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RESEARCH-BASED FUNDAMENTALS OF THE EFFECTIVE PROMOTION OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS

Marvin W. Berkowitz and Melinda C. Bier*

The intentional promotion of positive development in youth is an age-old project, probably a human enterprise since the earliest forms of human community. No society can endure if it does not take seriously the fundamental project of socializing subsequent generations. Translation of two Sumerian tablets give us evidence that this inclination was evident over 4,000 years ago:

My son, let me give you instructions. Pay attention to them! Do not beat a farmer’s son, or he will break your irrigation canal…. When you are drunk, do not judge…. Do not break into a house…. Do not speak with a girl when you are married, the [likelihood of] slander is strong…. Do not allow your sheep to graze in untested grazing grounds…. Submit to strength. Bow down to the mighty man.

(A Sumerian Father Gives Advice to his Son, about 2300 BCE)

Why do you idle about? Go to school, recite your assignment, open your schoolbag, write your tablet, let your “big brother” write your new tablet for you. Be humble and show fear before your apprentice teacher. When you show terror, he will like you…. Never in my life did I make you carry reeds to the canebrake. I never said to you “Follow my caravans.” I never sent you to work as a laborer. “Go, work and support me,” I never in my life said that to you. Others like you support their parents by working…. Compared to them you are not a man at all. Night and day you waste in pleasures…. Among all craftsmen that live in the land, no work is more difficult than that of a scribe. [But] it is in accordance with the fate decreed by [the god] Enlil that a man should follow his father’s work.

(A Sumerian Father Wants His Teen-Ager To Be A Scribe, about 2000 BCE)

Over the ensuing four millennia, the body of literature describing how to raise and educate children and adolescents continued to grow, so that now it is a massive
collection of advice, unfortunately often conflicting, and more importantly for this dis-
cussion, frequently not based in scientific evidence and theory. This is just as true
regardless of whether one examines the literature on parenting for character develop-
ment or the literature on educating for character development.

In this chapter, a more scientific approach will be brought to bear on just this ques-
tion: What do we know scientifically about best practices in fostering moral and charac-
ter development in general, and particularly in schools?

THE SEMANTIC MINEFIELD

Before we can reap the lessons of the research, however, we need to turn to one of the
obstacles in describing the research: the problem of language and definition. This has
proved to be a rather intractable problem (Berkowitz, 1997; Smagorinsky & Taxel,
2005), and it only seems to be getting more complex. The authors currently work
mostly under the rubric of “character education” but have all also done similar work
under other names; for example, moral education, values education, child develop-
ment, social-emotional learning, primary prevention, positive youth development,
and youth empowerment. Many colleagues have worked under still other rubrics for
the same or similar work, such as service learning, citizenship education, and science
technology and society (STS).

Defining each term so that it is clear is difficult enough, but defining them so that
they are clearly distinct from each other appears impossible because of the remarkable
overlap between most of them. We will not attempt to create a taxonomy of the disparate
terms and fields that intersect when one attempts to promote healthy and positive devel-
opment of youth in educational settings, because (1) it is beyond the purview of this
chapter; (2) we have made some attempts to do this elsewhere (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a;
Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier, & Battistich, 2006); and (3) it may ultimately be impossible
because of the ill-defined boundaries of many of these fields, as well as the polarizing and
projective nature of the promotion of “goodness.”

Instead we will simply carve out our turf by trying to define what we include when
we talk about character education. Character education occurs in educational set-
tings. Whereas there are many educational settings, for practical purposes more than
for any other reason, we try to limit our scope to pre-kindergarten through 12th
grade schools, or what many other cultures refer to as primary and secondary schools.
We also try to limit our scope to what happens during the regular school day, thus
avoiding after-school programs and extracurricular programs that occur outside of
regular school hours, although they may be bundled with school day implementation
strategies. Certainly these are artificial lines we have drawn, but when one focuses
on intentional efforts to promote positive character in youth, one has to draw lines
because so much (albeit not enough) of a society’s efforts are directed toward this
fundamental human project. This is not to devalue the other spheres of influence
(certainly families and more particularly parenting are the primary “character edu-
cators” and we have become increasingly concerned about the powerful impact of
the media on youth character as they have become more ubiquitous, ambiguous, and
graphic); rather it is intended to focus on a developmental sphere of influence that is
significant, common, and more readily accessed for intervention. Furthermore, as we
have learned (Berkowitz, 2012a; Berkowitz & Grych, 1998, 2000), the fundamental
principles of what promotes character development remain much the same across different domains of influence. Child development is impacted by the same fundamental forces and strategies, regardless of the source (e.g., parents vs. teachers).

Within those educational settings, we focus on those activities and processes that should influence student character development. That in itself is rife with difficulties. By what basis should they have such an influence? Must we individually justify each process and practice we examine? While one could argue affirmatively to the latter question, we will take the authors’ prerogative and allow ourselves some slack here. As experts in the field, we will use our professional judgments to decide what can reasonably be included in the domain of character education, knowing full well that there is extensive disagreement about this.

But another issue about the selection of variables of influence has to do with intentionality. While we would prefer to examine only intentionally targeted influences, given the nascent state of this field, some fishing is warranted. For instance, we believe a powerful, even critical, variable in the effectiveness of character education is the nature of school leadership, especially the degree to which leadership understands deep school reform-based character education, is committed to it, and can serve as an instructional leader for it (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz, Pelster, & Johnston, 2012). Yet little is known about the impact of school leadership and rarely is it an intentionally targeted aspect of character education (Devaney, O’Brien, Resnik, Keister, & Weissberg, 2006; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). An even stronger but related argument can be made for the nature of the adult culture in schools (Berkowitz, 2012a), another variable for which there is little research (cf. Bryk & Schneider, 2002). In one sense this is a moot argument, as we can only report on that which has been studied thus far, and these unintentional variables almost by definition are not typically studied. However, as we also want to address what needs to be known, it is worth making this point.

The final piece of the definitional puzzle has to do with outcome variables. Up to this point we have really focused on the second word in the term “character education”; that is, education. We defined it as pre-K to 12th grade, during the school day, and expected to impact student character development. However, that still leaves the first word, “character.” If, for us, character education is the set of practices and programs during the pre-K to 12th grade school day that should influence student character development, what is this student character that we expect to develop? Here we will simply rely on a definition that we have been using for a while: Character is the set of psychological characteristics that motivate and enable an individual to function as a competent moral agent. In other words, it is those aspects of one’s psychological makeup that impact whether one does the right thing, whether that entails telling the truth, helping an unpopular student who is in jeopardy, resisting the temptation to cheat or steal, or some other matter of moral functioning.

These characteristics span a range of psychological domains. One common shorthand for this range has been adopted by the Character Education Partnership in their definition of character as “understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values” (www.character.org). This tri-partite definition incorporates aspects of the cognitive, affective/motivational, and behavioral domains of psychological functioning and development (for a fuller explication see Berkowitz, 2012b). “Of course, this still leaves open the question of what is moral, but we will not attempt to define this other than to rely on the millennia old wisdom of philosophers and simply refer the reader back to them” (cf. Berkowitz, 2012b).
WHAT IS NEEDED

Years of consultation with, training of, and observation of educators grappling with how to effectively promote character development has led to the recognition of the main obstacles to successful moral and character education. Educators typically need assistance with the following:

1. Understanding the nature of character and how it develops; i.e., what it is and what impacts its development;
2. Authentically allowing themselves to give priority to moral and character education (often in the face of countervailing historical, political, cultural, and economic forces);
3. Thinking sociologically (e.g., understanding character education as, in large part, fundamentally organizational/institutional reform), and not just pedagogically and psychologically;
4. Acquiring the often complex knowledge and developing the often equally complex pedagogical competencies required to be an effective moral and character educator.

This chapter will present what is empirically known about effective moral and character development in an attempt to address all four of these needs, but will focus most extensively on those aspects of needs 1, 3, and 4 that directly deal with evidence-based moral and character education practice. Most centrally, however, the focus will be on what research tells us about effective character education practice.

MAJOR SOURCES OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Over a decade ago, the authors began to survey what was empirically known about school-based character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a), and were then surprised to uncover 69 scientifically sound studies of relevance. More recently, in a meta-analysis of studies of social-emotional learning, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011) identified 213 studies of relevance. Whereas SEL is not identical with character education, they are largely overlapping domains. In other words, there is a growing and substantial body of relevant literature upon which to draw in order to address the question of effective practice in this domain. Hence, we have elected to look at a set of meta-analyses and reviews rather than to try to examine all the individual existing studies. An important note is that our focus is on empirically identified “best practices” and most studies and reviews do not include implementation strategies as independent or moderator variables. For example, the one meta-analysis of specifically character education programs that we could find, an unpublished master’s thesis, only looked at outcomes of character education and did not examine differences in implementation methods (Berg, 2003).

Furthermore, triggered by an aphorism we often invoke during professional development with educators, “good character education is good education,” we will examine reviews of the impact of educational strategies on academic achievement in order to look for such pedagogical similarities.
The character education reviews utilized here are Berkowitz and Bier’s (2005a) *What Works in Character Education* (WWCE), Lovat, Toomey, Dally, and Clement’s (2009) review of values education, and Durlak et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis of social-emotional learning, along with Berkowitz’s (2011) updating of WWCE.

The civic/citizenship domain will be represented by the EPPI (2005) systematic review of citizenship education. While this study focused on academic outcomes, it was a comprehensive review of outcome research and looked at implementation strategies.

The reviews focusing more broadly on academically successfully educational practices are the cluster of work by Marzano (2003a, 2003b, 2007) and Hattie’s (2009) extensive review of over 800 meta-analyses.

**FRAMING WITH PRIME**

In order to organize the results of the review of reviews, it is helpful to adopt a conceptual model of major character education strategies. Berkowitz (2009; cf. Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013) has proposed a five component model of optimal character education implementation, called PRIME. The term refers to:

- **P**rioritization of character education in the educational setting. This emphasis must be authentic, and ideally begins with the organizational leader (principal, superintendent, etc.) and is school-wide.
- **R**elationships are the essential building blocks of character development and optimal education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005b; Watson, 2003). They should be proactively and strategically nurtured and this applies within and across all stakeholder groups in the school or district.
- **I**ntrinsic motivation should be the primary motivational and developmental target of character education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2013). Conversely, modes of extrinsic motivation should be minimized if not eliminated.
- **M**odels of character should surround students. Primarily all adults in the educational setting should model the character they want to see developing in students.
- **E**mpowerment of all stakeholders should be emphasized and strategically supported. Flattening governance structures, increasing democratic processes, and generally making space for “voices” to be elicited, heard, and honored are core aspects of this element.

The effective methods identified in the review will therefore, where appropriate, be clustered under these five concepts. Additionally, where appropriate, aspects of the Character Education Partnership’s *Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education* (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2010) will be identified and related to specific elements described below.

**EFFECTIVE METHODS**

Table 14.1 presents all the methods for which any of the seven reviews/meta-analyses report empirical support. It also clusters them according to the five PRIME meta-strategies.
### Table 14.1 Research-based Practices

<table>
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**Notes**

Prioritization

The importance of authentic prioritization of character education is represented by three research-supported practices:

- professional development;
- common language;
- school-wide emphasis.

**Professional development.** Professional development was reported as a research-based practice by Berkowitz (2011), Berkowitz and Bier (2005a), and Hattie (2009). Berkowitz and Bier reported that all 33 effective character education programs they identified included professional development either as a mandatory component or as an option. Hattie reports a meta-analysis by Timperley et al. (2007) which identified seven characteristics of professional development that leads to student change, including sustained training, training by outside experts, challenges to teachers’ current concepts and language, teachers talking to teachers, and leadership support.

**Common language.** Lovat et al. (2009) were the only ones to specifically cite common language as a best practice, “the use by teachers, students and often parents of this common language not only led to greater understanding of the targeted values but also provided a positive focus for reflecting on and redirecting children’s inappropriate behaviour” (p. 33). Anecdotally schools frequently report a lack of common language as an impediment to optimal implementation, or the development of shared language as a tipping point in moving their initiative forward. Many research-supported programs include their own terminology, often including a list of character outcomes. The Character Education Partnership (Beland, 2003; Character Education Partnership, 2010) strongly encourages schools/districts to identify a set of core ethical values as the framework and language upon which to build a comprehensive character education initiative. The first two principles focus almost exclusively on this approach.

**School-wide emphasis.** Making character education an organizational priority includes implementing across the entire organization, rather than a single curricular strand, for only some students, or in other ways as an isolated strategy. School-wide implementation was reported by Berkowitz (2011), Berkowitz and Bier (2005a), Lovat et al. (2009), Hattie (2009), and Marzano (2003a, 2003b, 2007). Lovat et al. (2009) actually identified a set of school-wide variables including incorporation in school policy and discussion of values at school-wide assemblies. The Character Education Partnership’s (2010) third principle emphasizes the comprehensive implementation of character education across all school elements. Some effective character education programs explicitly include school-wide implementation emphasis (e.g., Caring School Community, Developmental Studies Center, 1994). Berkowitz (2011; Berkowitz et al., 2012) has further emphasized the critical role of school leadership in effective implementation.

Relationships

The promotion of relationships is an element in five evidence-based strategies:

- interactive pedagogy
- family and/or community participation
- promoting trust
• directly targeting relationships
• nurturance.

**Interactive pedagogy.** Berkowitz and Bier (2005a) identified this cluster of pedagogical strategies to be very common in effective character education programs. Such methods focus on learning and development promoted through predominantly student-to-student interactions. Interactive strategies include peer tutoring, cross-age initiatives, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, etc. In fact, this was the only strategy identified in all seven reviews. Durlak et al. (2011) focused on active learning, EPPI (2005) on engagement and discussion, Lovat et al. (2009) on relational learning, Hattie (2009) on relational learning and cooperative learning, and Marzano (2003a, 2003b, 2007) on relational learning, class meetings, and cooperative learning. Berkowitz and Bier also identified a large set of studies demonstrating the impact of moral dilemma discussion on the development of moral reasoning competencies.

**Family and/or community participation.** Applying a character education initiative beyond the typical stakeholders in a school or district expands relationship-building to a broader range of individuals and groups. Most commonly these are family members, most notably parents of students, and other related community members (e.g., law enforcement, local government, local businesses, etc.). Strategically encouraging such extra-school relationships was identified as an effective practice by Berkowitz (2011), Berkowitz and Bier (2005a), Lovat et al. (2009), and Marzano (2003a, 2007). In particular, Lovat et al. emphasized communication with families and Marzano emphasized recognition of community members and inclusion of families in behavior management. The Character Education Partnership’s (2010) 10th Principle supports engaging “families and community members as partners.” Parental involvement in particular can be implemented at many levels, from parent as audience to parent as client to the more desirable parent as partner (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005c). In the latter case, parents partner with the school in designing, implementing, and/or evaluating character education. Santiago, Ferrara, and Quinn (2012) offer an excellent model of comprehensive community-school partnership combined with character education.

**Trust.** Whereas an intentional focus on building trust per se was identified only by Berkowitz (2011), it has been a major focus of a set of disparate educational models of relevance. It has been invoked as a critical element in school leadership in particular (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) and the adult culture of a school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) as well as foundational for developmental discipline (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Watson, 2003).

**Relationship-building.** Marzano (2003b) directly cites the strategic intentional fostering of healthy relationships between student and teacher as one of the three aspects of effective classroom management (along with rules/procedures and disciplinary interventions). Watson (2003) also includes this (along with student–student relationships and using behavior incidents as opportunities for growth and learning) as the foundation of developmental discipline. One rather unique and effective character education program, Roots of Empathy, incorporates relationships at multiple levels by bringing a mother and her infant, with a trained facilitator, to classrooms (Gordon, 2005), thereby studying parent–infant relationships but also developing a relationship between the students and visitors over repeated visits/lessons.

**Nurturance.** Despite the foundational importance of love/care in child development, it is not widely studied in educational research. Berkowitz and Grych (1998,
2000) found it to be a key element in both parenting and teaching for character. Other researchers have found this to be true in elementary school (Howe & Ritchie, 2003), middle school (Wentzel, 2002) and high school (Gregory et al., 2010). A growing body of educational theory and philosophy has also focused on an ethic of caring (e.g., Noddings, 1992). Nevertheless, it was only cited in two of the reviews (Berkowitz, 2011; Marzano, 2007). Marzano specifically encourages “behaviors that indicate affection for each student” (p. 155) such as greeting students at the door (cf. Urban, 2008).

Intrinsic Motivation
The internalization of motivation (Althof & Berkowitz, 2013; Streight, 2013) is a central goal of developmental education, particularly developmental education focusing on the development of pro-social characteristics. The Character Education Partnership’s (2010) 7th Principle is to foster self-motivation in students. This focus was manifested in the reviews in three research-supported strategies:

- Real and relevant education
- Service to others
- Progressive behavior management.

Real and relevant education. One way to promote the internalization of values and motives is to make education personally meaningful for students. This strategy was identified by both EPPI (2005) and Marzano (2003a, 2007).

Service to others. Another way to increase the likelihood that students will internalize pro-social values is to provide for them the opportunity to serve others, something that is common in character education. Service was identified by Berkowitz (2011), Berkowitz and Bier (2005a), Durlak et al. (2011), and Lovat et al. (2009). It is also the Character Education Partnership’s (2010) 5th Principle. Service learning, in particular, links service to others with the school’s curriculum, and this has been shown to impact both character development and academic achievement (Billig, 2002).

Progressive behavior management. The concept of character education naturally invokes student behavior, especially misbehavior, and hence interfaces frequently with the challenge of managing student misbehavior in school settings. Despite the wealth of data on ineffective behavior management techniques, most of which are based on an extrinsic theory of behavior change (cf. Deci & Ryan, 2002), educators persist in relying on such approaches (Berkowitz, 2012a; Streight, 2013), rather than on more progressive approaches such as developmental discipline (Bear, 2005; Danforth & Smith, 2005; Watson, 2003). Three of the reviews identified more progressive, developmental, and intrinsically-based behavior management as an effective practice (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a; Marzano, 2003a, 2003b, 2007).

Modeling
Developmental research has long supported the power of imitation and modeling in child development. Three reviews reinforced this emphasis (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a; Lovat et al., 2009). Ideally models are those with whom students have healthy relationships (e.g., teachers). However, there may also be others in the community, historical figures, or even fictional characters in the literature curriculum.
Empowerment

Given that a fundamental purpose of schooling, in democratic societies in particular, is the socialization of youth as future citizens, creating schools that embody democratic practices and principles is critical (Dewey, 1944). Berkowitz (2011, 2012b) has labeled the general focus on empowering educational practices as a “pedagogy of empowerment” and it applies to all stakeholders in a school (administrators, teachers, support staff, students, parents, etc.). Nonetheless, empowerment was identified only by Berkowitz (2011) and Marzano (2003a, 2003b, 2007) as an effective practice. Marzano (2007), for example, identified student voice in setting learning goals and designing educational tasks. Education tends toward hierarchical, authoritarian (albeit benevolent) approaches and tends to strain against the authentic empowerment of stakeholders and the flattening of governance structures (Berkowitz, 2012b).

Beyond PRIME

Six additional strategies that do not fit clearly in any of the PRIME components were also identified as research-supported practices.

Direct Instruction. It is not surprising that education for character includes teaching about character. This tends to focus on teaching character concepts, such as virtues and values that are often the most salient aspect of a school’s initiative. It may also focus on examples (e.g., exemplars, role models) in the curriculum or supplemental to the curriculum. Four of the reviews identified some form of direct instruction as an effective practice. This approach was either direct instruction about character (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a) or values (Lovat et al., 2009) or instruction in social-emotional competencies (Berkowitz, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011).

Inquiry-based Learning. The two reviews of specifically academic-focused strategies (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2007) both identified inquiry-based learning as an effective practice. While such approaches have been used effectively in character education (e.g., Berger, 2003), they tend not to be included in research studies of character education programs and methods.


Expectations. Setting high expectations is a core element of both parenting for (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998) and educating for (Berkowitz & Grych, 2000; Wentzel, 2002) character development, but it is not studied widely in the literature and hence was only identified by Berkowitz (2011) and Marzano (2003a, 2003b, 2007). Merely setting high expectations, however, is not likely to be adequate, as supportive conditions need to be in place along with pedagogies that scaffold students’ underdeveloped competencies to allow them to achieve excellent performance (Berger, 2003; Turner & Berkowitz, 2005; Urban, 2008). This includes setting clear expectations, checking in on progress, allowing multiple attempts at success, offering constructive feedback, allowing play relevant to the task, etc.

Safe Schools. Despite all the emphasis on school safety (e.g., bullying, violence prevention) and the fact that the major US Department of Education division charged with character, civics, and social emotional learning is the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, only one review identified school safety as a best practice, and it was not one of the character-focused reviews, but rather Marzano’s (2003a) review of best academic
practices. In a study of academic outcomes of character education, Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, and Smith (2003) found safe and clean schools to be a clear predictor of academic achievement.

**Reflection.** Reflection is an excellent means of promoting and sustaining understanding and retention, and this applies to both academic learning (Marzano, 2003a, 2003b, 2007) and character development (Lovat et al., 2009).

**ACADEMIC VS. CHARACTER/VALUES/CIVICS PRACTICES**

One of the more frequently asked questions is whether those reviews that focused on academic achievement (EPPI, 2005; Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003a, 2003b, 2007) identified different effective practices than did those focusing specifically on character, values, social-emotional, or citizenship outcomes (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005a; Durlak et al., 2011; Lovat et al., 2009). It is important to note that this dichotomy is far from pure. Berkowitz and Bier included academic achievement as an outcome variable, Durlak et al. focused heavily on academic outcome variables, EPPI examined citizenship programs but only looked at academic outcomes, and Hattie's review of meta-analyses included character and related programs (see Table 14.1). Nonetheless, the emphases are distinguishable and the studies reviewed varied widely depending on the primary emphasis of the review.

Despite the differential emphasis on academic versus developmental outcomes, the vast majority of practices were cited in both academic-focused and character-focused studies. It was our belief that “good character education is good education” that led to the initial inclusion of those academic reviews in this analysis. This intuition was vindicated by the results. Of the 19 practices identified (see Table 14.1), 12 were cited in both academic-focused and character-focused reviews. Given the fact that three of the reviews were more academic in focus and four were more character-focused, it is not surprising that more of the non-overlapping practices were cited by the character reviews.

There were six practices that were cited only by one or more of the character reviews: direct teaching; setting learning goals; using common language; modeling; service; trust. Interestingly, the first two could be argued to be more academic in focus, yet they were only cited by character-focused reviews. In a similarly counter-intuitive fashion, only one practice was cited only by academic-focused reviews. Marzano (2003a), the most purely academic-focused review, was the only study to cite safe schools, which can be argued to be more closely aligned with character concepts (Benninga et al., 2003).

**CONCLUSION**

Sufficient research has been amassed to allow for the examination of best practices in character education, and related fields such as values, citizenship, and social-emotional learning. Furthermore, the overlap in these domains of outcomes and methods with studies of best academic achievement practices allows for the examination of an even larger body of research. In so doing, this review has looked at seven research reviews/meta-analyses of relevance and has identified 19 research-based practices for both promoting academic achievement and character development.

Interestingly, the practices that promote academic achievement and character education are predominantly overlapping, and when they are not, the differences are both
counter-intuitive and probably artifactual of the variables of focus in particular studies or areas of research.

This set of practices provides a broad-based and research-driven foundation for building effective schools, districts, and classrooms for both the promotion of academic achievement and for fostering the development of character, values, citizenship, and social-emotional maturity.

NOTES

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