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Epistemic Trust and Teacher-Student Relationships: A Psychodynamic Framework for Learning

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Abstract

This theoretical paper develops a psychodynamic framework for understanding how epistemic trust operates within teacher-student relationships and shapes learning outcomes. Epistemic trust the willingness to consider knowledge from others as trustworthy, generalizable, and personally relevant emerges from early attachment relationships and profoundly influences students' capacity for educational engagement. We synthesize psychodynamic theory, attachment research, and mentalizing perspectives to illuminate five core relational mechanisms: transferential dynamics, containment functions, rupture-repair processes, recognition, and mentalization. Each mechanism contributes to either establishing or undermining the epistemic trust necessary for transformative learning. Students unconsciously transfer early relational patterns onto teachers, experience classrooms through attachment-informed expectations, and regulate learning anxiety through relational processes originally developed in caregiver relationships. Teachers who understand these psychodynamic dimensions can create conditions that foster epistemic openness—the sustained capacity to receive, integrate, and be transformed by new knowledge. We argue that epistemic trust represents the psychological foundation of effective education, with significant implications for teacher preparation, pedagogical practice, understanding educational inequalities, and conceptualizing learning as fundamentally relational rather than purely cognitive. This framework bridges psychodynamic clinical theory and educational practice, offering theoretical tools for understanding why relationally attuned teaching proves more effective than technically proficient but emotionally disconnected instruction.

Keywords: Epistemic Trust, Teacher-Student Relationships, Psychodynamic Theory, Attachment Theory, Transference, Containment, Mentalizing, Recognition, Relational Pedagogy, Educational Psychology

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1. Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Background and Rationale

Educational research has increasingly recognized that learning outcomes cannot be adequately explained by cognitive models alone (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). The quality of teacher-student relationships consistently predicts academic achievement, engagement, and socioemotional development across diverse educational contexts (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Yet theoretical frameworks adequate for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying these relational effects remain underdeveloped. Traditional pedagogical models emphasize instructional techniques, curriculum design, and assessment strategies while treating the teacher-student relationship as background context rather than fundamental process.This theoretical paper addresses this gap by examining epistemic trust as a core psychological construct linking relationship quality to learning capacity. Epistemic trust refers to an individual's willingness to consider new knowledge communicated by another person as trustworthy, generalizable beyond the immediate context, and relevant to the self (Fonagy, Luyten, & Allison, 2015). Originally developed within psychodynamic and attachment frameworks to explain therapeutic change, the concept has profound but largely unexplored implications for educational theory and practice.

1.2 Aims and Scope

This paper develops a comprehensive psychodynamic framework for understanding how epistemic trust operates in educational relationships. We synthesize theoretical contributions from object relations theory, attachment research, interpersonal psychoanalysis, and contemporary mentalizing perspectives to illuminate the unconscious relational processes that enable or obstruct learning. Our analysis focuses on five interconnected mechanisms: (1) transference dynamics, (2) containment functions, (3) rupture and repair processes, (4) recognition and validation, and (5) mentalizing capacity. Each mechanism shapes whether students can maintain the epistemic openness necessary for genuine learning.We argue that epistemic trust represents the psychological foundation upon which all effective education rests.

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Without adequate epistemic trust, even the most skillfully designed instruction fails to produce transformative learning because students cannot genuinely receive and integrate new knowledge. Conversely, when epistemic trust is established and maintained through relationally attuned teaching, students can tolerate the uncertainty, vulnerability, and cognitive restructuring that authentic learning requires.

2. Conceptual Foundations of Epistemic Trust

2.1 Defining Epistemic Trust

Epistemic trust represents a specific form of social trust concerned with the transmission and reception of culturally relevant knowledge (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). It involves three interconnected capacities: (1) the ability to recognize another person as a potentially reliable source of generalizable knowledge; (2) the willingness to receive communicated information with openness rather than automatic skepticism; and (3) the capacity to integrate new knowledge into existing mental schemas, allowing genuine cognitive-emotional transformation.

Epistemic trust differs from general interpersonal trust in its specificity to knowledge transmission. A student might trust a teacher as a kind person while remaining epistemically closed to their instruction. Conversely, epistemic trust can exist in relationships characterized by emotional distance if the learner experiences the teacher as authentically invested in their understanding. The construct captures something fundamental about human learning: we acquire most meaningful knowledge through social transmission rather than individual discovery, making our willingness to learn from others psychologically and evolutionarily significant.

2.2 Developmental Origins in Attachment Relationships

Psychodynamic and attachment theories converge in identifying early caregiver relationships as the developmental context where epistemic trust emerges (Bowlby, 1988; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002). Infants and young children face the fundamental task of making sense of their experiences in a confusing, overwhelming world. Caregivers serve as external meaning-making systems, helping children

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understand and organize experience through responsive attunement to the child's internal states.

When caregivers accurately recognize and respond to children's emotional and cognitive states, they communicate several crucial messages: the child's subjective experience is real and meaningful; internal states can be understood and managed; other people can help make sense of confusing experiences; and the world is fundamentally comprehensible. This consistent pattern of marked, contingent responsiveness establishes what Fonagy terms "ostensive cuing"—signals that the information being communicated is intended specifically for the child and is relevant to their concerns (Csibra & Gergely, 2009).Through thousands of such interactions, secure attachment relationships foster robust epistemic trust. The child develops confidence that others possess knowledge worth attending to and that engaging with others' perspectives will prove productive rather than dangerous. This early-established openness becomes a relatively stable personality characteristic shaping how individuals approach learning opportunities throughout life.

2.3 Epistemic Vigilance and Defensive Closure

Not all developmental trajectories foster epistemic openness. When early relationships are characterized by misattunement, inconsistency, or trauma, children develop what Sperber et al. (2010) term "epistemic vigilance"—heightened wariness about information received from others. While some epistemic vigilance is adaptive (protecting against misinformation), excessive vigilance becomes a defensive stance that closes individuals off from potentially valuable knowledge.Children who experience caregivers as unreliable, intrusive, or frightening learn that other people's communications may be misleading, manipulative, or dangerous to the self. Knowledge transmission becomes associated with violation of boundaries, erasure of the child's own perspective, or exposure to overwhelming affect. These children develop what Fonagy describes as "epistemic hypervigilance" or "epistemic freezing"—rigid patterns of either hyperactively scrutinizing all incoming information or passively refusing to engage with new ideas altogether. From a psychodynamic perspective, epistemic

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defensiveness represents a protective adaptation to relational trauma. The child preserves psychological integrity by maintaining firm boundaries around what can be known and who can be trusted as a knowledge source. However, this adaptation becomes maladaptive in educational contexts, where learning requires provisional openness to ideas that may challenge existing beliefs and tolerance for the temporary disorganization that accompanies cognitive restructuring.

3. Psychodynamic Mechanisms in Educational Relationships

3.1 Transference: Teachers as Attachment Figures

Classical psychoanalytic theory established that current relationships are inevitably shaped by templates derived from earlier formative relationships—a phenomenon called transference (Freud, 1912/1958). Contemporary relational psychoanalysis and attachment theory have refined this concept, emphasizing that individuals carry forward internal working models—cognitive-affective schemas about self, others, and relationships—that unconsciously structure perception and behavior in new relational contexts (Bowlby, 1973; Mitchell, 1988).In educational settings, students inevitably transfer early attachment patterns onto teachers. The teacher-student relationship shares structural features with caregiver-child relationships: asymmetric power, dependency for guidance and support, the teacher's role in organizing overwhelming experiences (academic challenges), and the student's vulnerability when revealing areas of ignorance or confusion. These parallels activate attachment systems, causing students to unconsciously perceive teachers through lenses shaped by early relational experiences. Students with secure attachment histories and established epistemic trust approach teachers as potentially benevolent guides. They can comfortably seek help, admit confusion, tolerate constructive criticism, and engage with challenging material because their internal working models suggest that authority figures are fundamentally supportive and that vulnerability will be met with support rather than exploitation or rejection. These students possess what Winnicott (1958) called the "capacity to be alone in the presence of another"—the ability to think independently and creatively while still utilizing the teacher's psychological availability.Conversely, students with insecure

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attachment patterns transfer maladaptive expectations onto teachers. Those with anxious-preoccupied attachment may become hypervigilant to signs of the teacher's approval or disapproval, unable to focus on learning because their attention remains captured by relationship maintenance (Granot & Mayseless, 2001). Students with dismissive-avoidant attachment may defensively minimize the teacher's importance, maintaining pseudo-independence that masks underlying needs for guidance while preventing genuine epistemic receptivity. Most concerning, students with disorganized attachment—often resulting from frightening or traumatized caregivers—may experience teachers as simultaneously needed and dangerous, producing paralyzed confusion in learning situations. Understanding transference allows educators to recognize that student resistance, emotional dysregulation, or withdrawal often reflects transferred expectations rather than defiance or deficit. A psychodynamically informed approach involves maintaining consistent, predictable, emotionally attuned responses that can gradually modify maladaptive working models. The teacher becomes what attachment theorists call a "secure base"—a reliable presence enabling exploration of intellectually and emotionally challenging territory.

3.2 Containment: Metabolizing Learning Anxiety

Wilfred Bion's concept of containment describes how one person receives, processes, and transforms another's overwhelming emotional experiences into something manageable and meaningful (Bion, 1962). The mother (or primary caregiver) serves as a "container" for the infant's raw, unprocessed experiences—what Bion termed "beta elements"—transforming them through "alpha function" into "alpha elements" that can be thought about rather than merely evacuated through behavioral or somatic discharge.This containing function proves essential in educational contexts where learning inherently involves anxiety-provoking experiences: confronting one's ignorance, tolerating confusion and uncertainty, risking mistakes and failure, relinquishing comfortable certainties, and reconstructing one's understanding of the world. For many students, these experiences activate primitive anxieties about incompetence, exposure, and dissolution of the self.Teachers who can remain

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emotionally regulated, thoughtful, and confident when students struggle provide crucial containment. Their calm presence in the face of student confusion communicates that difficulty is tolerable rather than catastrophic. By responding to student frustration with curiosity rather than irritation, they model how challenging experiences can be approached thoughtfully rather than reactively. The teacher's containing presence allows students to metabolize learning anxiety sufficiently to continue engaging rather than defensively withdrawing or behaviorally discharging their distress.The containing function directly supports epistemic trust. Students learn that the teacher can tolerate their not-knowing without contempt or rejection. This creates psychological safety for the vulnerability that learning requires—admitting confusion, asking questions that might reveal ignorance, and provisionally adopting perspectives that challenge existing beliefs. The teacher's containment communicates that the student will not be abandoned or shamed in states of uncertainty, establishing the secure base necessary for intellectual risk-taking. Failures of containment produce epistemic defensiveness. Teachers who become visibly frustrated by student difficulty, respond dismissively to questions, or communicate that confusion represents personal failure inadvertently teach that certain mental states are dangerous and must be hidden. Students learn to perform understanding superficially while avoiding genuine engagement with challenging material. The relationship between teacher and student becomes contaminated by mutual pretense—students pretending to understand and teachers pretending not to notice—that precludes authentic learning.

3.3 Rupture and Repair: Strengthening Relational Resilience

Attachment research demonstrates that the quality of caregiver-infant relationships depends not on perfect attunement but on patterns of rupture and repair (Tronick, 1989). Misattunements inevitably occur in all relationships; what distinguishes secure from insecure attachments is whether ruptures are recognized and repaired or allowed to accumulate unacknowledged.In educational relationships, ruptures occur frequently: misunderstandings about expectations, moments when the teacher's attention fails, times when instruction misses the student's actual difficulty, occasions when the teacher

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responds impatiently or dismissively, or instances when cultural or individual differences create interpretive gaps. From a psychodynamic perspective, these ruptures need not damage epistemic trust if genuine repair occurs.Repair involves several interconnected processes: recognition that disconnection has occurred, acknowledgment of one's contribution to the rupture, communication of understanding about how the other person experienced the rupture, and collaborative restoration of connection. When teachers enact genuine repair, they model crucial capacities: fallibility and self-reflection, tolerance for one's own imperfection, accountability for impact regardless of intent, and confidence that relationships can withstand conflict and misattunement. Repair processes actually strengthen epistemic trust because they demonstrate that the relationship possesses resilience. Students learn that disconnection does not equal permanent rejection, that the teacher remains psychologically available even when things go wrong, and that their concerns are taken seriously enough to warrant explicit attention. This creates what attachment theorists describe as "earned security"—the development of secure relational patterns through consistent experiences of successful repair even when initial interactions were difficult.For students with histories of neglect or trauma, repair sequences may initially be met with suspicion. These students expect apologies to be manipulative or temporary, anticipating that acknowledged mistakes will be held against them or that expressing hurt will produce retaliation. Consistent patterns of authentic repair gradually modify these expectations, opening pathways for deeper epistemic trust. The student's internal working model shifts from "people who hurt me deny it and attack me for complaining" to "people can make mistakes, acknowledge them, and repair damage without the relationship ending."Conversely, unrepaired ruptures accumulate into epistemic closure. When teachers deny misattunements, blame students for misunderstandings, or respond defensively to student concerns, they communicate that the teacher's perspective is the only legitimate reality. This violates the mutuality necessary for epistemic trust. Students learn that their subjective experience will be invalidated if it contradicts the teacher's self-perception, creating a context where genuine learning becomes psychologically unsafe.

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3.4 Recognition: Validating the Student as Subject

Jessica Benjamin's (2004) intersubjective theory emphasizes that human beings need recognition—to be experienced and acknowledged as separate subjects with legitimate perspectives rather than as objects to be shaped according to others' agendas. Recognition involves a paradoxical capacity to simultaneously hold two truths: the other is like me (a thinking, feeling subject) and different from me (possessing their own irreducible perspective).In educational contexts, recognition requires that teachers approach students as thinking beings whose subjective experiences and meaning-making processes are inherently valid even when incorrect or immature. This differs fundamentally from treating students as empty vessels to be filled with predetermined knowledge or as objects to be shaped toward learning objectives. Recognition involves genuine curiosity about how students understand things from their perspective rather than simply judging whether their understanding matches the correct answer.When teachers demonstrate curiosity about how students arrived at particular conclusions—even mistaken ones—they validate the student's status as a meaning-making agent. Questions like "How are you thinking about this?" or "What made that seem like the right approach?" communicate that the student's mental processes matter and are worthy of attention. This recognition fosters epistemic trust because it establishes that learning involves developing the student's own thinking rather than merely replacing it with approved content. Recognition also requires that teachers allow themselves to be known and affected by students. Benjamin emphasizes that recognition is mutual—not symmetric, given power differences, but genuinely bidirectional. Teachers who remain opaque, never acknowledging how student ideas affect their own thinking or revealing moments of uncertainty, communicate that only one perspective (the teacher's) truly matters. Conversely, teachers who can genuinely say "I hadn't thought about it that way" or "Your question is making me reconsider" model the mutual influence that characterizes authentic epistemic exchange.The absence of recognition breeds what Fonagy describes as "epistemic hypervigilance" or "epistemic freezing." Students comply outwardly while maintaining internal conviction that the teacher doesn't truly understand them or that the knowledge being offered isn't relevant to their lived

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experience. This produces surface learning—students reproduce information for tests while remaining fundamentally unchanged by their education. The knowledge never becomes personally meaningful because the student as a person was never meaningfully engaged.

3.5 Mentalizing: Understanding Minds in Educational Interaction

Mentalizing—the capacity to understand behavior in terms of underlying mental states such as thoughts, feelings, desires, and beliefs—represents both a developmental achievement and an ongoing relational process (Fonagy et al., 2002). Effective mentalizing requires holding mental states as representations rather than concrete realities, recognizing that internal states can be opaque or misleading, and maintaining curiosity about mental states rather than assuming one knows them with certainty. Teachers' mentalizing capacity profoundly shapes whether epistemic trust can develop. Mentalizing teachers approach student behavior with curiosity about underlying mental states rather than reacting solely to surface actions. When a student appears disengaged, the mentalizing teacher wonders "What might they be feeling or thinking that produces this response?" rather than immediately concluding "They're not trying" or "They don't care." This stance creates space for understanding the psychological barriers to engagement rather than simply judging their manifestation. Mentalizing also involves recognizing the limits of one's understanding. Teachers who assume they know exactly what students think and feel often misattribute mental states, responding to their projections rather than the student's actual experience. The mentalizing stance maintains appropriate epistemic humility—"I have ideas about what might be happening for you, but I need to check whether I'm understanding correctly." This validates the student's authority over their own internal experience while still offering the teacher's perspective as potentially useful.For students, developing mentalizing capacity enables several crucial learning processes: recognizing that confusion is a mental state rather than a personal deficiency, understanding that the teacher's corrections reflect their beliefs about accurate knowledge rather than personal criticism, tolerating temporary uncertainty while new understanding develops, and reflecting on

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one's own thinking processes metacognitively. Students who can mentalize their learning experience can regulate anxiety more effectively because they recognize emotional responses as temporary states rather than fixed realities.The relationship between teacher and student mentalizing proves bidirectional. When teachers model mentalizing—wondering aloud about mental states, correcting their own misunderstandings, acknowledging complexity—they implicitly teach mentalizing as a skill. When teachers respond to student mentalizing attempts with interest rather than defensiveness, they validate this crucial capacity. Over time, the shared practice of mentalizing creates what Peter Fonagy calls an "epistemic match"—a relational context where both parties approach knowledge exchange with curiosity, flexibility, and genuine openness to influence.

4. Integration: A Psychodynamic Model of Learning Relationships

4.1 The Epistemic Trust Cycle

The five mechanisms described above operate as an integrated system rather than independent processes. We propose a cyclical model where epistemic trust enables learning, learning successes reinforce trust, and trust disruptions activate repair processes that either restore or permanently damage epistemic openness.The cycle begins with the student's initial epistemic stance—shaped by attachment history and previous educational experiences—determining whether they approach new learning opportunities with openness or defensiveness. When sufficient epistemic trust exists, students can tolerate the anxiety inherent in learning, allowing them to engage authentically with challenging material. The teacher's containing function metabolizes learning anxiety sufficiently for continued engagement. Recognition processes validate the student's thinking, maintaining motivation through difficult stretches. Inevitable ruptures occur but are repaired through mentalizing-informed acknowledgment and collaborative restoration of connection.Successful navigation of this cycle strengthens epistemic trust, creating a positive feedback loop. Students who experience learning as supported rather than threatening develop increasing confidence in their capacity to understand new material. They internalize the teacher's containing function, gradually

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developing self-regulatory capacities for managing learning anxiety. Their own mentalizing abilities mature through repeated interactions with a mentalizing teacher. Over time, epistemic trust becomes less dependent on the specific teacher and more a stable characteristic of the student's approach to learning.Conversely, disruptions to the cycle produce epistemic closure. When teachers fail to contain learning anxiety, mismanage ruptures, or withhold recognition, students learn that learning environments are psychologically dangerous. Transference patterns solidify rather than soften, becoming increasingly rigid defensive structures. Epistemic vigilance intensifies, producing either hyperactive scrutiny of all information or passive withdrawal from engagement. The student becomes trapped in what psychodynamic theorists call a "repetition compulsion"—unconsciously recreating early relational failures even when new opportunities for secure relationships exist.

4.2 Individual Differences and Differential Susceptibility

Students vary considerably in their baseline epistemic trust and susceptibility to relational interventions. Attachment research suggests that early experiences create relatively stable but not immutable working models (Bowlby, 1988). Students with secure attachment histories require less explicit relational work from teachers to maintain epistemic openness. Their established trust generalizes to new authority figures relatively easily, allowing them to benefit from even moderately skilled teaching. Students with insecure attachment patterns show differential responses to teacher behavior. Those with anxious-preoccupied patterns may be highly susceptible to relational interventions—responsive to teacher warmth and devastated by criticism or perceived rejection. Their epistemic trust fluctuates dramatically based on moment-to-moment relational cues, requiring consistent emotional availability from teachers. Those with dismissive-avoidant patterns may defensively minimize the teacher's importance, requiring patient persistence to establish connection. Their epistemic trust develops slowly but, once established, may prove relatively stable.Most challenging are students with disorganized attachment patterns resulting from frightening or traumatized caregivers. These students approach authority figures with profound

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ambivalence—simultaneously craving and fearing connection. Their epistemic trust may never fully develop without therapeutic intervention beyond typical educational relationships. Teachers require specialized training to avoid inadvertently retraumatizing these students through behaviors that feel threatening despite benevolent intent. From a psychodynamic perspective, these individual differences reflect not fixed traits but relational patterns subject to modification through new experiences. However, modification requires relationships sufficiently sustained, consistent, and attuned to challenge established working models. Brief educational contacts may prove insufficient to shift deeply entrenched epistemic defenses, suggesting the importance of continuity in teacher-student relationships and the potential value of therapeutic educational interventions for students with severe attachment trauma.

5. Implications and Future Directions

5.1 Teacher Education and Professional Development

This psychodynamic framework suggests that effective teaching requires sophistication about relational processes typically absent from teacher preparation programs. Teachers need training in recognizing transference patterns, developing their own mentalizing capacity, providing containment for learning anxiety, managing rupture-repair processes, and offering genuine recognition to diverse students.Such training might include: experiential learning about one's own attachment patterns and how they shape teaching relationships; practice in mentalizing student behavior rather than reacting automatically; supervision focused on the emotional dimensions of teaching relationships; and opportunities to process the affective demands of containing student anxiety day after day. This parallels the personal therapy and supervised practice required for clinical psychodynamic work, suggesting that truly relational teaching demands similar psychological preparation.

5.2 Systemic and Structural Considerations

While this paper emphasizes psychological mechanisms, we acknowledge that epistemic trust develops within broader systemic contexts. School policies that prevent

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sustained teacher-student relationships (frequent class changes, large class sizes, high teacher turnover) structurally undermine the continuity necessary for establishing epistemic trust with students who have attachment difficulties. Similarly, evaluation systems that pressure teachers to demonstrate immediate measurable outcomes may inadvertently discourage the patient relational work required to establish epistemic openness with defended students.

Educational inequalities reflect not only resource disparities but also the reality that students from marginalized communities may have well-founded reasons for epistemic vigilance toward institutional authority. Teachers representing dominant cultural groups may be experienced through transferential lenses shaped by histories of educational violence against the student's community. Establishing epistemic trust across lines of social difference requires explicit attention to power dynamics and historical context that pure psychological frameworks can overlook.

6. Conclusion

Epistemic trust represents the psychological foundation of effective education—the relational substrate that determines whether students can genuinely receive and integrate new knowledge. Through psychodynamic lenses emphasizing transference, containment, rupture-repair, recognition, and mentalizing, we can understand how unconscious relational processes profoundly shape learning outcomes. Teachers function not merely as knowledge transmitters but as attachment figures whose emotional availability, containing capacity, and willingness to offer genuine recognition determine whether students can maintain the epistemic openness that learning requires.This framework challenges purely cognitive or technical approaches to education, suggesting that the most sophisticated instructional methods will fail when epistemic trust is absent. Conversely, relationally attuned teaching can enable transformative learning even with modest instructional resources because it addresses the psychological foundations that make knowledge transmission possible. Education, from this perspective, is fundamentally an act of relationship—one with the potential to modify not only what students know but their fundamental openness to knowing itself.

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