

## DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL MANAGEMENT: BETWEEN PROMULGATED AND PRACTICE

*GESTÃO ESCOLAR DEMOCRÁTICA: ENTRE O PROMULGADO E A PRÁTICA*

*GESTIÓN ESCOLAR DEMOCRÁTICA: ENTRE PROMULGAR Y PRACTICAR*

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**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this research is to understand the elements that make it difficult and the possible paths for effective democratic school management in Monte Santo-BA. This is a *nethnographic* study, with a qualitative approach, which starts from the following question: what are the elements that hinder and the possible ways for effective democratic school management in Monte Santo-BA? To achieve the proposed objective and answer the central question, a semi-structured interview was conducted with three education professionals who worked in the direction of schools by political indication and by elective process and a discussion of the subjects' aspirations and beliefs with the studies theorists about democratic school management and propositions printed in the legal diplomas. The results show that the election for school administrators is a fundamental mechanism for promoting democratic school management and that dialogues with the desires of the research interlocutors, but it still depends on the political will of the local government to be carried out.

**KEYWORDS:** Democratic school management. Participation. Autonomy.

**RESUMO:** O objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender os elementos dificultadores e os caminhos possíveis para efetivação da gestão escolar democrática em Monte Santo-BA. Trata-se de um estudo netnográfico, de abordagem qualitativa, que parte da seguinte questão: quais os elementos dificultadores e os caminhos possíveis para efetivação da gestão escolar democrática em Monte Santo-BA? Para atingir o objetivo proposto e responder à questão central, realizou-se uma entrevista semiestruturada com três profissionais da educação que atuaram na direção de escolas por indicação política e por processo eletivo, e traçou-se uma discussão das aspirações e crenças dos sujeitos com os estudos teóricos sobre gestão escolar democrática e proposições impressas nos diplomas legais. Os resultados apontam que a eleição para gestores escolares é um mecanismo fundamental para promoção da gestão escolar democrática que dialoga com os anseios dos interlocutores da pesquisa, mas ainda depende da vontade política dos governantes locais para ser efetivada.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gestão escolar democrática. Participação. Autonomia.

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**RESUMEN:** *El objetivo de esta investigación es comprender los elementos que lo dificultan y los posibles caminos para una gestión escolar democrática efectiva en Monte Santo-BA. Se trata de un estudio netnográfico, con enfoque cualitativo, que parte de la siguiente pregunta: ¿cuáles son los elementos que obstaculizan y los posibles caminos para la efectividad de la gestión escolar democrática en Monte Santo-BA? Para lograr el objetivo propuesto y dar respuesta a la pregunta central, se realizó una entrevista semiestructurada con tres profesionales de la educación que trabajaron en la dirección de escuelas por indicación política y por proceso electivo y una discusión de las aspiraciones y creencias de los sujetos con los estudios teóricos sobre la gestión escolar democrática y proposiciones impresas en los diplomas legales. Los resultados muestran que la elección de administradores escolares es un mecanismo fundamental para promover la gestión escolar democrática y que dialoga con los deseos de los interlocutores de investigación, pero aún depende de la voluntad política del gobierno local que se lleve a cabo.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Gestión escolar democrática. Participación. Autonomía.*

### **Introduction: the research, the object and the objectives**

The sociocultural and technological changes that permeate society demand that the school reconfigure its ways of acting. This process demands democratic school management capable of decentralizing power and encouraging the effective participation of all community actors in administrative, pedagogical and financial decisions. In practice, participation is a principle of democracy that enhances transparency and constitutes “[...] the main means of ensuring the democratic management of the school, enabling the involvement of professionals and users in the decision-making process and in the functioning of school organization” (LIBÂNEO, 2004, p. 102, our translation).

In the meantime, democratic management is an ever-present theme in the country's educational programs and policies. In writings and speeches concerning education, it is clear that autonomy, participation and democracy are principles that need to be consummated at school; However, consolidating these precepts and democratizing education requires removing from schools political, government and management obstacles, theories and objectives that interfere in the constitution of democratic educational organizations (LIMA, 2018).

In view of the discussions about democratic management, this study aims to understand the hindering elements and the possible ways to implement democratic school management in Monte Santo-BA. The research is based on the netnographic method, understood here as an adapted form of ethnography to study realities and subjects in digital environments, discussion forums, videoconferences, blogs and social networks (KOZINETS,

2014). Nethnography does not treat online communications only as content or forms, but as cultural artifacts embedded in meaning.

As it develops in a natural situation, has a flexible plan and focuses on the situated reality (LÜDKE; ANDRÉ, 1986), the qualitative approach was chosen to conduct the research. In the development of the qualitative study, the personal history and the political positions of the researcher are starting points for investigation, artifices that dialogue with a research that seeks to build a provisional knowledge to answer the following problem question: what are the hindering elements and the possible paths for effective democratic school management in Monte Santo-BA?

In order to achieve the proposed objective and respond to the central provocation, a semi-structured interview was carried out in January 2021, organized in a questionnaire through Google Forms<sup>2</sup>, with three education professionals<sup>3</sup> who have already worked in the direction of schools by elective process and by political statement. The interview was chosen because it provided data on the various aspects of social life (GIL, 2008) and because it gave subjects the opportunity to express their knowledge, aspirations, expectations and beliefs about democratic school management in municipal daily life.

The corpus for theoretical reflection and discussion was built from the unitarization and categorization (MORAES, 2003) of the material produced, a movement that led to the selection of relevant answers for this study, which is justified by the need to study democratic management and problematize its legal system, urgency to discuss the conception of educational actors about the methods of choosing principals and the importance of conceiving direct election as a mechanism of democratic management, aiming to reflect on other modalities of choosing school managers<sup>4</sup>.

The academic relevance of this study derives from the urgency of questioning the principle of democratic management implicit and explicit in the legal diplomas, which demand new propositions from the public power and society, which dialogue with the practices of democratic school management necessary in the current context. It is socially relevant for promoting situated discussions about the movement of choice for school leaders practiced in the municipality, as well as for raising propositions that dialogue with democratic school management in the form of the law.

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<sup>2</sup> Google's free service to create online forms, surveys, reviews, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The copyright assignment terms were signed by all research participants, and to keep their identities confidential, they were referred to by the following pseudonyms: Assis, Ayla and Júlia.

<sup>4</sup> In this study, the nouns principal and manager are used synonymously. Furthermore, the option for the use of the masculine is justified because the researcher's voice is implicit in the writing, but issues related to gender are recognized and respected in the writing itinerary.

## **Democratic school management in Monte Santo-BA: from text to context**

Democratic school management assumes the active participation of all community actors in administrative, pedagogical and financial decisions. The concept of democratic school gained prominence with the redemocratization of the country, when the aspirations of intellectuals and political idealists were institutionalized in the Federal Constitution (FC) and in the Law of Directives and Bases of National Education (LDB). Indeed, the democratic management of public education became one of the fundamental principles proclaimed in Art. 206 of the FC and in Art. 3 of the LDB; however, the effectiveness is still a challenge to be discussed, faced and overcome in many education networks.

The adversities that affect the political-educational management and the distance between the enacted and the practice are manifest elements in public education. Proof of this is that the principle of democratic management, which should already be consolidated, is still one of the guidelines and goals of the National Education Plan (PNE). In fact, even with the aim of “ensuring conditions, within two years, for the effective democratic management of education, associated with technical criteria of merit and performance and public consultation with the school community [...]” (BRASIL, 2014, p. 83, our translation), the principle of democratic management has provoked multiple discussions and interpretations.

In Monte Santo-BA, locus of this study, the democratic management of public education is a pillar of the Organic Law of the Municipality of Monte Santo which, in its Art. 66, sole paragraph, recommends that "The principals and Vice-principals will be chosen through direct elections in accordance with the law" (MONTE SANTO, 2012, p. 39), and the Statute of the Public Teaching of the Municipality of Monte Santo, Law no. 16/2013, which in its Art. 67 defines that “The direction of the municipal teaching unit will be exercised by the Principal and the Vice-Principal, chosen through election, in a democratic and harmonious way with the School Council” (MONTE SANTO, 2013, p. 27, our translation).

In the same direction, the Municipal Education Plan (PME), specifically in goal 18, aims to “ensure conditions, within four months (4), for the effective democratic management of education, associated with technical criteria of merit and performance and public consultation with the school community [...]” (MONTE SANTO, 2015, p. 108, our translation), and the Positions and Salaries Plan, Law No. 001/2016, which defines, in Art. 14, that “The choice of the gratified functions of Principal and Vice-Principal will fall on education professionals who are part of the effective staff of the Municipal Public Teaching, elected in direct election by the School Community [...]” (MONTE SANTO, 2016, p. 12-13,

our translation). In view of this, direct election, under the terms of the municipality's legal diplomas, is the method of choosing the directors and deputy directors of public schools in the municipality.

Based on the aforementioned legal provisions, the Municipal Department of Education of Monte Santo-BA held, in December 2015, the first election for school managers in the 33 schools that had more than 120 students. Even admitting that the election for directors is just one of the principles of democratic management of public education, the election held was a great step towards effective democratic school management in Monte Santo-BA; However, debates and political-administrative disagreements revealed the switching of laws, actions and speeches, preventing the holding of the second elective, scheduled for December 2018.

In the midst of political-administrative differences and based on national legal diplomas that do not have a clear rule determining the election of school managers as a method of democratic management, the executive and legislative powers approved and sanctioned Law no, 025/2017, amending Municipal Laws no. 16/2013 and no. 001/2016 (MONTE SANTO, 2017; 2016). With the amendment of these laws, the direction of teaching units in the municipality with more than 120 students would no longer be chosen by elective election but appointed by the head of the executive branch – the well-known political appointment.

After several political-administrative debates with education professionals, the municipal governance rethought its propositions and regulated the elective election through Decree no. 404/2018 (MONTE SANTO, 2018), provoking debates in the educational environment and legal action in the Public Ministry (MP) by predicts election only in the 32 schools that had more than 120 students. In its order on the matter, the MP warned that municipal legislation is unconstitutional for violating, among other articles, Art. 37, item II of the Magna Carta. Therefore, it would not have legal support to challenge Decree No. 404/2018, nor to demand that the executive implement the direct election to fill the position of principals in all school units in the municipality.

Faced with this position of the MP, the municipal administration decided to completely extinguish the election for school administrators, provoking likes, nudges and fissures for electoral campaign promises. After the 2020 municipal election, the legislative and executive powers approved and sanctioned Law no. 088/2020, which introduced a new amendment to Law no. direct election (MONTE SANTO, 2020). This episode caused strangeness, because those who were once in favor of removing the election for principals

changed their discourse and became defenders; many who were in favor, became against, above all, because of the *modus operandi* or inversion of power.

Under the precepts of Municipal Law no. 088/2020, the election for principals would have to be held by 31 January 2021; However, the new municipal governance claimed that the rules of social distance as a result of Covid-19 and the short period would be obstacles to carrying out the elective election and, therefore, used the political indication to appoint the principals. Certainly, these justifications are well-founded, but they are characterized as a strategic defense to postpone the effectiveness of democratic management in public schools in the municipality.

To endorse this debate, the legislature approved Law No. 003, of 15 February 2021, which provides for the amendment of Municipal Law no. 025/2017 and 088/2020, and makes other provisions (MONTE SANTO, 2021). In this new device, the direct election for principal was maintained, but the effectiveness of the democratic management continues to depend on the political will of those in power, since the election for school administrators will be regulated by an Executive Power Act.

### **Theoretical-practical reflections: the (inter)faces of democratic school management**

The school has been a space for studies and discussions nowadays. Among the topics under debate, democratic management has permeated research and scientific publications. In order to understand the number of studies on the subject and to take ownership of those that dialogue with this research, an initial literature review was carried out in January 2021, in SciELO - research published from 2016 onwards - because it is a cut-off current time, having *democratic school management* as a descriptor. The results obtained indicate that there are 21 scientific articles published on the subject in this period.

There is a lot of research on democratic school management, but reading the abstracts of the articles pointed out three publications whose 'findings' dialogue and contribute to the debate outlined in this text: School Management in Feira de Santana: analysis of official texts; Why is it so difficult to democratize public school management?; and, Contributions to the debate on democratic management of education: focus on municipal legislation in Rio Grande do Sul. The option for dialogue with these surveys is justified because they confirm that the election of principals is a mechanism that contributes to the construction of democracy at school; however, it is a modality that does not have legal support in the national legal system, being at the discretion or political will of local rulers.



Added to these findings is the fact that democratic school management assumes the involvement of all actors in the decision-making process of the educational institution, which contributes to decentralizing power, democratizing public schools and building social quality education, that is, an education capable of solving social inequalities and ensuring the permanence and success of all in school (BRASIL, 2013).

For Oliveira and Vasques-Menezes (2018, p. 898, our translation), “the concept of school management is socially constructed and reconstructed according to the historical evolution and educational policies in question”. It is necessary to discuss democratic school management in the political, sociocultural and economic context, with a view to attenuating the multiple understandings on the subject and building schools whose change of conception, knowledge and practices accompany the transformations of society. This means that education systems need to define the norms of democratic management and ensure that public schools have pedagogical, administrative and financial management autonomy (BRASIL, 1996).

One of the challenges of democratic management is to establish personal and collective changes in school daily life, because “[...] not everyone wants to build changes, or not everyone is prepared to break established concepts and practices, especially if such changes do not constitute individual and immediate gifts” (LIMA, 2013, p. 40, our translation). The success of school management under the prism of democracy requires participatory planning and decentralization of power; however, it is necessary to root out the autocracy, the false participation and the political-administrative amateurism of those who take care of education.

In his daily actions, the principal “needs to assume a position of articulator of the organization of the school space, acting as an active subject for the implementation of the right to learn and the mobilization and social participation in the school context” (SANTOS; CASTRO, 2020, p. 12, our translation). This process requires the manager to act as a leader, seeking to dialogue with the entire school community to decentralize power and strengthen the crucial factors of democratic school management: autonomy and participation.

Democratic management demands collective work, based on the principles of autonomy and participation, with a view to promoting learning and human emancipation. In this light, democratic school management implies community participation, and autonomy is a *sine qua non* condition for building democratic schools and the formation of critical-reflective and democratic subjects, capable of acting responsively in society.

The discussion on democratic school management gains materiality when discussing the topic with those who work directly in the direction of schools. When asked about what democratic management is, Teacher Assis reported that it is “leadership based on knowing how to listen, question and be questioned; to understand that there are always other opinions, is to live together and know the importance of everyone's participation”. This discursive excerpt shows that democratic management is a collective construction, which demands managers committed to the administrative and pedagogical functioning of the school (LIBÂNEO, 2004), and involved in mobilizing the community to participate in the institutional life of the school and deal with the multiple challenges that permeate the dimensions of school management. It is, therefore, a path that is made by walking, requiring continuous reflections on the obstacles and potentialities (PARO, 2016) intrinsic to the process of building democratic school management of public education.

In the same direction, Teacher Júlia stated that democratic management is a “process that involves the effective participation of parents, teachers, employees and students in the organization and viability of deliberative processes” (our translation). This discursive extract reinforces that democratic school management is only effective if it is based on the democratic-participatory model, in which decision-making takes place collectively (LIBÂNEO, 2004), which requires overcoming the bureaucratic perspective of parent-teacher associations and collegiate agencies.

Lima (2013, p. 31, our translation) argues that there are five basic requirements to implement democratic school management: “like to participate, want to participate, have knowledge of the object of participation, recognize oneself in this object and have the power to participate in decision making”. These aspects show how important it is to develop actions that encourage the participation and autonomy of the school community.

Establishing this movement requires understanding that “school management is the act of managing the cultural dynamics of the school, in line with the guidelines and public educational policies for the implementation of its political-pedagogical project” (LÜCK, 2009, p. 24). Therefore, it is vital that every school team, especially the school's management, has the spirit of a democratic leader, the ability to dialogue, build consensus and coordinate the decision-making process and the implementation of pedagogical work, as well as balance and autonomy to build bridges necessary for the operationalization of the actions.

The nodal point of democratic management is the socialization and transparency of information, a process that demands collective participation, decentralization of power and autonomy of all in the organization, operationalization and evaluation of administrative and



pedagogical propositions. For the interlocutors of this study, the effectiveness of these principles is influenced by the mode of choice of the school leader, since,

*When elected by the community, we are free... we clearly have to live up to the expectations of the school community. When indicated, I also try to do work that pleases everyone, but with one detail: often submissive permeating the silence.* (Teacher Assis, our translation).

*Elected: walks with the school community. Indicated: follows hierarchy* (Teacher Ayla, our translation).

*When elected by the community, the commitment to all, students, employees and family members in participating in the actions and results is fundamental in the management of the school; when indicated there are partisan interests that override the needs and desires of the school community* (Teacher Júlia, our translation).

These testimonies, allied to the events that make up the history of choice of school managers in the municipality, show that the election is the method of choosing principals that enhances democratic management, but the democratization of public schools in Monte Santo still depends on the political will of those who are in the power. In fact, democracy is not restricted only to school units, but as a public and sociocultural value inherent to all social spheres, as a necessary pillar for the ethical, democratic, critical and citizen training of Brazilians.

By stating that the nomination is a modality that denotes following hierarchy and that the partisan interests overlap the needs and desires of the school community, Ayla and Júlia reveal that the nomination for directors is a modality that causes damage to the principles of democracy. Therefore, even if the election is not adopted for constitutional reasons, it is necessary to overcome political obstacles, understand that democratization takes place in practice (PARO, 2016) and establish other mechanisms for choosing principals who share democratic ideals.

When she emphasizes the importance of the 'commitment of all', Júlia emphasizes that the school is an arena of possibilities for democratization, a privileged space for dialogue between all actors in the school community. However, it cannot be denied that the school is a political and social arena of community participation, an institution of power and dispute as a political-ideological space. Therefore, democracy and participation as inseparable terms (LÜCK, 2009) need to be pillars of school management.

The importance of participatory organizations in schools for the effectiveness of democratic management is emphasized by employees. Assis states that “these segments are

the witnesses of the acts. The manager only follows the thorny path if conniving with them. Actively organized, they make the whole leadership process much more democratic”. In fact, the school collegiate and the association of parents and teachers have deliberative, consultative and supervisory functions, essential factors to democratize the management of the school; however, it only takes effect when power is decentralized and there are participatory subjects, who act in decision-making processes and contribute to making institutions democratic (LIMA, 2013).

In democratic school management, participation, autonomy and individual responsibility for the benefit of the collective are essential. For this, team engagement and a responsive performance by the school manager are necessary, as “the school principal is the leader, mentor, coordinator and main guide of the school’s life and all its educational work, and his responsibility should not be diluted among all school management collaborators, although it can be shared with them” (LÜCK, 2009, p. 23, our translation). Thus, managing the school requires knowledge and skills to exercise leadership and ensure the participation of all segments of the school community in decision-making and problem solving (LIBÂNEO, 2004).

In Souza's conception (2009, p. 135, our translation), “democratic participation presupposes a regulatory, inspection, evaluative action, as well as a decision-making process regarding the political and social life of (school) institutions and society”. In a way, democratic participation can begin with the direct election of principals who, despite being a field of power disputes and changes in discourse, employees defend the elective process. Assis is in favor of the election, because “We must be evaluated by the school community. Voting is the tool”. This fragment reveals the importance of the elective process and the relevance of participation and autonomy as continuous constructs of democratic school management.

In the same direction, Júlia says: “I am in favor of the election [...]”, and Ayla informs: “I am in favor, as long as those involved understand its importance, as many have not yet understood the real importance of democratic management”. From these reports, it is possible to infer that democratic management cannot be confused only with the direct election to fill the position of principals, but as a continuous process that requires autonomy and participation of all segments of the school community.

The conception of the subjects of this study and the legal diplomas of Monte Santo share the vision of Paro (2011) when he warns that the election of directors is the most appropriate mechanism for the provision of the function, since it prevents political

dependence and electoral clientelism, strengthening relationships between the school and local community. By providing political independence to directors, the election meets the principles of impersonality, morality and publicity (BRASIL, 1988); however, the election for managers in the schools of Monte Santo is still a terrain of dispute of powers and, as stated by Paro (2016), the election should not happen in a way that is unrelated to other measures that transform the administrative structure of the school.

Faced with the discussions and the emergence of choice of school administrators who strive for participatory, democratic and decentralizing management of power, it is vital to reflect on the ways of choosing principals that predominate in Brazil: nomination, election, public contest and mixed scheme (ALVES, 2009). The appointment is the mechanism for filling the position that refers to the executive power; the election represents the method of choosing the school community through voting; the public contest is a selection process that includes tests and titles; and the mixed scheme requires combining professional experience, technical and political processes.

In order to implement any modality, it is necessary to take a multidimensional look at its strengths and weaknesses: the indication, if carried out based on technical criteria and considering the educational profile of the candidates for the position, may mitigate the main weakness – partisan political connotation; the election, which presupposes a greater commitment from the principal to the school community and it is believed that there is greater engagement and participation of all in the management of the school, can become a vicious movement in the political-electoral process, such as the exchange of votes for personal favoritism; the public contest guarantees the selection of candidates with more theoretical knowledge and continuity in the position, but the candidate may not present an adequate profile to manage the school; and, the mixed scheme aggregates strategies that combine with other modalities, in order to minimize weaknesses in a single way, but if it does not contain clear definitions and transparency in the process, it may become a mechanism of little interest to candidates and the school community.

Whatever the method of choosing managers, it is essential to adopt clear criteria and monitor the political-educational actions carried out at the school, with a view to materializing the principle of democratic management printed in the country's legal diplomas, after all, in the absence of a concept clear about democratic management, local legislation encourages debate in the direction of the education network to find its own formula to define and implement this principle (ESQUINSANI, 2016). For this, it is necessary that the public power understand the importance of its actions to dialogue with the aspirations of the school

community and that it is essential that its political-partisan interests are less influential in the school arenas.

The theoretical-empirical structure of this study reveals the importance of the teaching network consolidating the elective process for filling the position of directors; but, in the absence of this modality, it is essential to outline and constitute a mixed scheme, in the sense of requiring technical knowledge, professional experience, presentation of a management plan, interviews and adherence to continuing education courses for school managers.

In the midst of judicial decisions, changes in discourse and political-administrative interest, the adoption of direct election for principals and the constitution of new mechanisms to improve the ways of choosing managers seems opportune in a period marked by continuous social, educational and technologies changes, but it is a political-educational issue that challenges municipal governance, education professionals and the school community of Monte Santo.

### **Final considerations**

Conceiving democratic management as a constituent part of the school curriculum and one of the dimensions of the educational process (LIMA, 2018), the study participants are unanimous in defending the election as a modality for filling the position of directors, as it guarantees greater commitment from the manager and grants pedagogical and administrative autonomy to the school. Effective democratic management demands exhausting the political interests rooted in schools and placing the real needs and true desires of the school community as priorities.

The analysis of the events in the empirical field confirms that the direct election by itself does not transform the school into a democratic educational institution, but it is a powerful instrument to enhance participatory democratic management and citizen education. Indeed, the educational reality of the locus of the study denotes that the realization of democratic school management cannot be the desire of some, but a social demand based on Brazilian legislation and the desire to decentralize power and ensure social quality education for all citizens.

By intertwining the theoretical readings with the events of the empirical field, it is possible to affirm that the participation of the entire school community in the different decision-making of the school is a relevant aspect for the constitution of democratic management. Participation needs to be a constant practice of the school community in the

pedagogical and administrative actions of the school unit, as well as in the choice of managers, with a view to implementing democratic-participatory management in the school arena.

The research made it possible to carry out other interpretations on democratic management and to understand the elements that hinder the effectiveness of democratic school management in municipal daily life: absence of clear norms in the national legal system, switching laws and discourses to meet the interests of those who hold power, little interest of the rulers to institute democratic school management and limited school organizations to demand the enforcement of laws. Subverting such obstacles requires a change in the political-philosophical conception of the governors and society of Monte Santo, active collegiate bodies and, above all, political aspiration to democratize the management of schools and public education.

In view of the discussions carried out on such a broad topic, the expectation is that the results will contribute to the understanding that the elective process is the method of choosing school managers that dialogues with the aspirations of the school community and that contributes to decentralizing power, providing greater participation of all the actors that make up the school. Furthermore, the wish is that this debate - which is far from being finalized - provokes the public power and the school community to think and build mechanisms that reduce the distance between what is enacted and what is practiced.

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