



Exploring the Effect of School-Based Communities of Practice on the Moral Climate of Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how School-Based Communities of Practice (SBCoP) contribute to fostering a moral climate within schools, with a focus on transforming schools into learning organisations. Recognising a gap in prior research that largely excluded teachers' perspectives on moral climate, the study employed action research methodology to explore this underrepresented viewpoint. Two public sector schools in Pakistan were purposively selected, and a three-cycle action research model was implemented involving school heads and selected teachers. Data was collected through interviews, observations, reflection journals, and meeting minutes, and analysed thematically. Findings reveal that SBCoP enhanced ethical behaviour, collaborative learning, and reflective practices among educators, despite initial resistance and hierarchical dependencies. Teachers began demonstrating greater collegiality, and school heads developed a clearer understanding of ethical leadership. The study also uncovered the urgent need for professional development and structured mentorship for school heads and teachers. The research concludes that SBCoP, supported by ethical leadership and professional learning structures, is a powerful mechanism to revitalise the moral and collaborative culture of schools. It recommends policy-level support for SBCoP implementation, integration of moral education into professional training, and expansion of this model to varied educational contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The integration of moral and ethical dimensions within educational frameworks, particularly in the context of communities of practice, is essential for fostering self-driven learning and monitoring skills among teachers and school leaders. The literature indicates that morality and working ethics are critical to achieving professional development individually and collectively, where personal value orientation and social behaviour are integral to the competencies required for professional practice (Bienengräber, 2014).

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This suggests that teacher education initiatives must prioritize moral enhancement alongside cognitive skills to prepare teachers for learning and addressing issues related to their professional development. Moreover, the concept of community ethics plays a significant role in shaping moral practices within educational settings. Boyd and Newton argue that an ethics of community, which emphasizes collective responsibility over individual moral agency, can effectively address ethical dilemmas in curriculum development and delivery (Boyd & Newton, 2011). This perspective aligns with Kristiansen's analysis of spontaneous moral practices, which highlights the importance of community and interpersonal dimensions in moral education (Kristiansen, 2015). By fostering a sense of community, educational institutions can create environments where ethical discussions and reflections are encouraged, thereby enhancing students' moral sensitivity and ethical reasoning.

As we can look around the world, teachers are confronting numerous challenges. It has been reported that the education system is failing, why? Not because of the decline of academic grades but also because of the decline of moral values (Kristjánsson, 2006). Teachers are role models and students imitate them. For the development of moral values, it is important that teachers can practice them. The most important critical aspect of the school is the moral climate that guides behavioural values and allows positive interactions within society. Modern workplaces nowadays have become too messy, lacking moral values, creating an environment where individuals are drawn into relentless professional competition. The moral culture of the school is profoundly influenced by the implementation of environment of learning organization. The way out of this failing mechanism is to bring a change. With the work of an educationist, the notion of teaching has been replaced as learning directing the teachers to adopt the new role of a teacher, of a mentor.

The connection between school-based community of practices (SBCoP) that fosters school as a learning organization and its moral climate remains unexplored in the past highlighting a profound research gap in this context. The current study aims to find out the effects of school-based practice on the development of moral climate of the school. It is also observed that the moral climate of the school was studied in the past broadly from student's perspectives, but less work was done to explore the measures of the moral climate from teacher's perspectives. The study would also help to develop the tool for measurement of the moral climate of the school that helped to find out the effects of SBCoP on the moral climate.

Research Objectives

- To explore teachers and school heads' perceptions of SBCoP which provides framework for the school to work as a learning organization
- To investigate how teachers experience the moral climate in a school -based community of practice that can align with domains of learning organization

The need for a robust moral framework is further underscored by the challenges faced in various professional fields, including education. Studies have shown that ethical education significantly impacts the moral sensitivity of students, enabling them to navigate complex ethical situations in field practice (Lee et al., 2016). Similarly, educational leaders articulate ethical principles that reflect commitment to justice, honesty, and respect for the community, underscoring the necessity of integrating ethical training into their education (Kumar & Subramaniam, 2022). This indicates that a well-rounded education that includes moral dimensions can empower professionals to engage ethically with their communities. The incorporation of a moral dimension into educational practices, particularly through the lens of community of practice, is vital for developing ethical awareness and sensitivity among students. By prioritizing moral education, fostering community ethics, and utilizing reflective practices, educational institutions can better prepare learners to navigate the ethical complexities of their respective fields.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework for the study is constructed by integrating the variables of school-based community of practice and its impact on cultivating moral values on teachers. A school that functions as a community fosters an environment conducive to the learning and development of all teachers. It helps to develop the culture of shared perceptions, respects and collaboration in educational settings (Berson, et al., 2014). The findings are supported by the study that suggest supporting culture helps to develop the moral ethics among teachers and they started to think not for themselves rather for others

thus thinking for “we” and helping to serve environment thereby can achieve the desired educational experiences (Da’as et al., 2020). This adaptability helps to establish a moral climate that encourages ethical behaviour and responsibility among all staff. School climate is multidimensional which covers interpersonal relationship, emotional wellbeing and safety of teachers and other staff (Daily, et al., 2020). Various domains of schools are interrelated, and they are collectively responsible for developing a positive ethical climate in schools (Zullig et al., 2020). The perception of a positive school climate with sense of belonging and ownership can foster moral responsibility among staff and teachers (Lezha, 2017). Further it is evident that organizational justice spread the moral climate suggesting equity and fairness are foundational to a positive moral atmosphere (Kemer & Polat, 2021). The moral climate of a school is influenced by the ethical parameters and standards that help to model the teacher’s behaviour. Discussion and ethical counselling can help to develop and practice ethical standards by teachers (Scott, 2020). In school role of leadership matters, particularly transformational leadership style plays a critical role in making realization among teachers about moral values (Vermeulen et al., 2020). Schools, when work as a learning organization can help in developing such a nurturing culture where teachers practice moral values and are free to discuss, reflect and share their knowledge with each other (Karnopp & Walls, 2023).

Community of Practices and Learning Organization

Study is focused on the framework learning theory proposed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger who first coined the term of “Community of Practice” in 1991 (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They defined Community of Practice as, “CoP are group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and they learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 148). As per definition three elements are identified:

- Domain is when people have some common goals,
- Practice when they are learning to improve things and to better and
- Community when the people regularly interact with each other.

A school, when developed the model of CoP would allow their teachers and other staff to interact and collaborate with each other and thus promote learning within the school. The work of Kools and Stoll (2016) also aimed to develop and implement a scale which can be applied in a school to convert it into a learning organization. Both CoP and the learning organization emphasize ongoing collective learning and allows social interaction (Jagasia et al., 2015). This can be demonstrated by the scale of the learning organization which was made up of seven constructs including Shared Vision, Continuous Professional Learning, Team Learning and Collaboration, Culture of Inquiry, Exploration and Innovation, Systems for Collecting and exchanging Knowledge, Learning from External Environment, and Modelling and growing Leadership.

The variables of the scale were found to be effective in developing the collaborative learning climate within the school. In contextual settings teachers face many issues related to their professional development, they have time management issues, traveling issues, financial issues that hinder them from growing professionally. Informal learning therefore has become popularized in which school as a learning organization can play its eminent role. Literature has found out the gap that highlights the lack of development of moral values among teachers that transfer to their students as teachers are role models and these lacking can easily transfer to the students which is very much obvious in recent generations. Moral climate is often demonstrated by three main factors which are lifelong learning (Hursen, 2016), Respect and honour (Martinez-Egger & Powers, 2007; Zhao et al., 2023) and school leadership (Alban-Metcalf & Alimo-Metcalf, 2000). Literature lacks a proper framework for moral development for teachers, the dimensions thus explored were taken from the studies and scales developed in the past but not been studied to explore how the school itself could be transformed where teachers can develop moral values.

Ethical leadership is also very critical in the development of moral values as ethical leaders have been coined as moral leaders having reputed as the ones who make fair and ethical decisions (Treviño et al., 2003). The statement is further supported by the study that reports the reciprocal relationship between ethical leadership and job satisfaction (Kim & Brymer, 2011) and when employees are satisfied their work productivity enhances (Puni et al., 2018). Ethical Leadership is the appropriate conduct of behaviours

by school heads that help to develop a positive interpersonal relationship among their teachers which allow them to own their profession and increases work productivity (Treviño et al., 2003). They influence their employees through social - emotional exchange and thus produce their followers that can freely and openly exchange their ideas and bring creativity to their work. It will help to develop a climate that allows everyone to respect others and motivates others to indulge themselves in continuous learning as teaching- learning is a dynamic process. In the present context moral elements are missing from educational context and from the school climate where teachers instead of collaborating are busy in competing (reference) imparting the same behaviours among students as a result schools are developing students academically, but moral values are missing in the educational system.

Theoretical framework thus highlights the importance of school as a learning organization and implementation of moral values in teachers that can enable the students learn ethical and moral cultural practices. Various studies done in the past describe different dimensions of moral practices that fall within three major dimensions: respect and honour, lifelong learning and school leadership. The role of school head is therefore eminent as positive and ethical leadership will enable to develop a school into a learning organization which can help to nurture moral values.

METHODOLOGY

Action research was used for the study that involved collaboration of school heads with researcher for the development of a model that converted school into a learning organization where teachers learned to practice moral values and grow themselves professionally. As primary purpose of the study is to establish a learning culture to improve the existence of messy culture therefore action research is used because primarily action research is used to solve practically a problem (Cohen et al., 2017) and is collaborative (Dulfer et al., 2024), both purposes being fulfilled with the study. Qualitative methodology was used for data collection and analysis as the primary aim of the study was to explore and find out the ways in which a school could be transformed into a learning organization.

For the study two schools have been selected based on purposive sampling, criteria for the selection of the schools were:

- Supporting behaviour of school heads
- Schools have more than 200 students
- Schools are registered and recognized
- School heads wanted to transform their schools.

Based on the above criteria two public sector schools were selected. In the next stage school heads were asked to select two teachers who could work with them. School heads were provided with the freedom to select teachers. They selected two teachers. School head A selected one teacher of Grade V: English Teacher and one for Grade IV (Mathematics Teacher). They are the class teachers but based on subject expertise one is English teacher and other is mathematics teacher. School B selected one teacher for Grade IV (Science and another Grade (III) who was a home teacher.

Action Plan

The study was conducted in three cycles that last for 5 months: 1 month for preplanning, one for planning, and two for action being provided to each cycle. It was followed by a reflection phase. It is observed that currently the education system is lacking in morality which is the basis of many unprofessional activities (Thornberg, 2008).

Pre- Planning Phase

Within this phase school heads were interviewed and found out the challenges they face in terms of their teachers and their behaviours. During this phase researcher also aimed to find out the culture of their schools and if the school heads wanted to transform their culture into a learning organization.

Questions developed for this planning phase were:

- Q.1 Are you satisfied with your teachers' performances? Do you agree with their status?
- Q.2 Does your school culture provide them with any opportunity to learn with organization?

- Q.3 Do you know about the community of practices? If provided guidance and support, will you agree to develop a model of SBCoP in your school?

Q.4 Do you teachers practice moral values with each other?

The interviews collected were transcribed carefully and analysed through thematic analysis to discover major findings about school heads' perceptions of school to convert into learning sphere and practicing of moral values in their schools

First Cycle (Planning Phase)

During the initial phase school heads were asked to select any two teachers from their school based on their own selection criteria and arrange a meeting with their teachers to find out about the challenges they face during their teaching. In the next phase, which was the planning phase where after discussion researcher conducted an interview with the school heads to find out their discussion outcomes. Researcher after the interview carefully transcribed and analysed the interviews and found out the major issues related to teaching process and some behavioural issues from the teachers. After thorough and careful analysis of interviews the researcher identifies one problem which is common in both schools and that was student's absenteeism. Researcher asked school heads to work on it, have guided them to coordinate with their teachers and apply a mini reward strategy. Studies showed that students get motivated with rewards (Chen, 2023) so teachers need to apply this in their practice to find out its efficacy. Researcher asked the school heads to develop the strategy and apply this for two months in school on elementary grade students first.

Second Cycle (Implementation Phase)

In the next stage school heads with their teachers developed a plan for mini reward. In School A, every Friday in the morning the assembly students receive mini rewards like pencils, chocolate etc. for their regular attendance for a week. Their names were called out and they were praised in front of all the schools. This practice was applied for two months, and the outcome of the strategy was assessed by comparing the scores before and after the strategy. In School B, teachers have developed a Time to Climb Up Chart in their classrooms and weekly demonstrate the attendance progress of every student on chart. Every day students saw their names on the chart and after 15 days they were provided with a gift. The activity was applied for two months and improvement in attendance is observed by comparison of pre and post attendance record.

Third Cycle (Reflection Phase)

Last Cycle was reflection based in which the school heads were asked to conduct a meeting and share thoughts about the attendance record. Further they were also asked by the researcher to find out their behavioural changes during the cycle and what improvement in their working style and behaviour they themselves have noticed.

Data Collection Tools

Data was collected through interviews, meeting minutes, and reflection journals. A semi structured interview was conducted with the school heads, which was audio recorded by taking the consent from the respondents. Researcher has also observed one interview to observe the teacher's correspondences and their conversations with each other. That was a non-participant observation. Researcher has also maintained the reflection journal that provided the insights of challenges and unusual observations that came across the entire study.

Table 1

Summary of the tools used in the study

Data Tools	Participants	Total
Interviews	(with school heads)	2x3=6
Reflection Journal	of researcher	1
Observation	by researcher	3
Meeting Minutes	(school heads with their teachers)	3

Data is recorded carefully during the study, organized and finally analysed to get the idea how this study through action research has helped to develop the culture where school can serve as a learning organization thereby enabling teachers to realize and practice the moral values.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data received through multiple sources are properly organized and interpreted. Interview recordings are first transcribed and then analysed through thematic analysis. The procedure for thematic analysis used for the study is demonstrated in the figure below:

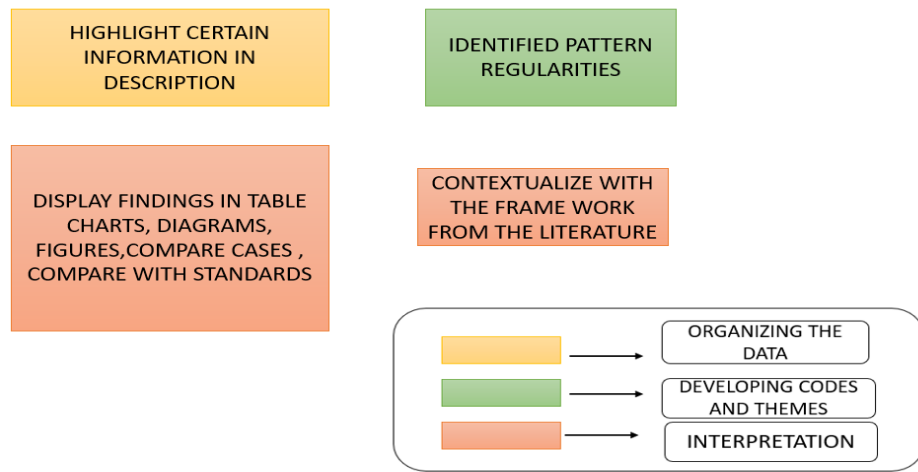


Fig. 1. Thematic Analysis

Source: Pattern adapted from Creswell and Poth (2016)

As shown in the table thematic analysis is done in three stages: first data is organized by highlighting important information, then identified pattern for development of codes and themes finally it is interpreted in form of themes and contextualize with the framework from the literature. Data collected through reflection journals and observations is also analysed by identifying important information and compared with codes from interviews to strengthen the findings which supports rich triangulation of data thereby reduces the chances of subjective biasness in qualitative study.

FINDINGS OF THE CYCLES

Based on interviews in the preliminary stages it was found that school culture now a days have become too messy with personal and self-interests as everyone is working for their own interests. Education is demanding in contemporary age and to meet the needs teachers also need to be upgraded. Teachers are facing numerous issues and because of this upgrade it is not possible now a days (reference). As quoted by one of the school heads,

“Teachers have too hectic schedule; majority are living with extended families so they cannot give extra time for their professional development The majority are engaged in home tuition because of financial needs therefore they are unable to invest time in their own learning.”

Therefore, it’s the need of the time that school should convert into a learning institution not only for students but also for teachers. Teachers’ behaviour in school as observed by researcher are not collaborative, it has been observed they belittle others, sometimes not valuing other decisions in the meeting. During the first meeting with the school head with their teachers it was noticed that one senior teacher was not willing to participate, providing excuses about additional work. Keeping these observations and data received from the interview’s research guided the school heads to maintain the encouraging behaviour and motivate them all to work in a collaborative climate. After the end of the cycles, school heads and teachers found out that the strategy was successfully applied, and it showed their existing problems in teachings get resolved through support, collaboration and mentorship from teachers, school heads and researcher.

Overall Findings of the Study

The overall findings of the study are represented and explained with three broader themes.

Head Teachers' Dependency on Researcher

The community of practice idea was well supported by the school leaders. But they mainly rely on the researcher to provide them with ready-made answers to the concerns raised by the teachers. Although head teachers did not have mentorship experiences earlier, and this research provided them with this experience. They did not appear to be making any initiatives themselves. This could be an issue of their judgment and moral reasoning of their role as academic leadership. This became a working norm in the school since the teachers themselves also follow the dependent culture. As it was mentioned in the researcher's reflective journal,

"For every single task, the principal asked me, they hesitate in taking the decisions. I believe they lack in training and need mentorship and support....."

This statement is further supported by one of the interviews with the school principal when he said, *"We are used to work in our context and performing our old duties, we never were asked to think in this way, and we never reflect and discuss."*

This showed that school principals need guidance and mentorship. In one of the reflective journals, it was stated that the way they ask for guidance using, "please! can you provide us the template..." depicts that they even have started to learn ethics and wanted to implement a good moral and learning culture in their schools.

Professional Development Needs

Upon completion of the cycles and analysing enriched interviews it was found that school heads agreed the lack in their teacher's knowledge and skills. They said they are qualified but lack skills and competency because of which they face challenges in the classroom. As one school head said,

"Teachers we hire are professionally qualified, but they are unable to meet the teaching needs of contemporary era. Therefore, we see that there is a continuous need for teachers to learn and develop."

Teachers face a multitude of issues that hinder them getting in-service teachers' training programs. If they are forced to do so, their productivity will compromise. During the job hours they are highly engaged and they have a lot of work they are taking at their homes. In that case school heads even do not urge them to engage in professional development programs (Mohammad, 2004). This all resulted in outdated teaching ultimately exerting its impact on student development, hence their learning needs would not be fulfilled. Teachers face knowledge gap; this might be due to changes in curriculum, educational reforms or shifts in student's learning needs. Continuous professional development is needed to meet the gaps (Zhang et al., 2024) which in present scenario is not possible for teachers (Matiba, 2024).

In essence professional development needs reflect the understanding that teaching is an evolving field, and teachers must continually learn to grow to remain effective and meet the changing needs. In that context schools must play a role in providing resources and opportunities to teachers that help them to bridge this gap.

Organizational Learning Practices and Support Structures

It is discussed in the above theme that teachers need continuous professional development and to fulfil their needs school must be converted into a learning organization where teachers can collaborate, share, discuss and reflect and thereby learn and grow themselves within their school culture. Work of Kools and Stoll (2016) proposed a validated scale that be used to convert a school into learning organization which is made on seven constructs. When school will share vision, they develop the practices of team working and collaboration, when school heads model delegate authority by modelling leadership, school could be transformed into a learning organization (Bouchamma et al., 2018). The data revealed that school heads are aware of learning organizations, partially they are implementing the rules, but they are not completely updated about its constructs and how to apply them to transform their school culture. School heads are willing to adopt the changes and are ready as they themselves need to make their school culture a learning zone that can foster teachers professional learning.

“I strongly believe that the culture of schools needs to be changed as teachers need to believe that they can learn more from each other through discussion and dialogue. Open communication helps teachers to find out solutions of many problems.”

The role of guidance and leadership plays a role as willingness of school heads are very important. Based on the interview findings it was noticed that school heads are giving extra time for meeting and discussion with their teachers.

“It was also observed by the researcher that the school head in one of the meetings was trying to convince a teacher a lot, suggesting him advises and motivating her to work to apply the strategy in a way that can provide the maximum effect of teacher’s output. Therefore, it is deduced that to bring a change role of school heads is very critical.”

School heads are also dependent on researcher for solutions, for practical guidance as one school head proclaimed,

“Yes, we can do anything, but we want guidance we also want some training programs based on learning organizations and action research with these we can learn and apply more.”

Hence concluded that school as a learning organization can bring an innovation but for this to implement changes required in the system that can be achieved by the support structures. It is thus concluded that school heads if get proper guidance can develop a model of school-based community of practices in which teachers believe in cooperation and respecting others and help others for the accomplishment of the institutional tasks.

Moral and Ethical Practices

It was noticed that during the initial phase teachers lack respect towards everyone, as it is said by the school head,

“Our teachers have their comfort zone with a group of teachers in which other teachers are treated as an alien ...”

This type of environment is not suitable for everyone, and teacher productivity got compromise if teachers behave ethnocentric. Teachers need to demonstrate collegiality in their actions by supporting, caring and sharing with each other. Further it was also observed during one visit that the school head of one school at times was not fair in discussion with every teacher. She was responding warmly to some teachers but for other responses vary. Researcher’s observation has guided the action plan in which she has advised the school head to maintain the fairness and integrity in school climate, then only school would be able to transform, otherwise this injustice attitude will make teacher rebel against the school leadership. School head has accepted and applied the practice throughout the cycles because of which teachers have developed the feelings of ownership and belonging and that helped them to work against the common goals. Teachers have started to collaborate, have started to exchange their knowledge, bringing in positivity in the school culture.

“Teachers have now started to discuss and reflect on their teachings, they share new ideas ins staff room with all, their group working has changed into a school community, and all seems are working together.”

This action research has helped to develop a school as a learning organization that will help teachers to learn within their school thereby, they will be able to get knowledge lifelong. School itself will provide structured informal learning that will help the teachers to meet their contextual teaching and learning needs. Overall, this will help the schools’ heads to learn about positive school leadership which is an ethical leadership that can help the teachers to practice with equality as teachers are fairly treated thereby, they imitate this fairness and apply it within their practices. The model thus developed from the themes for SBCoP suggests Team working and Collaboration Sharing vision and goals and modelling leadership are very important and can be considered as a core element for SBCoP. The findings revealed that (SBCoP) helps the teachers to identify and practice moral values and hence school culture would be a culture that spreads positivity, morality and a quest for lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION

This action research has effectively demonstrated that the development and implementation of

School-Based Communities of Practice (SBCoP) can positively influence the moral climate of schools. The study reveals that teachers and school leaders currently operate within professional cultures that lack collaboration, mutual respect, and ethical leadership. Through structured cycles of planning, action, and reflection, participants began to experience shifts toward ethical practices, shared leadership, and collective learning. It is observed School heads were eager yet reliant on the researcher, reflecting the need for structured mentorship. Teachers initially showed resistance and ethnocentric behaviour, but with consistent support, collaboration improved. Moral and ethical practices flourished as teachers began to reflect, share ideas, and work with a sense of belonging. Action research cycles supported school transformation into learning organizations, demonstrating how informal, in-context learning helps address moral and professional gaps. Thus, SBCoP is not only a viable but a necessary approach to building a learning-oriented, ethically grounded school environment.

Recommendations

- Training in Action Research and SBCoP for School Heads: Provide professional development opportunities specifically focused on action research, leadership, and developing learning organizations.
- Structured Mentorship Programs: Institutionalize mentorship programs where school heads and teachers can receive ongoing guidance to foster moral leadership and collaborative cultures.
- Integration of Moral Development in Professional Training: Embed ethical education and moral development into in-service teacher training modules.
- Policy Support for Informal Professional Learning: Encourage educational authorities to formally recognize and support informal, school-based professional learning models like SBCoPs.
- Establish Feedback and Reflection Mechanisms: Ensure regular meetings, reflective journals, and peer-sharing platforms are maintained to sustain the momentum of collaborative learning.
- Expand the Model to Diverse School Settings: Conduct similar studies across different school types (private, urban/rural) to validate and refine the SBCoP framework for wider applicability.

Competing Interests

The authors declared no competing interests.

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