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The Moral Agent Teacher: teaching morally and teaching morality

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The Moral Agent Teacher: Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality

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I think it's really hard to separate character education and cognitive development in the classroom, because when you're looking at morals it encompasses everything. How you do things *and* how you think about things. I wouldn't know how to compartmentalize and say, "I'm this kind of moral educator; therefore, I can't do that activity because that's not who I am". The character education stuff should support care ethics and being in relationship with each other, and service as well—caring more outside of you and the community. The developmental approach is how you develop as a person, also your moral reasoning, so you can problem-solve and make decisions that support being in relationships and development of your character... [Teachers] have to be all of that and maybe some other things that haven't been identified to make sure [they] can support the full range of development.

—Terry Kennedy (pseudonym), elementary schoolteacher

With different underlying assumptions and beliefs, character education, cognitive development, and care ethics are typically presented as alternative orientations to moral education. Character educators assert that one is born without virtue and that primitive impulses reign over reason (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999). Thus, character education involves instruction and training to cultivate and habituate virtues, and to align inclinations, feelings, and passions with reason (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Wynne & Ryan, 1997). Cognitive development theory recognizes an innate predisposition for knowing what is moral. Moral education within this orientation aims to facilitate the construction of autonomous moral understanding, reasoning, and judgment (Kohlberg, 1975; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Care ethicists contextualize morality within human relationships. Hence, moral education prioritizes reciprocally caring relationships between teachers and students, so that morality might flourish (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984).

Despite these fundamental differences, several teaching strategies and methods are commonly promoted. Attending to classroom culture and climate, providing opportunities for students to practice expressing morality, and nurturing teacher-student relationships, for example, are recommended for character education (Lickona, 1991, 2004; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Wynne & Ryan, 1997), care ethics (Noddings, 2002, 2008, 2010), and cognitive development (Nucci, 2009; Watson, 2003). Accordingly, Lickona (2004) seems to echo Noddings in declaring, “Good teachers build the relationship in both directions; they and their students learn about each other” (p. 115). Further, Howard (2005) observes, “As is the case with classroom discussions of ethical issues, all three moral education approaches embrace service-learning as a strategy and it can be used across disciplines” (p. 54). In addition, character education (Lickona, 1991; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Wynne & Ryan, 1997) and care ethics (Noddings, 2002, 2008, 2010) both recommend that teachers model moral behaviour. Finally, Ryan and Bohlin (1999, p. 144-145) pose a series of questions for character education. Two are also relevant to care ethics: “Does the teacher respect the students?” and “Does the teacher play favourites?” One is relevant to cognitive development: “Are ethical questions such as ‘What is the right thing to do?’ part of the classroom dialogue?” Employing such strategies and methods in the classroom, therefore, might further the educative goals of more than one orientation to moral education, and in doing so, provide students with a range of learning experiences on what is right, good, caring and virtuous in one’s actions, character, reasoning, relationships, and ways of being.

This suggestion is supported by the results of a micro-ethnographic study that explored the question: How does a schoolteacher who prioritizes the moral education of

students envision, enact, and reflect on that moral education? Throughout the 2009-2010 school year, I spent a minimum of two full days per week with Terry Kennedy and her grade-four class (pseudonyms used throughout), observing and participating in activities and events, and formally and informally interviewing Terry. Seven morally educative practices emerged: (a) modelling morality, (b) creating a class community, (c) nurturing relationships with students, (d) delivering virtues lessons and messages, (e) facilitating moral discussions, (f) fostering self-discipline, and (g) promoting service. This paper presentation briefly outlines Terry's expressions of each practice and proposes a re-conceptualized framework for moral education in classrooms. Examples and illustrations are drawn, with permission, from *Portrait of a Moral Agent Teacher: Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality* (Rosenberg, 2015).

Modelling Morality

Terry consistently expressed a range of moral values in professional practices and personal conduct and behaviour. Respect, fairness, kindness, and honesty were prioritized and readily visible, but almost always associated with several other moral values. Respect was expressed, for example, in how Terry acknowledged everyone by name, maintained eye contact during conversations, listened with patience and focus, acknowledged the contributions of others, was discrete with personal information, was trusting with classroom materials and supplies, and avoided publicly reprimanding individuals. Fairness was expressed in how Terry accommodated and valued the individual needs, desires, talents, and abilities of her students, providing each with personal attention and ensuring each sustained a presence and a voice in the classroom. Bonnie received extra support during seatwork, for example; Kathy frequently asked for

hugs; Zeth required individual coaching prior to presentations; Connor was often called upon to help his peers with math work; Pia assisted with artwork; Paige was Terry's whiteboard scribe; and Sammie kept the classroom shelves organized.

Terry's acts of kindness were embedded in school conventions, classroom life, and the compassion and empathy she felt for each student with a scraped knee, bruised ego, or anxious psyche. She closed the blinds when noticing that Gabby and Mary were squinting from the sunlight; loosened Noah's tie when it looked too tight; and when his desk-mates were absent, suggested that Connor change tables so he would not be lonely. Further, when Kathy forgot to bring a lunch, Terry walked to the grocery store and bought her soup. When Zeth did not bring money for a fundraising event, she gave him 10 dollars of her own. And when Heather was in tears, she placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and whispered words of encouragement.

Finally, Terry was honest in representing herself and truthful in communicating with others. She publicly acknowledged shortcomings, weaknesses, mistakes, and oversights, confessing, "I am not always the expert in the classroom. I don't know everything"; and "I'm human and I'm allowed to make mistakes. [Students] need to know that I can make mistakes. They don't have to see me as somebody who's perfect". Emotions were similarly expressed. Terry acknowledged, "Even in those moments when I feel like I am not at my best and I am getting frustrated more easily with them, I'm open"; and "If something is humorous I will laugh about it, because that's the way it was and that's an honest reaction to it. I should give them an honest reaction". Lastly, Terry was truthful in providing feedback, noting, "I don't like compliments that aren't real.

When I tell [students] that they've done a great job, I really do mean that they've done a great job".

These and many other moral values were expressed knowingly and intentionally, as both a personal goal and a means of conveying morality to students. As a personal goal, Terry believes, "I have a responsibility to be a good person with a conscience, to make sure that I contribute in some way". As moral education, she asserted, "Everything that the adults do, the children see. So you might as well show them what you want them to see". This is commonly understood as modelling morality. Terry connected modelling to her broader education agenda, claiming, "If I teach morality without being a model of a moral person, students won't take me seriously. If they are reflecting on the ideas, they will see that I'm not following them, so why should they".

Creating a Class Community

Terry envisions a class community characterized by moral values of care, helpfulness, attentiveness, and inclusiveness. She said, "In the community, I want them to care and to know how to take care of each other"; "I would like to see them being a good community where they're helping each other out and being observant about each other's needs"; and "If it's a community, then we all have to have some say and everybody has to be able to have their ideas out there". In working toward this community, Terry provided multiple opportunities for the students to interact with and get to know each other. This included countless groupings and partnerships, most of which were randomly determined; a new seating arrangement approximately every month; and two desk orientations. Terry's pedagogy obligated the students to work cooperatively and collaboratively, with whomever they were assigned to or seated beside.

In addition, she empowered the students to autonomously and spontaneously carry out duties and tasks and to negotiate amongst themselves several classroom conditions, such as whether the blinds were up or down, the windows and doors were open or closed, and the lights and fan were on or off.

Importantly, these structures of the community were underpinned by messages related to relationship and pro-social values of friendship, support, openness, collaboration, and accommodating others; and to moral values of inclusiveness, care, kindness, responsibility, cooperation, and helpfulness. As seating arrangements were being determined, for example, Terry reminded the students, “We are all friends here”; and “You know what your needs are, so consider them”. When groups and partners were assigned, Terry coached the students on appropriate responses, as follows:

Keep your feelings to yourself about who your partner will be. Remember that your body language can give away your feelings too. Don't slump. You wouldn't like it if someone said, “Oh no!” about you, or slumped in their chair with a frown. You never know what a great partnership you can make. It also isn't nice to shout, “Yeah!” That could make other people feel bad too. Remember, good friends may not make the best project together. This is an opportunity. Your best friend may not be the best person for you to work with.

During group work, Terry often asked, rhetorically, “Are we cooperating?” and reminded the students, “This is not a competition among you”. In relation to classroom conditions, she said, “Be mindful of different students' needs”. Finally, Terry explained her expectations regarding classroom duties and tasks in relation to helpfulness and responsibility:

Not having assigned jobs does seem to reinforce in a more natural way that we are responsible for helping each other. Because if they do have jobs, what they tend to say is, “It is not my job to do that. It's so and so's job.” Here, it's everyone's job to help. Otherwise, I would undermine the kind of community that I'm trying to build.

Terry considers creating a class community to be right and good practice, because it safeguards students' happiness, welfare, wellbeing, and dignity. "I think the happiness thing is just building a really close-knit and well-connected community", she reflected. As noted, community also provided many opportunities for Terry to impart morality, which she did with intention and focus, and for the students to practice and habituate expressing moral values in their conduct, behaviours, motivations, and attitudes, as they partnered with Terry to sustain their community.

Nurturing Relationships with Students

Terry nurtured independent relationships with her students, by initiating regular and informal interactions and getting to know each as an individual. For example, she greeted them at the classroom door or in the hallway most mornings, with personalized comments, questions, and anecdotes, such as: "How was your sister's piano recital last night, Heather?" "Mary, did you like how the book started off?" "How was skiing, Alexander?" "What did you think of the hockey game last night, Connor? I know you watched"; and "I took your grandma's advice, Zeth. I'm eating more quinoa. I bought the bread she recommended too". In addition, Terry ate lunch with the class three of five school days per week. Although usually remaining at her own desk, she chatted and joked with the students rather than engaging in professional work. Occasionally, Terry sat at a student table for the opportunity to connect with particular students:

There are some who don't speak a lot, who I don't get to know right away... The quieter ones, like Gabby and Alexander and sometimes even Mary. Those are the ones I have to make more effort to get to know, because they're just in the back. They do their thing. Those are the ones that I remind myself to go and check-in with.

Indoor recess was similarly spent. Through these and other opportunities for interacting,

Terry's knowledge and understanding of her students grew. She noted, "The more that you allow [the students] to talk about things, and the more that you listen to where they're coming from, the more you understand about who they are".

This process was reciprocal. Terry's accessibility, humility, respect for students, and honesty encouraged the students to also initiate interactions and get to know her. "I hope it comes across to them that I'm not in any way so above them that I'm not approachable", she worried. Accordingly, the students chatted with Terry during recess, sought her help on a variety of non-academic issues, inquired about the photographs posted by her desk, and candidly expressed their feelings in drawings, letters, cards, and poems. Mutual caring and trust developed, as defining qualities of the relationships. This is reflected in the following card that was signed by all of the students (corrected for spelling and grammar):

You've been here for this year and hopefully the next, too. You stood here with us all year long. Together we are strong. And when you smile, the sunshine falls upon your face and brightens up the room. You've understood our problems and helped us work them out. For us, you are our world, our sunshine and moon. Just knowing that you will be there waiting for us when we get to school gets us up in the morning. And all we are trying to say is, although we have not been here long, you've taught us all we know. Together we are strong.

Within the context of these reciprocally caring and trusting relationships, Terry was able to recognize and meet a range of student needs beyond those related only to academics. She considers this to be an important part of her practice, and consequently, feels morally obligated to nurture such relationships. These relationships are also morally educative. They enabled Terry to model how to be in relationship with others and served as an exemplar for student relationships in a class community. Further, relationships with Terry provided another context in which students were encouraged to

express moral behaviours, motivations, and attitudes.

Delivering Virtues Lessons and Messages

In the applied context of this work, the term *virtue* is used synonymously with the term *moral value* to delineate right from wrong and good from bad. Accordingly, virtues lessons and messages focused on a particular virtue or moral value. Lessons were formal and usually pre-planned, as in traditional character education. Terry delivered such lessons on compassion, courage, cooperation, respect, and responsibility, in the context of the school's character program and the grade-four health and language arts curriculums. The lesson on compassion is recounted, in part, by way of example.

Terry posted a large pad of chart paper at the front of the class. On the first page she had prewritten the word compassion. "Let's talk about what this word means, what it looks like. Give me your ideas", she began.

Kathy raised a hand. "You show it by helping people if they're hurt".

Bonnie added, "Being really nice".

"Another word for compassion is being kind or nice, as you say Bonnie", Terry clarified. "If something happens at recess, how can you show compassion?"

Frances called out, "You could let everyone who wants to play with you, play".

"Some of you are going to be trying out for sports teams. Some will make it on the teams, some won't. What could be compassionate in this situation?" Terry continued.

Paige replied, "You could say, 'You did a good job. Sorry you didn't make it'".

"And what if you got onto the team? How would your reaction help other people? When you get in, you feel happy and proud. But how could your reaction help your friend who didn't get in?" The students were silent. "You see? There are two sides to this—your reaction will either make them feel worse or better. So feel proud and happy, yes. Just keep others in mind. Be gracious about it, if they didn't get in. Don't go whooping all over the place".

Terry recorded the students' comments as well as her own on the chart paper; the last as good sportsmanship. Although not referenced again, they remained posted until the next virtue lesson. (adapted from Rosenberg, 2015)

Virtues messages, although similarly direct and focused, were informal, brief, and spontaneous. Introducing a group project, for example, Terry noted, “It’s about learning how to get along. And you have to be respectful of each other to do that. But you also have to be responsible for what you’re doing and saying”. While disciplining two students, she exclaimed, “This is very disrespectful behaviour from both of you”. Prior to concerts, presentations, and performances, Terry said versions of “For some of you, this might take courage”. Lastly, during a lesson, ironically on respect, Terry told two disruptive boys, “I’m sorry, I was talking right now. You are not being respectful of me or of each other”.

These virtues lessons and messages were mutually supportive in providing moral education. The lessons established a moral language and common knowledge base around specific representative moral values, and signalled to the students that morality was important and would be attended to in this classroom. Messages operationalized and normalized this expectation, by relating a wider range of moral values to in-the-moment experiences, behaviours, actions, attitudes, assumptions, interactions, and general ways of being. Thus, students were encouraged to *talk the talk* as well as to *walk the walk*. This addresses a significant criticism of traditional character education (Joseph & Efron, 2005; Noddings, 2002; Straughan, 1988).

Facilitating Moral Discussions

Class-wide and small group discussions regularly emerged from curriculum materials and academic work, as well as from school and classroom activities and interactions. They provided a forum for free-flowing ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Terry

seized such opportunities to impart morality regarding the content of the discussion and the conduct of students while in discussion. With respect to content, Terry was not always values-neutral. She justified this as follows:

When I'm not comfortable with them having a certain perception, then I want to change it. Usually I try to respect everybody's opinion. But when there's something that I don't agree with and I can't leave it, then I have to give them the right direction or a different way to think about it. Otherwise, I wouldn't be teaching them anything.

With discretion, Terry might identify core moral values, present alternative moral positions, correct morally wrong and bad viewpoints, or direct students toward morally defensible decisions and actions. For example, during one discussion Kay could not understand why Afghani people would reject the help of Canadian and American soldiers. Terry presented autonomy as an alternative moral position to helpfulness: "It's okay not to understand that and to have your own opinion. However, they want to be able to solve their own problems and they don't want foreigners in their land solving them for them". In another discussion, she posed a series of questions that referenced respect, sensitivity, and empathy to explain why the identity of a child with lice should be protected.

Terry was also concerned with her students' conduct during discussions:

We try to debate and respect each other's opinions. It doesn't mean that you have to change the other person's opinion. But I like the students to see how you can talk about two opposing views and still relate to the other person well. It's not about changing their minds. It's just being able to speak their minds freely still being able to listen to each other. To open their minds up to different things, and to being more open about differences.

By way of illustration, Terry recounted a discussion on zoos:

Someone believed that you shouldn't keep animals in cages and within small areas. She didn't want to go to the zoo, didn't think it was right. And then others

said, “Well some of those animals are endangered and having them breed is helping to keep the species going”. It was really good to have a debate.

In another example, Kathy, Frances, and Bonnie solicited Terry’s help to resolve a personal conflict. Terry facilitated a discussion in which she coached the girls to be empathetic and tolerant of each other’s positions, fair, and respectful so they might determine amongst themselves an appropriate solution.

Discussions, therefore, served two morally educative outcomes. Consistent with cognitive development theory, they helped develop “students’ moral judgment, moral reasoning, ability to process moral matters, and ability to identify moral issues”, as Terry noted. Continuing, she explained:

There’s such value in being able to say the ideas out loud and hearing other people say, “Well no, you don’t understand”. No one is encountering your views if it all stays in your head. So when you’re being challenged by other people, especially your peers at this age, there’s some meaning. You are forced to actually reason out much better.

Additionally, Terry’s insistence on moral conduct during discussions provided students with opportunities to practice, cultivate, and habituate expressions of several moral values, also promoting character development.

Fostering Self-Discipline

In Terry’s practice, discipline is an educative process to advance students’ self-control and self-regulation. As such, it is properly understood as fostering self-discipline. “I want them to get to the point where they can think it through and say, ‘I need to get work done. So maybe this is not the best choice for now’”, Terry explained. She similarly instructed the students: “I want you to know, yourself, within yourself, whether or not it’s the right decision for you too. Do not do it just because your friend is doing

it". Contrary to conventional wisdom and popular practice, Terry did not communicate her behavioural expectations in terms of classroom rules, admitting:

I don't do rules. Teachers are always saying that it's really good. And there are a lot of books that say it's really good to have your class come up with things that they are agreeing to for the entire year. Like a student pledge. And that the teacher should do a pledge, as well. But I never find that I refer to it beyond that. It just never worked for me.

Terry would like the students to behave according to what they "*should* do, rather than rules that should be followed". As with assigned duties and tasks, rules are too prescriptive and narrowly conceived for Terry's education goals.

Pro-social and moral values substituted for rules in guiding students' conduct, behaviours, and actions. As Terry observed, "What makes the rules right anyway are the values they represent". Accordingly, values messages were imparted preemptively to prevent behaviour problems from occurring, as well as reactively to stop unacceptable behaviours. The following statements made to students illustrate the former: "Everyone who speaks should be heard. That's being respectful"; "Good Morning! This is rehearsal day so please be patient and expect changes in our schedule"; and "If it is not helpful behaviour, please don't do it". Additionally, on Remembrance Day Terry reminded the students that the assembly would be longer and more somber than usual, and implored them to respect the speakers and the content of their presentations. Reactive values statements included the following: "She's talking. You are remaining respectful and listening"; "Even if you aren't interested, you must listen"; and "You need to take responsibility for this and make it right. I am expecting you to do this now". Finally, after a particularly contentious game of *capture the flag*, Terry told the girls:

This game makes you care more about winning than you care about each other. Can we agree then that only those involved in a situation will deal with that

situation, and that you won't be so competitive, that you'll care more about each other?

In these examples, Terry did not delineate specific behaviours related to respect, patience, helpfulness, responsibility, and care, but rather, obligated the students to interpret for themselves what was appropriate.

As is the case with discussions, Terry's approach to discipline supported two morally educative outcomes. Cognitive development was promoted, as students were encouraged to make good and right choices and decisions. This is consistent with developmental discipline theory (Watson, 2003, 2008). Character development was also promoted, as students were encouraged to connect their conduct, behaviours, and actions with moral values. This is consistent with character-based discipline (Center for the 4th and 5th Rs, n.d.; Lickona, 2004).

Promoting Service

The term *service* broadly refers to volunteering, community service, and service-learning activities, in which Terry's students were involved. For discussion purposes, I distinguish action-oriented and learning-oriented activities, acknowledging that such a distinction is not absolute. The former were associated with particular charities and needs that the students and their families supported. For example, Terry's class designed and sold greeting cards at a fundraiser for Haiti; donated store gift cards, food, clothing, toys, games, and school supplies to a local family; assembled craft kits for children with neurological disorders and injuries; and gave money to a variety of charities.

Additionally, Pia solicited support from her classmates for cancer research and Kathy sold cookies to raise money for the Girl Guides of Canada organization. In regard to these last two examples, Terry encouraged the students to inform their participation,

suggesting, “It’s your job to ask questions if you want to know things about this [charity]” and “This isn’t a competition with your friends. It’s about what you think is worthwhile to support”.

Learning-oriented activities were not associated with charities and students had no obligation to serve a need. Rather, these activities aimed to increase awareness of local and global ethical, moral, and social justice issues; to impart moral values of empathy, respect, compassion, sensitivity, tolerance, and responsibility; and to stimulate students’ moral reasoning, problem solving, and decision-making abilities. They include three school-wide activity days organized around the themes of Remembrance Day, cultural diversity, and environmental sustainability. Terry had no direct responsibility for these programs. Nonetheless, she seized the opportunity to impart service values, telling the class on Remembrance Day, for example, “The soldiers had the courage to help. They took responsibility to protect our rights and freedoms. This is about us having courage to help too, not in quite the same way. It is about us taking responsibility”. Further, a current events unit of study raised several relevant issues in which Terry engaged her class. Regarding Kay’s article on a new human rights museum in the United States, Terry asked, for example, “Do you think [human rights violation] happens in Canada?” “Where do we still have some problems?” Regarding Bonnie’s article on the Pacific Ocean garbage patch, Terry asked, “What is our obligation to our environment?”

According to service-learning theory, a service activity is morally educative when learning and action are fully integrated, such that students are involved in researching, analyzing, problem solving, planning, organizing, and acting (Billig, 2009; Hart, Matsuba & Atkins, 2008). On their own, none of the activities in which Terry’s students were

engaged would qualify as such. Yet, in combination the activities can be perceived as a morally educative program that encouraged students to apply moral values to several environmental and social problems and to act in support of those in need. Importantly, Terry articulates her goals for promoting service in terms of moral growth and development:

I love taking myself and children's minds out beyond what they are comfortable with. And to be just really aware of what's happening in the world. And relate it back to their lives. To be helpful in a global way.... I'm hoping that I'll be able to plant some seeds to help them create a better world at some point in the future.

Conclusion

Although Terry's expressions and interpretations are nuanced, these seven practices are not entirely new to moral education literature. Several, in fact, have been quite thoroughly explored in the contexts of character education, cognitive development theory, and care ethics theory. Some have also been identified in accounts of other empirical studies, notably *The Manner in Teaching Project* (Fenstermacher, 2001; Richardson & Fenstermacher, 2000, 2001), *The Moral Life of Schools* (Jackson, Boostrom & Hansen, 1993), and *The Ethical Teacher* (Campbell, 2003). What I believe to be new, however, is empirical evidence demonstrating their harmonious and complementary integration in a single teacher's practice. This defies typical conceptualizations of moral education.

To create a broader framework for moral education, therefore, I have united Campbell's (2003) two-pronged definition of moral agency—the moral person and the moral educator—with Fenstermacher, Osguthorpe, and Sanger's (2009) framework of teaching morally and teaching morality. Accordingly, a moral agent teacher is a moral person who teaches morally, or in ways that are right, good, caring, and virtuous. This

includes the first three of Terry's practices: modelling morality; creating a class community; and nurturing relationships with students. A moral agent teacher is also a moral educator, who teaches morality by intentionally imparting messages and lessons on what is right and good in regard to one's actions, behaviours, character, reasoning, relationships, and ways of being. This includes the latter four of Terry's practices: delivering virtues lessons and messages; facilitating moral discussions; fostering self-discipline; and promoting service. Complex synergies exist between the individual practices, between teaching morally and teaching morality, and between being a moral person and a moral educator, such that these distinctions are difficult to empirically maintain. I have alluded to a few interactions, including the influence of teacher-student relationships on the relationships among students in a class community; class community as both a morally justifiable end and a means of moral education; and substantiating moral instruction with personal moral conduct, respectively. These interactions are explored further in *Portrait of a Moral Agent Teacher: Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality* (Rosenberg, 2015).

Repositioning the term *moral agency*, therefore, sustains the idea of an agent with virtuous character, and adds consideration for teaching practices that are morally good and right, as well as an education agenda that is able to embrace the assumptions, beliefs, and applied aspects of more than one theoretical and ethical orientation. In conclusion, I propose that moral education in schools and classrooms be reframed, accordingly, as moral agency. I look forward to discussing the opportunities and challenges this might entail.

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