

TEACHERS' BELIEFS ON FACTORS AFFECTING THE FAILURE OF ROMA CHILDREN

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Abstract. The Roma constitute numerous national minority in Serbia which faces various problems reflected in extreme poverty, poor living conditions and low social, economic and educational status. Since education is one of the most important factors that can determine their future success in life, it is crucial to analyse the reasons for their failure in school. Considering the importance of teachers for educational outcomes, this study aims to investigate teachers' opinions regarding the factors in academic achievements of Roma children. The paper is based on the research that included 450 teachers from the southern Serbia, aiming to estimate the impact of various factors that influence the academic achievements of Roma children. The results present teachers' opinions regarding the dominant group of factors whose influences are intertwined: poverty, poor living conditions, insufficient preparedness for school, inability to understand the language in which the lessons are presented, irregular attendance at school and additional help in learning by teachers and others. The results of the research indicate the existence of statistically significant differences in relation to teachers' gender, the length of their teaching experience and

different types of education. The results also point to the importance of inclusive education, which has proved to have potential to change some prejudices about minority populations, as well as to help these children become an integral part of the society in which they live.

Keywords: Roma children, education, teachers, success factors, inclusion

Instruction

In a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional country such as Serbia, aside from the Serbian majority, there are other ethnic communities which differ according to their historical, sociocultural, and demographic development, as well as according to their religion and language. The second most numerous national minority are the Roma. Extreme poverty, poor living conditions, and low social, economic and educational status are the central characteristics of this minority in European countries, as well as in Serbia (O'Hanlon, 2016; Vermeersch, 2012; Baucal & Stojanović, 2011).

Aside from numerous predicaments in various spheres of life, the members of

Roma minority face tremendous problems in the field of education of young generations. This is also typical of some other countries in which Roma live, and discrimination, poverty, cultural differences and marginalised position are just some of the reasons behind the regrettable situation regarding the education of Roma children. Contrary to the attitude which advocates the existence of significant cultural differences which contribute to hindering the educational process of Roma children, some research studies show that cultural factors are not pivotal to Roma education after all. As per Surdu et al. (2011), the socio-economic factors are more dominant, first and foremost the lack of means necessary for the education of Roma children. The causes for exclusion of Roma children from the education system can be found in poor economic situation of

Roma families and a low level of competence in the majority language. The transition process has further aggravated the poor economic situation, which carried significant implications for the position of Roma and the process of their education (Brown et al., 2013; De Munck & Risteski, 2013). Poor living conditions of Roma people undoubtedly leave their mark on Roma education levels, and this depicts a vicious cycle of destitution: most of Roma are not qualified to work because they are not educated, and they are not educated because they lack proper conditions (Mendes et al., 2021). Peček & Macura-Milovanović (2012) believe that education is the only possible path to overcome different adversities which Roma encounter, and point to numerous problems which Roma children experience during their education.

Some studies show that the situation in schools attended by Roma children is intolerable, with high rates of early school leaving, absenteeism and conflicts in the classrooms, as well as with conflicts between teachers and families (Rosário et al., 2011). These conditions often result in a significant number of Roma children leaving school. Those Roma children who remain within the framework of an educational system most frequently encounter various forms of discrimination which results in the segregation of entire classes, and even schools (Búzás, 2021; New, 2013).

Excluding Roma children by placing them into special classes or schools is a very frequent occurrence. Various research studies show that children belonging to the majority population consider Roma children to be undesirable friends at school, which leads to their exclusion to special, segregated schools (Búzás, 2021; Ljubic et al., 2012). The main characteristic of segregated schools which are attended by over 50% of Roma children is that they are located in the vicinity of Roma settlements and that they are marked as Roma schools in the social environment. The other element which characterises these schools is that they are equipped far worse than regular schools (Surdu, 2003). Unjustified

placement of Roma children in special schools intended for children with developmental disabilities is also present as a form of segregation (Kende & Neményi, 2006). By introducing inclusion into the process of education the enrolment of Roma children to special schools has been somewhat mitigated. However, according to the assertions of the European Roma Rights Centre, it is still far from the desired (ERRC, 2014).

Theoretical framework

It is well-known that a large number of Roma children quit school before they turn 15, while Roma children who remain within the framework of the school system, in addition to discrimination, face another issue – the issue of academic achievement (Tourtouras et al., 2016). The failure of Roma children included in the regular school system is, without a doubt, determined by numerous factors which are mutually connected and conditioned. Among them, the central role is played by socioeconomic factors and pedagogical factors.

Socioeconomic factors depend neither on the educational institution nor on Roma children, and they refer to the conditions in which one lives, as well as to parent's employment and financial situation in the family. The socioeconomic factors affecting the success of Roma pupils are connected by one common characteristic which is at the same time a very significant mark of the Roma population – poverty. The influence of poverty on academic achievements is justified by the lack of financial means, which creates enormous problems in the education of these children, because the inability to buy books, materials, toys and necessary didactic tools and equipment hinders the children's cognitive development. The poverty of Roma families develops depression and stress, which triggers undesirable patterns of behaviour towards children, the severity and inclination towards punishment, and the lack of interaction and warmth (Lee et al., 2014).

Insufficient preparedness of Roma children for school, as pedagogical factor, is reflected in the lack of readiness to master lessons at school. The aforementioned insufficient preparedness can be a result of a non-stimulating family atmosphere which is created by a low level of education of the parents. The poverty of Roma families significantly influences an inadequate preparedness of Roma children for school. The inability to buy toys and other suitable materials makes the environment in which Roma children grow a non-stimulating one. This may lead to attention deficit, a weaker visual and motor coordination and a slower development of cognitive abilities. The preparation of Roma children for active participation in the school context has been additionally hampered by their lack of presence at pre-school institutions. Even when they do, they usually join the mandatory preparatory programme which includes children who are about to start attending primary schools, while at earlier levels these children usually do not attend kindergartens, or very few of them do so (Macura-Milovanović et al., 2013).

In addition to the insufficient preparedness for school, another pedagogical factor which leads Roma children to fail at school is the inability to understand the language in which the lessons are presented at schools. At the earliest age Roma children do not have the opportunity to hear or speak a language other than their mother tongue. Thus, they start attending schools without any knowledge or with insufficient knowledge of the language in which the teaching process is being realised. Little knowledge or no knowledge at all of the language in which the teaching process is realised, the inability to communicate with teachers in order to ask for further explanations or additional help, as well as poor communication with peers, determine not only academic achievements, but also the opportunities for socialisation and friendship, which as a problem arises in other countries as well (Richards & Armstrong, 2010; Şandru, 2009).

It is considered that irregular attendance at school by Roma children is directly influenced by children's age. Accordingly, the Roma children of the age

between 11 and 12 attend school less frequently, and a logical consequence of this is school failure (Korać-Mandić, 2011). Irregular attendance at school, a low level of differentiation and individualisation of the teaching process, as well as teachers' low expectations of Roma students regarding academic achievements, almost certainly lead to failure. The results of the research show that teachers in higher grades do not show enough readiness to adjust their teaching process to Roma children, to additionally engage themselves and provide educational support, nor do they consider themselves responsible for a proper motivation and achievements of Roma pupils (Jovanović et al., 2013).

A continuous impact of socioeconomic (poverty and living conditions) and pedagogical factors (insufficient preparedness, inability to understand the language, irregular attendance, additional help), which are intertwined, leads to school failure of Roma children. Some of those consequences are momentary and they can easily be eliminated, while some others leave a lasting mark, not only with respect to a low level of education of Roma children, but also with respect to their entire life. The consequences which Roma children face after the established failure at school are as follows: taking additional examination, taking class exams, grade repetition and early school leaving. With the aim of preventing the failure of Roma children, both schools and the society make efforts to develop more efficient strategies which should contribute to the overall achievements and to a better integration of Roma children (UNICEF, 2014; Walker, 2010). An important role in that process is played by teachers who are both creators and moderators of the teaching process adjusted to the educational needs of all children, including Roma children. The first and the most fundamental task of teachers regarding the prevention of failure of Roma children is to change their relationship to this population of pupils, to overcome discrimination, to make the school context more sensitive to a more adequate acceptance of Roma children, and to overcome stereotypes and prejudice (Bhopal, 2011).

There is no doubt that teachers' actions when working with Roma children are partly determined by teachers' personal beliefs, their relationship towards the children of Roma population, and mostly by the expectations which they have regarding the achievements of Roma children. Bearing in mind the importance of teachers for Roma children achieving success at school, this research investigates teachers' opinions regarding the factors in academic achievements of Roma children.

Methods and data

The basic aim of the research is to determine the opinion of primary school teachers regarding the influence of certain factors on academic achievements of Roma children. In accordance with the set aim, eight research tasks were defined - to determine teachers' opinions regarding the influence of: (1) poverty on failure/success achieved by Roma pupils at school; (2) Roma living conditions on failure/success achieved by Roma pupils at school; (3) unpreparedness for school on failure/success achieved by children from Roma families; (4) inability to understand the language in which lessons are taught on failure/success achieved by Roma pupils at school; (5) irregular attendance at school on failure/success achieved by children from Roma families; (6) additional help for Roma pupils on their academic achievements; (7) to determine whether teachers' opinions, which were inquired into and which dealt with the factors in school failure/success of Roma children, differ depending on teachers' gender, the length of their teaching experience and different types of education; (8) to determine teachers' opinions regarding inclusive education, and whether they believe that the process of inclusion actually contributed to the improvement of academic achievements of Roma children.

In the research the authors applied the descriptive method, and the instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire with a scale of assessment,

that has been constructed specially for the purposes of this research. The reliability of the instrument has been checked by means of Cronbach's alpha method of internal consistency and its value is $\alpha = 0.71$, which confirms that the instrument is relevant for the purposes of the research.

The research sample is apposite and it comprises 450 class teachers and special subject teachers of primary schools in Serbia. The characteristics of teachers relevant to the research are: gender (two categories: male and female), the length of teaching experience (two categories: to 20 years of experience and over 20 years of experience) and the type of education (likewise two categories: class teachers and special subject teachers). The data have been processed by means of the SPSS data processing software. The ANOVA was used along with standard statistical parameters.

Results

In the research section we presented the results regarding teachers' opinions with respect to the influence of dominant factors on academic achievements of Roma pupils: poverty and housing conditions, preparedness for school, unfamiliarity with the language in which teaching process is implemented, absence and irregular attendance at school, additional help in learning, as well as teachers' opinion on inclusion in education. The relation between teachers' opinions and the relevant characteristics (gender, length of teaching experience and types of education) will be presented within those items where statistically significant differences were noted.

Table 1. Teachers' attitudes about factors of influence on the academic achievement of Roma children

	N	I strongly agree	I partially agree	I cannot decide	I mostly disagree	I strongly disagree	AS	SD
Poverty influences the academic achievements of Roma children	450	165 (36.7%)	189 (42.0%)	34 (7.5%)	49 (10.9%)	13 (2.9%)	3.17	0.76
Living conditions influence the academic achievements of Roma children	450	185 (41.1%)	146 (32.5%)	25 (5.5%)	53 (11.8%)	41 (9.1%)	3.07	0.96
Insufficient preparedness influences the achievements of children from Roma families	450	244 (54.2%)	159 (35.4%)	24 (5.3%)	19 (4.2%)	4 (0.9%)	3.45	0.66
The influence of the inability to understand the language in which lessons are taught on failure/success achieved by Roma pupils at school	450	185 (41.1%)	148 (32.8%)	21 (4.6%)	58 (12.7%)	40 (8.8%)	3.08	0.95
Teachers' opinions regarding the irregular attendance at school as a failure factor	450	354 (78.7%)	83 (18.5%)	5 (1.1%)	5 (1.1%)	3 (0.6%)	3.75	0.51
Teachers' opinions regarding the additional help for Roma pupils	450	259 (57.6%)	159 (35.4%)	15 (3.3%)	16 (3.5%)	1 (0.2%)	3.52	0.60

Poverty and living conditions of Roma as factors in Roma children school failure

The data in the Table 1 provide the answers to the first task which deals with the determination of teachers' attitudes with respect to the influence of living conditions of Roma on their academic achievements. The obtained results

can be considered expected because they confirm that poverty and poor living conditions, according to teachers, do influence the academic achievements of Roma children. As much as 78,7% of teachers agree with the first claim, 7,5% is indecisive, while 13,8% of respondents believe that poverty does not influence the failure of Roma children at school. The degree of concurrence of the tested sample with the second claim was 73,6%, while the degree of disagreement was significantly lower, 20,9%, (5,5% is indecisive). The validity of the obtained results can be traced in the awareness of class teachers and special subject teachers of the conditions in which Roma children live and learn, and of the financial situation of their families. Our results are in accordance with the Hemelsoet (2015) research study.

Poor living conditions and poverty have been identified by the United Nations as extremely significant factors in the process of education. Some research studies show that the young who grow in poverty face numerous problems during their education (McKinney, 2014; Beckett & Wrigley, 2014). One can safely assert that the poverty of Roma families influences the education of their children, their level of aspirations and their academic achievements. The Roma life style characterised by frequent migrations and changes of residence hinders the inclusion of Roma children in the system of education, even when other social problems are successfully mitigated (Mendes et al., 2021).

Insufficient preparedness of Roma children for school

The next important factor, evaluated by the teachers, which influences academic achievements of Roma children was their unpreparedness for school. Table 1 shows that 403 teachers, i.e. 89,6% of them agree that insufficient preparedness influences the achievements of children from Roma families. Hence, one can conclude that teachers are aware that the inability to enrol children for pre-school institutions due to financial difficulties, a large distance between pre-

school institutions and Roma communities (mahalas), as well as the lack of attendance at preparatory programmes leave consequences on the level of success of Roma children at school. The number of those teachers who mostly disagree or totally disagree with the claim is very small, almost negligible (23 teachers, 5,1%), as well as the number of indecisive teachers (24 teachers, 5,3%). Nevertheless, that percentage confirms that there are those who believe that one can compensate for that which one missed later in the process of education.

These findings are consistent with findings of other authors.¹⁾ The research of Felfe & Huber (2017) has shown that Roma children who finish pre-school level of education have up to 30,4% better chance to learn at least 10 letters of the alphabet more than the children who do not attend pre-school institutions. The same research states that, under the same conditions, Roma children would have at least 23,8% better chance to read at least 4 popular words, 22,2% to write their own name and 41,8% to know the numbers from 1 to 10.

Language barrier as a factor in academic failure/success of Roma

One of the main objective problems which Roma children face during their enrolment in school and later, during their education, is a low level of competence in the official language of the country in which they live. This problem is evident in almost all European countries (Kyuchukov, 2021; Sime & Fox, 2015).

Within this task we started from the assumption that teachers believe that the inability to understand the language in which lessons are taught influences the lag and slowness in learning, and therefore the failure of Roma pupils. As presented in Table 1, the largest number of respondents (41,1%) totally agrees that the inability to understand the language during the teaching process is one of the causes of Roma children failing at school. A smaller number of teachers – 32,8% partially agree with the presented claim. Some 12,7% of the respondents mostly disagree with the claim, and the percentage of those who totally

disagree is 8,8%. There were 4,6% of indecisive respondents. The research data indicate that teachers emphasize mutual connection between unfamiliarity with Serbian language and school failure.

The data showed in Table 2 indicate the differences in teachers' attitudes regarding the types of education (class teachers and special subject teachers). The obtained values of the t-test, df and r show that the type of education of the respondents creates the difference in opinions regarding the influence of poor language skills on the inability of Roma students to follow the teaching process. The observed difference is justified by the values of arithmetic means which reveal that the concurrence with the stated claim is larger among the class teachers. The interpretation is found in the fact that the language barrier is more conspicuous at an earlier age (from 7 to 11), bearing in mind that they first encounter Serbian language when they enrol for school, while special subject teachers have less problems with this issue in higher grades, because Roma children master the basics of Serbian language at the previous stage of education.

Table 2. Statistically significant differences in the attitudes of teachers

			AS	SD	t- test	df	p																
Poor language skills influence ability of Roma students to follow the teaching process	Type of education	Class teachers	3.10	1.03	0.268	229.718	0.04																
		Special subject teachers	3.07	0.92				Irregular attendance at school influences academic achievements of Roma children	Gender	Male	3.70	0.55	1.382	269.029	0.05	Female	3.78	0.48	Type of education	Class teachers	3.80	0.46	1.485
Irregular attendance at school influences academic achievements of Roma children	Gender	Male	3.70	0.55	1.382	269.029	0.05																
		Female	3.78	0.48					Type of education	Class teachers	3.80	0.46	1.485	285.776	0.00	Special subject teachers	3.73	0.52					
	Type of education	Class teachers	3.80	0.46	1.485	285.776	0.00																
		Special subject teachers	3.73	0.52																			

Inclusion has positive influence on the academic achievements of Roma children	The length of teaching experience	Up to 20 years	1.83	0.81	0.138	436.320	0.02
		Over 20 years	1.75	0.94			

Irregular attendance at school

By means of surveying teachers about the impact of absenteeism on the success of Roma children, the responses were obtained and shown in Table 1, which confirm the attitude that irregular attendance at school is one of the major factors in school failure of Roma children. Out of 450 respondents, 354 (78.7%) totally agrees with the claim that irregular attendance at school influences academic achievements of Roma children, while 83 respondents (18,5%) partially agrees. The number of those teachers who do not perceive the correlation between irregular attendance at school and success of Roma children at school is 3 (0,6%), while there are 5 (1,1%) of those who believe that this correlation is insignificant. The same number of teachers is indecisive. On the basis of the research results one can conclude that teachers highly value this claim and believe that regular attendance at school is a precondition for better academic achievements of Roma children.

Table 2 shows different degrees of agreement according to gender and types of education. By comparing the arithmetic means one reaches the conclusion that female respondents and class teachers expressed a higher degree of agreement with the claim that irregular attendance at school influences academic achievements of Roma children. The obtained difference in beliefs can be assigned to a more expressed aspiration of these classes of teachers towards the improvement of academic achievements of Roma children, and consequently towards avoiding the negative effects of irregular attendance at school.

Similarly, a large number of studies show that one of the major problems in the education of Roma children is an irregular attendance at school (Parthenis

& Fragoulis, 2019; Gatti et al., 2016; Karagiorgi et al., 2011). Irregular attendance at school is very frequently the starting point for grade repetition and quitting school (Harding, 2014; Wilkin et al., 2010).

Additional help with learning as a factor in academic achievements

Table 1 shows the results relating to teachers' opinions regarding the provision of additional help for Roma pupils to make them achieve better results. The starting assumption was that the help provided by the employed in the educational institution, teachers first and foremost, could lead to the improvement of academic achievements of Roma pupils. The results indicate that the largest number of teachers (57,6%) totally agree with this assumption, while the smallest number (0,2%) totally disagrees that additional help could produce positive results. If one considers the percentage of the respondents who partially agreed with the stated assumption (35,4%), i.e. those who mostly disagreed (3,5%), one can safely assert that the opinion that additional help plays a significant role in the improvement of academic achievements of Roma pupils has been confirmed.

The process of providing help and additional educational support should also include the representatives of the local community, volunteers and other interested parties, which is suggested by the practice of developed European countries (Rotaru & Grebeldinger, 2020; Ryder et al., 2014). The examples of good practice of developed countries point to the importance of mentoring teachers, to the individualised approach to pupils who need help, as well as to capacity building. Capacity building can take many forms. Training of teachers, teaching assistants/bilingual learning assistants, parents and community organisations on how best to support the education of pupils is one way of increasing the capacity of services (Lewis & Starkey, 2014).

The process of inclusive education as a support for the success of Roma pupils

Inclusive education has proved to be beneficial when considering the education of Roma children, both from the standpoint of reducing prejudice towards them and from the standpoint of an easier inclusion into the school community (Žeželj et al., 2015; Devecchi et al., 2012). Although there are significant efforts by various governments and state authorities, the largest problems occur at the local level, which puts certain limitations to the process of inclusive education (Schmidt & Pančocha, 2013; Bhopal, 2011). In that context it is important to examine the attitudes of teachers with respect to inclusive education because their competencies and beliefs largely influence the realization of an inclusive process, and therefore on the success of Roma pupils.

Figure 1 shows the results of the influence of inclusive education on academic achievements of Roma children from the teachers' perspective. Teachers mostly disagree with the claim that the process of educational inclusion contributed to the improvement of academic achievements of Roma children. I strongly disagree expressed 46,7%, and I mostly disagree 30,0% of the respondents. Also, a very small percentage (8,4%) of respondents strongly believe that educational inclusion contributed to the improvement of academic achievements of Roma children, whereas with this statement partly agrees 3.8%. It is interesting that there is a significant number of undecided respondents - 11.1%, which supports the view that teachers are insufficiently informed about inclusive education, and for this reason don't have clearly built convictions on this issue.

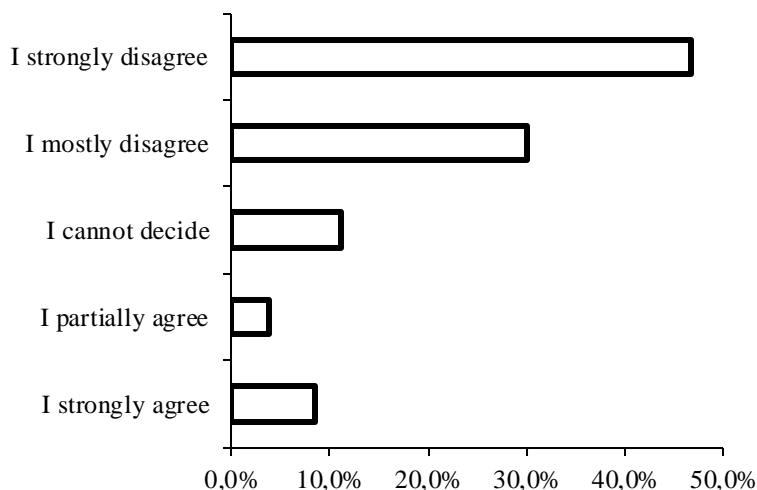


Figure 1. Teachers' opinion on the statement: the process of educational inclusion contributes to the improvement of academic achievements of Roma children

The attitude of the majority can be justified by an image of an inadequate realisation of inclusion in practice, which is reflected in the lack of financial means, unpreparedness of schools and teaching staff, as well as in their inefficiency at work.

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that there are statistically significant differences ($r = 0.02$) with respect to the claim regarding the implementation of inclusion between teachers with different length of teaching experience. The respondents with less teaching experience (to 20 years) expressed a large amount of agreement with the positive influence of inclusion on the academic achievements of Roma children, which indicates that younger teachers have a more optimistic perspective on the idea of educational inclusion.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the question of teachers' beliefs about factors that influence academic achievements of Roma children in Serbia. The results of the

research indicate that the opinions of the responding teachers regarding the factors in failure of Roma children are very similar to those listed in the scientific literature references (Macura-Milovanović & Peček, 2013).

Namely, the obtained results indicate that teachers believe that the failure of Roma children is mostly caused by poor living conditions and poverty. The second significant cause is the unpreparedness of these children for school, which is partially the result of the lack of financial means, as well as of the insufficient dedication of parents and their low esteem for schools and education in general. A significant percentage of teachers perceives the unfamiliarity with the language in which lessons are taught as a factor in failure, which is especially emphasised by teachers who work with younger children. Another factor pointed out by teachers is absenteeism, i.e. irregular attendance at school. Due to academic failure, children from Roma families need additional help which should come from teachers and teaching associates, as well as whole society. Our initial assumption was that teachers would recognize that inclusive education creates favourable conditions for improving the success of Roma children, and that in this respect their views would be positive. However, the results of studies show that the teachers are greatly affected by social and educational context in which they work, that is, they are not immune to prejudices and stereotypes that are rooted in the majority of population (Peček et al., 2014). It can be concluded that teachers accept the inclusive education merely declaratively, while its implementation is a very slow process (Jovanovic et al., 2014). The idea of inclusive education, even aside from the efforts of the society and legislative acts, has not been adequately implemented in practice.

For the purposes of overcoming the aforementioned problems and creating more favourable conditions for the education of Roma children, the authors point to the importance of: an active participation of Roma families, as well as providing additional assistance, which can influence the mitigation of both behavioural and academic issues through a dialogue with schools (Neill &

Schlappa, 2016; Gábor & Gábor, 2016). Aside from an active participation of the family, it is necessary that local communities be engaged to a greater extent for the purposes of improving academic achievements of Roma children and changing the status of Roma population in general.

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NOTES

1. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/closing-early-learning-gap-roma-children-bulgaria>

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