



POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC INTEGRATED SCHOOLS IN GUIMBA, NUEVA ECIJA: A BASIS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

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ABSTRACT

Bridging the educational needs of communities in the Province of Nueva Ecija, integrated schools were established to provide accessible and continuous education from Kindergarten to Senior High School. This initiative supported the national government's vision of "Education for All" by ensuring that quality education is available to every Filipino learner. Similarly, the Department of Education in Guimba District has pursued the establishment of integrated schools to expand educational access. However, the opening of these schools also brought various issues and concerns that require school heads to be more vigilant in developing policies and management practices appropriate for newly established integrated schools. Thus, this study focused on the lived experiences of five (5) school heads and two (2) teachers from newly established integrated schools in Guimba West and Guimba East Districts, Nueva Ecija during the academic year 2024–2025. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews to explore their experiences in managing and operating newly established integrated schools. Through Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method of Qualitative Analysis, the study generated seven (7) major themes clustered into opportunities, rewards and accomplishments, challenges, and management strategies in the operation of newly established integrated schools. Findings revealed that one of the strongest opportunities identified by the participants was the ability to establish a conducive learning and working environment that promotes school growth and development. The most significant obstacles were classified as internal and external issues impacting school operations and resource management, while rewards and achievements were defined by intrinsic fulfillment, stakeholder support, and teacher involvement. The school heads used vision and goal orientation, faculty development, and stakeholder engagement as effective management tactics. The most important finding of all was the strong stakeholder collaboration, which emphasized how important it is for the school to operate effectively, strategically and sustainably.

KEYWORDS: *Challenges, integrated schools, possibilities, strength.*

INTRODUCTION

The modern educational landscape in the Philippines has undergone a significant paradigm shift with the institutionalization of the K–12 Basic Education Program. A pivotal component of this reform is the establishment of "Integrated Schools" (IS), defined as institutions that offer a continuous educational pathway from Kindergarten to Senior High School under a single administrative system (Department of Education, 2023). This strategic consolidation is designed to achieve "Education for All," particularly in geographically dispersed or underserved areas where establishing separate secondary schools is not feasible (Chica-Olmo et al., 2018).

By collapsing the physical and systemic barriers between elementary and secondary levels, the government aims to reduce dropout rates and foster greater community participation (Chica-Olmo et al., 2018). However, this transition imposes a heavy burden on school leadership. Administrators are now tasked with managing complex organizational structures, diverse learner demographics ranging from children to teenagers, and heightened instructional requirements (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019). Despite the structural benefits, newly founded integrated schools in Guimba, Nueva Ecija, often grapple with the "formation phase"—a critical period characterized by resource shortages, infrastructure deficits, and the absence of established operational policies (Smith & Davenport, 2020). This study seeks to investigate these administrative realities to provide a basis for strategic planning and institutional sustainability.

Effective leadership is the primary determinant of success in integrated school settings. Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) emphasize that school heads must cultivate "adaptive capacity" to oversee a heterogeneous school community. Because these schools serve learners with vastly different developmental needs, leaders cannot rely on monolithic management styles; instead, they must implement proactive strategies to foresee and mitigate

potential administrative friction (Gordon et al., 2021). Furthermore, the development of policies within IS is a sensitive matter; research by Gibson and Brooks (2020) indicates that stakeholders often resist new regulations if they perceive a lack of equity across different grade levels, highlighting the necessity for adaptive, context-sensitive policy frameworks (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Resource distribution remains a contentious issue in newly integrated schools. Smith and Davenport (2020) argue that the operational costs of IS—including facility maintenance, specialized laboratories, and staffing—significantly exceed those of stand-alone schools. Wagner (2021) observed that financial constraints often lead to "uneven distribution," where primary or secondary levels are prioritized over the other, creating disparities in educational quality. To address these gaps, innovative management models are required, such as fostering partnerships with private entities or mobilizing community-based fundraising initiatives to supplement government grants (Jordan, 2024; Smith & Davenport, 2020).

The efficacy of an integrated school is also measured by its ability to provide a culturally responsive learning environment. Lopez and Miller (2016) found a strong correlation between student participation and the integration of local traditions and cultural origins into the curriculum. When teachers contextualize lessons to align with the students' lived experiences, there is a measurable increase in academic interest and performance (Wilson & Davis, 2021). Furthermore, the use of low-cost technological interventions, such as open educational resources (OER), can help bridge the resource gap, allowing schools to maintain academic standards even when infrastructure is limited (Leary, 2022).

This study is anchored on Kurt Lewin's Change Theory (Hussain et al., 2018), which provides a framework specifically suited for understanding the transition from stand-alone to



integrated educational systems. The theory unfolds in three distinct stages: the "Unfreezing" stage involves recognizing that current stand-alone models are insufficient for modern educational demands, representing the initial administrative acknowledgement in Guimba that the status quo must change to better meet community needs. This is followed by the "Moving (Change)" stage, which serves as the active transition phase where school heads implement new organizational charts, merge staff roles, and adopt collaborative management techniques to address the challenges of student diversity and resource scarcity. Finally, the "Refreezing" stage involves the institutionalization of new norms; by documenting successful management strategies, this study aims to provide the necessary mechanism to ensure that the ad-hoc survival strategies currently used by school heads are transformed into stable, long-term administrative practices.

Statement of the Problem

This study explored the possibilities and challenges of public integrated schools in Guimba, Nueva Ecija, specifically seeking to answer:

1. What are the strengths and opportunities brought about by the establishment of integrated public schools in Guimba West and Guimba East Districts?
2. What challenges are encountered by school heads and teachers in the management and operation of these schools?
3. What strategic plan may be proposed to improve the management and operation of integrated schools?

METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the research design, locale, sampling techniques, respondents, research instruments, data collection procedures, and the analysis methods employed.

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology, as described by Alase (2018), is the study of how individuals interpret their encounters with specific phenomena, aiming to uncover significant participant quotes and the core essence of their lived experiences. By applying this design, the study identifies the strengths, opportunities, and challenges associated with the establishment of Public Integrated Schools (IS) in Guimba, Nueva Ecija, providing a foundation for evidence-based administrative interventions.

Research Locale and Sampling

The study was conducted in the Guimba East and Guimba West Districts of the Schools Division of Nueva Ecija. This locale was selected because these districts contain integrated schools, providing a relevant setting to examine administrative transitions under the procedural frameworks of DepEd Order No. 91, s. 1999, and DepEd Order No. 40, s. 2014. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria: schools officially established or converted into integrated status within the last five years, offering both elementary and secondary programs under a single administrative structure, and meeting the DepEd conditions for establishment, such as resource constraints or limited local access to complete basic education.

Respondents

The study participants consist of seven individuals: five school heads and two teachers. School heads were selected for their firsthand experience in managing newly established integrated schools, while teachers were chosen to provide complementary perspectives on transition and operational challenges. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge—ensuring that the information collected is sufficient to capture the depth and richness of the participants' experiences.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using several instruments:

- Interview Guide: A list of non-leading questions focused on strengths, opportunities, management challenges, and necessary support programs. Probing questions were used to clarify responses.
- Data Capture: With participant consent, interviews were recorded via audio devices and supplemented by manual note-taking.
- Observation Checklist: The researcher used a checklist to document non-verbal cues, such as eye contact and facial expressions, during interviews.

Data Gathering and Analysis

The researcher first obtained approval from the Schools Division Office of Nueva Ecija before coordinating with school heads to schedule interviews. Each interview followed the prepared guide, with a focus on eliciting spontaneous, genuine responses.

For data analysis, the study employs the Colaizzi Seven-Step Method:

1. Familiarization: Reading through all transcriptions to acquire a feeling for them.
2. Identifying Significant Statements: Extracting phrases relevant to the phenomenon.
3. Formulating Meanings: Formulating meanings from these significant statements.
4. Clustering Themes: Organizing aggregated formulated meanings into clusters of themes.
5. Developing an Exhaustive Description: Integrating results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon.
6. Producing the Fundamental Structure: Formulating the exhaustive description into a statement of identification.
7. Member Checking: Returning the final findings to the participants for validation to ensure accuracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents findings from the lived experiences of school heads and teachers in Guimba West and East Districts (AY 2024–2025). Seven themes emerged, highlighting strengths, challenges, and opportunities in integrated school management. Framed by Kurt Lewin's Change Theory, the results reveal how schools adapt structurally to achieve "Education for All."



Participants’ Background Information

Table 1 Participant Background Information

PARTICIPANTS	AGE	SEX	DESIGNATION
Participant 1	48	Male	School Principal IV
Participant 2	46	Male	Head Teacher III
Participant 3	51	Male	School Principal III
Participant 4	50	Male	School Principal III
Participant 5	52	Female	School Principal I
Participant 6	34	Female	Teacher III
Participant 7	35	Male	Teacher III

Participants were seasoned educators (ages 34–52), mostly school heads with graduate degrees. Their roles reflect significant administrative and instructional leadership

responsibilities, making them well-positioned to articulate both opportunities and challenges of integrated schools.

Emergence of Themes

Table 2. Objectives and Themes

OBJECTIVES	THEMES
Strengths & Opportunities	Expanded Access; Continuity of Progression; Unified Leadership; Stronger Collaboration; Stakeholder Support; Responsive Learner Services
Challenges	Transition Management; Insufficient Facilities; Staffing Difficulties; Instructional Supervision Issues; Administrative Burden; Budget Constraints; Policy Adjustment; Stakeholder Coordination; Capacity-Building Needs
Intervention Programs	Resource Mobilization; Instructional Supervision Enhancement; Teacher Development; Stakeholder Engagement; Transition & Sustainability Plan

Strengths and Opportunities
Expanded Access to Education

One of the most dominant strengths identified was the expanded access to education. Participants emphasized that integrated schools reduced barriers of distance, cost, and transportation, making basic education more accessible to learners in rural communities. Participant 1 shared, *“Our students no longer have to travel far... Education has become more accessible.”* This finding reflects Lewin’s Change Stage, where structural adjustments are introduced to improve service delivery and address systemic barriers.

The establishment of integrated schools directly responds to the need for equitable access, particularly for students from low-income households who often face financial and logistical challenges in continuing their education. Prior studies confirm this outcome: Chica-Olmo et al. (2018) highlighted that integrated schools ease financial burdens and travel distances, while Roser (2021) and Torres (2024) emphasized that school location significantly impacts retention rates. Thus, expanded access is not only a logistical improvement but also a strategic intervention that enhances student perseverance and completion rates.

Continuity of Schooling

Another prominent opportunity was the continuity of schooling. Learners were able to transition smoothly from elementary to secondary education within the same environment, reducing adjustment difficulties and dropout risks. Participant 2 emphasized, *“Learners no longer struggle to adjust because they know the environment, teachers, and system.”* This continuity strengthens retention and supports long-term educational participation. Lewin’s Change Theory situates this within the Change Stage, where organizational restructuring enhances service provision. Stevenson and Hardy (2022) underscored the importance of seamless transitions in promoting retention, while Khumalo (2021) noted that integrated schools are designed to provide continuous learning opportunities. The findings confirm that continuity fosters a sense of belonging, familiarity, and

stability, which are critical to sustaining learner motivation and academic success.

Unified Leadership

Unified leadership emerged as a significant strength. With a single governance structure overseeing both elementary and secondary levels, planning and execution became more streamlined. Participant 3 explained, *“Because there is only one leadership structure, it has become easier to unify the direction of the school.”* This reflects Lewin’s Refreeze Stage, where new processes are institutionalized and stabilized. Unified leadership ensures coherence in policy implementation, resource distribution, and strategic planning. Smith et al. (2021) and Gordon et al. (2021) emphasized that cohesive leadership is essential for integrated school performance. The current study extends this by showing that unified leadership is particularly critical during the early stages of integration, when systems and procedures are still being developed. Effective leadership thus transforms potential obstacles into opportunities for organizational coherence and stability.

Stronger Collaboration

Teachers across levels reported stronger collaboration, sharing practices and coordinating interventions. Participant 7 observed, *“Unity and cooperation among teachers have become stronger because they are now in one school.”* This collaboration fosters holistic learner support and institutional coherence. Lewin’s Refreeze Stage explains how collaboration becomes embedded in organizational culture once integration is institutionalized. Hargreaves and Shirley (2019) highlighted the importance of collaborative cultures in managing diverse educational contexts. The findings suggest that collaboration not only enhances instructional planning but also strengthens professional relationships, enabling teachers to better understand learner progression and design connected interventions. This synergy contributes to improved educational outcomes and organizational resilience.



Improved Stakeholder Support

Stakeholder support increased significantly once integrated schools began offering full basic education. Parents, barangay officials, and community groups became more engaged, recognizing the schools as investments in the future of learners. Participant 4 noted, *“Parents and local officials became more supportive when they saw the benefits of integrated schools.”* This finding highlights the critical role of community partnerships in sustaining integrated schools. Lewin’s Change Stage emphasizes stakeholder participation as essential for successful transformation. Taylor and Ramirez (2023) and Jordan (2024) confirmed that strong support systems and community engagement are vital for integrated school performance, while Bernay et al. (2020) emphasized that collaborations with external partners provide opportunities for resource sharing and organizational growth. The study demonstrates that stakeholder support strengthens other opportunities—such as access, continuity, and responsive services—by mobilizing resources and fostering shared responsibility.

Responsive Learner Services

Finally, responsive learner services were identified as a key opportunity. Continuous monitoring across grade levels enabled timely interventions in academic performance, attendance, and behavior. Participant 6 shared, *“We can follow students from elementary to secondary... We become more proactive in providing interventions.”* This learner-centered approach reflects both the Change and Refreeze Stages of Lewin’s model, where new mechanisms for tracking student progress are institutionalized. Lopez and Miller emphasized the importance of culturally responsive education, while Wilson and Davis (2021) argued that sustained interaction with learners enhances academic achievement and holistic development. The findings confirm that integrated schools allow administrators to design timely, relevant interventions, ensuring that learners receive consistent support throughout their educational journey.

Challenges Encountered

Transition Management

Transition management emerged as one of the most pressing challenges. School heads described the adjustment as difficult, noting that both the number of learners and the scope of management responsibilities expanded significantly. Participant 1 admitted, *“At the beginning... the adjustment was really difficult. Not only did the number of learners increase, but the scope of our management also expanded.”* This reflects Lewin’s Unfreeze Stage, where old structures are dismantled and resistance arises as stakeholders adapt to new organizational realities. The findings align with Hargreaves and Shirley (2019), who emphasized the need for flexible leadership in integrated schools, and Gordon et al. (2021), who highlighted proactive leadership strategies to cope with organizational change. Transition management thus requires deliberate planning, capacity-building, and continuous adaptation to ensure that integration does not compromise service delivery.

Resource Limitations

Insufficient facilities, classrooms, and learning materials were consistently reported. Budget allocation and mobilization remained pressing concerns, limiting the ability of schools to provide equitable learning environments. This challenge underscores the importance of strategic resource mobilization, as identified in the intervention programs. Lewin’s Change Theory suggests that resource constraints can hinder the “Change Stage,” where new structures are implemented. Without adequate facilities, the sustainability of integration is compromised. Prior

studies confirm that infrastructure gaps are a common barrier in rural education systems, requiring government and community collaboration to address them.

Staffing and Supervision

Teacher deployment, workload distribution, and instructional supervision across grade levels posed significant difficulties. School heads struggled to balance staffing needs between elementary and secondary levels, often stretching administrative capacity. Supervising instruction across multiple grade levels required new competencies and organizational adjustments. This challenge reflects the complexity of integrated leadership, where administrators must ensure quality teaching across diverse educational stages. It also highlights the need for capacity-building programs for school heads and professional development for teachers to adapt to expanded roles.

Administrative Burden

Expanded operations increased paperwork, reporting, and compliance requirements, straining school heads. The administrative workload diverted attention from instructional leadership and student support. This burden illustrates the tension between bureaucratic demands and educational priorities. Lewin’s framework suggests that during the “Change Stage,” organizations often experience increased complexity before new systems are stabilized. Streamlining administrative processes and adopting digital solutions may help reduce this burden, allowing leaders to focus on pedagogical and community engagement.

Policy and Structural Adjustments

Implementing new policies and aligning organizational structures required continuous adaptation. School heads reported difficulties in reconciling existing procedures with the demands of integrated schooling. This reflects the dynamic nature of policy implementation, where adjustments are necessary to ensure coherence across educational levels. Lewin’s theory emphasizes that organizational “refreezing” requires institutionalization of new policies. Without clear guidelines and consistent support, schools risk fragmentation. This finding underscores the importance of policy clarity, training, and monitoring mechanisms to sustain integration.

Stakeholder Coordination

While stakeholder support increased, sustaining collaboration demanded consistent communication and trust-building. School heads noted that parents, local officials, and community groups were more engaged, but maintaining this involvement required deliberate strategies. This challenge highlights the dual nature of stakeholder engagement: it is both an opportunity and a responsibility. Lewin’s Change Stage emphasizes the role of stakeholders in successful transformation. Studies by Taylor and Ramirez (2023) and Jordan (2024) confirm that strong community partnerships are essential for resource mobilization and sustainability. However, without structured coordination, stakeholder enthusiasm may wane over time.

Strategic Plan

Based on the findings of the study, particularly the themes on transition management, shortage of facilities and resources, staffing concerns, instructional supervision, administrative burden, budget constraints, policy adjustment, and stakeholder engagement, the Strategic Plan was proposed. This program was designed in accordance with the panel's recommendations and in line with the opportunities and difficulties that public integrated schools have been found to present.



Project Title:
Project I.N.T.E.G.R.A.T.E.
(Institutionalizing New Transitions, Engagement, Governance, Resources, and Administrative Transformation for Educational Excellence)

Within a three-year implementation term (SY 2026–2029), to improve the management and operational efficacy of public integrated schools through strategic leadership development, resource mobilization, instructional support, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability planning.

General Objective
Intervention Matrix

Objectives	Activities	Timeline	Responsible Persons	Budget Estimate
1. Enhance the leadership and management competencies of school heads in managing integrated schools.	Conduct Semi-Annual Capacity Building Program on Integrated School Leadership, Transition Management, Resource Management, and Strategic Planning	Twice a year (June and November) SY 2026–2029	SDO Education Program Supervisors, Public Schools District Supervisors, School Heads	₱50,000 annually
2. Improve instructional supervision across elementary and secondary levels.	Conduct quarterly instructional supervision workshops, learning action cells (LAC), mentoring sessions, and classroom observation calibration activities	Quarterly	School Heads, Master Teachers, Department Heads	₱30,000 annually
3. Address shortages in facilities, classrooms, and learning resources.	Develop and implement a Three-Year Facilities Expansion and Resource Development Plan; prepare project proposals for LGU, NGOs, and private partners	SY 2026–2029	School Head, LGU Officials, School Governing Council (SGC), PTA Officers	₱500,000– ₱1,500,000 (depending on projects sourced through partnerships)
4. Strengthen teacher capability and support systems in integrated schools.	Conduct biannual teacher development training on differentiated instruction, curriculum articulation, classroom management, and learner support services	Twice yearly	School Head, Master Teachers, Learning Area Coordinators	₱40,000 annually
5. Increase stakeholder participation and community support.	Establish School-Community Partnership Program; conduct quarterly stakeholder consultations, Brigada Eskwela enhancement activities, and resource mobilization drives	Quarterly	School Head, PTA, Barangay Officials, Alumni Association, Community Stakeholders	₱20,000 annually
6. Strengthen resource generation and budget mobilization mechanisms.	Conduct annual Resource Mobilization Planning Workshop and preparation of school project proposals for external funding sources	Annually	School Head, School Finance Committee, Stakeholders	₱15,000 annually
7. Improve policy implementation and organizational transition processes.	Develop and disseminate Integrated School Operations Manual, Organizational Structure Guide, and Transition Framework	First Year of Implementation	School Head, SDO Officials, School Management Team	₱25,000
8. Institutionalize sustainability and continuous improvement mechanisms.	Prepare and implement a School-Based Transition and Sustainability Improvement Plan (STSIP) with annual monitoring and evaluation	Annual Review	School Head, School Improvement Plan Team, Stakeholders	₱10,000 annually

Expected Outcomes

- The following outcomes are anticipated following the program's three-year implementation:
- Enhanced management and leadership skills among integrated school administrators.
 - Improved teacher performance and instructional monitoring at all educational levels.
 - More classrooms, facilities, and educational materials are available.
 - Enhanced professional cooperation and teacher competency.
 - Greater community support and involvement from stakeholders.
 - Enhanced financial sustainability and resource mobilization.
 - Smoother organizational transitions and more efficient policy implementation.
 - Creation of sustainable management frameworks that promote long-term school expansion and operational efficiency.



Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators

Indicator	Target
School heads trained in integrated school management	100% annually
Teachers participating in professional development activities	At least 90% annually
Stakeholder engagement activities conducted	4 per year
Facilities development projects implemented	At least 2 major projects within 3 years
Resource mobilization initiatives conducted	1 major initiative annually
School Improvement Plan targets achieved	At least 85% accomplishment rate
Learner retention and transition rates	Increased annually
Stakeholder satisfaction rating	90% or higher

Strong stakeholder collaboration, efficient transition management, better facilities and resources, teacher development, and unified school leadership—all of which emerged as crucial elements in guaranteeing the sustainability of recently established integrated schools—are the main conclusions of the study that this intervention program directly addresses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the study highlights that public integrated schools have played a vital role in expanding access to full basic education, ensuring continuity of instruction, strengthening stakeholder participation, and fostering more coordinated school leadership. Among these opportunities, increased access to education stands out as the most significant, particularly in addressing the needs of geographically scattered communities. However, despite these advantages, integrated schools continue to face operational and administrative challenges such as heavy administrative workloads, staffing difficulties, instructional supervision across multiple levels, inadequate facilities and resources, and complex transition management. These findings emphasize the importance of careful planning, flexible leadership, and effective resource management to ensure the success of integrated school operations. The experiences of participants further underscore the critical role of leadership in transforming challenges into opportunities, as strategic planning, collaborative decision-making, and responsiveness to emerging issues enable school administrators to sustain improvement initiatives. The proposed intervention programs—leadership capacity-building, resource mobilization, supervision enhancement, teacher development, stakeholder partnership, and transition and sustainability planning—address the actual needs of newly established integrated schools and highlight the importance of strengthening organizational capability and stakeholder collaboration. Overall, the study concludes that while integrated schools are effective mechanisms for expanding educational opportunities and promoting learner continuity, their long-term success depends on strong leadership, efficient resource management, and sustained stakeholder engagement.

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are put forward. School administrators and educators should undergo specialized leadership development programs focusing on integrated school management, transition leadership, instructional supervision, strategic planning, and organizational development. The Schools Division Office is encouraged to implement a three-year Integrated School Development and Support Framework (2026–2029) with annual monitoring of staffing, infrastructure, instructional resources, and leadership support. To strengthen leadership effectiveness, school heads should participate in semi-annual training programs beginning SY 2026–2027, focusing on resource mobilization, stakeholder engagement, instructional supervision, and organizational development, with effectiveness measured through school improvement indicators. To address shortages in classrooms, learning spaces, instructional materials, and equipment, school heads should collaborate with Local Government Units, School

Governing Councils, and community partners to develop a three-year facilities expansion and resource acquisition plan with annual progress reviews. Integrated schools should also conduct at least two professional development courses annually on curriculum integration, classroom management, diversified teaching techniques, and multi-level education, with implementation tracked through performance reviews and classroom observations. Furthermore, school administrators should establish formal stakeholder partnership programs with quarterly engagement activities involving parents, barangay officials, alumni, private organizations, and community partners to support school projects and resource generation. To ensure smooth operations and sustainable growth, integrated schools should design and implement a Comprehensive Transition and Sustainability Plan within one year of establishment, outlining organizational structures, operational procedures, risk management strategies, and long-term development targets. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct follow-up studies within the next three to five years to assess the effectiveness of these interventions and examine their impact on stakeholder participation, organizational sustainability, leadership efficacy, and school performance in integrated schools.

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