

## Devolution of Power in South African Education: Is Democracy Being Served?

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**ABSTRACT** This paper presents findings of a study that explored democratic governance in South African schools. The focus was on principals and educators who served in school governing bodies (SGBs). A qualitative research design was adopted. Data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews and the resultant transcripts were analysed by following Giorgi's phenomenological steps. The paper argues that all the stakeholders in schools have a role to play in ensuring that democratic governance exists in schools in South Africa. These stakeholders must be assisted in developing democratic values, behaviour, skills and attitudes that are consistent with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

Democratic values underpin the ideals of popularly elected, representative systems of governance. This paper examines the role of school governing bodies (SGBs) in ensuring that democratic governance exists in schools in South Africa. It is premised on the view that democratic forms of schooling can contribute to the delivery of quality education for learners. The paper presents survey evidence on the views and experiences of principals and educators with regard to how SGBs provide better quality education for learners by promoting democratic governance and social justice in schools. This is important because if quality is to be enhanced through more democratic forms of schooling, then all stakeholders will potentially play a key role and their views and understandings will shape the way reform is implemented in schools.

Bush and Heystek (2003) maintain that there has been a major shift to self-governance for schools in many countries during the past two decades. Although there is considerable diversity in the forms of self-governance adopted in these countries, school governance is generally underpinned by notions of democracy and school effectiveness. They maintain that power is typically devolved to school-level governing bodies while operational management is the responsibility of the principal (Bush and Gamage 2001; Bush and Heystek 2003).

In line with the international trend, the devolution of power to the local level in South Afri-

can schools was aimed at furthering democracy and making schools more effective and accountable. To put this into practice, the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, hereafter SASA, mandated that all public schools in South Africa were to have democratically elected school governing bodies, comprised of the principal (in his or her official capacity), educators, non-teaching staff, parents, co-opted members and learners (the latter only in secondary schools) (Republic of South Africa 1996). This reform was intended to foster tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making, reflecting the belief that governance would contribute to the democratisation of schools and the country at large. To this end, SASA emphasises the devolution of power, not just deconcentration or delegation. Devolution involves more than the transfer of tasks without authority, namely deconcentration, or the transfer of authority to an entity that cannot act independent of the source of that authority, which would be delegation (Bray 1999). It involves the transfer of authority to an entity that can act independently without the permission of the centre (Bray 1999). Discretion, authority and responsibility are transferred to an individual school (Gordon 1992; Sharpe 1996) with the view of correcting unresponsive bureaucracies, promoting democratic transformation and giving stakeholders, especially parents, more power and control over education (Bauer and Bogotch 2006; Gordon 1992; Lingard et al. 2002). The benefits of devolving authority to schools are that, among others, it:

- ♦ improves teaching and learning outcomes;
- ♦ engenders enthusiasm, interest, effectiveness and commitment among stakeholders;
- ♦ promotes concern for people;
- ♦ improves communication, planning, decision-making and problem solving; and
- ♦ enhances organisational accountability.

Critics of devolution of authority to schools, however, point out that this practice does not always promote the democratisation of school structures and processes. They argue that local decision-making may merely provide opportunities for the more powerful and serve to maintain exploitation and exclusion (Hildyard et al. in Grant-Lewis and Naidoo 2004; Sharpe 1996; UNDP 2002). This would be unacceptable in South African schools as it would be in direct contravention of SASA, which seeks to redress past exclusions and facilitate the necessary transformation to support the ideals of representation and participation in schools (Karlsen 1999).

According to Purkey (cited by Sharpe 1996) the positive or negative outcomes of devolution of authority depend on a range of factors, not devolution itself. These include the political climate in which devolution takes place; the readiness of the principal and/or the school governors to adapt to the changes; the values, principles and leadership style of the principal and/or other governors; and the availability of appropriate capacity-building initiatives. This suggests that it cannot be taken for granted that SGB structures, processes and the execution of responsibilities are democratic merely because they are outcomes of efforts to democratise education.

In the main, the extent to which devolution of authority to the SGB serves democratic ends will depend on the extent to which SGB members embrace and are guided by democratic values. This may not always be easy given that members of SGBs are drawn from diverse backgrounds and the functions of SGBs evolve around contentious and value-laden issues like developing a mission statement, drawing up a code of conduct for learners, and supporting the principal and staff in the performance of their functions. Participation in SGB activities may be influenced more by the background of members and their vested interests than by the pursuit of the democratic ideal and school effectiveness. In this regard, Grant-Lewis and Motala (2004) advise that it must be noted that the representative democracy within SGBs is a system of

competition for power and influence. Given the diversity of membership of the SGB and the power politics that are associated with such structures, the extent to which the SGBs of surveyed schools are perceived as promoting democracy was considered pertinent to the investigation.

### **Theoretical Frameworks of Democracy and Social Justice**

The research reported in this paper is underpinned by two theories, namely those of democratic school governance and social justice. The need for greater democracy in education is supported by a great deal of literature both nationally and internationally (Harber and Davies 1997; Mncube 2005; UNDP 1995; UNICEF 1995).

In line with the democratic ethos of post-apartheid legislation in South Africa, school governance is founded on democracy. The preamble to SASA advocates the democratic transformation of society and the participation of learners, parents and educators as the State's partners in education. This emphasis on the participation of stakeholders resonates with the view that democracy, and education that is democratic, offers all legitimate stakeholders opportunities to participate (Cohen 1971; Shields 2004). Such participation must not be seen as an end in itself. Rather, in the case of the SGB, it is meant to bring about democratic change that benefits the school, its learners and the community. Chapman et al. (1995) have identified the following "core values" that are typical of schools with more democratic forms of management:

- ♦ The schools are capable, democratic and just, affording learners the opportunity to acquire, apply and practice the different kinds of knowledge, skills and attitudes that will prepare them for life.
- ♦ The schools actively demonstrate concern for and promote high standards of excellence in all aspects of school life, both at an individual and institutional level.
- ♦ The schools expose learners to a humane outlook on life and instil crucial values as an integral part of each individual's personal and social development.
- ♦ The schools develop in learners a sense of independence and self-worth as human beings, giving them confidence in their ability to contribute to society in different ways.

- ♦ The schools infuse in learners a concern for the cultural and economic enrichment of the surrounding community.

According to Apple and Beanne (1995), there are conditions upon which democracy depends and which can be considered foundations of a democratic way of life. These, among others, are:

- ♦ the open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity;
- ♦ the use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies;
- ♦ concern for the welfare of others and the common good;
- ♦ an understanding that democracy is an idealised set of values that must be lived and guide the life of people; and
- ♦ the organisation of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

These conditions suggest that the democratic way of life is distinct from undemocratic practices and is not a social given. It has to be created and nurtured. Promoting a democratic way of life is likely to be more challenging to the SGB given their diverse membership and the history of school governance in South Africa. In the past, learners and educators were excluded from governance structures. Although parents were involved in school committees, their participation was mere tokenism. Recent studies in South Africa also found that different members of the SGB were still marginalised in some way (Heystek 2004; Mabovula 2009; Magadla 2007; Mncube 2008, 2009; Van Wyk 2004, 2007). Notwithstanding evidence of such undemocratic practices, Grant-Lewis and Naidoo (2004) found that most stakeholders in SGBs seemed to deny the existence of school politics or diverse and competing constituent interests, values and demands. This explains why the tendency of school principals to dominate decision-making on both management and governance matters may continue in the SGB if it is not specifically targeted for eradication. Similarly, if stakeholders are not taught how to be democratic and question the status quo, relationships in the SGB may be characterised by power relations that result in those that are usually marginalised in the broader society being afforded no voice and being further marginalised in schools. To this end, section 19 of SASA makes provision for provincial departments of education to provide training to SGBs to enable them to fulfil their functions.

Hyttén (2006) argues that since democratic societies are ideally just, social justice is an integral feature of democratic life, where equity, self-determination and freedom are pursued. Social justice refers to when a society values principles of equality and solidarity, understands and values human rights, and recognises the dignity of every human being (Zajda et al. 2006). Murrell (2006) adds that while social justice involves recognising and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment inherent in organisational practices and policies, it forms the core of participatory democracy as the means of bringing this envisaged end. These explications of social justice suggest that it cannot just be an espoused ideal but must be experienced in practice. Structures, processes and relationships must be experienced in distinctly different ways from how they are experienced in unjust societies.

In practice, a just school would, according to Carlisle et al. (2006), promote inclusion and equity, hold high expectations for all learners, develop reciprocal community relationships, involve a system-wide approach and have a direct social justice education and intervention. Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) illustrate the inextricable link between transformation, democracy and social justice in schools. They maintain that for leaders to further entrench social justice advocacy in schools they must be critically pluralist and democratic, transformative, moral and ethical, feminist or caring, and spiritually or culturally responsive. This may not be easy, however, given that schools tend to be sites of cultural politics that serve to reproduce and perpetuate some inequities, and to confirm and legitimise some cultures while other cultures are marginalised (Quarts et al. in Shields 2010). Given this challenge, Shields (2010) argues that transformational leaders, in this case the SGB, must learn to diminish undemocratic power relationships and use their power to transform present social relationships, the inappropriate use of power and the resultant inequity and injustice. This requires the SGB to create conditions that will promote and nurture democracy and social justice. Bogotch (2000) notes, in this regard, that participants must experience the environment as socially just in terms of its processes, relations and programmes. In addition, educational outcomes that are based on social inequalities and promote such inequalities must be eradicated (Bogotch 2000).

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This qualitative study explored the perceptions and experiences of school principals and educators regarding the following:

- ♦ whether the relevant SGB promotes the effective functioning of the school through democratic governance;
- ♦ the extent to which parent-members are utilised to promote the effective functioning of the SGB; and,
- ♦ the extent to which SGB members are properly trained for their role in fostering democracy.

Approval for the research to be conducted in the relevant schools was first obtained from the two provincial Departments of Education. The informed consent of the participants was sought and they were given the normal guarantees regarding privacy and the right to withdraw from the study if the need arises.

The use of a small sample is common in qualitative research in which the aim is depth rather than breadth (Lemmer and Van Wyk 2004). A total of eight schools, four from the Western Cape and four from KwaZulu-Natal, were selected for inclusion in the study. In each province, the schools were purposefully selected to provide a range of rural, township and urban schools. The aim was to get views from people who had a role to play in schools that varied markedly in terms of their physical conditions, facilities, available space, access to social amenities, local community infrastructure and poverty level. While this study did not seek to present a comparison of the two provinces, the purpose was to garner the views of principals and educators on how best parents could be involved in promoting the effective functioning of schools. It was therefore not deemed necessary to scrutinise the views per type of school. In each selected school, the principal and three teachers who were currently serving members of the SGB were included in the sample.

Data consisted of interview transcripts and notes taken during interviews. The analysis of the transcripts followed the phenomenological steps suggested by Giorgi et al. (1975) as outlined below:

- ♦ Firstly, each transcript was read to gain an overall sense of the whole.
- ♦ Secondly, the transcript was read to identify what transactions could be seen to have occurred during the interview.

- ♦ Thirdly, any redundancies identified in the units of meaning were eliminated and the remaining units were interconnected.
- ♦ Fourthly, the participants' language was transformed into the language of science.
- ♦ Fifthly, the insights that had been gained from conducting the study were synthesised into the description of the overall experience of leadership practices (Mncube and Harber 2010).
- ♦ Finally, the analysed data were categorised into themes that emerged from the findings.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports on the main findings of focus groups from the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. It presents responses of educators and principals regarding their experiences on the functioning of the SGB in promoting democracy in schools. Selections from the transcripts of interviews have been used to ensure that the voices of principal and educators are heard regarding issues of democracy and how this can lead to effective schooling. The problem formulation of the research directed the research aims of the study. Themes that emerged from the data analysis are discussed next.

### The Role of the SGBs in Promoting Democracy

The need for democracy in schools has been emphasised. This means promoting values such as transparency, fairness, tolerance, equity, justice and openness. In line with the democratic tenets of SASA, school governing bodies were meant to be entities for addressing issues of democracy and social justice in South African schools.

When asked whether the SGBs contribute to or promote the development of democracy in South African schools, respondents had conflicting views regarding appointment practices. On the one hand, the SGBs were viewed as transparent, fair and extending equal employment opportunities to all. One respondent from the Western Cape said:

*Yes, they have just promoted democracy by just allowing all educators without just concentrating on the colour of the skin, race, or creed. In fact, they employ everyone who has got the required skills of just doing the job by*

*not saying this one is a foreigner (“ikwerekwerekere”). But if he/she possesses the required skills like Mathematics and Science, then [it] is fine. Of course our governing bodies are well aware that sometimes highly skilled educators can be found in any races. So they employ those educators and by so doing I think they are promoting democracy by not discriminating [against] other educators because of their race.*

A contrasting view was that some SGBs were undemocratic, manipulative and engaging in practices that bordered on preferential treatment and corruption. One educator’s response to the same question was this:

*Not at all. The main thing that I have seen SGBs doing in our schools is doing appointment of staff, which, most of the time, has been coupled and flawed with many disputes. There are many cases in my area, especially where I teach, where teachers were actually buying from the SGB members – giving money. If I want to be a principal, the SGB members will decide whether this vote is going to be R5000 or so. So, as a potential candidate, I have to pay upfront R5000 and then I know for sure I will be in the job. Everybody will be called for interviews but you will know for a fact that so and so is actually earmarked for this post because he has paid some money to a certain member of the SGB. So you can see it never achieved the purpose for which it was intended [which is democracy].*

The perception that SGBs are generally undemocratic and corrupt was in the minority. The majority of the respondents perceived SGBs as being democratic in their conception and function. Emphasis in responses was placed on the SGBs being representative of various stakeholders and giving them, especially parents, more voice and freedom of expression. In addition, the SGB was viewed as a forum that facilitates collaboration between the school and the community. An educator from KwaZulu-Natal noted in this regard:

*Yes, I would say of course they have contributed a great deal simply because if we look at the structure of the governing body when we compare the governing bodies with the school committees that used to govern the schools. There is a good representation of the various stakeholders like learners, the parent component, as well as the teacher component. So, all these people are there to see to it that the school is functioning effectively.*

The SGB has a role to play in helping clarify misconceptions about democracy held by different stakeholders in schools. Too often learners, parents and educators tend to emphasise their rights while ignoring associated responsibilities. An educator from KwaZulu-Natal expressed support for the view that the SGB helps to develop the culture of democracy in schools thus:

*Yes, my belief is that the way governing bodies are formed; they are a structure that is meant to promote democracy. Because, amongst others, democracy means whatever I do, should be mine. It should be what I want to see happening... For each and every stakeholder there is nothing that prevents them from airing their views. So really, they do contribute to promoting democracy.*

The majority of respondents agreed that there were challenges and barriers that inhibited SGBs from contributing to the development of democracy in schools. In the main, these included:

- ♦ lack of training on democratic governance;
- ♦ short terms of office that end before members understand democratic practices;
- ♦ low literacy levels, notably of parents; and
- ♦ power relations and the manipulation of the process by those with higher literacy levels, like educators.

Given the centrality of democratic practices to school effectiveness, the existence of such barriers and perceptions of undemocratic practices of SGBs are unacceptable. In line with the provisions of SASA, the SGBs should co-opt members of the community who are more skilled and more experienced on democratic governance issues. Parents should be empowered through capacity-building programmes that extend beyond basic literacy. This concern and the proposed measures give credence to the contention that leadership and the performance of school principals and educators in terms of governance have recently received more attention than educational reforms (Herrington and Wills 2005).

### **The Involvement of Parents in SGBs Makes Governing Bodies and Schools Functional**

Respondents were asked whether they perceived the involvement of parents in SGBs as working in schools. They also had to indicate whether they considered parents to be effec-

tively involved in the SGB. The majority of respondents expressed the view that there was merit in involving parents in the SGB. Respondents placed much value on consultation as an aspect of democracy. This is consistent with the assertion that the intentions of an inclusive approach and promotion of ownership by relevant stakeholders is commendable (Van der Westhuizen and Van Vuuren 2007).

One educator from the Western Cape commented:

*Of course, it is working, sir. Yes, it is working. Take for instance if/when a great need make for instance a security. We used to first of all start just negotiating with the governing body. Thereafter, we convene a meeting for the parents just to go and ask for a mandate and plead for them for a need of security at school. What can we do because we have got no money because we are not allowed even just to pay the security by using norms and standards? We have just to use those donations by parents. So we ask mandate from them just placing the needs of a security.*

A similar sentiment was shared by an educator from KwaZulu-Natal:

*In my opinion I can say yes, the SGB have been able to lead to effective functioning of the school. Because the SGB is the key or the umbrella of the school, which means most of the things that are in the school started from the SGB. Then I can say yes, the SGBs have been able to promote democracy in South African schools in such a way that each member has a right to come out with the ideas about the things that they need to talk about and things that they need to do. So that is why I say the SGBs have been able to promote democracy in SA schools.*

The majority of respondents, however, had the perception that the involvement of parents was poor and ineffective because of a number of reasons. These included, among others, the illiteracy of parents; lack of compensation for SGB work and consequent reluctance to participate; other members usurping the participatory power of parents and making them feel marginalised; and the inability of the SGB to enforce participation. Some of the comments that outline barriers to the meaningful participation of parents are presented below.

An educator from KwaZulu-Natal argued:

*There is very poor involvement of parents due to some reasons. I wasn't there when par-*

*ents were elected. As far as I look parents are not well educated; they are just there for formality. On the involvement and suggestions, there is nothing from the parents' side. They just stand there; they sit back and listen to the meeting that is conducted by the chairperson. There are no views from the parents' side. I suggest it will be better if there is development for parents in a sense that they are taught or educated on how to participate in the SGB. I think if there can be something like workshops or kind of training when parents as the stakeholders will go and try to capacitate themselves on how to participate in SGBs and that will be a brilliant idea, so as to get the school working. It is obvious that the school needs the parental involvement because they are within the community. For example, there are some of the activities that occur in community, take place in the school while in the school we do not understand what is happening outside the school premises or maybe it's the holidays. Then the parent members will then go and unlock/open the school.*

A related observation was made by a principal from the Western Cape:

*Parents are a working species, so because there is no remuneration as you can well imagine they are not very keen to do too much, but you have the others that have more time and become more involved in getting things done. Fortunately for us here at school we have a community and there are no storms which may be in the process of blowing over and people can now see the worthiness of other persons at the school. You find that they are willing to contribute in all types of ways. We had "potjiekos" last week Saturday and it was done completely by parents outside here. They are busy with fundraising for the school. Learners are participating while parents are encouraging learners. They give them money to buy and contribute whatever fundraising we have at the school. School fees are coming in better so there is the understanding of the financial obligation to the school. So parents wish to become involved; it is how you actually attract them to school.*

It is interesting to note that educators and principals do not perceive the poor involvement of parents in the SGB as a hopeless situation. The majority of respondents share the view that meaningful participation of parents can be en-

hanced through relevant capacity-building programmes. This is consistent with the argument of Mncube and Harber (2010) that stakeholders in a democratic school are prepared to abide by democratic principles through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. SASA makes provision for this. Bush and Heystek (2003) contend that SGBs provide a good prospect of enhancing local democracy and improving the quality of education for all learners in a school.

### **Training of the SGB to Promote Democracy**

People are elected to serve on SGBs not necessarily because they know about the role of the SGB or anything about democracy. Some parents may also be illiterate or semi-illiterate. Thus, Tsoetsi et al. (2008) maintain that training must be provided for the SGB to enable them to function efficiently. Respondents shared the view that training in the form of seminars and workshops is important for the SGB (Ngidi 2004). They, however, expressed some reservations about the quality of the training that is provided and the attitude of some SGB members to the training. An educator from the Western Cape lamented one SGB chairperson's lackadaisical attitude to training:

*Irrespective that we went for training organised by the department, the chairperson only attended one training session and when it came to the most important session, he did not attend the meeting that was very important.*

Training is unlikely to be beneficial if it is not taken seriously. Not all respondents perceived the training that is provided as serving the intended purpose of adequately preparing SGB members for their roles. In this regard, the following responses are noteworthy:

*Yah, although they (parents) have been trained, the legacy of being uneducated remains there.* (KwaZulu-Natal educator);

*Now one must look at how you view training... that type of training takes place in a very sterile environment and has very little interaction with one another. Even the social event you know is not nice as there is no gel of avenues and so on. So it is most probably to do with the way it is presented ...* (Principal); and

*Parents are not sufficiently trained to participate in the SGB. They do not know exactly what to do. If maybe they can get through train-*

*ing, they will know what to do in their portfolios and thus they will know how to perform their duties. Due to the fact they are not trained that is why they become shy to share their ideas when we have meetings; they always think only educated members will come up with the correct ideas* (KwaZulu-Natal educator).

For democracy to work, those entrusted with implementing it in schools must understand what it entails and how it works. To this end, they need to be trained to learn about and experience democracy (Harber and Serf 2006).

### **Working Relationships between SGBs, Management and Educators in Entrenching Democracy**

Although SASA spells out that school governance is the competence of the SGB and professional management of the school is the responsibility of the principal, Heystek (2004) points out that there is some uncertainty about the roles, as the legislated functions do not provide a clear distinction between the two. While there are some overlaps between some roles, some parents tend to insist on being involved in the professional management of schools simply because they have children at the school. Such blurred boundaries and resultant encroachment in the roles of others may engender conflict and tension that may impact on how parties affected promote democracy in schools. An apt comment in this regard came from a Western Cape educator:

*So for me it is very important to note that from the onset it is very important to have a clear distinction between what is governance and what is management. You often find that because governing bodies seem to have that function of governance, they seem to think because they have children at the school they can just come and do your work as the manager of the school. There need to be some kind of boundaries, but you know the vagueness in the boundaries can create confusion and hostilities. So for me effective governance has not taken place completely at our school and there is always this rift that governing bodies seem to have personal agenda against the management of the school.*

For democracy to flourish, a positive working relationship must exist between all role players. Such a spirit of cooperation and tolerance is required in both the deliberative process that

generates decisions and in the implementation of those decisions. The working relationship was experienced differently in different schools. Some reported it positively while others experienced it negatively and as stifling the democratic spirit. One educator from the Western Cape commented:

*...the chairperson had certain people that were his spokesperson[s] or who agreed with him. So he only gave them a chance to speak and if we wanted to put forward something he would say that we must write a report or a letter. It's like he does not hear what we want to say ... the chairperson is a good person but he does not work hand in hand with us.*

Arguing against a negative relationship between different stakeholders, Heystek (2004) contends that the principal must support the members of the SGB in their governance functions, and that the SGB, in turn, must support educators in their professional functions. It is only once there is such cooperation that different stakeholders can, collectively, contribute to the development of democracy in schools. It is therefore unacceptable that some stakeholders are marginalised in meetings and are not allowed to have a say.

### CONCLUSION

The current study examined the extent to which school principals and educators perceive and experience SGBs as entrenching democracy in schools. Findings suggest that there are conflicting views regarding the role of SGBs in promoting democracy in schools. While on the one hand SGBs are perceived as democratic, on the other hand some of their practices are perceived as flouting democratic values. This is particularly with regard to staff appointments, in which various stakeholders have vested and competing interests. In the main, SGBs are perceived as being democratic in terms of their composition, processes and pursued goals. The general view of both principals and educators in KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape is that SGBs are effective in entrenching a democratic culture in schools.

This study also found that there are some systemic and internal barriers that militate against the SGBs' quest to entrench democracy in schools. It becomes a challenge for SGBs to be champions of democracy when some of their

members have a limited understanding of and commitment to values that underpin democracy. It is interesting to note that nothing in the findings suggests that the reported limitations and inefficiencies of the SGBs in promoting democracy in schools is because of the inherent undemocratic nature of their members. Rather, these are mainly attributable to capacity-building problems, a finding that is consistent with other conclusions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In closing, it needs to be noted that the view of the authors is that the challenges that SGBs face in entrenching democracy in schools are not insurmountable. These can, in the main, be addressed by first ensuring that newly elected SGB members are properly inducted into their roles. They must also be provided with sustained capacity building on democratic governance and associated subjects like social justice, mutual respect and tolerance of diversity. All members of the SGB need to be trained to learn about and experience democracy.

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