

Keywords:

Engagement, Educational Trajectories, Narrative Inquiry, Life History, Life Course Theory

Introduction

There are many issues within education that are rooted in history. Some have extensive research behind them and therefore provide additional detail (Garnica et al., 2019). This is relevant to the problem tackled within this study, that of the school dropout rate of vulnerable, also known as at risk, students (Bernárdez-Gómez et al., 2021; Thureau, 2018; Vandekinderen et al., 2018) and how these students can then return to their studies (Cuconato et al., 2017; Tomaszewska-Pękała et al., 2017; Portela et al., 2022; Ribaya, 2011). This text presents some of the results of a wider research project where the factors that do or do not benefit school engagement of young dropouts and returnees are examined. Therefore, the aim of the research was to determine the various factors intervening in student engagement via these stages of young people's educational trajectories when they have dropped out of school.

This research examines the circumstances of those who have been prioritised for education administrations over the years and in spite of this still demonstrate their relevance. The obsolete Europe 2020 Strategy to the current

Sustainable Development Goals or the Horizon Europe Framework Programme (EU Regulation, 2021) proposed goals which could be aimed at enhancing educational quality and well-being in schools. Consequently, those organisations are referred to by us as OECD (Viac & Fraser, 2020), and we can say that wellbeing in educational centres therefore has a direct link to educational quality provided by the school system. Therefore, it should be demonstrated how the challenge can no longer be used to retain valuable students, but instead to determine friendly spaces within the centres where studies can be performed, and engagement maintained throughout the educational trajectories.

Educational trajectorias and Life Course Theory

Studying educational trajectories is based on studying the life courses of the individuals (Hutchison, 2019; Monarca, 2017). This is a popular theory used within the field of social sciences and has increased in relevance to research within the social sciences (Tomaszewska-Pekala et al., 2017; Mena, Fernández & Enguita, 2010). Development of the paradigm on which life course theory (LCT) has been developed is multifactorial in nature, as is the dropout problem. The various factors that can be found within their past research are consistent (Bernárdez-Gómez, 2022; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019). Therefore, using the life course theory, events are presented that have a significant effect on the trajectory of students. These events are the factors which have been found by authors including Salvà-Mut, Oliver Trobat & Comas Forgas (2014) or Nichol, DeFosset, Perry & Kuo (2016), who have referred to various spheres of proximity to the individual: micro, meso and macrosocial. Simultaneously there are different events that can occur which have a different intensity. First, life events present throughout the whole trajectory but yet have no particular significance for the subjects (Kang, 2019; Tarabini, 2018). Conversely, there are critical events, which are powerful enough to stimulate a transition within the trajectory that lead to a change in their direction.

The various events that happen within an individual trajectory have a significant effect on the resultant implications (Crosnoe & Benner, 2016; Vicente & Gabari, 2019). One frequently occurring definition of the idea of engagement is that student attachment exhibits within their studies and affects the intensity with which they are dedicated to a specific educational task (Emery et al., 2020). In this instance, when various events lead to deterioration in student engagement, this ignites a process of disengagement (Yusof et al., 2018). At this point the situation is being referred to in which a student begins a gradual withdrawal from the educational experience provided by the school (Gebel & Heineck, 2019). Therefore, the various data that have been extracted from the research will demonstrate the types of engagement that more frequently occur within the trajectories of dropout students. The stages whereby students present more positive or negative engagement are also presented. Finally, events are identified that produce quality of engagement either in a positive or negative direction.

Engagement in students´trajectories

Student engagement, as a construct reflecting the link with school student tasks has been much examined over recent years (Cooley et al., 2021). These studies have begun to question how the teaching and learning process has developed based on a school's history, academic life, and characteristics that result from students (Boyaci, 2019; Mayhew et al., 2016; Teuscher & Marakova, 2018). One of the main researchers in this area is Astin, who defined student involvement as the amount of energy that a student invests in the educational experience (Astin, 1984, 1993). This energy, which is modulated by the learning process, places us in terms of quality (Zabalza & Zabalza Cerdeiriña, 2022) within a process that can be understood as a continuous phenomenon passed through by the individual.

The concept of non-involvement or low quality of it within students manifests within the literature as an abstract issue within any field (Bernárdez-Gómez, 2022). Therefore, it is a heterogeneous phenomenon for which there is very little agreement of the mobilisation, hanging, internal or virtual absenteeism, or lack of belonging or affiliation (Fernández Enguita, 2011). The intersection of all of these aspects is the final project of moving away from common concepts between students and schools and the removal of the feeling of belonging (Tomaszewska-Pekala et al., 2017; Mena, Fernández & Enguita, 2010). This causes us to reflect on the distinction between schools and students and the potential dichotomy between students who acted in a way that was initiated towards the institution, and those who present with problems. Consequently, it is an issue that affects all students, and which has several levels of intensity, different means, and different results. These results have traditionally resulted from the situations of the students within a risk context.

Trajectories of vulnerable students

Risk at school affects students who, because they are vulnerable, "suffer learning difficulties with some severity in the educational systems, centres and classrooms we have" (Escudero & González, 2013, p. 13). Students at risk who experience difficulties in their education are not uncommon and the phenomenon is often seen as an epidemic in the education system (Karacabey & Boyaci, 2018; Rogers, 2021). This makes it ripe for further investigation.

From a wider perspective, the subjects who find themselves in a situation of risk are those who "due to certain personal characteristics and perhaps a set of them, as well as social, community and family, have high probabilities of reaching undesirable results by being exposed to the influence of situations and contexts of risk" (Escudero & González, 2013, p. 20). It is important to note from this definition how the subjects, in spite of their singularities, are subject to a large influence by the realities in which they are framed, and stay as the ones that will promote, or not, situations of risk (Barros, Souza Neto, Silva, & Guedes, 2019). Similarly, these students are those who go on to have the highest likelihood of absenteeism, abandonment, and school failure (Jurado & Tejada, 2019; Rubio, 2017) as well as undesirable results and insufficient skills to integrate into patterns of society, family, and working life (González & San Fabián, 2018). This results from a danger of the individual not developing their potential because of the risk situations which can go onto affect their educational career.

Method

Design

Considering this study's objectives and the previous research that has been conducted on this issue (Deterding & Waters, 2021), this study was conducted using a qualitative approach. In particular, the design had a biographical-narrative nature. By developing this type of methodology, we were able to establish the various events that occur during the student trajectories (Brandenburg, 2021) with the aim of gathering and understanding the various relationships that can develop over the course of a life (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). This methodology therefore tries to make sense of and build meaning from individual events that, via the researcher, are then evoked in the individuals (Portela et al., 2019, 2022). This involves using a reflective and introspective process of the individual and contrasting the different events that have occurred within their life or in regard to an aspect of their life.

Data collection

The data collection method was used to conduct research on life histories using semi-structured in-depth interviews. This has been determined as one of the best approaches to carry out biographical-narrative research (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020) as it allows the researcher to be immersed within the issue and be flexible enough to develop the interviews according to the different needs as they arise (Deterding & Waters, 2021). The individual aggregate method was used to validate the interviews (Traverso,

2019) by producing an initial draught and gaining feedback from field experts. The interviews were structured to have three sections, one was a series of initial questions so that the researcher could verify that the interviewee was suitable for this study and to establish the personal and socio-humanitarian context from which they come. Second, a central block was dedicated to investigating each stage of the student's career: the stage prior to leaving school, the stage at which they were away from the school, and the stage of reincorporation. Lastly, a block of questions were aimed to investigate the aspects that were unclear and assess their trajectory as well as their prospects.

Sample

The sample was chosen on a non-probabilistic purposive basis. There were three criteria used for selecting the individuals: a) young people that had been away from school and, subsequently; b) they were at the moment of their participation involved in studying some of the measures aimed to foster their reincorporation into the educational system; c) the size of the sample. This final factor was the most relevant, as twice as many people were chosen as recommended by Hernández-Sampieri, Fernández y Baptista (2018) for this research, from three to five individuals. Lastly, the sample consisted of 10 people from programmes which were deemed to be encouraging people back into training. In particular, four comprised of basic professional training, four of professional training programmes, and two of entrance exams. The characteristics of these types of reinstatement programmes were specifically for "students at risk of educational exclusion and/or which feature personal characteristics or schooling background which result in a negative appraisal of the school framework" (Bernárdez et al., 2021, p. 257). Thus, it is guaranteed that one of the candidate requirements is that they have been through a situation of distance and reincorporation into the school.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis was performed using two complementary techniques: content analysis (Friese, 2020) and Barton & Lazarsfeld's qualitative data analysis model (in Taylor et al., 2015). Using these two techniques sequentially was done with the support of the analysis software ATLAS.ti. First, a content analysis was performed, whereby: 1) the information was reduced, and the data was prepared for coding; 2) the data was structured through categorisation and; 3) relationships between the different categories were extracted. Second, the process was complemented by the model of analysis as described by Barton &

Lazarsfeld (1961): 4) systematising the relationships via code concurrences; 5) making matrix formulations using semantic networks and; 6) conducting a theory-supporting analysis.

The benefits of using qualitative analysis by Barton and Lazarsfeld (1961) was pointed out by Glasser & Strauss (1967) who described it in analysis that could be conducted using this procedure on both a simple and more complex level. Using this procedure has meant there is greater relevance to using this process via support from data analysis software such as ATLAS.ti (Friese, 2020). Software helps with monitoring the analytic steps by using tools that help with each stage, as in previous research (Bernárdez, González & Rodírguez, 2022; Bernárdez, Portela, Nieto & Rodríguez, 2022), and which are described below.

The categories used in the analysis can be seen in table 1. Within which we can highlight the categories that are related to student involvement as perceived by them, the event type, the stage in their educational trajectories in which the event takes place, and the type of event depending on the approach of the student.

Results and Discussion

Trajectories of the students were analysed and reconstructed, and each has demonstrated the uniqueness of an individual to whom the story belongs. In terms of this paper, we aim to focus on how engagement is located within these life stories and also how engagement is manifested within the quality of the stories and within each of the trajectory stages. Conversely, the main events in the student trajectories and their relationship with engagement quality will also be reflected.

Engagement in students' trajectories

First, when we focus on how engagement is reflected in each of the events of the subjects, we can assess that there is a likelihood of an event tending towards a negative nature (Figure 1). In both of their critical events there is a greater importance for the subject and in their life events, everyday events, as well as a greater connection with events that lead to a provocation of negative engagement. Yet, if we are only to focus on life events there can be no difference between the events that lead to the student distancing themselves or the level of engagement with their studies. Cooccurrence coefficients[1] of 0.57 and 0.47 are presented, which have a small difference in this aspect. Conversely, there is an observed substantial difference between positive and negative critical events, with negative events occurring most frequently. This reveals that in the trajectory of the individuals, events tend to push them towards leaving school. This is the result of the

Table 1.
Codes and groups of codes used in the analysis.

Level of student approach		Engagement type	Stages in educational trajectory	
Macrosocial	-Education and training system -Dominant social values -Links between training and employment	-Positive Engagement -Negative Engagement	Previous primary stage	Stage away
Mesosocial	-Community -Family -Peer group -Educational centre	Life course theory -Life events -Critical events	Previous secondary stage	Reinstatement stage
Microsocial	-Individual characteristics -Interpersonal relationships		Distancing stage	Timeless

events being decisive in the direction that they take students in terms of their career, with seven points of difference in their co-occurrence coefficient and their quintuplicate number of events.

Figure 1.

Co-occurrence between types of events and different qualities of engagement

		● ◇ Negative_Engagement 451	● ◇ Positive_Engagement 379
● ◇ CRITICAL EVENTS	53	47 (0,10)	11 (0,03)
● ◇ LIFE EVENTS	811	457 (0,57)	382 (0,47)

Moreover, if we only focus on identifying at which point the events are concentrated according to their positive or negative engagement, we are then only able to highlight two differentiated aspects (Figure 2). The events which have the highest negative engagement occur in the stages prior to the student leaving their studies. Specifically, there is an outstanding co-occurrence coefficient (0.48) in the stage before the dropout happens. This could be over the result of progression between the stages before the dropout occurs, as the quantity of negative events multiplies, while the quantity of positive events is unchanged. This accords with the events that develop a positive engagement, the majority of which happened within the re-entry stage, with a significantly higher co-occurrence coefficient than in the other stages.
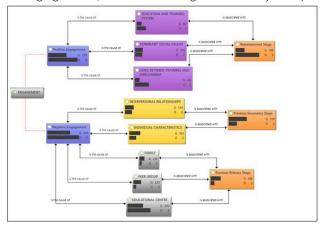
Figure 2.

Co-occurrence between different engagement qualities and stages of the trajectories.

		● ◇ Negative_Engagement 451	● ◇ Positive_Engagement 379
● ◇ Previous Primary Stage	196	123 (0,23)	86 (0,18)
● ◇ Previous Secondary Stage	319	248 (0,48)	86 (0,14)
● ◇ Reinstatement Stage	196	43 (0,07)	165 (0,40)
● ◇ Stage away	95	48 (0,10)	52 (0,12)

The factors that emerge according to the quality of engagement

As previously mentioned, there are some stages in student trajectories that differ from others because of engagement quality in terms of events that occur within them. Thus, the presence of different factors within the stages is heterogenous. In every stage of the different subjects there is event diversity that refers to a number of different factors affecting the school trajectory, however, there are many factors that predominate over others within every stage. These factors are illustrated in figure 3.

Figure 3.

Semantic network[2] of the relationship between quality of engagement, factors and stages of the trajectory.

The semantic network that emerges from these co-occurrences, which we have found between the factors in the various stages, are reflected in table 4. The network is created in terms of different events occurring in each stage and whether the events lead to a positive or negative engagement.

Table 4.

Cooccurrences between types of events present in the trajectories and each of the stages they pass through.

	Previous primary stage		Previous secondary stage		Stage away		Reinstatement stage	
	No. quote	CooC	No. quote	CooC	No. quote	CooC	No. quote	CooC
Individual characteristics	11	0.03	49	0.11	26	0.11	51	0.17
Interpersonal relationships	27	0.09	64	0.17	10	0.05	7	0.02
Community	19	0.08	26	0.08	8	0.06	6	0.03
Family	70	0.20	65	0.14	31	0.11	50	0.14
Peer group	59	0.16	139	0.34	25	0.08	18	0.04
Teachers	54	0.16	79	0.19	20	0.08	44	0.13
Educational centre	99	0.25	157	0.34	17	0.04	57	0.13
Education and training system	5	0.02	23	0.06	11	0.07	37	0.15
Dominant social values	17	0.06	31	0.07	25	0.13	54	0.20
Links between training and employment	4	0.02	8	0.02	22	0.16	39	0.17

Note. Extracted from data analysis in ATLAS.ti.

Mesosocial factors, influence of the family and its relationship with the center and peers. In the initial stage which occurred before the students left their primary or secondary school, there was a decrease in engagement quality which resulted from factors which were close to the experience of the students. These school related events, as well as those related to family and peer groups, stand out particularly within primary education although they do not have a high co-occurrence coefficient, nor did they have an especially high number of citations. As seen from the student quotations, the relationship with each group is especially relevant. In fact, there is a presence that defines the trajectory of the students who are at risk of exclusion.

> It helped me because I used to say to dad, I don't understand this, can you help me, but maybe he didn't come to help me and that, I don't know... it bothers me because from childhood to adolescence, he doesn't ask me: - hey, what's wrong with you? (D3:35)[3]

> I remember one of them very fondly, one in particular who was my tutor in class. [...] The man must have retired years ago, he was older, he was a good guy, he was a constant source of laughter (D1:41)

When addressing each factor individually in terms of the dimensions of the meso social level, we find that a difficulty occurs specifically in terms of the analysis and the breadth of factors that comprise each dimension. Beginning with those that demonstrate less relevance in terms of student trajectory and those referring to the community, it can be seen that there is anecdotal evidence indicating a low relevance for students in terms of this factor (Ribaya, 2011). This may also show that there is a limited influence in the stage before the distance when the subjects have stated that the environment in which they are developing their studies and which highlights how harmful this can be to their studies as a result of the environment being too distant from the school culture (Salvà-Mut et al., 2014).

If we adhere to the order that determines the relevance of events according to the quantity of appearances that appear in the coding, then the family is presented as a dimension that takes its significance from an influence on how the life stories of students are configured. Thus, throughout every stage there is a continual presence of events which are related to it, whereby attending to circumstances lends a trivial cohesion towards the family nucleus (Garnica et al., 2019). This includes the excessive responsibility of students with roles to which they do not belong, at least because of age, or little involvement from the family (Tarabini, 2018) in their children's education and, by extension, in what happens in school.

Conversely, the group of equals is also relevant primarily in the stage before abandonment, which is a stage associated with student friendship and which is significantly influential (Cooley et al., 2021; Salvà-Mut et al., 2014). The primary events showing a student's stories are linked to those which derive from students and that have a lower educational level and problematic behaviours than those that distance themselves from school and their education.

Lastly, at the mesosocial level, the school is the primary dimension generating the events influencing student trajectories. It is therefore important for schools in terms of student educational trajectories that factors comprising this dimension are relevant to the lives of students within a psychosocial context.

Microsocial factors, interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics. At the secondary education stage there is a similar phenomenon, with micro social factors having an increasing relevance in terms of individual characteristics and relationships. Upon reaching adolescence they have already begun a stage in that development where the events closest to them have not increased in importance. How they handle their personal characteristics and the influences on them from their closest circle of friends will be decisive in how they develop their trajectory and when the most negative events happen.

> Mathematics has always been very difficult for me, I see a number and I don't know what to do with it. (D2:48)

> There are teachers who have given me many opportunities, of course, who have helped me [...] and they are good people who have been very good to me (D5:54)

Conversely, the stage when they are away is not representative of a specifically significant stage for the student. Although they do start to have a sense of how macrosocial factors influence their trajectory and in a more significant way. In this way, via the quote we are seeing an example of how dominant social values influence student trajectories when they have moved away from education.

> I was ashamed to be asked or that we were among us, talking in the group of friends at home and, maybe, we would talk about it: at seven euros an hour for six days 7×6... and I would stay, oh my God, don't ask me. (D9:44)

Among the various factors at the microsocial level are examples of event diversity that also affect student trajectories. If individual characteristics are considered (Monarca, 2017), then issues of security and self-esteem as well as behavioural issues become externalised, including a delinquency or aggression that develop internally as well as depressive states (Kang, 2019). According to Salvà-Mut et al. (2014),

these difficulties influence how a school provides feedback to students when a significant number of them are only referring to the negative experiences experienced during their school time (Boyaci, 2019; Teuscher and Makarova, 2018) because of issues such as low participation or not having a sense of belonging, or a lack of academic skills and learning ability. There may also be issues of educational support needs (Yusof et al., 2018). Yet those events that are related to the interpersonal relationships of students also have a greater significance as well as being a hindrance to them, because they are deeply connected to events linked to their own individual characteristics. This is because whilst there is an absence of valuable and relevant relationships in both older students and their teachers, there will always be a lack of reference for generating positive experiences in their core where they feel that sense of belonging that is often lacking.

Macrosocial factors, dominant social values and the employment training system. Lastly, and more positively, student engagement is presented as being an improvement during their re-entry phase. Events that are related to the dominant social values as well as the relationship between training and employment or specific training lead to a significant increase in engagement. At this stage students see the importance of training because of interventions that are not within their control. This results in them assuming that they are unable to intervene and that it is necessary that they should just align themselves with the issue.

> They didn't think so much about you, it's like university, you know? ... Simply: I'll give it to you (professors giving the homework) if you like it, fine, if you don't like it, if you don't like it at all, get a life, that's it, I wash my hands of it like Pilate. In VET they give you the opportunity to meet, to say: I like this, I'm going to do this. And above all, they are looking out for you. (D2:62)

> Because I need a job, and I need to try to pick up everything else, to learn everything I haven't learnt. (D5:83)

Various events that can be found are reflected in the quotations from the macro social level and the factors affecting the stages of the educational trajectories within the previous levels. This is because many reflect on the actions that are conducted by a person or an individual level as a direct result of culture and society that they are involved in (Fernández Sierra, 2017; Jimenez, 2008; Salvà-Mut et al., 2014). These are the primary sources from which macro social factors emerge.

One example of this is dimension that is related to the educational system. Although within life stories events of different programmes and measures are aimed at alleviating the issue discussed, there remain legislative issues towards what happens within schools. These events can make it impossible to devise

any improvements or changes at a particular level and therefore these are barriers of a structural nature.

Another factor that has a basis in every level is that of dominant social values. We know that students take on a self-image based on preconceived ideological patterns (Barros et al., 2019; Karacabey and Boyaci, 2018). This danger results in the assumption of a future eventuality that belongs to a specific ethnic group, that of growing up in a specific environment where there is little value placed on education or that the culture does not place a particular value on education. Given this issue, there is a fear that this problem lies within a foundation that is both diffuse and global.

Conversely, although there is no strong link with other levels of all dimensions, there is a referral to the relationship between training and employment which manifests mainly in reintegrating students into the educational system. The main reason is that the perception is that subjects developed their training and positioning as a form of motivation that helps them to access the job market and presupposes improvements within the expectations they have of the labour market. A major incentive in training is that it is employment orientated, and the subjects therefore assume that they have taken the correct path. Yet, this high level of involvement demonstrates that there was a singularity that takes an extensive amount of time to emerge and which leads us to question why, before leaving school, there is a lack of awareness of this specific need.

Conclusions

The apex point of the students examined here is the end product of slowly distancing themselves from the common ideas of the school and moving away from a feeling of belonging and engagement with the school (Emery et al., 2020). Similarly, this distance is again lowered by the students being re-involved in their studies through various factors producing the same effect. This results in us reflecting on the separation between a student's school and a potential dichotomy between these units in accordance with the institution and those who are presenting with problems. Therefore, it is a phenomenon affecting every student and which has multiple levels of intensity and results (Salvà-Mut et al., 2014). Likewise, it is also a process that is very expressive of the student's boredom with their school and with the schools having both outdated and rigid (Nichol et al., 2016; Yusof et al., 2018) teaching methodologies which manifest as tedious and irrelevant for the student's education.

The various events occurring in each student's school career are neither episodic nor are they disconnected from one another (Christodoulou et al. 2018). Plus, the aim of constructing their life history is an attempt towards understanding the continuities, events, and

experiences happening within a school's trajectories and how they divert and establish the twists and turns in student lives and passage through school (Gebel & Heineck, 2019; Hutchison, 2019).

The emergent school trajectories have, more or less, been reflected in the various trajectory models used as a reference (Cuconato et al., 2017; Tomaszewska-Pękała et al., 2017). However, there are specific differences between the emerging patterns and those used as a reference which reveal that the trajectory models are more sharply focused on processes of absenteeism; dropping out of school does not fully chart the trajectory of someone returning to training. Yet, Blasbichler & Vogt (2020) state that student perspectives have their own course life, even though their trajectory develops in a specific direction, as they are both dynamic and reversible. They do this by using their own resilience, whereby the situation in which they find themselves is corrected and after which they are unaffected. Finally, and in line with the objective set, there are various manifestations of student engagement which are strongly tied to different career stages. This is because of the strong relationship between various factors and specific quality of engagement. There are also factors facilitating student involvement and other factors that facilitate their distance. Similarly, it was also verified that, in each trajectory stage, there are factors in which its presence is predominant.

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Ethics

This research has been approved by the research ethics commission of the University of Murcia (Id: 3226/2021)

Footnotes

1. Co-occurrence coefficients are offered by the ATLAS.ti software from the relationship strength between two codes.

2. In the semantic network, in addition to the different relationships between codes, we will find the total number of citations of a code (letter G) and the relationships with other codes that have been established for that code (letter D).

3. For the citation of the material, the coding offered by the analysis software has been used, where the D indicates the interview number, and the next number indicates the citation within that document.

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