

Leading Through Crisis: Understanding Instructional Leadership and Educational Resilience in India

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines how instructional leadership practices enacted by school principals contribute to educational resilience during crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and recurrent natural disasters (earthquakes and landslides) in Uttarakhand, India. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 50 school principals and complementary field observations, the study investigates leadership strategies that supported teachers' professional development, sustained instructional continuity, strengthened communication, and fostered community engagement. Findings indicate that principals who prioritized instructional guidance, collaborative decision-making, and adaptive planning were more successful in maintaining student learning outcomes and minimizing dropout risks during periods of disruption. The study reveals a strong association between sustained instructional leadership and the development of resilient school systems capable of responding effectively to crisis conditions.

Keywords: crisis, educational resilience, instructional leadership, qualitative case study,

INTRODUCTION

The world is undergoing significant catastrophes that are undermining the very existence, constancy and coherence of educational institutions, especially in parts that are prone to calamities. Force majeure, such as landslides and earthquakes, have destroyed educational edifices, unsettling learners and connected

stakeholders (Hoffmann & Blecha, 2020; Wang, 2024). SARS-CoV-2 uncovered the weak links of the very fabric of any education across the globe (King & Dahal, 2022). Thus, both digital and remote learning are essential (Casas et al., 2021). Apart from natural disasters, the world is also witnessing a series of tumultuous changes vis-à-vis economic malaise, chaos and upheavals on social fronts, as well as unstable governments and geopolitical changes. These and many more add to the disruptions in the educational setting, the mental and emotional state of learners and teachers alike, and consistency in learning and education.

The concept of an adaptable and resilient educational environment is even more pertinent in these trying times, marked by uncertainty and doubt. Any school that possesses the ability to stand up to adversities, convalesces from crisis and adapts quickly to newer changes is said to be a resilient institution (Nandy et al., 2020). Being resilient is not easy. It requires understanding and managing the cataclysm to safeguard the process and continuation of teaching learning (Pinskaya et al., 2018). The pertinence of addressing the continuance of pedagogy increases in many folds in seismically fragile zones. Even though the educational structure might be designed to be structurally stable due to frequent earthquakes, the staff's preparedness to safeguard learners' interests needs to be addressed. A resilient school environment is woven in the fabric of preparedness in the highest state, eager to adapt and open to join hands with the community for faster bouncing back to normalcy (Suresh Babu, 2023).

Despite its many negative effects, the pandemic has accentuated the need for a resilient educational system with a tenacious attitude (Chen et al., 2024). The period of Covid was also an era of dubiety, and it saw a tectonic shift from face-to-face learning to remote and digital learning, with most schools helping learners and parents navigate smoothly (Iglesias et al., 2022, Naidu, 2021). With the reopening of the world, precariousness still loomed overhead. In addition, there was a dire need to resist any further challenges, recover from the past and emerge more strongly with better and healthier school environments. Being more people centric than process centric (Brion, 2021). This is where the effectiveness of the principal was seen.

Understanding the meaning of resilience is notably important for understanding educational resilience. Educational resilience is pivotal for students to grow both physically and mentally and ultimately to achieve sustainability. Resilience is not achieved overnight but developed over a period. This involves facing disruptions, absorbing them, fighting against them, overcoming victoriously and starting afresh while adapting to the new norm. A resilient environment ensures having a "not giving up attitude" and growing and thriving in the face of any challenge (Shah et al., 2019).

Instructional leadership has always been a harbinger of a resilient school environment with meaningful approaches. However, the system of instructional leadership is not restricted to the principal but extends to the heads of the

department, curriculum specialists, and tutorial heads. All these pedagogical staff play a crucial role in transforming the climate and culture of the school into a positive, receptive and conducive one that promotes optimum learning. Instructional leadership ensures a smooth transition from chaos to clarity and optimal support for students in terms of students' engagement and well-being and for teachers in terms of resources and training (Lopez & Hossain, 2021).

The uphill task of navigating through complex and multifaceted obstacles requires adept leadership. Hence, instructional leadership has redefined itself to be not just a type of leadership supporting instructions but also a type of leadership that is adaptable, innovative, and proactive in response to crises. The pandemic has highlighted the very foundation of instructional leadership, i.e., to communicate effectively with stakeholders, manage resources, and make informed decisions. All these factors ensure a resilient school culture and climate. Such qualities among the head of the institution promote a mindset for continuous growth and adaptability among both teachers and students (Seong, 2019). Hence, instructional leaders need to foster educational resilience.

This paper is a qualitative case study that explores the relationship between instructional leadership and educational resilience under crisis conditions. The paper highlights the instructional leadership practices that are followed by the principals of Uttarakhand state under the subheads of communication of school goals, supervising and evaluating instructions and coordinating the curriculum. It also studies the resilience of the school setting under such leadership while highlighting the subthemes of fostering a positive school culture, building community partnerships and emphasizing social-emotional learning. The paper utilizes an extensive study of the literature along with observations and interviews to reach a conclusion. This study also highlights the strategies that instructional leaders follow, which might aid in policy-making decisions and promote resilience in other states enduring such scenarios.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper reviews the available literature extensively to study the relationship between instructional leadership and resilient educational systems. The literature is studied under various headings to obtain a clearer picture. Instructional leadership is key in shaping the quality of the pedagogy and climate of the school.

The Concept of Instructional Leadership and its Effects

According to Hallinger and Murphy (1986), instructional leadership started its journey in the 1980s and firmly set its roots to focus on teaching learning experience. The role of a principal shifted from the conservative administrative head to an omnipresent tutorial head, aiding in the enhancement of instructional

methodology and decision-making (Campbell et al., 2018). The key components of instructional leadership include the following:

- Outlining, construing and communicating the school vision can enhance academic pursuits (Hallinger & Hosseingholizadeh, 2019).
- A culture that is collective and sustainable and professional development that is constant should be promoted (Spillane, 2015).
- Data can be used to inform instructional strategies and interventions (Alsaleh, 2022).
- Providing instructional support and feedback to teachers (Murphy & Torre, 2014).

These leadership actions are foundational in guiding schools through crises and ensuring resilience in educational practices. There are three types of effects of such leadership practices.

Direct effects: An empirical study has shown that instructional leadership practices by principals of schools have direct effects on learners, teachers and the curriculum. Research has shown that schools with heads of the school that have been practicing such leadership consistently for more than a couple of years have shown significant improvement in grades and academics among students (Sánchez & Watson, 2021). With their focus set on the curriculum and instructions, the principals who follow such leadership styles ensure that learning is wholesome and effective. This also leads to a holistic way of learning rather than a myopic way to just clear exams. This holistic progress is not limited to students but extends to teachers and the school system as much. For the teachers, they see their professional development, encouragement in developing effective instructional methods and ultimately their career growth. The school system also molds into a thinking system or a system of innovativeness and development (Francisco, 2022, Musa & Noor, 2017, Shaked & Schechter, 2018). The leadership practices ensure a clearer focus on the curriculum, shared leadership, and teaching learning experiences. Even though learners are from various backgrounds, such practices safeguard the holistic interests concerning students (Hallinger, 2010; Lee et al. 2012a; Rigby, 2013).

Indirect or mediated effects: Empirical studies have shown that instructional leadership practices by principals of schools also have significant indirect effects on students, teachers, and the school climate. Even though any kind of educational leadership does not affect the working pattern or the way a teacher teaches, it influences the work culture and the climate of the school. This in turn affects the work effectiveness of staff, especially teaching members (Zahed-Babelan et al., 2019). Similarly, the learners' motivation and achievement are affected by the kind of leadership that is followed in the school. The presence of instructional leadership in the realm of affairs has a very positive effect, albeit an indirect effect (Özdemir & Yalçın, 2019). The specified type of leadership also has an indirect effect on the classroom setting and the process of teaching and learning.

Instructional leadership practiced by principals has a positive effect on the classroom setting while driving teachers toward teaching using innovative methods and encouraging students to excel in subjects (Mark et al., 2010).

Reciprocal effects: This study has also proven that every type of leadership has a reciprocal effect on learners, teachers, and schools in general. While leadership influences students' learning, their academic growth (upside or downside) also affects school leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Leadership is also affected by teachers' attitudes toward instructional skills and instructional methodologies (Southworth, 2002). The school's effectiveness in framing instructions and delivering a curriculum reflects the intentions of the leadership and the confidence that is passed down. The true test of leadership is reflected in the climate of the school and how much learning centered the leadership is (Goddard & Miller, 2010).

Educational Resilience: A Theoretical Perspective

Resilience in education is often conceptualized within ecological and systemic frameworks. It is a pivotal component of a learner's psychological well-being and socioemotional health (Gillham et al., 2013). It involves the ability of individuals and institutions to recover from challenges, adapt to changing conditions, and maintain educational effectiveness. The major factors that contribute to educational resilience are internal protective factors, positive family relationships, a supportive school environment, strong peer relationships and community support (Ye et al., 2024). Teachers are also psychologically affected by extended roles coupled with a lack of adequate support (Aydos et al., 2025). In addition to strong leadership and vision, a supportive school culture and climate, adaptive teaching and learning strategies and effective communication and stakeholder engagement are vital (Downey, 2008, Ravani, 2025). Intertwining leadership practices, training, infrastructure and technology play a significant role (Rohani & Rahmawati, 2025). It is also important to ensure that standard operating procedures are updated and in place and that the students are aware of the same along with the guidelines. Instructional leadership aligns with these resilience-building factors by ensuring structured guidance, promoting adaptability, and maintaining an unwavering focus on student learning outcomes. A vital point highlighted by these studies is that resilience can be achieved through the strong coordination of both governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Osegbue, 2025).

Instructional Leadership and Crisis Management

Research has consistently demonstrated that strong instructional leadership is critical in times of crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, instructional leaders played a crucial role in transitioning to remote learning, supporting teachers in adapting pedagogical approaches, and ensuring student engagement despite disruptions (Roofe, 2021; Shaked, 2022). Several case studies

highlight how schools led by proactive instructional leaders are better able to implement digital learning solutions, maintain academic rigor, and provide emotional support to students and teachers (Chatzipanagiotou & Katsarou, 2023). Research has proven that instructional leadership practices by the heads of the school have been instrumental not only in ensuring a secure school environment during crisis, especially during the pandemic but also in bringing back normalcy sooner and in a more efficient manner after the calamity. Such practices have also proven to be adaptable in terms of technology (Pollock, 2020).

Instructional leadership emphasizes that during trying times, such practices have led schools that prioritize instructional quality over bureaucratic functions to become more resilient (Moulin & Soncin, 2024). These leaders actively engage in problem solving, foster collaboration among teachers, and make data-driven decisions to enhance learning continuity. Furthermore, studies have emphasized that instructional leaders who cultivate a growth mindset among educators contribute significantly to institutional adaptability and resilience (Tabacao & Salva, 2021).

Role of Instructional Leadership in Teacher and Student Resilience

Beyond crisis management, instructional leadership is instrumental in building resilience among teachers and students. Teachers who receive continuous professional support, constructive feedback, and opportunities for skill enhancement are more likely to persevere through challenges (Mustari & Nurhayati, 2024). Such practices also foster better retention. (Lazcano et al., 2022). Instructional leaders create conditions for teacher resilience by encouraging innovation and flexibility in pedagogical practices, providing emotional and professional support networks and recognizing and addressing burnout and well-being concerns (Bush, 2015).

For students, instructional leadership fosters resilience by promoting inclusive and differentiated instruction, ensuring access to learning resources, and fostering a supportive school culture (Naicker et al., 2013). Schools with strong instructional leadership often demonstrate higher levels of student engagement, lower dropout rates, and improved academic outcomes, even in challenging circumstances (Lee et al., 2012b).

Instructional Leadership Strategies for Enhancing Educational Resilience

Several leadership strategies have been identified as particularly effective in fostering educational resilience:

- Visionary Leadership – Establishing a clear and inspiring vision that aligns with long-term academic goals and resilience-building efforts (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021).

- Synergetic Leadership—Recognizing teachers as instructional leaders and empowering them to make informed and collective decisions (Houchens et al., 2017)
- Informed Directives – Collating the academic performance of the learners to strategize pedagogy and pedagogical gaps (Blink, 2014).
- Higher Emotional Quotient – Building an environment of empathy, trust and belongingness to ensure the socioemotional needs of both the learner and the teaching faculty (Grobler & Conley, 2013, J. Chen & Guo, 2018).
- Continuous Professional Development and Growth – Supporting continuous and constant training programs to grow professionally and adapt to changing times (Kilag & Sasan, 2023)

A review of the literature highlights the dire need for instructional leadership practices by principals to ensure a resilient educational setup. The literature review also signifies that such practices ensure a tripartite engagement, i.e., learner, teacher and community. Learner engagement, teachers' continuous professional growth and community involvement have been the core elements in building a resilient educational institution. Nevertheless, the literature highlights the gap in which such studies are missing in any area that falls under a seismically fragile zone, especially in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand state.

RESEARCH GAP AND RATIONALE

Despite extensive scholarship, several theoretical, empirical, and contextual gaps remain. Addressing these deficiencies forms the rationale for the present study. Although instructional leadership has been widely theorized in terms of direct, indirect, and reciprocal effects, these strands remain fragmented. Most studies focus on academic achievement, teacher motivation, or school climate but do not integrate these dimensions into a systematic framework that links leadership practices with resilience outcomes. There is limited theorization of how specific leadership actions, such as supervision, vision-building, or community partnerships, translate into measurable resilience indicators such as continuity of learning, socioemotional well-being, or institutional adaptability. This lack of integration restricts the development of a coherent model that explains leadership in fragile and uncertain environments.

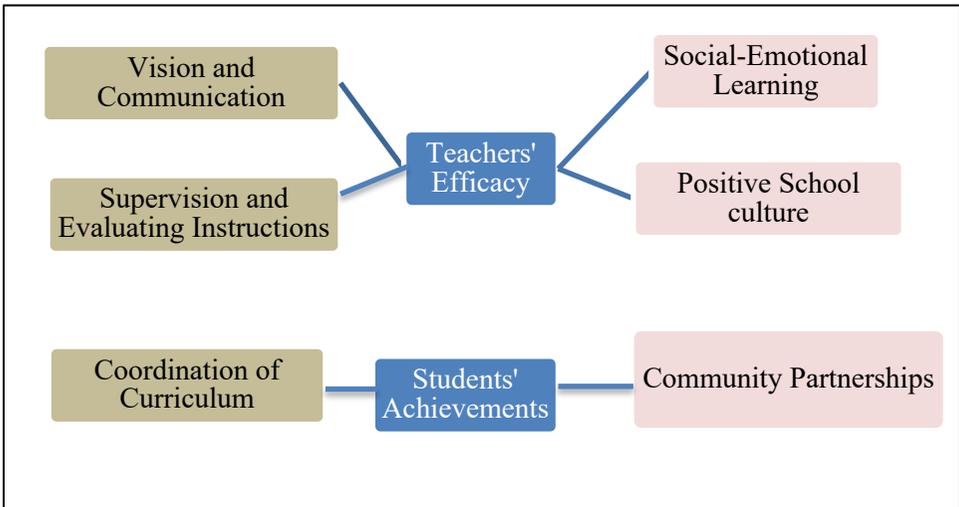
Much of the existing evidence on instructional leadership is drawn from urban, policy-driven, or resource-rich contexts. Studies in stable educational environments confirm its association with student achievement and teacher efficacy, but there is limited empirical work on its impact in fragile or crisis-affected regions. For example, the role of supervision and feedback in sustaining teacher morale under conditions of resource scarcity remains inconclusive. Similarly, while community linkages are acknowledged as important, few studies

investigate how such partnerships function in geographically isolated or disaster-prone areas. The absence of robust, field-based evidence constrains the understanding of leadership effectiveness in contexts where resilience is most critical.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A conceptual framework anchored in instructional leadership theory and resilience perspectives is illustrated in Figure 1. Leadership practices vis-à-vis vision and communication, supervision and feedback, data-informed decisions, teacher professional development, and community collaboration feed into teacher self-efficacy and student achievement as mediating constructs. These, in turn, shape resilience outcomes such as continuity of learning, teacher motivation and retention, positive school climate, socioemotional well-being, and institutional adaptability. The framework highlights how principals foster resilience by strengthening both organizational and individual capacities to ensure sustained learning in times of change.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Instructional Leadership, Mediators and Educational Resilience



RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a phenomenological approach to investigate the practices and strategies employed by school principals in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. Data were collected through interviews and observations to capture

lived leadership experiences within disaster-prone contexts. A purposive sampling strategy ensured representation across diverse school settings, including rural and urban locations and a mix of government, private, and private-aided institutions. Principals with at least three years of administrative experience were selected to ensure familiarity with institutional challenges and leadership practices. A total of 50 principals participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour. Although this number is relatively large for qualitative inquiry, it enabled coverage of geographical and institutional variability. Data saturation was reached at approximately 42 interviews; however, additional participants were included to strengthen validity and capture nuanced perspectives, particularly from underrepresented remote rural schools.

Consistent with case study methodology, multiple sources of evidence were used to ensure triangulation and contextual depth. Semi-structured interviews explored instructional leadership practices, crisis management approaches, resilience strategies, challenges, and professional development under four guiding domains: instructional leadership practices, challenges and obstacles, strategies and solutions, and professional development. Focus group discussions with teachers examined collective perceptions of leadership, school climate, and crisis responses. Document analysis of school records, policies, and disaster management reports provided evidence of preparedness, response mechanisms, and alignment with national frameworks. Observations conducted during site visits to both urban and rural schools allowed direct assessment of leadership practices and contextual challenges. Together, these methods enabled the construction of comprehensive case profiles capturing both leadership processes and the realities of operating in a disaster-prone environment.

Data analysis followed a two-stage process. First, within-case analysis was conducted using NVivo, where interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and documents from each school were thematically coded to construct individual case narratives. Second, cross-case analysis enabled comparison across schools to identify convergences and divergences in instructional leadership and educational resilience strategies. Two overarching themes emerged: (1) instructional leadership practices, including communication of school goals, supervision and evaluation of instruction, and coordination of curriculum; and (2) educational resilience, reflected in fostering positive school culture, building community partnerships, and emphasizing social-emotional learning. Cross-case synthesis revealed patterns linking clear communication of goals and socioemotional leadership practices with stronger community partnerships and more stable school environments during crises. To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed member checking, double coding for dependability, maintaining an audit trail, and thick description for transferability. Nonetheless, limitations included restricted geographical scope to the Garhwal region, challenges in accessing remote or geopolitically sensitive areas, reliance on qualitative methods without longitudinal

tracking, and the inability to generalize findings statistically beyond the study context.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis highlight that instructional leadership practices by the principals of the schools and a resilient educational setting are strongly correlated. Both the individual themes have seen various patterns as well.

Theme 1-Instructional Leadership Practices

The analysis revealed interesting subthemes under the instructional leadership theme. Formulating and communicating the goals of the institution have always taken precedence by principals following instructional leadership. Overseeing and guiding pedagogies and ultimately aligning curricula according to the framework of disaster management have fostered educational resilience.

Theme 2-Teacher Support

The analysis highlighted another strong theme of ensuring faculty guidance by instructional leaders. This theme focused on capacity-building opportunities provided by the head of the school. This result is critical because the teachers are constantly providing professional development to face crisis and rebound back to normalcy faster. This is coupled with optimum access to resources that aid in resilient educational environments.

Theme 3-Fostering a Positive School Culture

The results emphasize the need to create and encourage a positive school climate for a resilient setup. This can be managed by involving learners to understand crisis, react sensibly and participate in building back to normalcy. This theme also emphasizes the utmost importance of the emotional quotient of the students. A physically, mentally and emotionally healthy person can play an equally important role in a resilient educational environment.

Theme 4-Community Partnerships

The last theme that the theme analysis revealed was participation by the community. The analysis revealed that it is pertinent for instructional leaders to partner well with the community and the local business for skill development among students. Such partnerships not only ensure that the infrastructure is built back but also provide access to resources and supplies that might be cut off after the disaster.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the investigation has a very large effect on the practices of the school principals, the strategies that the schools follow and the framework of sustainability that is implemented in schools that come under seismic zones or naturally fragile regions. The results have proven that instructional leadership is

needed when the world is turning toward achieving the sustainable development goals of the United Nation. In light of the same, the research has proven that instructional leadership practices by principals foster educational resilience.

Policymakers can provide funding, training, and technical assistance to schools to promote resilience in terms of academics and sustainability. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of teacher engagement, student awareness, and community involvement in promoting educational resilience and sustainability in schools. School principals should engage teachers, students, and the community in making the school resilient and practicing sustainability.

The findings of this study, theme wise, support the literature on instructional leadership and educational resilience. The results of theme 1 highlight the need to communicate school goals not only to the students and teachers but also to the community to return students to school after any crisis. Supervision of instructions and coordination of curriculum chimes with the school goal of getting the students back on track to foster a resilient school environment, especially in an earthquake-prone zone state of Uttarakhand. This has also been proven empirically (Geleta, 2015). Theme 2 resonates with the idea of resilience by ensuring the faster adaptability of teachers by continuously providing them with professional development. The ever-changing geographical scenario in a hilly state such as Uttarakhand needs to be adequately stocked up with resources and constant updates to fight out crisis. The results have proven that resilience in an educational setup cannot be achieved without the help of students and the involvement of the community. Theme 3 underlines the necessity of building a positive school culture so that students find it easier to return to school after a calamity. A school culture prepares a learner psychologically, wherein a positive culture results in an eager and a happy learner. The findings of theme 4 reiterate the fact that a successful and resilient school is not possible without the support of the community. It has been seen that the community always comes forward to getting the infrastructure back in state if the leadership has made them feel that they are part of the school. The study's findings highlight the importance of instructional leadership practices, teacher support, fostering a positive school culture, and community partnerships in promoting educational resilience.

The empirical study and the results of the study reveal that educational resilience has become pertinent in the present day. There are many factors that increase resilience among teachers, students, parents and communities at large (Celbis et al., 2024; Iriqat et al., 2025; Velásquez-Espinoza & Alcántara-Ayala, 2025). Educational resilience is best among students despite adverse conditions (Zhelanova et al., 2025). Studies have also proven that instructional leadership is not just a performance but an intricate process that is based on the current situation, with intent, aim and guidance. Figure 2. Illustrates the study (Salo et al., 2014). A resilient school environment is also based on the instructional leadership of school heads whose work is aligned with the goals and visions of the school, credence

toward stakeholders and the school environment, inclination toward improvement, informed decision making and pillars of strength and inspiration (Bussey, 2006).

Figure 2: Strategy and Practice Model of Instructional Leadership



This paper investigates the interplay of the tripartite approach, namely, the principal, school and community. Instructional leadership practices by the principal involve students, teachers and the community to foster educational resilience through continuous professional development, the engagement of learners and the involvement of the community in providing skill development and resources. This mitigates the enormity of the crisis and strengthens the resilience of the institution and hence ensures sustainability.

Another interesting finding is that the practices of instructional leadership ensure that principals have managed to move out of the conservative administrator role to a broader role that encompasses being supportive, collaborative, vision-setters and informed decision makers (Akomodi, 2025). The results show that instructional leadership, as it encompasses a wide range of responsibilities, calls for a strong leader who is proactive in planning ahead of time. The results also reveal that the heads of the school who practice such leadership styles are open to the integration of technology to provide quality education, building strong partnerships with parents and communities at large who can help them recover faster after a disaster. Such mentorships also build a secure and structured support system between learners and teachers. According to the results, instructional leadership practices significantly ensure better preparedness in times of crisis. All these collectively strengthen the idea of resilience and seep effortlessly into the culture of the school.

To conclude, one can say that principals who have practiced instructional leadership are motivated and dynamic to foster a school climate that is resilient and believes in the continuation of education in the face of adversity.

IMPLICATIONS

The conclusions of this research have immense implications for sustainable education. The United Nations has proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that also call for universal and equitable education for all. Apart from moving toward achieving sustainable development goals, this research also highlights policies pertaining to the capacity building of teachers, partnerships with parents and communities at large and the need to foster emotional health while enhancing a positive school climate.

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