

# Distributed Leadership and School Improvement

*Leading or Misleading?*

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the relationship between distributed leadership and school improvement. Drawing upon empirical evidence from two contemporary studies of successful school leadership and recent studies of school improvement, it explores the extent to which distributed forms of leadership can contribute to school improvement. The article argues that the distributed perspective offers a new and important theoretical lens through which leadership practice in school can be reconfigured and reconceptualized. It concludes by suggesting that, while evidence would suggest that distributed forms of leadership can assist capacity building within schools which contributes to school improvement, further research is needed to confirm a relationship between distributed forms of leadership and improved student learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS *improvement, shared leadership, collaboration*

## Introduction

Contemporary educational reform places a great premium upon the relationship between leadership and school improvement. International research evidence has consistently reinforced the importance of leadership in securing and sustaining improvement (e.g. Hopkins, 2001; Van Velzen et al., 1985; West et al., 2000). It is clear that effective leaders exercise an indirect but powerful influence on the effectiveness of the school and on the achievement of students (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000). In summary, the impact of leadership upon school effectiveness and school improvement is significant (Wallace, 2002).

Despite the prevailing certainty that leadership matters, there is still much

that is not yet understood about effective educational leadership (Leithwood and Riehl, 2003). As a result the knowledge base is constantly expanding and, as Bush and Glover (2003: 7) point out, this 'inevitably has generated a plethora of alternative and competing models'. In their recent review of the leadership literature, Bush and Glover (2003: 12) identify eight models of leadership that provide 'a starting point for a normative assessment of school leadership'. They also point out the weak empirical support for these constructs and the artificial distinctions between the different models. Looking at the leadership literature, it is certainly difficult to discern how different theoretical positions or models of leadership differ. Although Bush and Glover (2003) argue for an 'integrated model of leadership' it seems unlikely when there are different labels applied to the same conceptual terrain, i.e. 'instructional leadership,' 'learner centred leadership and 'pedagogical leadership'. Much more importantly, what evidence is there that these different models or constructs of leadership contribute to improved learner outcomes? As Leithwood and Riehl (2003: 3) note, 'large scale studies of schooling conclude that the effects of leadership on student learning are small but educationally significant'. Surely, the key question must be what types or forms or models of leadership in schools maximize student learning and contribute to school improvement? This article aims to explore this question.

A contemporary review of the literature (Hallinger and Heck, 1996) identified certain 'blank spots' (i.e. shortcomings in the research) and 'blind spots' (i.e. areas that have been overlooked because of theoretical and epistemological biases) within the leadership field. An important blank spot concerns exactly what form or forms of leadership practice contribute to sustained school improvement. An important blind spot is the fact that much of the research literature has focused upon the formal leadership of headteachers in particular, and has overlooked the kinds of leadership that can be distributed across many roles and functions in the school. It has tended to over-rely on accounts of headteachers to define effective leadership in action (Owens, 2001; Morrison, 2002; Razik and Swanson, 2001) and, to a certain extent, neglected leadership at other levels or from other perspectives (Muijs and Harris, 2003).

There is a growing body of evidence within the school improvement field that points towards the importance of capacity building as a means of sustaining improvement (e.g. Fullan, 2001; Hopkins and Jackson, 2002; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). At the core of the capacity-building model, it has been argued, is 'distributed leadership along with social cohesion and trust' (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002: 95). Leadership, from this perspective, resides in the human potential available to be released within an organization. It is what Gronn (2000) terms 'an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise' (Bennett et al., 2003: 3). Implicit within this model of leadership are the leadership practices of teachers, either as informal leaders or in a formal leadership role as a head of department, subject coordinator or teacher mentor (Muijs and Harris, 2003). As Leithwood and Reil

(2003: 3) note, 'research suggests that teacher leaders can help other teachers to embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement'. The clear implication is that distributed leadership is most likely to contribute to school improvement and to build internal capacity for development. The literature is less clear, however, on the exact form that this distributed leadership takes. Bennett et al. (2003: 4) note in their recent review of the literature on distributed leadership 'there were almost no empirical studies of distributed leadership in action'. Hence accounts of distributed leadership in practice are not readily available and 'operational images' of distributed leadership are not forthcoming (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002). While work by Spillane et al. (2001) and Muijs and Harris (2003) has started to explore distributed leadership in action, many more studies are required before firm conclusions can be drawn about the forms of distributed leadership activity that contribute to school improvement.

With this caution clearly in mind, this article aims to explore, in a tentative sense, the relationship between distributed leadership and school improvement. Drawing upon two recent empirical studies of leadership in successful schools and more widely upon recent studies of school improvement, the article first examines the concept of distributed leadership in some depth, second considers the empirical evidence from two recent studies of successful school leadership and in particular, the role of the headteacher in fostering distributed forms of leadership and, third, explores some of the inherent barriers and tensions implicit in distributing leadership within schools. The article concludes by reiterating the need for further research on the relationship between distributed leadership and school improvement and calls for studies exploring the impact of distributed forms of leadership on student learning outcomes.

## **Distributed Leadership: An Exploration**

Distributed leadership is currently in vogue. It has become increasingly used in the discourse about school leadership in the last few years and is currently receiving much attention and growing empirical support (Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2002; Hopkins and Jackson, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001). However, as Bennett et al. (2003: 2) point out, there seems to be 'little agreement as to the meaning of the term' and interpretations and understandings vary. Most helpfully, Bennett et al. (2003: 2) suggest that it is best to think of distributed leadership as 'a way of thinking about leadership' rather than as another technique or practice. In understanding distributed leadership this way it inevitably challenges assumptions about the nature and scope of leadership activity as it reconceptualizes leadership in terms of the leadership of the 'many rather than the few' (Harris and Lambert, 2003: 4). Distributed leadership concentrates on engaging expertise wherever it exists within the organization rather than seeking this only through formal position or role.

In contrast to traditional notions of leadership premised upon an individual managing hierarchical systems and structures, distributed leadership is characterized as a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working together. This distributed view of leadership, it has been suggested, offers a frame for studying leadership practice including 'every person at entry level who in one way or another, acts as a leader' (Goleman, 2002: 14). As Elmore (2000: 14) points out, in a 'knowledge-intensive enterprise like teaching and learning there is no way to perform these complex tasks without widely distributing the responsibility for leadership among roles in the organisation'. Distributed leadership, therefore, means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture. It is the 'glue of a common task or goal—improvement of instruction—and a common frame of values for how to approach that task' (Elmore, 2000: 15). This is not to suggest that ultimately there is no one responsible for the overall performance of the organization or to render those in formal leadership roles redundant. Rather the job of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship. Their central task is to create a common culture of expectations around the use of individual skills and abilities. In short, distributing leadership equates with maximizing the human capacity within the organization.

The distributed perspective focuses on *how* leadership practice is distributed among formal and informal leaders. As Bennett et al. (2003: 3) note, 'distributed leadership is not something "done" by an individual "to others", rather it is an emergent property of a group or network of individuals in which group members pool their expertise'. In this sense, distributed leadership is a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work at mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change (Spillane et al., 2001). It extends the boundaries of leadership significantly as it is premised upon high levels of 'teacher involvement' and encompasses a wide variety of 'expertise, skill and input' (Harris and Lambert, 2003: 16). Engaging many people in leadership activity is at the core of distributed leadership in action. Hopkins and Jackson (2002: 99) suggest it is where 'leadership and organisational growth collide and by definition, it is dispersed or distributed'.

The arguments for distributed forms of leadership and organizational development, change and improvement are powerful. In their recent review of successful school improvement efforts, Glickman et al. (2001: 49) construct a composite list of the characteristics of what they term the 'improving school', a 'school that continues to improve student learning outcomes for all students over time'. At the top of this list appears 'varied sources of leadership, including distributed leadership'. Similarly, research by Silns and Mulford (2002) has shown that student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community and where teachers

are empowered in areas of importance to them. In an earlier study, Louis and Marks (1996) found that in schools where the teachers' work was organized in ways that promoted sharing of leadership roles, there was a positive relationship with the academic performance of students. This implies a changing view of structures away from command and control. It suggests a view of the school as a learning community chiefly concerned with maximizing the achievement capacities of all those within the organization (Gronn, 2000).

A variety of studies have also found clear evidence of the positive effect of distributed leadership on teachers' self-efficacy and levels of morale (Greenleaf, 1966; MacBeath, 1998; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000). Evidence suggests that where teachers share good practice and learn together the possibility of securing better quality teaching is increased (Lieberman, 2000; Little, 1990, 2000). Collaboration and collegiality are at the core of distributed leadership, but it is important to recognize that distributed leadership is distinctive from, and more than, mutual collaboration between teachers. Spillane et al. (2001: 10) argue that distributed leadership 'emerges through interaction with other people and the environment'. The important delineation between forms of team-working, collegiality, collaboration and distributed leadership is the fact that distributed leadership results from the activity, that it is a product of a conjoint activity such as network learning communities, study groups, inquiry partnerships, and not simply another label for that activity. Not all collaborative activities will necessarily generate distributed leadership as much depends on the level and quality of involvement plus the degree of skilfulness within the group (Harris and Lambert, 2003). It also depends on the extent to which their activities impact upon organizational change and development. Much also depends on the internal conditions set, often by the formal leadership, to support and nurture collaborative learning and to harness the leadership energy that results.

Hopkins and Jackson (2002) suggest that formal leaders in schools need to orchestrate and nurture the space for distributed leadership to occur and to create the 'shelter conditions' for the leadership of collaborative learning. This raises the question of whether distributed leadership is 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'. Is it a form of leadership which acknowledges and depends upon the formal leadership positions within the organization or is it more likely to occur organically and spontaneously from the activities of teachers working together? Bennett et al. (2003: 9) consider the relationship between positional and informal leadership as a means of exploring the top-down/bottom-up dichotomy. They also look at sources of change and suggest that the impetus for developing distributed leadership can arise from a variety of influences and that it is possible that the 'development of distributed leadership . . . may be found in the shape of a "top-down" initiative from a strong or charismatic leader'. A number of studies that identified the headteacher as a source or impetus for generating distributed forms of leadership are cited in their review of the literature (e.g. Blasé and Blasé, 1999; Gold et al., 2002). Other research

work has similarly pointed to the role of the headteacher in fostering and generating distributed leadership and has provided illuminating rather than conclusive evidence of a relationship between school improvement and distributed leadership (Day et al., 2000; Harris and Chapman, 2002). A summary of the findings from these contemporary studies of successful school leadership follows.

## **Distributed Leadership in Action**

Two recent studies of successful school leadership have pointed towards the importance of distributed leadership in securing school improvement. Both studies explored the leadership practices in schools that were considered to be improving primarily in terms of increased levels of student attainment and achievement, although other indicators of success were also used.<sup>1</sup> In 1999 the NAHT (National Association of Headteachers) commissioned research to identify and examine successful leadership practice in schools (Day et al., 2000). In 2001 the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) funded research that explored successful leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances (Harris and Chapman, 2002). Both studies offer a contemporary view of successful leadership and provide insights into leadership practices in schools that are improving. The central message emanating from both studies was that successful heads recognized the limitation of a singular leadership approach and saw their leadership role as being primarily concerned with empowering others to lead.

The NAHT research project involved in-depth case studies of 12 schools. Interviews were conducted with parents, pupils, teachers, governors, senior managers and headteachers at each school. The research set out to examine the extent to which existing theories of effective leadership, for example 'purposeful', 'transformational' or 'moral' leadership, had resonance with the practices of successful heads in times of change. The primary aim of the research was to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of contemporary leadership in schools through a synthesis of theoretical perspectives derived from the literature and new evidence obtained by means of empirical research.

The research revealed that, although the heads were at different stages in their careers, of different ages, had different experiences and were working in very different situations, their approaches to leadership were remarkably similar. The evidence from this study pointed towards a form of leadership that was distributed through collaborative and joint working. The evidence showed that these successful heads led both the cognitive and the affective lives of the school, combining structural (developing clear goals), political (building alliances) and educational leadership (professional development and teaching improvement) with symbolic leadership principles (presence, inspiration) and distributed leadership practice (empowering others to lead). They were primarily transformational leaders who built self-esteem, enhanced

professional competence and gave their staff the confidence and responsibility to lead development and innovation.

It's enabling other people to take over, to do things . . . It's being able to trust other people. To be confident in your own ability to share tasks and know they will be done . . . to allow other people to lead and not to try and control everything yourself. (Headteacher, School 10)

You don't achieve things on your own. You set the way forward, lead by example, communicate what needs to be done and have to be hands on in the way you want it achieved . . . it doesn't always have to be you doing the leading. (Headteacher, School 5)

The heads in the NAHT study were all highly responsive to the demands and challenges within and beyond their own school context. In managing people and cultural change they managed external as well as internal environments. They had skills in communicating, in supporting colleagues' development so that they felt confident in fulfilling expectations of their contribution to the achievement of strategic goals and in the management of conflict and negotiating positive outcomes. From the perspectives of governors, deputies, teachers, parents and pupils, the overarching message was one of the head building the community of the school in its widest sense, that is, through developing and involving others in leading improvement within the school.

The second contemporary study of successful school leadership also adopted a case-study methodology. It investigated leadership practice within a group of 10 schools designated by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as 'schools facing challenging circumstances' (SFCC). Schools in which 25 per cent of pupils, or less, achieve five or more grades A\* to C at GCSE are placed in this category. This grouping also includes a number of schools that achieve above 25 per cent but where over 35 per cent of their pupils receive free school meals. Many of these schools are also in the DfES categories of 'Special Measures' or 'Serious Weaknesses' and are subject to regular inspection.

To explore leadership approaches in these schools a research design was constructed that incorporated multiple methods. The prime aim of this approach was to capture 'thick descriptions' of leadership practice. In-depth case-study data was collected from 10 schools facing challenging circumstances. This included semi-structured interviews with headteachers, middle managers and classroom teachers. In addition, a wide range of documentary and contextual data was collected at each school. The selection of case-study schools was informed by two factors. First, care was taken to ensure that the schools represented a wide range of contexts and were geographically spread. Second, inspection reports were scrutinized to ensure that there was evidence of successful leadership and an upward school improvement trajectory as shown through performance data, self-evaluation and Ofsted data.

It is acknowledged that the possibilities for generalization are limited with such a small sample of schools. However, the volume and range of data collected

provided a rich insight into the leadership practices in SFCCs. Previous research had shown that authoritarian 'top-down' forms of leadership are most prevalent in schools in special measures or serious weakness, particularly in the early stages (Gray, 2000). In a failing school context, leadership approaches often need to be very directive and task focused. However, in schools not in either of the failing categories but improving, in spite of challenging circumstances, a recent review of the research points towards less directive forms of leadership (Muijs and Harris, 2003).

The data collected within the study suggest that all the heads acknowledged that they had adopted autocratic leadership approaches at critical times in the school's development. The majority of schools in the study had at some stage emerged from special measures or serious weaknesses. All the heads acknowledged that they had taken a more autocratic stance during the inspection phase. This included paying special attention to issues such as policy implementation and consistent standards of teaching (Chapman, 2002). However, they all also agreed that this leadership approach was least likely to lead to sustained school improvement and that no one style could meet the diverse range of challenges found in schools in difficult circumstances. 'I don't think there is one leadership style or approach is there? Anymore than there is a single teaching style. You need breadth and diversity in both particularly in schools like this' (Head, School 5).

Following the inspection phase all the heads in this study had deliberately chosen a leadership approach designed to move the school forward, one that gave others the responsibility to lead and to undertake leadership tasks. In many ways their selected leadership approaches were transformational both in orientation and aspiration (Leithwood and Jantzi, 2000). However, the particular emphasis given by these heads to allocating improvement responsibilities to those not in formal leadership positions would suggest an approach to leadership that has both distributive and transformational principles at its core. 'My prime purpose was to give staff ownership of the improvement agenda, that way there was every chance we could sustain momentum' (Head, School 3).

In all 10 schools the research found that distributed approaches to leadership prevailed and directly influenced approaches to problem-solving and decision-making. While heads' responses to problems varied, depending on the circumstance or situation, their value position remained consistently one of involving and consulting pupils, staff and parents. Within the study the heads saw the agency of staff and students as central to achieving the school's purpose. The heads used a number of strategies for distributing leadership. These included involving others in decision-making, allocating important tasks to teachers and rotating leadership responsibilities within the school. A number of headteachers had deliberately chosen to distribute leadership responsibility to others and had put in place systems and incentives to ensure this happened. There was also encouragement and support for teacher-led initiatives and development.

In short, all the heads in this study actively sought to promote innovation and



change by engaging teachers in developmental tasks that were absolutely crucial to move the school forward. Their approach to leadership, however, was not generally one of 'delegated headship' where tasks were imposed upon those within the organization. On the contrary, they distributed leadership activity through a redistribution of power within the organization by giving those not in 'formal' leadership positions responsibility for major and important development tasks. The decision to work with and through teams as well as individuals was a common response across all eight schools to the management of change. The perspectives of those within the school community (i.e. teachers, parents, governors and pupils) on the leadership approach or style of their headteacher was one of the head encouraging others to take responsibility for important development work. In this sense they were demonstrating distributed leadership but paradoxically in a 'top-down' way.

When I first came to the school, the head and SMT were considered to be the leaders, everyone else opted out. With the formulation of teams with clear targets I've been able to distribute leadership and to energize teachers to take responsibility for change and development. (Head, School 7)

The teachers now have greater responsibility and authority for leading. The days of waiting for the head to lead on all fronts have gone. (SMT, School 10)

Both studies point towards an emerging model of leadership that is less concerned with individual capabilities, skills and talents and more preoccupied with creating collective responsibility for leadership action and activity. The focus is less upon the characteristics of 'the leader' and more upon creating shared contexts for learning and developing leadership capacity (Harris and Lambert, 2003). A link is made between distributed leadership and school improvement in both studies, but the nature of the investigations and the methodologies employed can only illuminate but not confirm a correlation between this form of leadership and school improvement. It is implied but not proven. If we accept that the studies show that distributed forms of leadership feature in schools that are improving, even in challenging circumstances, and this is considered to be an important dimension of their success, then it is worth considering what might be the barriers to and benefits of developing distributed leadership within schools.

## **Distributed Leadership: Barriers and Benefits**

While the research evidence from the leadership and school improvement fields highlight the advantages of distributed forms of leadership, there are inevitable and inherent difficulties associated with its widespread adoption and adaptation within schools. It would be naive to ignore the major structural, cultural and micropolitical barriers operating in schools that make distributed forms of leadership difficult to implement. Clearly schools as traditional hierarchies,

with the demarcations of position and pay-scale, are not going to be instantly responsive to a more fluid and distributed approach to leadership. Furthermore, there are inherent threats to status and the status quo in all that distributed leadership implies. First, distributed leadership requires those in formal leadership positions to relinquish power to others. Apart from the challenge to authority and ego, this potentially places the head or principal in a vulnerable position because of the lack of direct control over certain activities. In addition, there are financial barriers as formal leadership positions in schools carry additional increments. Consequently, to secure informal leadership in schools will require heads to use other incentives and to seek alternative ways of remunerating staff who take on leadership responsibilities.

Second, the 'top-down' approaches to leadership and the internal school structures offer significant impediments to the development of distributed leadership. The current hierarchy of leadership within both primary and secondary schools means that power resides with the leadership team, that is, at the top of the school. In addition, the separate pastoral and academic structures in schools, the subject or department divisions plus the strong year groupings, present significant barriers to teachers working together. These structures can actively prevent teachers attaining autonomy and taking on leadership roles within the school as they demarcate role and responsibility.

Finally and most importantly, distributed leadership poses the major challenge of *how* to distribute development responsibility and authority and more importantly *who* distributes responsibility and authority. From the two studies it is clear that a 'top-down' approach to distributed leadership is possible and that giving improvement or development responsibilities to teachers offers a means of empowering others to lead. But it will be important to ensure that distributed leadership is not simply misguided delegation. Instead, it implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership function is *stretched over* the work of a number of individuals and where the leadership task is accomplished through the interaction of *multiple leaders* (Spillane, 2002: 20). It implies interdependency rather than dependency, embracing the ways in which leaders of various kinds and in various roles share responsibility. As Bennett et al. (2003: 10) highlight, there may be both 'institutional and spontaneous' forms of distributed leadership. There may be a long-term institutional form of distributed leadership through team structures or working groups and there may be ad hoc groups offering a more fluid and immediate response to the change and development needs of the school. As the two studies demonstrated, there will inevitably be a relationship between those in formal leadership positions and those who are involved in leadership and development activities at other levels. It is clear that certain tasks and functions would have to be retained by those in formal leadership positions but that the key to successful distributed leadership resides in the involvement of teachers in collectively guiding and shaping instructional and institutional development.

Under the right conditions, the positive benefits of distributed leadership

clearly have been shown. King et al. (1996) and Griffin (1995) found that distributed leadership resulted in positive effects on pedagogy, on school culture and on educational quality. However, the research also points towards the importance of allocating time for teachers to work together and generate developmental activity of benefit to the school. In her study of a school where distributed leadership was being implemented Ovando (1996) found that time to meet was a central component of success and in schools that were improving teachers were given dedicated time to collaborate with one another.

The research evidence would also suggest that the success or otherwise of distributed leadership within a school can be influenced by a number of interpersonal factors, such as relationships with other teachers and school management. The importance of these is evident, both with respect to teachers' ability to influence colleagues and with respect to developing productive relations with school management, who may in some cases feel threatened by teachers taking on leadership roles. There may also on occasion be conflicts between groups of teachers, such as those that do and do not take on leadership roles, which can lead to estrangement among teachers. Research has shown that colleagues can at times be hostile to distributed leadership because of factors such as inertia, over-cautiousness and insecurity (Barth et al., 1999). Overcoming these difficulties will require a combination of strong interpersonal skills on the part of the 'teacher leader' and a school culture that encourages change and leadership from teachers.

## Reflection

The empirical evidence presented in this article suggests that successful leaders are those who distribute leadership, understand relationships and recognize the importance of 'reciprocal learning processes that lead to shared purposes' (Harris and Lambert, 2003: 7). Essentially, these leaders are more connected to people and networks than the 'traditional' forms of leadership, that is, 'the lone chief atop a pyramidal structure' (Greenleaf, 1996: 61) – they distribute leadership in order to generate organizational development and change. Yet, as Hopkins and Jackson (2002: 17) note,

. . . despite more than two decades of writing about organisational development we are still in a position of needing to develop understandings about what leadership really involves when it is distributed, how schools might function and act differently and what operational images of distributed leadership in action might look like.

In addition, despite a wealth of school improvement literature advocating more collaborative, democratic and distributed forms of leadership, clear links with improved student outcomes have yet to be established.

A comprehensive review of the literature on headship and principalship has highlighted the paucity of evidence linking leadership at this level to improved student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 1996). Most recently, in their

systematic review Bell, Bolam and Cubillo (2002: 4) reinforce this general observation but suggest that 'distributed forms of leadership among the wider school staff is likely to have a more significant impact on the positive achievement of student/pupil outcomes than that which is largely or exclusively top down'. For this reason we undoubtedly need to understand much more about distributed leadership in action, and how it can be nurtured, supported and developed. We need more empirical studies of distributed leadership that interrogate the relationship between distributed leadership and school improvement. But most importantly, we need to know whether distributed forms of leadership contribute to improved student outcomes and, if so, in what form. Unless distributed leadership impacts positively upon the quality of teaching and learning it will, at best, encourage schools to operate more openly and encourage teachers to work more collaboratively. At worse, it will add to the growing number of leadership theories and constructs that cannot be linked to school improvement or student learning outcomes and, as such, prove to be misleading.

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### **Note**

1. For a full account of methodology, refer to final reports (Day et al., 1999; Harris and Chapman, 2002).

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