Who Should Define the Curriculum?

Holly Southcott

This paper takes a political and international perspective, asserting a critical viewpoint towards the role and purpose of the current education systems, and in turn discusses who should define the curriculum. Drawing on national education ideologies and educational philosophies within the UK it contrasts with international ideas with reference to current curriculum policies. It reviews the Finnish education system and discusses possible recommendations for future practice regarding who should define the curriculum.


The nature of this paper has been approached from a political perspective, synthesising international literature and national documentation with personal philosophies regarding education. It draws on national education ideologies alongside international educational philosophies to draw pertinent conclusions with reference to current curriculum policies. It additionally discusses possible recommendations for future practice regarding who should define the curriculum.

When contemplating who should define the curriculum, it is critical to acknowledge long-standing characteristics influencing its design. The question itself is invaluable in investigating national, international and individual values and philosophies in order to expose what our society requires from a curriculum in times of an uncertain future.

**The purpose of education**
Consistent time-honoured debates exist regarding what education is for. Bates and Lewis (2009) establish how many societies comprehend education as the formal, structured method
of schooling. Peters (1966) affirms this alongside others, conveying how young children might suggest it is for learning, and secondary-aged children perceive it as assisting them in getting a job (Sewell and Newman, 2009). Conversely, Gregory (2002) poses an alternative analysis, communicating that education is concerned with enabling students to identify with the physical, social and cultural world.

Education persistently remains a priority on global government agendas (Robinson and Aronica 2015; Sayd, 2016) and undergoes consistent influence by these political motives (Gearon, 2009). From dynamic government initiatives, society develops its perception of the purpose of education. However, in order to determine an accurate purpose of education, we must first define education. Yet, what do we suggest by ‘education’? Carr (2003) regards ‘schooling’ as relative to the term ‘education’, yet, Gregory (2002) accentuates the terms are distinct and do not hold the assumed relationship. Sewell and Newman (2009) support Gregory’s (2002) stance, arguing that education encompasses both formal and informal learning. Informal learning is regarded as learning which occurs outside the school or classroom (Bartlett and Burton, 2006), is not deliberately organised and is often achieved unintentionally (Tudor, 2013). Therefore, a child’s education is not simply what one learns within an institution. However, throughout this paper education will be discussed in relation to what is accredited as the formal method of education; that which takes place within an institution.

The notion of education has taxed philosophers since the times of Plato and Socrates (Sewell and Newman, 2009). Papadopolous (1998) acknowledged there are numerous interpretations of the term ‘education’ and it is these integrated terms which generate the struggle in deducing a clear definition. Craft (1984) offers an applicable definition which concerns traditional organisations of education. Stemming from the Latin root, ‘educare’ translates to ‘train or mould’. When applied, this approach demands conformity. Conformity within education is recognised as an institutional tendency to assess students by an independent standard of ability (Robinson and Aronica, 2015). This is further construed by Bass (1997) emphasising how education is comparable to how industrial processes produce identical products. In his book ‘Creative Schools: Revolutionizing Education from the Ground Up’, Robinson characterises how this conventional approach to education is modelled by the interests of industrialism, and in the image of it (Robinson and Aronica, 2015). This image emphasises how schools imitate factory production lines, with ringing bells to signify changes in the day, specific allocated time and places for assembly of separate components (different curriculum areas), with the analogy of industrialism and education
resulting in manufacture of a whole product. That product is seen as a child’s education. Conversely, corresponding with Gregory’s (2002) evaluation that education should encompass a holistic approach, acting as a process rather than a product (Bruner, 1960), Craft (1984) additionally proposes a respected definition, stemming from the Latin root ‘educere’ translating ‘to lead out’. Craft further implies that this interpretation represents how education should be to provide for change.

It should be acknowledged how these definitions represent the two central ideologies of education. Ideologies, defined as value-rich philosophies encompassing intertwined systems of ideas and beliefs (Ernest, 1991; Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997), remain diverse when maintained by varying social groups with separate educational ambitions. In synthesising each ideology with the National Curriculum for England (DfE, 2013) it is interesting to identify which ideology the curriculum strives to achieve, contrasted with the ideology which it enforces.

A curriculum has been defined throughout literature with reference to various concepts, but is commonly understood by ‘what is taught’ (Squires, 1990; Glatthorn, Carr and Harris, 2001; Glatthorn, 2000). In contrast, Toombs and Tierney (1993) offer a working definition that a curriculum as a concept is almost without limitations, from encompassing a variety of programs, to the individual experience of each student. Male and Waters (2012, p.9) further support this stance, communicating that curriculum design is more than listing what we want students to learn; it is about designing the experiences students need in order to learn those things.

In 1988 the government passed the Education Reform Act (Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1988) which was considered one of the most important Reform Acts since 1944 (Gillard, 2011). The Act’s major provision concerned the curriculum, which gave the government increased involvement within the United Kingdom’s education system. The Act provided for a ‘basic curriculum’ to be taught (Gillard, 2011) which would ensure an accessible framework throughout the country where a body of knowledge and skills valued by society could be passed on to younger generations (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009). This reflects Squire’s (1990) and Glatthorn’s (2000) evaluation of a curriculum as something taught. At the time educationalists appeared to be in favour of the curriculum. Furthermore, in later years, the Cambridge Primary Review (2009) identified that although the curriculum had been revised numerous times, the general structure of the curriculum had been maintained, alongside persistent support amongst educators for a national framework (Alexander, 2010).
However, with regards to the recently revised Primary National Curriculum (DfE, 2013), attitudes concerning the need for a national framework have altered. It is clear through government initiatives and policy that the government aspires to progress away from the conception of education as a product, in order to provide education for change in our dynamic society (Lewis and Ansell, 2010; Craft, 1984). Educationalists have indicated we are still educating children for occupations unlikely to exist in future years (Robinson and Aronica, 2015) therefore a curriculum heavily influenced by content, and predominantly consisting of academic subjects might not be successful in providing for these changes. It is apparent from personal experiences that not all children require this formal, academic education, particularly with technology having an increasing impact on careers and society.

The National Curriculum sets out to establish a broad and balanced curriculum promoting the ‘spiritual, moral, cultural and physical development of pupils’ and preparing them for ‘responsibilities and experiences of life’ (DfE, 2013, p.5). This reflects Craft’s (1984) second ideology of education outlined in this review, developing the holistic child and preparing for future experiences. However, in practice the curriculum contradicts itself as it remains subject to conformity due to multiple characteristics; statutory requirements, assessment, curriculum time, performance measures (Alexander, 2012; Robinson, 2015; Herne, Burgess-Macey and Rogers, 2008). These aspects confine the curriculum within the ideals of the initial outlined ideology; the industrialist approach, ensuring all children receive the same education.

It is from this that questions are raised concerning historical and current political influences which governments have had upon the curriculum. Personal philosophies encourage deliberation concerning whether the government should continue to solely define the curriculum, or whether others such as alternative stakeholders, educators, and perhaps most importantly, children, should be acknowledged as invaluable in contributing towards defining the curriculum.

Personal vision and values of education encompass the importance of establishing a stimulating learning culture which encourages learner independence. I consider children need to establish learner independence in order to become life-long learners. Yet, this is currently difficult to achieve in practice due to the current conformity of the curriculum. Subsequently, this paper discusses personal values and philosophies regarding child-initiated pedagogy and synthesizes literature with personal experience exposing possible recommendations.
Child-initiated learning

There is controversy whether there remains the need for a curriculum. Mitra (2007) proposed that children are capable of self-teaching and self-learning, questioning whether there remains a place for formal education. This view stems from the 1999 Hole in the Wall project, where Mitra’s team created a ‘hole in the wall’ between the NIIT and the Kalkaji slum in New Delhi. This hole included a freely accessible computer which children from Kalkaji began to use without any prior experience or assistance, and was further investigated in Shivpuri and Madantusi where findings reflected those of Kalkaji (Hole-in-the-wall, 2015). In contrast, Sobel and Letourneau (2015) offer an analysis of how young children are unable to independently reflect on the learning process and do not comprehend what constitutes as valuable learning, establishing the need for a foundation to draw from; a curriculum. I consider it is invaluable to explore the concept of child-centered learning when deliberating who should define the curriculum, as Barbour, Kinos, Robertson and Pukk (2014) argue that child-centered pedagogy could act as an increasingly suitable approach to contemporary global challenges.

It is well established that child-centered learning puts the child at the centre of the educational process (Hytonen, 2008; Chung and Walsh, 2000), and is argued that this approach demonstrates an increase in children’s engagement and motivation (Beane, 1997; Brough, 2008; Dowden, 2010). However, interpretations of child-centered learning vary throughout literature. O’Neil and McMahon (2005) convey these interpretations encompass active learning, choices in learning and a shift in teacher-student relationships. Robertson, Kinos, Barbour, Pukk and Rosqvist (2015) evaluate how the term ‘child-initiated’ depicts a clearer, more definitive representation than ‘child-centered’. Child-initiated pedagogy entails that the interests and motivations of children are seen at the forefront of planning, organisation and facilitating children’s learning (Kinos and Pukk, 2010; Schweisfurth, 2013a).

Kinos and Pukk (2010) support how this approach exists within the exchange of ideas between adults and children, defining curricula as emergent as opposed to predetermined. It is here where it is imperative to understand the positive contributions children hold in defining their own learning. This approach forms a basis for children’s ideas and needs to inform construction of learning and in turn define curricula. From evaluation of literature I consider the individual child should be situated at the centre of the curriculum, which indicates their role in defining the curriculum. However, what could this look like in practice? Throughout this module I have developed an awareness of various institutions which adopt
child-initiated pedagogies, such as Plymouth School of Creative Arts, and independent school Summerhill, which are free from the National Curriculum. These free schools have encouraged children to take ownership of their own learning, and in turn promote learner independence. Conversely, these schools do not conform to the requirements of the National Curriculum, which generates these opportunities to adopt child-initiated approaches. A. S. Neil, the founder of Summerhill School in 1927, believed instead of making the child fit the school, he believed the school should fit the child (Hicks, 2004). Lessons at this school are still voluntary, as educators believe children come to the learning in their own time. However, not all schools have the luxury of this independence. From personal experience throughout practice I have been subject to an innovative approach regarding child-initiated pedagogy which adheres to government requirements, yet remains successful in encouraging learner independence.

**Progression based learning**

Recent classroom-based experience supported the development of personal perceptions towards the successive contributions of child-initiated pedagogy in practice. This was demonstrated through the use of learning progressions. Learning progressions are conceptual alongside visual maps establishing how students might progress through understanding within a subject area (Achieve, 2015; Popham, 2007). These progression maps reflect the ideas of others, such as Bruner’s (1960) spiral curriculum. The concept of a ‘spiral curriculum’ encompasses the idea that in teaching a subject you begin the learning well within the students’ abilities, and revisit these areas later through more formal or structured application (Bruner, 1996). Harden (1999) further evaluates how the spiral curriculum involves an iterative revisiting of topics. In contrast, Dowding (1993) evaluated that although a spiral curriculum has highly effective characteristics, it is rarely successfully implemented on a large-scale over a substantial period of time. Although this source is dated, Dowding’s observation remains consistent in today’s society. Furthermore, Bruner (1996) accentuates the importance of giving learners a sense of generative structure which the spiral curriculum values. This corresponds with the concept of learners generating their own structure of learning through the support of progression plans.

In the classroom context these learning progressions, often illustrated on a classroom wall, facilitate children’s access to curriculum content before it is taught. Teacher planning for a curriculum topic is translated onto a learning progression, transferring skills objectives into child-friendly vocabulary. This enables children to be aware of their steps of learning
Initial planning for progressions is not child-initiated due to the conformity of statutory requirements enforced by the curriculum, however; the way in which the learning is achieved represents child initiated pedagogy. Children move through the progressions at their own pace of learning and are able to revisit stages in order to inform more challenging concepts, reflecting Bruner’s (1960) concept of a spiral curriculum. What’s more, if children discover an alternative line of enquiry they wish to investigate, either independently or within a group, they are encouraged through this self-discovery and allocated time for this. From a global perspective, the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) advocates the establishment of these relevant learning contexts alongside an inquiry approach, and adopts a similar approach to child-initiated learning processes. The New Zealand curriculum framework intends to address children’s learning needs, encouraging them to become independent and lifelong learners (Shuayb and O’Donnell, 2008). This approach supports various elements of classroom practice, assisting teachers’ comprehension of how individuals develop knowledge and skills (Achieve, 2015; Masters and Forster, 1997) and personalises the learning experience, assigning children the ownership of their own learning. This view is internationally reflected through US based initiative Achieve (2015) which sets out to assist learner independence through progression-based learning.

Wenger (1998) argued learning is enhanced when students engage with learning through meaningful contexts; when transferred ownership of their learning. The importance of transferring this ownership to children is additionally analysed by Robertson et al. (2015) alongside opinions for Calder and Brough (2013). Children can achieve this ownership through the learning progressions through posing alternative inquiries in various areas of learning (Beane, 1997; Calder and Brough, 2013), alongside relating learning to own individual interests and motivations.

Learning progressions are not a new concept; developmental psychologist have long been examining the development of children’s ideas (Duncan, 2009). Yet, (Achieve, 2015) argues there are few examples of learning progressions within primary education, as it oversteps the confines of the curriculum. However, it is through approaches such as these where the diverse educational ideologies begin to intersect. But what attributes does this approach hold which can help structure our view with regards to defining the curriculum? From synthesis of international literature with personal experience and observation it is clear this approach can be highly successful in developing learner independence, therefore it is interesting to consider what children could achieve without current curriculum conformity. It is here where we debate whether children could construct their own curriculum? However, it
has already been deliberated that children are not aware of what is considered valuable learning. Therefore, if we were to consider shifting the responsibility of curriculum design away from the government to child-initiated construction, this alone would not be sufficient or effective. It is therefore essential to consider the role of the teacher within these progression based systems and in turn their role in defining the curriculum.

The educator as facilitator
Progression-based systems require educators to facilitate curricular opportunities for children to discover learning for themselves, unveiling new lines of inquiry relative to personal interests which construct individual curricula. The role of the teacher as facilitator has been well documented throughout literature (Musinski, 1999; Phan, 2014) communicating how this pedagogy can contribute towards educators and students co-constructing learning (Beane, 1997) and in turn, the curriculum.

This notion of the teacher as facilitator sits within the second ideology of education outlined in this paper, as opposed to the industrialist ideology. Within the industrialist ideology, the educator is viewed as a ‘leader’ who states what will be taught and what students will learn (Musinski, 1999). This corresponds with the illusion held by many, implying the curriculum as content which is taught by educators. This conventional ideology compels educators to direct each student in what is perceived as the ‘right’ direction, whether the student aspires to be directed that way or not. Hill and Howlett (1993) accentuate that educators adopting this stance, within the ideology of educational conformity, prevent children accessing the summit of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs; self-actualisation.

Within Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943; 1954) self-actualisation represents a concept derived from humanistic psychological theory (Olson, 2013). In achieving self-actualisation a person must construct meaning from phenomena which is important to them (Maslow, 1943; McLeod, 2007). However, Kenrick, Neuberg, Griskevicius, Becker and Schaller (2010) argue each person is unique and establishing motivation for self-actualisation directs people in various directions. If the teacher acts as facilitator as opposed to the leader there are more opportunities to provide for this discovery. Additionally, this element of Maslow’s hierarchy sits firmly within the second educational ideology, encouraging the holistic development of the child, and enabling them to identify with interests and motivations for learning. This is what our curriculum should provide for. Conversely, educators are steered by the conformity of the curriculum, inevitably encouraging them to adopt the stance of the ‘leader’ in the classroom, using instructive
approaches which prevent successful self-actualisation and learner independence. In turn, the shift from educators as experts to facilitators is not always simple.

There are arguments which convey that this shift can be diminishing of teachers’ authority. This however, should not be the case. The facilitator will still establish an authoritative role, in order to secure proficient learning. Facilitating learning opportunities assists learners to become aware of the need to know and the value of learning (Knowles, 1990). Scaglione (1996) further supports the role of the facilitator contributing how effective facilitators encourage positive learning environments while providing support, ideas and alternative interpretations to stimulate self-confidence. In contrast, this role is challenging to successfully implement due to statutory requirements set out by the government, leaving limited freedom for educators to infringe on curriculum time, resulting in a fast-paced curriculum directed by teachers.

Covey (1990) conveys how there are different stages of learning, categorised into two phases; dependence and independence. He expressed how the independence stage, where children know why they want to learn and what they want to learn, is rarely achieved until adolescence. We do not expect primary aged children to achieve this state of learning, hence instructive lessons conducted by a full-bodied curriculum to guide them how and what to learn. However, from personal experience I have been subject to mixed ability year 3 and 4 children migrating into the independence phase through progression-based teaching and learning, where the teacher facilitates these learning opportunities. It is here that personal philosophies have been secured with regards to encouraging learner independence. I believe it is critical that children are given opportunities to decide for themselves how and what they need to learn, relating it to their individual interests and motivations. Alfaro-Lefevre (1995) establishes that opportunities which facilitators provide must draw on children’s strengths, whilst incorporating students’ learning preferences. This is critical in order to motivate children to establish learner independence. This is supported by Musinski (1999) who, with regards to adult learners, established how they enjoy taking responsibility for their own learning. From personal observation, I consider this equally applies to children and their learning needs.

In practice this progression-based, facilitator approach is a personal preference in order to achieve personal philosophies concerning learner independence. Yet, as previously discussed, government documentation and policy makes this increasingly challenging to achieve. From a global perspective, many other countries such as Germany, Scotland and Sweden remain subject to a conformist curriculum (Shuayb and O’Donnell, 2008), restricting
alternative pedagogical approaches. So what are the implications for the curriculum? From discussions with colleagues it is evident the government does not currently acknowledge the invaluable professional judgements of educational professionals. Yet, I consider if this asset was recognised various forms of pedagogy would emerge, including child-initiated learning, promoting successful exchanges of ideas between children and adults, and in turn co-constructing curricula.

Interestingly, there are international education systems which have recognised educators as valuable assets within the decision making process of the curriculum. A country which has this successfully implemented this approach to defining the curriculum, is Finland.

**Finland**

Throughout this module I have developed a secure awareness of the Finnish education system and what we can learn from it. The Finnish education system has become an attractive example of successful policy, gaining international attention through exceptional PISA results and transforming Finland into a reference point for politicians world-wide to seek improvement for their own education systems (Ruiz, 2011). The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey (Data.oecd.org, 2016), occurs every three years to examine abilities of 15 year olds within 65 countries around the world, in order to review the extent that students have acquired knowledge and skills characterised as essential for participation in modern societies (OECD, 2016). Recent PISA results (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012) identify Finland as an exceeding OECD country for reading, mathematics and sciences, with students scoring on average 529. The extent to which Finland’s education systems can be considered effective is when compared with the OECD average which currently stands at 427, outlining Finland as the strongest OECD country for students’ skills (OECD Better Life Index, 2016). What’s more, Finland subsequently performs well in other international comparisons such as SIMS (Second International Maths Study) and TIMSS (Trends in International Maths and Science Study) (Sahlberg, 2007).

Hargreaves (2003) argues that international test comparisons have been one of the strongest pretexts for school reform in many nations. However, the Finnish education systems has remained relatively unresponsive to educational reform, particularly to what is commonly categorised as the ‘global education reform movement’ (Hargreaves, Earl, Shawn and Manning, 2001; Rinne, Kivirauma and Simola, 2002; Sahlberg, 2004; Aho, Pitkanen and Sahlberg, 2006). This education reform emerged within the 1980s emphasising a focus on global trends such as standardisation, focus on numeracy and literacy and consequential
ability. These have since become globally integral within government agendas. In contrast, these global trends have not been as substantially adopted within Finnish education policy. In turn, it is difficult to establish particular reforms which have been the driving forces in raising standards of student learning in Finnish schools. Sahlberg (2007) reminds us that the Finnish education system was initially highly centralised prior to the introduction of reform in the 1970s. However, Sahlberg additionally communicates that it was not until 1985 when initial characteristics of reform agenda shifted towards the formation of relationships between government and educators grounded in respect and trust. It was here, in the early 1990s that the trust-based culture of schools began to be integrated in Finland. It is considered that this trust-based approach is fundamental to Finland’s educational success (Sahlberg, 2007). This approach is rarely seen within other education systems across the world, and is therefore one which is integral to investigate with regards to the construction of our own curriculum.

In Finnish society the teaching profession has always enjoyed great public respect (Simola, 2005) with parents trusting teachers to know what is best for their children. Lewis (2005) surmises that these elements of trust are integral to the fundamental cultural values existing within Finnish society. Furthermore, often defined as a consensus society (Aho et al. 2006) Finnish governments aspire to ensure all major political decisions are agreed by all relative participants within society. For example, with regards to the construction of the curriculum, the Ministry of Education and Culture alongside the Finnish National Board of Education broadly prescribe principles and activities which they consider nationally appropriate. Conversely, in my opinion, governments within many nations such as England, place too strong an emphasis on knowledge, technical skills and cognition within the curriculum, limiting freedom around statutory requirements, additionally confining education within the realms of the traditional ideology of education. However, in Finland, once the government has affirmed broad educational outcomes, the detailed curriculum implementation is entrusted to teachers (Dreher, 2014). Dreher (2014) further conveys that instead of the government defining the curriculum as what must be taught, this approach values the professional opinions, and secure knowledge and judgements of teachers, in turn enabling them to additionally consider their particular school context alongside the needs of the individual children in the classroom. Sahlberg (2007) notes that this dimension of trust has played the most significant role in propelling the Finnish education systems past those of many other nations.

It is clear within many nations, particularly in England, that this high level of trust and respect is not prevalent. Standardised assessment in England was established to monitor
children’s progress individually and nationally, but currently leaves little room for consideration of teacher assessment (Wiliam, 1998). In turn, teacher assessment is not respectfully valued. However, in Finland, teacher assessment is at the forefront of recording children’s progress. Children only take a standardised test at age 15 to be compared internationally. These are the PISA tests discussed earlier in this paper. From the PISA results, it is critical to acknowledge what implications this loosely defined curriculum has in practice.

A typical feature of teaching and learning in Finland is the encouragement for teachers and students to explore new ideas and methods of learning (Sahlberg, 2007). This relates directly to personal philosophies regarding the progression-based system and creating an environment to establish learner independence. Valijarvi, Linnakyla, Kupari, Reinikainen and Arffman (2002, p.46) evaluated that high achievements in Finland should be attributable to the network of interrelated factors in which students’ own areas of interests are combined. Due to the focus within teaching in Finland encompassing the learning as opposed to preparing students for standardised assessments (Berry and Sahlberg, 2006), teachers experience more freedom in curriculum planning and various teaching methods can be employed without fear of failure to meet requirements.

The Finnish education sits comfortably within the second outlined ideology of education; providing for change (Craft, 1984). Establishing a curriculum which enables educational professionals to implement professional judgement with regards to context and individual children’s needs, ensures that the child is situated at the centre of the educational process and can be adapted accordingly with regards to changes within local, national or international society. The Finnish approach to the curriculum would inevitably promote personal philosophies of education, and additionally those of educators (Mitra, 2007; Barbour, Kinos, Robertson and Pukk, 2014; Musinski, 1999) enabling child-initiated pedagogy with teachers acting as facilitator without apprehension of consequential accountability.

Conclusion
This paper has analysed the current and historical government influences on the design and development of the national curriculum in England. I have contrasted the two central ideologies for education with the national curriculum, affirming it strives to achieve the second ideology, to provide for change, yet, remains attached to the traditional conformist ideology, due to government influences regarding substantial statutory requirements.
Synthesis with international policies, particularly with reference to the Finnish education system ascertains a necessary shift with regards to who should define the curriculum. This paper does not set out to remove the government from curricula decisions, but endeavours to promote personal philosophy regarding the invaluable contributions from educators alongside those of the child, who should be situated at the centre of the curriculum, and in turn contribute towards defining the curriculum.

In conclusion, it is unlikely that the philosophy of education will find a satisfactory answer to suit all (Bates and Lewis, 2009; Hargreaves, 1989). However, I have analysed personal philosophy with practice and international literature to establish that if the construction of the curriculum engaged all relative participants, such as government bodies, educators, and the child, successful implications for the holistic development of the child would be prevalent, and would additionally stimulate learner independence. As Noam Chomsky summarises,

‘Education is about enabling students to learn on their own,’

(The Purpose of Education, 2012)

We need to ensure that all participants that are relevant to accomplishing this are at the centre of defining the curriculum.

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