


The Potential of Restorative Justice: Holistic Student Development Based on Respect and Relationships

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Recibido: 14/Marzo/2024
Revisado: 12/Junio/2024
Aprobado: 19/Julio/2024
Publicado: 26/Septiembre/2024



Abstract

Harnessing educational contexts to build equitable and just societies requires attention to young people's meaning-making and development. The end goals of such efforts inherently extend beyond the schools themselves to include the skills, orientations, and values youth bring to their lives outside and after school. Additionally, interventions and programs that are meant to be supportive may not be experienced in that way by students. These foci are essential for better understanding the potential of school restorative justice, a growing movement in schools across the world. In this article, I define school restorative justice, review literature on its potential, and then make a case for a developmental perspective on how it might shape young people's lives and identities. Specifically, I apply the framework of conceptualized peace to argue for attention to how young people interpret, respond to, and build identities in relation to these experiences. The results are consequential because this framework highlights deeper impacts on students, as well as the reasons young people may or may not engage with them.

Keywords: restorative justice, psychological development, identity, social justice, youth.



La Potencia de la Justicia Restaurativa: el Desarrollo Holístico de los Estudiantes basado en el Respeto y las Relaciones Interpersonales

Resumen

Para que la educación sea vista como una herramienta capaz de construir sociedades equitativas y justas se necesita atender al desarrollo psicosocial. En este contexto, la educación embarca las habilidades, las orientaciones, y los valores de los jóvenes adentro y afuera del aula. Además, los estudiantes no siempre sienten que las intervenciones de verdad los apoyan. Estas consideraciones son importantes para entender la potencia de la justicia restaurativa en contextos educacionales. Este movimiento está creciendo por todo el mundo como una manera más justa de pensar en la disciplina y la formación. En este artículo, defino la justicia restaurativa en contextos educacionales, repaso su potencia, y propongo una perspectiva del desarrollo psicosocial para mejor entender cómo influye la justicia restaurativa en las vidas e identidades de los jóvenes. Utilizo el marco teórico de conceptualized peace para explorar como los jóvenes interpretan, responden y construyen identidades con relación a sus experiencias con la justicia restaurativa. De los conocimientos obtenidos se resaltan impactos y procesos más profundos, al igual que las razones por las cuales los jóvenes se involucran en construir sociedades más equitativas y justas.

Palabras clave: justicia restaurativa, desarrollo psicológico, identidad, justicia social, juventud

O Impacto da Justiça Restaurativa: Promovendo o Desenvolvimento Holístico dos Alunos por Meio do Respeito e das Relações Interpessoais

Resumo

Para que a educação seja reconhecida como uma ferramenta capaz de promover sociedades mais justas e equitativas, é essencial abordar o desenvolvimento psicossocial dos estudantes. Nesse sentido, a educação deve englobar as competências, orientações e valores dos jovens, tanto dentro quanto fora da sala de aula. No entanto, muitas vezes, os alunos não sentem que as intervenções educacionais realmente atendem às suas necessidades. Considerações como essa são fundamentais para compreender o impacto da justiça restaurativa no ambiente escolar. Este movimento tem se expandido globalmente como uma abordagem mais justa para tratar questões disciplinares e formativas. Neste artigo, exploro a definição da justiça restaurativa no contexto educacional, reviso seu impacto e proponho uma abordagem psicossocial para entender como ela afeta a vida e a identidade dos jovens. Utilizo o quadro teórico da paz conceptualizada para explorar como os jovens interpretam, respondem e constroem identidades em relação às suas experiências com a justiça restaurativa. A partir das reflexões levantadas, são ressaltados os impactos profundos e os processos que envolvem os jovens na construção de sociedades mais justas e equitativas.

Palavras-chave: justiça restaurativa, desenvolvimento psicossocial, identidade, justiça social, juventude

Introduction

Over the last several decades, restorative justice has become a growing movement in education. Its use has become more prevalent in both primary and secondary schools and higher education institutions across the world (e.g., Gavrielides & Wong, 2019; Lodi et al., 2021). In practice, this growth has been complex and dynamic, encompassing varied models of restorative justice, different strategies for implementing it, and a range of motivating actors advocating for it (e.g., school administrators, parents, and youth; Lodi et al., 2021).

Recently, there has been a clearer picture of restorative justice's potential to influence in-school outcomes for students and the broader school community. Recent reviews of studies highlight that it seems to lower exclusionary sanctions (e.g., suspensions, expulsions), improve school climate, and improve student-teacher relationships. More mixed results have been found for attendance, academics, and disproportionate rates of discipline (i.e., students with marginalized identities receiving disciplinary infractions at higher rates; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Song et al., 2020).

These areas of focus all matter for building just and equitable societies, but also only scratch the surface of the potential of school restorative justice. In this article, I make a theoretical argument for why developmental psychology can help us understand the experience of school restorative justice as something with the potential to lay the groundwork to promote youth engagement as peacebuilders. First, I define what restorative justice looks like in schools. Next, I provide a brief survey of the current work and focus on the field. In the following section, I highlight key elements that are consonant with what we know in developmental psychology and offer a theoretical framework for thinking through these questions. I end with why this approach matters and future directions.

Defining Restorative Justice in Schools

Broadly, restorative justice can be understood as a mindset that is centered on relationships, respect, and responsibility for all (Zehr & Mika, 2017). As a form of justice, it requires centering the victims' needs and engaging productively in structured conversations about how best to address harm. Howard Zehr, a key figure in developing theoretical underpinnings for the movement, notes that "Restorative justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible" (2002, p. 37).

It can also be understood in relation to other forms of justice, namely punitive and rehabilitative. In the former, those who commit harm are punished, often through exclusion. The underlying rationale is that this will serve as "just deserts" or what they did and create negative incentives for them and others to engage in such behaviors. The punishment is also often meted out by an authority figure, thus reinforcing hierarchical structures, while the needs and desires of victims are not considered. Rehabilitative justice centers the process of "improving" the behavior of the offender. The focus is on fixing what is wrong with them that motivates them to commit harm. It may be more attuned to why someone engages in harmful

actions, such as through being attentive to trauma or including therapy as part of the response. Unlike restorative justice, however, it focuses primarily on the offender and the idea that they need to be remodeled or incentivized differently (Clark, 2008; Daly, 2016). The victim is again left primarily on the side.

Within schools, restorative justice can be understood through a multi-tiered model that includes proactive community building, collaborative and dialogic responses to harm, and targeted interventions needed to reintegrate youth with more involved concerns (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Theorists also talk more broadly about restorative practices—versus restorative justice—in school to capture the diversity of ways adults, students, and educational systems can bring a focus on relationships, respect, and responsibility to everyday practices and interactions beyond more formalized rituals like circles and conferences (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

Typically, circles are the fundamental element of building out a restorative school. Circles can take various forms but fundamentally involve various parties coming together in a structured dialogue involving turn-taking and sharing of perspectives. They are used to build community and relationships as regular practices of authentic and open engagement. Whereby in home rooms, classrooms, or across the school, all students and teachers sit together and share their feelings and thoughts. In responding to harm, circles also structure inclusive dialogue about what happened and its impacts. These repair harm circles may be led by trained adults or youth facilitators and bring together affected parties (including community members or supporters beyond the harmed and harmer) to discuss their perspectives on what happened and collectively decide on what is needed to repair the harm.

Other proactive elements in a restorative school can include language and interpersonal engagement (e.g., greeting by name each student at the door). Responsive approaches may entail less formal restorative conversations and chats or peer mediation systems (Lodi et al., 2021; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Importantly, there is much nuance and diversity in implementation, and many theorists argue that whole school models with shifts in mindset are needed for effective and authentic restorative schools (Gregory et al., 2020; Parameswaran et al., 2023).

Current Trends in School Restorative Justice

We must consider the development and growth of restorative justice in schools to understand where it is now and how it can contribute to building just and equitable societies. This movement has been driven by increasing awareness of the limitations and negative consequences of traditional punitive systems. In many educational settings across the globe, suspensions, expulsions, and punishment have long been used to attempt to mold student behavior and to establish norms and expectations that are dictated by the adults holding power (Armour, 2016; Deakin & Kupchik, 2018). These approaches are coherent with a general conception of schools as hierarchical spaces where adults hold power and must work to form students into productive contributors to society. Adults hold the power, knowledge, and onus to mold students, who are passive recipients (if responding appropriately).

The critiques of such a framework are widespread and long-standing. Paolo Freire's attacks on the "banking" model of education highlight the assumptions and inequities in assuming students are empty vessels to be filled (Freire, 1973). More recently, there has been attention to the pernicious effects of this conception of schooling and connected punitive environments, particularly as evidence mounts that its extreme form—zero-tolerance discipline—that became dominant in the United States (U.S.) and elsewhere in the 1990s has had a host of negative repercussions (Hoffman, 2014; Warnick & Scribner, 2020). Specifically, punitive and zero-tolerance systems have been connected to lowered graduation, school engagement, and school climate, as well as disproportionate effects for students with marginalized identities and higher incarceration rates (Skiba et al., 2014).

Within this context, restorative justice has become an alternative model used across many diverse contexts. Nevertheless, some critics argue its use is often performative. Schools and administrators may claim to be restorative or give training on restorative justice when, in essence, their practices or overall culture remain the same (Gregory et al., 2020; Lyubansky & Barter, 2019). In some schools, teachers may be taught to hold circles, but their implementation may be inconsistent or ineffective, given the educators' lack of positive relationships with students. In others, administrators may still wield suspensions and expulsions when students violate codes of conduct and rules determined by the adults. Another critique goes further in this vein. Schools may, in fact, be using the language and positive aura of restorative justice to ignore deeper structural or systemic injustice embedded in education and schools (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014). Even when these situations are not the case, teachers' mindsets may remain punitive, the programs may struggle to fully engage students, or parents may doubt and challenge the programs (Jain et al., 2012; Lyubansky & Barter, 2019; Martinez et al., 2022). Overall, a wealth of research in the field highlights numerous obstacles to building a truly restorative school, even when intentions or commitment may seem sincere.

Within the theoretical literature on restorative justice, there is a subfield proposing a more critical model that blends attention to systems and structures with practices, while also prioritizing a whole school approach (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014; Lustick, 2022). Under this framing, restorative justice can move beyond specific rituals or addressing incidents to engaging more holistically with students and the socioecological contexts in which they are embedded. These theorists argue that when restorative practices are integrated with attention to critical consciousness and youth empowerment as leaders, they have the potential to foster resilience, resistance, and activism (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014; Lustick, 2022; Winn, 2020). It is worth noting that such a focus and the end goals are fundamental to the project of using educational systems and experiences to build more just and equitable worlds, empowering young people to understand and address injustice and oppression.

It is also important to note that there is an increasing empirical basis investigating the potential of school restorative justice. In general, it seems like these programs can be effective pathways—given the caveats noted above—to reduce disciplinary incidents and improve student-teacher relationships and school climates. Research has also explored connections to attendance (with some positive, though mixed findings), reductions in the disciplinary

gap (with mixed results), and social-emotional skills (a smaller, but positive set of findings; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Song et al., 2020; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Given the complexities and challenges regarding the implementation, much research has been devoted to better understanding the conditions that help foster authentic engagement in this approach. This literature highlights buy-in, sustained development, student leadership, and whole-school models (e.g., González et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2020).

A Broader Case for the Developmental Potential

There is potential for advancing the field of restorative justice at this intersection of current critiques and gaps in the empirical literature. On the one hand, it is valuable to focus on in-school variables like discipline, relationships, and climate, as they allow for student engagement, healthy learning environments, and schools—a primary place where young people spend their time and encounter socialization—to be places of safety and thriving. On the other hand, the prevailing metrics may be limited when we consider the roles that schools can play more broadly in young people's development. Educational contexts and experiences set the stage for many aspects of adult life: they are places of socialization for norms and expectations, they lay the groundwork for civic engagement, they are where young people begin to define identities, and they structure social development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Furthermore, young people are not simply building foundations for later engagement in communities and societies, but they are powerfully influential civic actors in their own right. Schools are not just microcosms where young people learn and practice skills, but they are also actors contributing to violence, peace, injustice, and justice through their everyday actions and agency in schools (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015; McEvoy-Levy, 2001, 2006).

One way to think about this more expansive view is through an example. We can imagine a young student who spends his entire life in a school with a harsh, punitive environment with a strict disciplinary system. Their experience in this school conveys messages that authority (rather than collective or critical thinking) should guide behavior, that those who commit harm must be isolated and excluded, that only certain perspectives matter, and—especially if the young person holds marginalized identities or is marked as a “troublemaker”—that they do not belong.

In contrast, the same young person in a restorative environment will be socialized to see all voices of those impacted as mattering, to engage in collective decision-making and accountability, to recognize and value differences in perspectives, and to employ a social-emotional toolkit to resolve conflicts. Each individual young person may respond differently to such punitive and restorative environments. Still, the latter sets up systems and structures that are more consonant with fundamental processes, values, and mindsets needed for just and equitable societies. Specifically, these foundational elements include both interpersonal capacities (like productive engagement across differences, empathy, and conflict resolution skills) and critical thinking and behaviors related to more structural dynamics (like fostering social conditions, institutions, and systems that respect all people).

A Developmental Framework

Therefore, as we expand thinking about the impact of school restorative justice, we should consider the broader implications for young people's development. *Conceptualized peace* (Velez, 2019) offers a developmental, identity-based theoretical framework to guide this extension of the current focus. *Conceptualized peace* argues that young people's identity outcomes in relation to peace can be understood through how they make meaning of ideas related to peace, justice, and harmony. The framework is rooted in phenomenological understandings of ecological systems (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Spencer et al., 1997). These theories guide an understanding of child and adolescent development as embedded within multiple, dynamic, and interactional systems from their immediate microsystem (i.e., their daily interactions with family, peers, and teachers) to the broad macrosystem (i.e., norms, laws) and chronosystem (i.e., the effect of time in terms of historical trends and personal experiences). One element is related to peace and justice: the discourses, events, and socialization that are collectively built around these ideas.

The collective creation of meaning around "peace," "justice," and more can be defined through social representations theory (SRT; Moscovici, 1984), which is rooted in social psychology. At its core, SRT asserts that social groups engage in building a collective set of values, ideas, beliefs, and practices to create structure, commonality, and cohesion. Developmental scholars have demonstrated how these systems intersect with young people's developing cognition and identities as they come of age as members of groups and societies (Jovchelovitch et al., 2013; Moloney & Walker, 2007).

Building from these theoretical traditions, *conceptualized peace* begins with a focus on how young people interpret and respond to ecological conditions as they make their own meaning of social representations. Risk or protective factors—living in areas of community violence or attending schools that are under-resourced—do not determine their outcomes, but rather set conditions that influence how they think about themselves and their roles in the world. These ideas develop through an iterative process in which young people act on the meaning they are making, and their behaviors produce responses from others. Based on this cycle, they continue to develop these ideas and enact new response strategies. The term "peace" in the theory's title refers to ideas and outcomes related to a broader conception of positive peace: young people's thinking about what a just, harmonious world entails and their engagement in creating structural and cultural conditions that uphold the value of all life (Galtung, 1990). Given their importance socially, schools are a particularly prevalent context for the environmental conditions that feed into young people's meaning-making and the process of supporting orientations to engage in peace.

To help clarify, we can explore an example of a young person attending a restorative school. This experience alone does not mean that they will passively adopt a sense of respect and responsibility, and value relationships and relational accountability. They will, however, be exposed to these ideas, and then may integrate them or reject them as part of their own self-concept. Their response will be based on their understanding of themselves and their broader experiences of the world. If they live in a context of high community violence

driven by retribution and activity, they may reject restorative mindsets as incoherent with the psychosocial demands that they are experiencing outside of school. If we better understand how they perceive and react to these ideas, we may be better able to craft restorative practices in schools to foster the orientations and consonance needed for prosocial outcomes.

Applied to the field of restorative justice, therefore, *conceptualized peace* prioritizes attention to broader developmental outcomes related to identity and meaning-making. In this sense, research should move toward understanding the ways young people think about, engage, or disengage with, and respond to their experiences of school restorative justice.

Key Elements to Promote Development

Conceptualized peace helps bring together various strands of theory and research in restorative justice that highlight critical elements through a developmental lens. First, as noted above, there have been increasing calls for an explicitly critical framing of restorative justice. This approach is inherently developmental and cuts across various levels of the ecosystem. It considers the role of systems in young people's lives while focusing on how whole environments can be changed and raising critical consciousness to engage with structural conditions (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014; Lustick, 2022). Critical restorative justice is rooted in student leadership and agency. Rather than being imposed from above—for example, administrators making teachers do circles with students—it draws on students' thinking about harm, its roots, and how to address it. Therefore, it is more resonant with their experiences and developmentally in tune with their desires to be active agents in their personal and social lives (Arnett, 2015; Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Such an approach stands in contrast to adult-determined frameworks that may end up being dissonant with youth's lived experiences or that treat them as passive actors. In response, young people will disengage. *Conceptualized peace* helps frame this argument because it highlights that it is not the presence of restorative justice in a school that alone will lead to safety, respect, and conflict resolution. Rather, how young people experience and interpret the work will inform how they think about restorative justice and peace, and then feed into how they engage with them.

Second and in the same vein, some scholars argue for the importance of youth leadership and voice in school restorative justice programs (Aquino et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2020; Lustick, 2020; Lyubansky & Barter, 2019). Benefits can include increased efficacy, being advocates for change, and promoting more peaceful, safer environments (particularly for young people with marginalized identities; Aquino et al., 2021; Lustick, 2022; Winn, 2020). *Conceptualized peace* can guide research to explore how this forms part of a developmental process, as well as understanding key motivators and obstacles. We must address how young people are thinking and feeling, particularly in reference to their sense of self, rather than simply focusing on inputs and outcomes.

Third, a particularly effective approach to implementation is a whole school model that embraces a shift in mindset. Restorative practice work with youth does not seem to be as effective or hold the same benefits if it is used as a tool or as a program imposed by the administration.

Instead, many theorists, scholars, and practitioners affirm that it should be embraced as a way of thinking and being, with a commitment across a school and its stakeholders to prioritizing relationships (González, 2012; Beckman et al., 2012). It is not simply about holding community-building circles or having alternative responses to punishment but rather involves adults working to build strong, supportive connections focused on respect and listening with and among students (Brown, 2017; Cavanagh et al., 2014). There are significant hurdles to such an approach, though evidence-based guides do exist and highlight critical elements to this more holistic implementation (Gregory et al., 2020; Lyubansky & Barter, 2019; Martinez et al., 2022).

The link to developmental processes is that such a sustained, integral commitment to restorative justice provides a more comprehensive and authentic program that is more appropriate to young people's needs. Adolescents, in particular, are attuned to dissonance and inequities in social settings and systems (e.g., Bondü & Elsner, 2015; Guerrero et al., 2021; Spencer, 2006). They are also highly responsive to connection and belonging. These developmental needs have grown considerably in the context of the pandemic and rising mental health concerns that have marked the lives of youth across the globe (Sapiro & Ward, 2020; Schweizer et al., 2023).

Conceptualized peace can also help frame these connections: it is young people's experience of school programs and efforts that matter, with particular attention to what is adaptive to them given the environment and their own psychosocial demands. An authentic, whole-school restorative justice program may offer them a deeper opportunity to feel supported in exploring their identities, coping with mental health stressors, and being part of a community to which they want to contribute. As with the other elements, the key here is understanding their psychological processing and how they interpret their experiences in light of emerging identities.

Why A Developmental Lens Matters for Forming More Just and Equitable Societies: Future Directions

In this piece, I have sought to demonstrate the value of a more expansive developmental lens to school restorative justice. Specifically, I have offered *conceptualized peace* as a framework for this extension, which has much to contribute to creating educational environments that foster young people's engagement in building just, harmonious societies. *Conceptualized peace* outlines a process of how discourses and events in society, along with more intimate risk and protective factors, are filtered through young people's cognition and intersect with their developing identities.

Finally, it is worthwhile to end with an argument for why this developmental lens matters for questions of equity and justice. As noted, much of the current scholarship on restorative justice focuses on in-school variables. These hold value as markers of bias, stereotyping, unequal treatment and resources, and, at times, violence toward young people. At the same time, focusing on these areas is only a first step. Just as Galtung's theory on peace details (1990), we must both stop violence (negative peace) and also build societies and systems

that foster the conditions for justice and a culture of peace (positive peace). The latter is a systemic question but involves a developmental component: fostering young people's critical prosocial and civic engagement. Achieving this end requires attention to their perspectives, their cognition, and how they see themselves as efficacious social agents (Amna et al., 2009; Beaumont, 2010; Nucci, 2017; Watts et al., 2011).

Often, the attention given to youth's perspectives centers on how they think about a given intervention, question, or experience. Has this peace education program provided them with new tools? What do they think about conflict or a different social group? What do they think about what is right and just? We can also consider, however, how young people even conceive of the underlying ideas. Work in psychology has taken this focus rooted in an understanding that this meaning drives action and identity, which can have profound implications with whether and how people engage in violence, peace, and justice (Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2011; Killen et al., 2022; Oppenheimer, 2012). *Conceptualized peace* can provide a theoretical framework for understanding these connections. The insights from its applications to areas like restorative justice can help build more effective programs that resonate with young people and support their prosocial formation.

Brief Case Study

To demonstrate this utility, I will close with a case study of the potential contributions of this lens. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is a city marked by challenge and inequity. It has been cited as one of the most segregated cities in the United States, and much attention has been paid to poor statistical outcomes for marginalized communities (Falk, 2021; Luthern, 2019). Still, there is considerable strength, resilience, and efforts to promote all young people's thriving and engagement in building a better future.

Within this context, I have collaborated extensively with various restorative justice practitioners working in schools to address punitive systems, inequities in discipline, and unhealthy institutional climates. One such partnership has led to a study of youth who had formerly served as restorative justice leaders in their high school and now live and work in the city as young adults. Their school had a developed restorative justice program in which they were trained, led efforts within the school, and then offered opportunities to bring the work into the broader community (e.g., through libraries and with the police). Over the course of a year, I conducted systematic interviews with seven of these youths as well as their former principal and restorative justice coordinator. I also participated in a reflective circle focus group with all of them together.

Analyses of this data reveal deep ways that their experiences with restorative justice in their school have marked their lives. These youths speak about developing coping strategies through their training and restorative work that help them as young adults manage emotions and mental health challenges. Other internal developments include building a sense of self-efficacy as they have come to see themselves as leaders and agents in the world. Interpersonally, they describe restorative justice as providing them with tools that they employ with others to resolve conflicts while also being a framework that they bring to their work as tattoo artists, preschool

educators, and more. Many of them described restorative justice as more than a tool, using the language of it as a “way of being.” Across these conversations, they detailed how it has become an integral part of their lives and how they understand other people and the world.

These young people are, of course, a particular group, and their school is just one case. Still, the meaning-making of their experience with restorative justice and integration of it into their lives speak to the developmental potential of restorative justice in schools. In line with the processes *conceptualized peace* details, the encounters, opportunities, and frameworks offered by restorative justice were experienced as supportive, integrated into their identities, and carried forth with them into their adult lives. Amid a broader ecological context marked by complexity and challenge, they use this foundation to work toward healthier selves, relationships, and communities.

Conclusion

The potential of restorative justice is considerable. Much evidence demonstrates its potential to address educational inequities in relation to discipline. Beyond such frameworks, however, school-based restorative justice may also have a broader developmental potential to support young people in becoming prosocial agents of peace. In this vein, *conceptualized peace* offers a theoretical framework for expanding the current thinking and research on restorative justice. This movement can help us to better understand and harness its deep potential.

Final Statements

Authors’ contribution. Gabriel Velez was the sole author and writer of this academic paper.

Conflict of Interest. The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest.

Funding. This work was supported by the Spencer Foundation # 202200205 and derives from the research “Minoritized Adolescents’ Perspectives on Harm, Justice, and Discipline in their Schools: Building a Youth-Centered Understanding of the Influence on Restorative Justice Development.”

Ethical implications. Informed consent was requested from the participants.

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