Original Paper

Character Education and Virtue Ethics in Nigerian Schools

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Abstract

The development of character in young people is an obligation that requires the efforts of parents, teachers and the community in a society with a decline moral tone. The involvement in immoral acts by some youths and elders in the contemporary Nigerian society may be traced to inordinate ambition of these youths and elders to accumulate material wealth. The young people engage in what is generally referred to as yahoo and yahoo plus, and elders engage in corrupt acts. Yahoo describes the act of defrauding people through the cyber connection, whereas yahoo plus involves the use of rituals to make financial and material gains. The paper examined how young people could be educated to cultivate the virtues of self-control, contentment, caring for others and self-discipline. It drew inspirations from virtue ethical theories to ground moral virtues in character education, and discussed some intervention programmes that could strengthen character development in young people. It examined the effectiveness of cultural dimension in character development, and argued that a healthy society might be vitiated by the absence of moral virtues, which is the core feature of character development, and concluded that young people develop positive self-efficacy when they are exposed to moral virtues such as trustworthiness, self-control, honesty, self-discipline, tolerance, and so on.

Keywords

Character, virtue ethical theories, character education, moral virtues, good life

1. Introduction

Building moral virtue at a young age is supposed to be one of the cardinal aims of education. Cultivation of character traits is inevitable in the face of issues such as *yahoo* and *yahoo plus* which have become a moral challenge among young people in Nigeria. *Yahoo* describes the act of defrauding innocent people financially through the cyber connection, while *yahoo plus* involves the use of rituals to acquire financial and material gains. The occurrence of these acts is an indication of declining moral values in our society. The paper intends to argue for character development with a particular focus on

virtue ethics. We intend to show how young people's exposure to the cultivation of virtues can help to shape their dispositions to moral issues at home and in their learning environment. In this paper character education is discussed from the standpoint of cultivation of virtues and the good life. In this regard, we adopt virtue ethical theories as the theoretical framework for grounding virtues in character education. We also discuss social-emotion learning and cultural dimension to character development. We conclude that character education is likely to serve as a veritable tool to cultivate moral virtues among young people in Nigeria.

2. Character Education in the Nigerian Education System

Character is defined as "a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct" (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, n.d.). On the other hand, Character education is seen as "an umbrella term for all explicit and implicit educational activities that help young people develop personal strengths called virtues" (n.p.). The ultimate aim of character education is to promote a set of core values and virtues that will enable individuals to live a responsible life. In a society with a decline moral standard educating for character development should be one of the goals of schools.

Character education has been forced into retreat in Nigeria through the attitudes of some officials who are concerned with educational policy. Such persons do not see any difference between religious instructions in schools and character education; hence, for them, it amounts to a duplication of efforts to have another subject in form of moral or character education when teaching of religious values may play the role of character education. This mindset probably informs the absence of character education in the curriculum of junior secondary schools in Nigeria.

Most parents want their children to excel intellectually, especially in this age of technology, so that they can fit into the work force and face the challenges of life. According to Lickona (1999) (as cited in Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006) such parents want their children to become persons of a certain kind. Many of these parents think less of the moral life of their children, while they are mostly concerned with what their children become in life especially which profession to choose that will earn them the dignity they desire. In this case, parents are more concerned about their children's intellectual life or "intellectual virtues", whereas for Geirsson and Holmgren, 2000 (as cited in Kucukuysal & Beyhan, 2011, p. 46), such "intellectual virtues (only) enable us to think rationally, whereas moral virtues enable us to handle our desires and emotions". In this respect, cultivation of moral virtues is one of the areas schools should focus their attention. Basically, the reason is that there are a lot of challenges in the society today which call for the cultivation of moral virtues. Lapsley et al. (2013) list some as epidemic of poor academic achievement, cheating, premarital sex, and substance use. In Nigeria with cases like cult-related activities, yahoo and yahoo plus and immoral craving for material acquisition we are likely to require more than education that discusses themes such as *consumer stuff*, and perhaps *disaster risk management* to be able to manage these challenges.

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Sometimes, too, government may not be keen at promoting character education for reason that character development is the prerogative of the parents. The reason for this action may be because government's attitudes are directed at promoting "activity-based curriculum and developing the competencies of students and teachers as well" (Bakhati, 2015, p. 22). The urge to meet the demands of the 21st century learning society may sometimes play a leading role in government's effort to promote competence education. In spite of such disposition, Bakhati (2015) does not see why competence education should not equip students with both skills and attitudes for sustainable future. Lapsley and Stey (2014) (as cited in Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016) think while we want children to be competent students, we must also let them have a moral compass, be conversant with ethical issues and become persons who care about morality. For Lickona (1999) (as cited in Arjoon, 2001) character education is all-embracing; hence, it permeates subject matter of curriculum activities, the rigour of the academic standards, the conduct of sports and other extracurricular activities and so on. The traits of character such as resilience, determination and creativity, when demonstrated, become the enduring virtues students require not only in their studies but also in their moral life.

The Character Scotland in its paper entitled: *A framework for Character Education in Scotland's Schools,* asserts that any society desirous of enabling its members to live well will treat character education as something to which every child has a right. It says that developing young people's character will enable them to develop positive personal strengths called virtues. In a morally corrupt society, where character education is said to be in retreat and virtues have almost lost their relevance, the call for more attention to character education becomes more forceful.

3. Plato and Aristotle on Virtue Ethics Theory and the Good Life

There are contending ethical theories which try to explain the moral attitudes and behaviour of individuals within the scope of normative ethics. Among these theories are deontology and consequentialism, and their main concerns are to determine the right action of the individuals within the acceptable moral landscape. Also in this family of normative ethics is virtue ethics which deals specifically with the good life and the kinds of persons we should be. Simply put, virtue ethics is all about what we are and what people think of us—that is our character. According to Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) virtue ethics deals specifically with the claim that the basic moral facts are facts about the quality of character. While character according to Arthur, Crick, Samuel, Wilson and McGettrick (2006, p. 3), "is about who we are and who we become and includes the virtue of responsibility, honesty, self-reliance, reliability, generosity, self-discipline and a sense of identity and purpose". In this regard, character defines our personality- who we are and what we claim to be.

In their discussions of virtue ethics, Plato and Aristotle attempt to work out the conditions under which individuals will be happy within the state. They start with man, examine his soul and suggest how his well-being can be ensured. In his own case, Plato divides the human soul into two, the rational and irrational. The irrational is also made up of two parts, spirited (noble) and appetitive (ignoble). Plato

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introduces the notion of justice to ensure that both the spirited and appetitive parts of the soul are properly kept in control. Here there is justice in man when the rational part controls the spirited and the appetitive. The essence of this exercise is to ensure that the well-being of the individuals in the state is well protected. At this level, he sees the need for the philosopher-king to rule the state while the auxiliaries and the ordinary people follow the dictate of the ruler.

Aristotle does not differ markedly from Plato in his account of the human soul. He too believes that the soul can be divided into two parts, viz., the rational and irrational. Aristotle recognises that the soul is the seat of desires and appetites, and the need for these desires and appetites to be brought under the control of reason to ensure proper moral conduct. For this reason, he calls the rational control of such desires moral virtue.

Indeed, Plato and Aristotle see the need to control the irrational part of our soul which serves as the seat of passion, desires and appetites. By doing this, vices such as dishonesty, lust, and unfaithfulness which spring from the soul (or mind) will be curtailed. In their view, the vices can be controlled by reason. Certainly desires and appetites must be prevented from rising above reason else it breeds irrational behaviour. In order to avoid such an irrational behaviour in our life, individuals need to cultivate certain virtues. Plato lists these virtues as courage, temperance, wisdom and justice. These virtues, according to Plato, are generated in our soul by habit and exercise. Each of these virtues Plato associates with human soul. Courage is the virtue of the spirited soul while temperance or self-control is reserved for the appetitive soul. The virtue of wisdom is for the rational soul. The virtue of justice, as claimed by Plato, is to create harmony among the three parts of the soul. The just soul, he says, is one in which the reasoning part resides. Thus as Plato implies in his doctrine, justice is nothing but proportion and harmony which accrues to the soul when all the three parts perform their functions and cooperate with one other.

Aristotle possesses a related but modified account of virtue. In his view, there are two kinds of virtue, viz., intellectual virtue and moral virtue. For Aristotle, intellectual virtue is theoretical and philosophic and its focus is on contemplation of the truth while moral virtue, on the other hand, is achieved by the submission of passions and appetites to the control of reason. Aristotle (as cited in Onyewuenyi, 1993) identifies with the cardinal virtues earlier discussed by Plato, e.g., courage, temperance or self-control, justice and wisdom but refuses to associate them with parts of the soul as done by Plato.

Like his master, Aristotle believes that individuals should practise self-control. Such a practice, he says, ultimately leads to the control of passions by reason. Plato and Aristotle see the need to use the intellect to control our existence. They contend that a combined effort of the intellect and moral excellence is what the individual needs to be able to live a happy life. While Aristotle may want us to accept moral excellences as the sole element of good life, Plato sees the possibility of achieving this good life in the harmonious activities of the soul.

It is clear that Plato and Aristotle hold that the rational control of our actions may sometimes determine the good life we live. For Plato, we have one major virtue, viz., wisdom and that is the absolute good.

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This good offers shelter to such overriding good as knowledge, happiness, piety, beauty etc. As a matter of fact, the good cannot be divorced from justice. The good life involves an adjustment of the excellences or virtues through the organisation of the soul and that is justice. The good life is achieved in individuals when each part of the soul recognises its own limit, performs its own functions and allows reason to mediate where necessary.

Aristotle holds a similar view to Plato's earlier account of the good life. The best way, he argues, for a man to live is to live up to his nature, i.e., a creature directed by a rational soul. The proper function of human soul, he says, is to make men live well, that is, living a rational life. To live a successful life or a life of happiness is to live under the guidance of the best virtues of the rational soul. So the highest possible life is that which expresses the highest element in us, the divine element of reason or in a modest term, intellectual contemplation. Aristotle does not pretend to show that he does not agree totally with Plato. It is true, he argues, that individual should live under the guidance of the rational soul in order to achieve a successful life where a successful life is defined in terms of the cultivation of virtues. Thus, in their various conceptions of the relationship among happiness, virtues and good life, Plato and Aristotle have held that happiness, virtues and good life are intertwined and are infused in virtue ethics. In this case, to enjoy a good life one must be virtuous, and when one is virtuous one achieves happiness. The pursuit of happiness is the greatest feat individuals should aim at. Being virtuous is a necessary condition for achieving personal well-being which is here defined as happiness.

4. Virtue Ethics and Character Education

The term "virtue ethics" as seen by Hursthouse (2003) (as cited in Kucukuysal & Beyhan, 2011), is said to originate from the ancient Greek word "ar ête" meaning "excellence" or "virtue", Though Annas (1998) (as cited in Kucukuysal & Beyhan, 2011) says "ar ête" means "excellence" and not "virtue", except that excellence in character itself can translate to virtuous living. The idea of virtues forms the basic notion behind Aristotle's Eudaimonia. It embodies discussions on normative ethics with a particular focus on the ethical goal that can ensure happiness and well-being of individuals. Eudaimonia rests on the principle that justice, integrity and a feeling of happiness or self-satisfaction constitute the basic values of life. It is a theory that provides Aristotle with the means to measure the moral temperament of the Athenian society of his days. Aristotle's interest in how to ensure a happy society leads him to embrace the five cardinal virtues; wisdom, justice, courage, temperance and integrity which is a reflection of an earlier position held by Plato.

Plato's interest in virtue ethics has been motivated by the stories of men like Euthyphro, Laches, Ion and Hippia endowed with success in their chosen careers, and blessed with money and popularity (Reid, n.d.). Nevertheless, Plato asserts that they lack the sense of moral direction by which to guide the use of their expertise (Reid, n.d.). Plato thinks they mistake excellence in a particular techne with excellence of the soul or ar ête. He sees the need to strike a balance morally between one's personal life and one's profession (which may sometimes be driven by selfish motive), and which Aristotle thinks (if the

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balance is maintained) is likely to lead to living in harmony with moral law. Here the moral string that binds our personal life to our profession is strengthened by a continuous allegiance to such virtues as prudence, self-discipline as the case may be. Invariably, virtues such as prudence, self-control become intrinsic to our personal identity since they rule our personal and professional life. A person's virtue defines his moral life either in his personal life or in his profession. Our moral life is guided by how far the decisions we take reflect those values that are intrinsic to our well-being. The approach we choose to follow in our decisions making is likely to be guided by what we intend to achieve, i.e., the outcome of our actions. The outcome which may either be positive or negative becomes a mirror of our *self*.

Indeed, there are different approaches to ethical decision making. Prominent among these are utilitarian, right, virtue, common, and fairness/justice approaches (Meeler, n.d.). Each of these ethical approaches either focuses on the actions of individuals or the outcome of these actions on our ethical relations to others. For instance, utilitarian's principle harps on the actions that produce the greatest benefits and least harm for all. On the other hand, the principle of right approach rests on the belief that action is morally right if individuals affected by moral decisions are not used as instruments to achieve an end. The principle of fairness/justice says that people should be morally treated the same unless there are morally relevant differences in them. The principle of common approach contends that what is ethical is what advances the common good. Lastly, virtue ethics says that what is ethical is what develops moral virtues in us. From the principles espoused by these ethical approaches one is convinced that virtue ethics is likely to address Arjoon's (2001) claim that "the prodigious power of present-day technology is in the hands of character-deficient individuals" especially where the issue of values is at stake. The challenge posed by having a morally void society seems to be critical enough to warrant an appraisal of the call for character education in schools.

The question is: Why are we interested in virtue ethics in spite of the compelling significance of other ethical approaches to decisions of life? First, we are concerned with virtues which constitute the heart of character education. Students require a life laced with self-discipline, self-control, honesty, courage, caring, and many more to be able to succeed in life and in their chosen career. Second, there seems to be the need to tap into ethical theory that is directly connected with the actions of the individuals. Third, the challenges in the society today are brought about by the actions of individuals; hence there is the need to see how character education can address a few of these challenges.

Character education is one form of education that takes a critical look at how our actions impact negatively or positively on others. According to the Character Scotland's *Framework for Character Education in Scotland's Schools* the ultimate goal of all character education is to equip students with the intellectual tools to make wise choices of their own. The report further suggests that students need intellectual virtues as critical thinking and curiosity as guides in their quest for knowledge and information. The focus of character education is how to foster virtues in individuals where virtues are seen as character traits. A person's character is the picture of his personality, and sometimes it determines his success in life. Students' levels of self-discipline not only contribute to the success of

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their education but also to their entire life. As a matter of fact, Levent and Pehlivan (2017) indeed contend that the cultivation of ethical values by South Korean students plays a significant role in the success of their academic life as well as the success of their country.

Sometimes character education may fail to guarantee virtuous living especially if it is not handled properly. The fact that students are taught the virtues of self-discipline, integrity, temperance does not mean they will live by these virtues. In other words, the teaching of virtues may not lead to virtuous life in all cases, especially if the person concerned does not have the will to be virtuous.. Aristotle is right when he claims that unless a person wants to be a good person he will not be one. Thus, to Aristotle "virtue has more to do with will than it does with intellect" (Curtler, 1994, p. 46). The will to demonstrate moral virtues lies with the individuals. In the classroom situation, the teacher's personality is woven into his classroom activities. He serves as a mirror for students to observe from time to time. Students can acquire and strengthen their desire to be honest if they see in their teacher the trait of honesty supported by the will to emulate the teacher. Students' perception of their teacher as an honest person is likely to strengthen their desire to live an honest life. The conception of character education in terms of the acquisition and strengthening of virtues—the traits that sustain a flourishing life and a thriving society (Curtler, 1994) seems to worth a serious consideration.

Specifically, there is no consensus on whether moral virtues can be taught. There is a need for us to understand that any explanation on character education or the teachability of moral virtues is a direct attempt to understand the essence of our personality. Moral virtue expresses our character; hence it defines our personal identity. But the contention, indeed, is whether moral virtues can be taught like we teach subjects such as history, social studies, chemistry, etc. However, reactions to whether moral virtues can be taught are diverse. Curtler (1994) is sceptical about the teaching of moral virtues. Though for him, learning can bring about important changes in our disposition to make certain choices, virtues cannot be taught like other subjects with defined content and methods. For Howard et al. (2004) (as cited in Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016) what is in contention is not whether character should be taught in schools rather by what methods this should be done. In his explanation, Cubukcu (2012) insists there is character education, except that it involves teaching students how to decide well and how to behave accordingly. In his submission, Carr (1991) (as cited in Lapsley, Holter, & Narvaez, 2013, p. 1) says "values are infused in every interaction of teaching and learning, from selection of topics and insistence on high standards and respect for truth, to expectations and modalities of community and discipline that govern school life". Carr's claim remains sacrosanct at the level of community participation in character education.

Aristotle has a reservation for how moral virtues are acquired. According to him, moral virtue constitutes a habit that can be learned and gained through practice. Examples of these virtues are justice, prudence, fortitude and temperance. They are acquired through practice and habitual action, and are never taught like intellectual virtue, e.g., critical thinking, which is acquired through rigorous academic exercise. While Arjoon (2001) believes that virtue can be taught by example, Curtler thinks it can be

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acquired through modelling, didactic stories and programme rewarding good behavior. Arjoon's notion of teaching by example is similar to Curtler's modelling technique since both involve the teacher in action. Teacher's role does not remove the role of parents in this arrangement. The Character Scotland's paper makes it clear that a teacher of good character exemplifies commitment to the value of what they teach. Indeed, the paper submits that students and teachers need to learn not only the names and meaning of character virtues, but display them in the school's thinking, attitudes and actions. Thus a teacher can demonstrate self-discipline, transparence and trustworthiness while students observe and replicate same in their attitudes to issues of life. Lumpkin (2008) thinks students need to imitate teachers who are effortlessly honest, trusting, fair, respectful and responsible in their actions.

5. Intervention Programme and Character Education in Nigerian Schools

The Character Scotland's paper: *A framework for character education in Scotland's schools* aptly describes developing young people as an obligation on parents, teachers and the community at large. The aim of education is not supposed to be limited to students' acquiring skills and competencies, there should be an element of character education in what goes into students' education. Perhaps this is why a new subject, intending to teach morals, apparently designed for junior secondary school students in Nigeria is introduced into the curriculum. The subject: Religion and National Values specifies the subjects to be taken at the junior secondary school in Nigeria. Among these subjects are consumer education, disaster risk reduction education, peace and conflict resolution education, civic education and social studies, and security education. Except this is specified a teacher may not make reference to moral issues while teaching these subjects, though a passing remark may be made to moral issues in subjects like civic education and social studies, and peace and conflict resolution education. To Ballard (n.d.), "civic education is particularly significant for addressing ethical dilemmas of modern society" (p. 35). Even with civic education in the curriculum of the junior secondary school, children still lack the character traits such as care for others, honesty, self-control and so on in dealing with colleagues and their teachers.

Teaching students to cultivate such virtue as *phronesis* called "good sense" which depicts the quality of discerning the difference between "what to want and what not to want" can assist students to think of their actions and how such actions affect other people. It happens "when the demands of two or more virtues collide". What one needs is how to integrate such demands into an acceptable course of action (The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, n.d.). A child that lives with good sense is likely to care for others since he often takes any decisions based on rigorous consideration of the effects of his actions on others.

There are a number of school-based programmes that can be used to foster character development. Two of these programmes, viz., social-emotional learning (SEL) and cultural standard (CS) worth consideration. Durlak (2011) (as cited in Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016, p. 199) defines SEL as "the process of acquiring a suite of skills that allow children and youth to recognize and manage emotions,

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accurately process social cues, set and achieve goals, manage interpersonal relationships, and make responsible decisions". For instance, imbalance in emotion or inability to manage interpersonal relationship is capable of pushing a person to misbehave. Two of the skills (manage emotion and manage interpersonal relationship) address this matter; though most of the skills are not moral in nature, they deal specifically with what individuals require to manage personal challenges in life.

Two of the core competencies that are explicitly moral in nature are *social awareness* and *responsible decision makin*g (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016). Lapsley and Woodbury (2016) contend that social awareness in moral environment relates to being able to empathise with others. A child who demonstrates empathy for others, no doubt, has shown the will to care for others. The will to protect the interest of others is likely to be primary in his actions. The second core competence is the ability to make responsible decision where ethical standard is involved. Such a decision is made with the assistance of parents or teachers who act as guidance. The social awareness strategy will require the efforts of both the teachers and parents for effective outcome.

The best that could happen to character development is to involve institutions of learning in moral development of young students, though it does not remove the role of parents in this scheme. Young people spend most of their time in school, interacting with teachers and colleagues, with many of them being exposed to conducts inimical to their life. Some are compelled to internalise virtues or vices, the outcome which may sometimes strengthen or weaken the basis of their learning. The essence of character education is to attend to such things that may strengthen the students' learning. Virtues are lost when a student's disposition to learn is weakened by the moral tension around him, caused either by the teachers' attitudes or colleagues' behaviour. Bakhati (2015) advises that learning should be organised to cater for students' competencies as well as their attitudes and behaviour.

Cultural infusion into character education is not oblivious of the need for a critical reflection of what constitute rational behaviour among young people. Children do ask *why* questions when they are left to discuss issues of morality with their parents. Sometimes parents provide explanations of why moral virtues such as integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsible behaviour, and caring are valued in the society and what happen to those who indulge in vices. Some of these young people may want to know why individuals could choose to cherish vices than virtues. The response to such a question may be that the "values, projects, practices and ends of the community" (Kazeem, 2009, p. 172) are no longer followed. In case the child is not convinced by the explanation given by the parent, the parent may resort to using a proverb, e.g., *oruko rere san ju wura ati fadaka lo* (a good name is better than riches) to demonstrate the virtues of honesty and self-discipline.

In African culture, particularly the Yoruba culture (an ethnic group in Nigeria), children learn, early in life, to internalise moral virtues such as honesty, transparency, accountability, integrity, justice, caring, hard work, and truthfulness. Young people's exposure to Western culture of individualism and violence in films begin to shape their conducts, giving room to moral perversion. Muyila (2007) is of the view that moral upbringing of African children is the responsibility of members of the society. Thus, in

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Yoruba culture, absence of moral probity and integrity reduces the personhood of a person to the level of "eniyan lasan" (caricature person) (Kazeem, 2009). The young people that involve in yahoo and yahoo plus lack moral probity and integrity hence they are just *eniyan lasan*.

The Yoruba conception of virtue clearly demonstrates that the knowledge of virtues and its cultivation culture infused. Aristotle is said to have claimed that "the virtue of a man is the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do work well" (Aristotle, 350BCE) (as cited in Kucukuysal & Beyhan, 2011, p. 51). In all cultures of the world, moral issues are issues of objectivity; that is what the Yoruba world view advocates. There may be differences in methods and approaches to character education its relevance to individual life is incontestable.

6. Conclusion

In a world that is fast drifting into violence and chaos, character development provides an opportunity to arrest this dangerous drift especially in a country that is vulnerable to criminal activities. While arguing for the happiness and well-being of the individuals, Plato and Aristotle in their works, recommend the cultivation of justice, wisdom, temperance, integrity and courage for the individuals. Lumpkin (2008) adds trust, honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility, as essential virtues that should be cultivated. The desirability of these virtues is fostered by the teacher who helps the students to internalise the moral virtues by acting as role model and exemplar. It is concluded here that the effectiveness of character development can be achieved if teachers are ready to show respect to their students, be honest in how they discharge their duties, and be trusted in their actions in school and outside the school. Developing character as an aim of education is likely to become a veritable tool to cultivate virtues among our young people.

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