

## **Building Rapport with Pupils to Enhance Teaching: Implications from Observing Three Primary Excellent Teachers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Teaching is a social cultural activity. Studies show that good rapport between teachers and pupils may enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning process. A study has been carried out to identify the characteristics of effective mathematics lessons as valued by teachers and pupils in three different types of primary schools in Malaysia. The study involved six primary teachers who were awarded as “Excellent Mathematics Teacher” and their thirty six primary pupils. While analysing the data, we observed building good rapport with pupils emerged to be a significant characteristic of effective teaching. Out of the six participating teachers, three were observed to have built good rapport with their pupils. Therefore, this paper focuses on discussing the strategies and skills of building rapport with pupils by these three teachers. Qualitative data were collected through video-recorded lesson observations, in-depth interviews with the teachers and photo-elicited focus group interview with the pupils. Analysis of the data indicates that various skills such as using non-verbal gestures, act as a playmate, show full concern, understand pupils’ background as well as showing patience and care were used to build up good rapport with pupils.

*Keywords:* Effective teaching, excellent teacher, primary education, rapport, strategies and skills

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2010), the word “rapport” is defined as relation, especially the relation that is marked by harmony, conformity, accord or affinity. Likewise, the Random House Dictionary (1987) defines rapport as an especially harmonious or sympathetic connection. In fact, rapport has been found to be one of the most essential characteristics

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of unconscious human interaction. It is akin to being on the same wavelength as the people you are interact with. McLaughlin and Carr (2005) reckon that rapport is best discussed in terms of the quality of the relationship between two people. Therefore, Spencer-Oatey (2002) conceptualizes rapport as social interaction with a particular noticeable impact on a relationship with another person.

Classroom teaching is a cultural activity that involves social interaction between two parties, which are teacher and his/her pupils. Buskist and Saville (2001) argued that subject matter is also an important element in the social interaction. Hence, they define rapport as “a positive emotional connection among students, teacher, and subject matter that emerges from the manner in which the teacher constructs the learning environment” (p. 2). Therefore, in this study, we define rapport as a harmonious relationship that can be built by creating emotional connections between teacher and student and between student and subject matter. Building a good relationship, especially positive and harmonious rapport between teacher and students, is clearly important and helpful in resulting effective interaction and hence effective teaching. Indeed, Buskist and Saville (2001) proposed that rapport could be thought of as an emergent property of teaching, or, for that matter, any kind of social relationship. According to them, rapport should be developed since the very first day of the class, where the teacher welcome his/her students warmly to join in the learning community that is to be

established in the classroom. Then, teacher needs to continue this effort every day, regardless inside or outside classroom, as well as during the whole learning process.

Kyriacou (1997) wrote that “good rapport between the teacher and pupils involves their having a harmonious understanding of each other as individuals and is based on mutual respect and esteem” (p. 109). He further illustrates that there are three qualities in the teacher’s interaction with pupils that can help to develop good rapport: a) teacher’s genuine care for each pupils’ progress; b) teacher’s respect for pupils as learners; and c) teacher’s respect for pupils as individuals.

Past studies (e.g., Bernieri *et al.*, 1996; Hunt & Price, 2002; Buskist & Saville, 2001) have shown that there are many techniques that can help in building good rapport between teachers and pupils. These techniques include matching the body language, such as eye blinks, head nods and finger movement. Other techniques, such as eye contact and matching breathing rhythm, are also found to be effective in building rapport during conversation. Generally, some studies (such as Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990; Buskist & Saville, 2001) have observed that the more in tune between the teacher and pupils, the more synchronize will be their movements; therefore, a stronger rapport between teachers and pupils.

There are benefits obtained based on a good rapport between teacher-students relationship as stated by the past researchers. Among other, Buskist and Saville (2001)

mentioned that rapport is able to facilitate both student motivation for learning and their enjoyment of the class, and enhance student receptivity to what is being taught. In other words, rapport-building contributes to creating a context for establishing a positive emotional classroom atmosphere which helps students to learn better.

Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) study suggests that rapport has a positive relationship with students' perceptions of satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth communication in a school context. Such imitative behaviour like rapport may be useful in interactions with students because students tend to gravitate toward and become more comfortable around those similar to themselves (Thompson, 1998).

Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) describe three components that characterize relationships with a high level of rapport. Their "mutual attentiveness" and "positivity" components suggest rapport is higher in interactions in which the students are interested in each other and share a feeling of caring or friendliness.

### AIMS OF THIS PAPER

In view of the strong relationship between good rapport and effective teaching, it will be beneficial to examine how these *Excellent Teachers* build up rapport with their pupils. Strategies that are identified might help other teachers especially novice teachers to enhance their relationship with pupils and consequently resulted in better teaching and learning. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to highlight the techniques and skills used by these teachers in building

good rapport with their pupils.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON BUILDING RAPPORT

A review of related studies on rapport (e.g., Buskist, & Saville, 2001; Davis, 2006) indicates that a good rapport between teacher and students relationship can be developed based on the following five criteria: *trust, connectedness, enjoyable atmosphere, attraction and positive emotional response*. For instance, Buskist and Saville (2001) proposed that there are five key elements of quality relationship. These are: (a) the degree of students' acceptance towards the objectives defined by the teacher; (b) the ability of the students to achieve these objectives; (c) the ability of the teacher to care about his/her students and to cultivate their learning; (d) the extent of emotional "connection" between teacher and students; and (e) students' motivation to participate actively. As such, rapport is both a process (as it requires various steps to develop) and an outcome (as it only appears when all sufficient key elements are present).

*Trust* is the most important component in building rapport between teacher and students relationship. Brookfield (1990) contents that:

*Trust between teachers and students is the affective glue that binds educational relationships together. Not trusting teachers has several consequences for students. They are unwilling to submit themselves to the perilous uncertainties of new learning. They avoid risk*

*and keep their most deeply felt concerns private. They view with cynical reserve the exhortations and instructions of teachers* (p. 162).

In teaching, such trust contributes to building good rapport, enhancing motivation, and stimulating learning. Therefore, for teachers who wish their students to join them as members of the community of learning, it is vital for the teachers to demonstrate to their students that they are trustable.

**Connectedness** is another significant component in building rapport. Buskist and Saville (2001) cited that “good teachers strive to forge connections between themselves and their subject matter and between themselves and their students” (p. 2). They argued that “rapport is a positive emotional connection among students, teacher, and subject matter” (p. 2). Therefore, if a teacher

wishes to “connect” with his/her students or to establish good rapport with them, the teacher must expose at least part of himself/herself to his/her students. It is only when teachers are successful in making this “connection” that a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning can be constructed.

The third component is **an enjoyable atmosphere**. The enjoyable interaction component is an affective assessment of the actual interaction between the two parties and captures what some have described as “positivity” (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990). Rapport is also characterized by a certain level of coordination or feeling of being “in-sync” with one another (Tickle-Degnen & Rosenthal, 1990).

The fourth component is **attraction**. Attraction is the force that bonds two parties together in a relationship. Attraction in a relationship is based on a reward versus

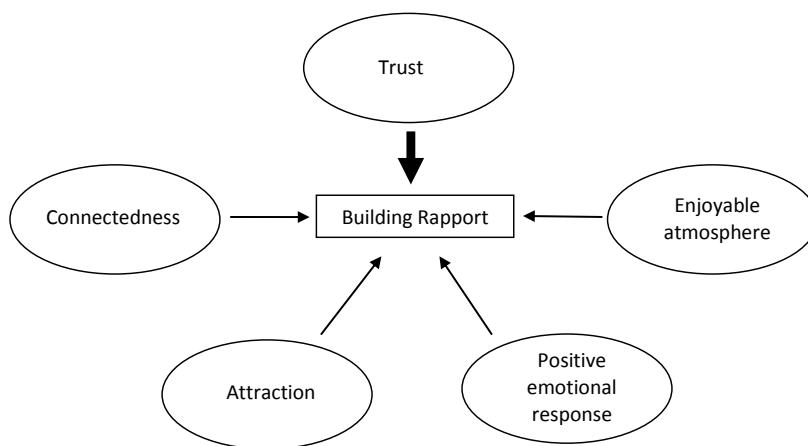


Fig. 1: Theoretical Framework of Building Rapport

costs assessment that exceeds a minimum threshold (Secord & Backman, 1974).

The fifth component is *positive emotional response*. Price, Arnould and Deibler (1995) found that there are three factors which had the most significant impact on positive emotional responses. The three factors are mutual understanding, extra attention and meeting minimum standards of activity. In addition, familiarity, which is defined as “knowing the student” also, has a positive impact on rapport. Familiarity will enhance teacher’s ability to provide rewards which will strengthen the sense of connection and consequently foster more positive interactions (Macintosh, 2009).

## PARTICIPANTS

The main study involved six mathematics teachers who were awarded as “*Excellent Teacher*” and their thirty six pupils. In Malaysia, “*Excellent Teacher*” is an award honoured to teacher who are “regarded as experts in their field of teaching and subject matter” (Ministry of Education Malaysia’s Official Portal, 20.9.2009, Retrieved from <http://www.moe.gov.my/?id=36&lang=en>). Therefore, we assumed that mathematics *Excellent Teacher* conducted effective Mathematics lessons. Six *Excellent Teachers*, two each from national school

(SK), national type Chinese school (SJKC) and national type Tamil school (SJKT) were selected. Each teacher was then asked to select six pupils from his/her class to participate in the study. These pupils were selected based on their teacher’s discretion on their general academic performance. Two pupils were selected each from the three groups of high performing, average and low performing.

However, in this paper, our discussion was mainly based on the analysis of data collected from three out of these six *Excellent Teachers* as they were observed to build good rapport with their pupils. The demographic information of these three teachers is presented in Table 1.

These three teachers were observed to have the following characteristics: (a) they took good care of their pupils and appeared to know their pupils very well, including the pupils’ family background, attitude, difficulties in learning mathematics and so forth; (b) there was an observed harmony relationship between the teachers and their pupils. The pupils showed respect to their teachers and did not hesitate to approach the teacher whenever they faced problems. The teachers also always encouraged their pupils to come up to them whenever they did not understand. The teachers showed

TABLE 1  
Demographic information of Excellent Teachers

Teacher	Type of school	Years of teaching experience	Year awarded as Excellent Teacher
Madam C	SJKC	More than 30	1998
Madam R	SK	About 10	2009
Mr K	SJKT	About 10	2008

willingness to teach the pupils when the pupils approach them; (c) Both teachers and pupils showed a close relationship. Besides academic conversation, there were many informal conversations between the teachers and their pupils. For example, Madam R was praised by her pupils when she wore a new skirt to the class. Mr. K's pupils told him that they missed his lesson when he was absent; and (d) there was a mutual respect between teacher and pupils in the classroom. While the teachers always encouraged the pupils to participate in the classroom teaching and activities, the pupils were eager to respond and their responses were highly appreciated by the teachers.

#### **METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

This study employed three methods to collect data, namely, lesson observation, photo-elicited focus group interview with pupils and in-depth interview with teachers. Briefly, the procedure of data collection was carried out in the following manner:

##### *a. Video-recorded Lesson Observation*

All the participating teachers were observed for three lessons. Each lesson lasted about 50 minutes to one hour. Three researchers were involved in collecting data during the lesson observation. One of them sat behind the class, observing the lesson and took down field notes, particularly episodes or phenomena that may be raised for discussion during the in-depth interview. The other two researchers were in charge of video recording. Two video cameras were used. One focused on the teacher while the other

focused on the pupils. The video cameras that focused on the teacher aimed to record the teacher's teaching steps, including his/her expression, body language, response to the pupils and interaction with the pupils. While the other video cameras aimed to record the pupils' interaction in the classroom and their responses to the teacher. For example, when the teacher posed a question, some pupils raised their hands immediately. This kind of pupil reaction was taken to indicate the pupils' keenness in participating in the classroom activities. By focusing the video camera on both teacher and pupils, we hoped to get a holistic view of the progress of the whole lesson. The videos recorded lesson also allowed the researchers to review the lesson several times, as well as to avoid missing some phenomena that might have been overlooked during the lesson observation.

##### *b. Photo-elicited focus group interview with the pupils*

During each lesson observation, the six selected pupils were provided with a digital camera each to capture any moment that they reckoned their teacher was teaching effectively. Immediately after each observation, these pupils were gathered in a quiet room, normally in the library or the resource room in the school. All the photographs taken were downloaded onto a laptop computer, and shown onto an LCD screen. Taking their turns, these pupils were asked to elaborate their opinions based on the photographs that they had taken. The aim of this focus group pupil interview was to

explore the pupils' perspective about what constitute as the characteristics of effective mathematics lessons.

*c. In-depth interview with the teachers*

Immediately after each classroom observation and after the photo-elicited interview with pupils, an in depth interview was carried out with the participating teacher. The interview began with the teacher reflecting on the lesson just taught. He or she was asked to highlight and elaborate any teaching steps or activities that they had planned or practiced to show effective teaching. For example, a particular kind of teaching tool, such as 'talking board', was used or certain kind of questions was asked. Likewise, significant phenomena that were observed by the researchers during the lesson, such as the teacher's effort to build good rapport with the pupils, would be brought up and discussed with the teachers.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND TRIANGULATION**

Both interviews with pupils and teacher were also video recorded for analysis. All the videos recording taken during the observed lessons and interviews were imported into NVivo and transcribed verbatim. The videos of lesson observation were coded for emerging themes, and then the nodes were explored to search for patterns and characteristics. While the interview transcripts were read several times to gain emerging themes. The themes were then categorised into related groups.

This study employed three types of triangulation: data triangulation, method triangulation and investigator triangulation. Data collected from the teacher interviews were triangulated with the data collected from the pupil interviews. Besides, the field notes written during the lesson observation, interview transcripts and the videos were also systematically triangulated. In term of investigator triangulation, there were three researchers involved in gathering the data and interpreting the data.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

For this paper, we focused our analysis mainly on qualitative data collected from both classroom observations and interviews showing how these teachers building rapports with pupils. Analysis of the nine lessons gave us great insight into how these *Excellent Teachers* conducted their Mathematics lessons, and also how they managed to build up good rapport with their pupils. In the following section, we will highlight some techniques used by these three teachers as featured in their classroom teaching:

*a. Teacher acts as a partner and a playmate to the pupils*

This technique was explicitly pointed out by Madam R during her interview, as well as observed in the classroom teaching of Madam C. In the interview, Madam R highlighted that one of the best ways to build up rapport with pupils is to be a playmate to the pupils:

*“When they (the pupils) play, I also join (them). I have to put myself as if I am also a child, just like them.”*

Madam R also emphasized that a teacher needs to be friendly and “be their friend” so as to build up good rapport with pupils.

Likewise, we observed that Madam C’s lessons were always filled with fun and game-like learning atmosphere. Even though we were non-participatory observers, we also felt the fun and enjoyment of the lessons. Most learning activities that Madam C planned were like playing a game which involved both teacher and pupils as teammates. For example, when Madam C was assigning a question to each group, one of the groups requested her to give them an easier question. She acknowledged to their request. However, when the pupils asked her how to do it, she replied as “I don’t know, you have to try it out first. Don’t ask me.” Her tone of answering their questions did not reflect anger but instead more like a teammate. As a result, it was not surprising that her pupils reported in the interview that Madam C’s lesson was fun, interesting and like playing a game.

*b. Showing full concern and care to every pupil*

Everybody likes to be cared for and loved, especially children. Madam C contented that many of her pupils lacked concern, care and love from their parents. According to her, most of the pupils’ parents were working and some were from lower income

groups. Therefore, as a teacher, she feels that she needs to always show her care and love to her pupils, especially for the weak pupils. She further espoused that different pupils have different needs and, also every pupil is unique and having different personality. Hence, a teacher must use different techniques to build rapport with different pupils. For instance, to pupils with good ability, they need praises and encouragement, but for those pupils who are good academically but with negative attitude (such as lazy to do their homework), the teacher will need to be strict with them.

Madam C’s emphasis on showing concern and care for pupils is agreed fully by Mr. K whose pupils were also from low income families. Mr. K explained that his way of showing concern in this manner:

*“for pupils who did not do their homework, I will not scold them straight away, but I will ask for their reasons. If they said they did not do because they did not understand, I will coach them; if they said they knew how to do but forgot to do, I will ask them to stay back during recess or after school hours, and get them to finish it.”*

*c. Having full understanding of pupils’ background*

This was specifically mentioned by Madam C in her first interviews. She believes that to build positive rapport with pupils, a teacher needs to invest some time to get



to know his/her pupils' background. From her experience, it needs approximately two months to explore and build up a solid relationship with pupils from the time she took over a class. Her following sharing shows her understanding of her pupils:

*"I just took over this class at beginning of this year. They were actually from quite a poor class. I have to first get them to be interested in mathematics before I can get them really want to learn mathematics. Unlike the good class pupils, we cannot force them to learn. They will get scared. Their foundation is not so good ..."*

Likewise, Madam R echoed the importance of having full understanding about her pupils' background. For instance, she elaborated that she knew one of her pupils who came from a one-child family. The child tended to work alone in class. During group activity as in the third observed lesson, she also tended to stay alone and passively waited for other pupils to invite her to join. Knowing her situation, Madam R came forward to encourage her to join one of the groups. She explained,

*"May be she is the only child in the family, she has a lot of family members. ...May be at home, she is used to be given instruction. When I say join, then only she join. Other pupils, like people say, they are independent, they can do."*

The above examples clearly showed that both teachers took time to understand their pupils' academic and family background, so that they can plan the best action for their pupils.

*d. Through non-verbal gestures*

Close analysis of the classroom teaching indicated that all these three teachers displayed some similar gestures when dealing with their pupils. The non-verbal gestures which are observable and obvious include smile, eye contact and gentle touch on the shoulder. All these teachers were seen to always put on a smiling face even when the pupils did something wrong or answered wrongly. Their smiles looked encouraging and comforting to their pupils. They also kept close eye contact with their pupils, with a feeling of reassurance and full attention. Particularly Madam C liked to pat on her pupils' shoulder to show her support. The following pictures (Fig.2 to Fig.4) depict some of these gestures.

*e. Always keep the promises*

Keeping promises made was another important way of building positive rapport with pupils. This was highlighted by Madam R in the interview: "promise with children, the promise must be fulfilled." For example, if she promised her pupils that she would give them a treat when they score A in their examination, then she would really give them a treat. She further elaborated that "I promise to do what, I keep it. Children hold on to the promises. They remember, they

don't forget. We may forget." She added that even though the gift may be very small in value, the children would appreciate and feel happy when receiving it.

When the researcher asked, "If you promise to punish them?" Madam R replied that she would also honour the promise. Her reply (in verbatim) is shown below:

*"Do too. If we promise that if we can't finish the homework today, then we have to do the homework together. So together we do it. When there is a person not yet finish, everyone must be responsible."*

*f. Being loving and patience*

Although the characteristics of being loving and patience were mentioned by Madam C only in her interview, it was observed to have been demonstrated in all the three teachers' classroom teaching. For example, in the second lesson observation of Madam R (Time: 13:18 till 14:40): She called up one pupil to come in front of the class to show his working on one given problem. She was observed to have given full attention to him for the whole one and half minutes. The pupil worked out the answer, wrote the answer on the board but then looked up at her to wait for her confirmation.



Fig.2: Eyes contact

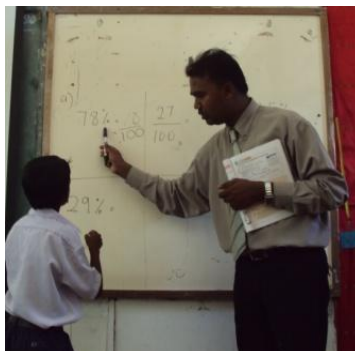


Fig.3: Eyes contact



Fig.4: Pat on the shoulder and smiling

She smilingly pointed to him that, “31 + 15 get 92?” The pupil quickly rubbed off his answer and rewrote it as “31+ 15 + 31 + 15 = 92”. In the mean time, Madam R commented that “It is ok, he is fasting today.” [Note: it was a fasting month for the Muslims when we collected the data]. Later, she led the whole class to check and confirm if the answer was really 92 cm.

Later in the post-observation interview, Madam R mentioned that she knew that he was a weak pupil who was not confident. Therefore, she always gives him more attention and encouragement by calling him to come in front to try and guide him. Madam R’s reply is shown below:

*“Most of the time I choose the weak pupils, like him, he is really weak. The clever pupil, I also call them, but mostly the weak one. Give him a bit more confidence to answer. If the teacher does not choose him, he is already not good, right! Teacher also did not give him attention, so he is surely not to have self confidence.”*

Similarly, we observed that Madam C was also inclined to call a few pupils whom she recognized as weak students to demonstrate their solution in front of the class. Like Madam R, she was seen to patiently guiding them to solve the problem step by step, and constantly giving them encouragement. Her kind action was recognized by her pupils as helping them to learn from other pupils’ mistakes. This

was evidenced in the pupils’ interview conversation:

*A2: “This photo shows that a pupil has done wrong. The teacher patiently teaches him”.*

*R: “Do you feel that teacher (who) calls weak pupils to show their answers on the board will affect the learning process of the pupils?”*

*B1: “No, very interesting”.*

*R: “Why interesting?”*

*B1: “Can come out to do and see if you have done wrong.”*

Hence, Madam C’s pupils’ comments seem to imply that she has successfully built up positive rapport with her pupils as they seem to understand each other very well, and they both share a common bond and understanding.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, we attempted to analyze the various strategies and skills used by the three *Excellent Teachers* to build good rapport with their pupils. The aim of our main study was to explore the characteristics that were valued by teachers and students as components of effective Mathematics lessons. We chose *Excellent Teachers* as our participants as we assumed that these *Excellent Teachers* produce excellent or effective lessons. It was during the classroom observations that we noticed the strong

rapport between pupils and their teacher. Nonetheless, not all the six participating teachers showed similar degree of rapport with their pupils. We found the strongest rapport between the three of them – Madam C, Madam R and Mr. K, as discussed in this paper. We recognized that having good and positive rapport with pupils might be one of the significant characteristics of these teachers’ effective lessons. Hence, in the post-observation interviews with the teachers, we further clarified with them and discussed the possible strategies and skills in developing good rapport with pupils.

Our findings showed that there are six ways the three excellent Mathematics teachers have used to build good rapport with their pupils: (i) teacher acts as a partner and a playmate to the pupils; (ii) showing full concern and care to every pupil; (iii) having full understanding of pupils’ background; (iv) through non-verbal gestures; (v) always keep to the promises; and (vi) being loving and patience. These imply that good rapport needs to be established from day one and continued to make the effort as the year proceeds. Taking a genuine interest in their pupils, knowing more about them and their families, asking how they are, listening and being approachable are important elements for building good rapport between teachers and pupils.

Linking these six strategies to the theoretical framework (see Fig.1), we observed that strategy (v) “always keep to the promise” is related to building “**trust**”, while strategy (ii) “Showing full concern and care to every pupils” as well as strategy

(iii) “Having full understanding of pupils’ background “will clearly help to make “**connections**” between teachers and pupils. In addition, strategy (i) “Teacher acts as a partner and a playmate to the pupils” may help to create a “**positive and enjoyable atmosphere**” for learning. Finally, strategy (vi) “being loving and patience” clearly enhance the “**attraction**” of the teacher to the pupils. In addition, showing non-verbal gestures such as smiling face, eye contact and patting on the shoulder are clearly **positive emotional responses** from the teachers that can help build better rapport with his/her pupils. In brief, we conclude that our findings have supported the proposed theoretical framework.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The findings of this study show that teachers can use good rapport with the students as a way to solve classroom discipline problems. Further study can then be conducted to explore the methods of utilizing good rapport in resolving the discipline problem and effective classroom management.

This study focused only on building rapport between teachers and students. Monroe (2010) stated that rapport among the students is crucial. He further remarked that students who feel comfortable to articulate in the class are more engaging and motivated to participate in the class compared to those who are afraid of being scorned by their peers. Therefore, future research may look into how to develop rapport among peers in the classroom.

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