THE PRACTICUM: A LEARNING JOURNEY?

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ABSTRACT This paper reports a four year study which investigated the final year practicum for a group of third year student teachers enrolled in a Bachelor of Teaching programme. The aim was to find out more about what happens during 'prac. teaching' or 'practicum' experiences, from the perspectives of the student teachers and their co-operating teachers and to see how learning opportunities could be maximised. The paper emphasises the notion of the practicum as a learning journey and raises questions about whose journey it is. It is argued that in order for the practicum to realise its potential as a significant learning experience for tomorrow's teachers, changes need to be made to the practicum, based on the notions of empowerment, collaboration and reflection. These changes are discussed in the paper.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on *quality* has been underpinning practicum research in the last decade, which is in keeping with the broader interest in teacher education and the current quality arguments. Many teacher educators (Britzman, 1991; Calderhead, 1987, 1988, 1991; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1987; Zeichner, 1986, 1989) have stressed the need for a more explicit understanding of the processes of learning to teach, so that learning outcomes from the practicum could be optimised. As Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann (1987) wrote, "making it on one's own in student teaching is not the same as learning to teach or being a teacher" (p. 60). Recent research trends regarding the practicum have looked more at the experience itself in terms of what is learned and how it is learned, taking the context, the student teacher and program's philosophical base into account. Zeichner (1986) asserted that these aspects had to be considered in order to provide important insights about how to realise the educational potential of the practicum. It was the need for more studies which portrayed the reality of the practicum experience and allowed a deeper understanding of the experience from the student teachers' perspective (Ziechner, 1989), which provided the catalyst for the study upon which this paper is based.

THE RESEARCH

The aims of the study were twofold: first, to provide further insights into student teacher learning and conditions which facilitate and/or hinder student teacher learning and second, to provide insights into student teachers' experiences with structures set up to facilitate the reflection process in the practicum. In order to address these aims, the two over-riding questions were: How do student teachers interpret their teaching/learning experiences during the practicum? and What happens when student teachers consciously reflect on their practicum experience?

The major data sources were interview transcripts (student teachers and teachers), student teacher journals, field notes and other practicum documentation. Data were analysed according to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) procedures, which involved immediate ongoing interpretation of events, checking of emerging interpretations, categorisation and description and theory building grounded in context.

The study consisted of two phases and focused on several groups of third year student teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) over a two year period. The research study was structured around the student teachers' final major field experience placement, which involved a voluntary week at the beginning of the school year (January), voluntary days throughout first term, one week in March and culminated in a five-week block at the beginning of second term (April-May). The final year students undertook their major practicum placement with all the requirements of other final year students (i.e. written program, daily lesson planners, daily evaluations, two weeks minimum full-responsibility teaching, etc) but with one distinct difference. They were asked to concentrate on their learning during the practicum. To facilitate this process, they were given half an hour a day release from their classrooms to record their thoughts and feelings about their learning in a journal. I spent two and a half days each week in the school during which time I read their journals, noted points for discussions and then conducted individual interviews with the students which typically lasted for approximately an hour. I also observed student teacher meetings which were organised each week by the co-ordinators of the practicum. Extensive interviewing was undertaken prior to the practicum and following it as well. Moreover, individual and group interviews were conducted with the co-operating teachers, the university lecturer and other school staff.

How do Student Teachers Interpret their Teaching/Learning Experiences During the Practicum?

The student teachers in this study interpreted their experience through a range of contradictory messages, incongruous expectations and a plethora of emotions. This finding is in keeping with Groundwater-Smith (1993), who noted: "The practicum experience is one fraught with difficulties, dilemmas and challenges as the student attempts to negotiate his or her way along a hazardous path of competing professional policies and practices" (p. 137). How student teachers interpret these contradictions is crucial. The current research suggests that the student teachers interpreted them in a way which resulted in them feeling that they were not in a position to take control of their own learning. Hence, in terms of Bintz's (1989) description of empowering as "a means for people to take control of their own lives" (p. 15), the practicum was disempowering for the student teachers.

The major cause of the student teachers being disempowered was the 'hidden curriculum' of the practicum, that is, the hidden messages conveyed to the student teachers during and about the practicum. The student teachers felt that they were controlled by the practicum rather than having control over it themselves. The student teachers were controlled by two institutions - the school and the university. The university held control over the practicum experience by

determining the requirements that the student teachers needed to satisfactorily meet in order to pass the subject. They maintained tight control by having detailed prescriptive requirements written down and a university supervisor visit and observe the student teachers teaching weekly, which the student teachers interpreted as her 'policing' the requirements. The school similarly controlled the practicum experience for the student teachers, as the school personnel involved with the student teachers not only worked within the guidelines stipulated by the university but they also held their own expectations of student teachers and of the practicum. The student teachers then were placed in the position of 'guessing what's in their heads' (referring to the supervisors) with the result that much anxiety was produced for the student teachers. They also experienced much pressure during the practicum as a result of feeling obligated 'to be perfect' and 'do it right'. A direct result was that the student teachers modified their behaviour constantly in terms of what they did or did not do, and what they said, or did not say. One of the student teachers explained:

> You constantly think 'is this the way she'd do it?'. Like 'is she going to agree with the way I'm doing it' cos she's writing my report and if she doesn't agree I'm doomed! Everybody does it, walk in and assess what type of class they're in and for 5 weeks they're going to become that type of teacher.

This study has provided insights into the complexity of the role of a student teacher. As a student teacher, the person is faced with his/her own expectations of the role as well as others' expectations of the role. The student teachers in this study encountered traditional attitudes in the form of covert messages about the perceived low status of 'being a student teacher' within the school setting. Messages such as 'you're only a student teacher' and 'know your place' were conveyed at one time or another throughout the practicum experience, in spite of formal and undoubtedly sincere attempts to make them welcome in the school. Hence, 'being a student teacher' in a school requires recognition of the institutional context. The reality is that schools are hierarchical systems, and relationships and roles are embedded in that context. Moreover, the students themselves approached their practicum with the view that they were 'only student teachers', resulting from their current and previous practicum experiences. Hierarchical thinking had been imposed on the student teachers, conditioning them to accept their "lesser place in society" (Shor, 1980).

The disempowered role of the student teachers was particularly obvious in the student teacher co-operating teacher (or Associate teacher) relationship, which proved to be one of the most significant relationships in which the student teachers were involved during the practicum. The relationship had both a personal and professional dimension to it. That is, the student teachers wanted to be liked or accepted as persons, as well as to establish themselves as teachers and have their professional capabilities respected. The pressure of school life meant that the student teachers were pushed into a professional relationship before a personal relationship had time to be established, which caused the student teachers constant dilemmas throughout the practicum. One of the student's sense of powerlessness, in the situation with her co-operating teacher, is conveyed in a

comment she recorded in her journal: "It's just that the relationship between me and Jen is not what I would like it to be but there's nothing I can do about it." This imbalance in power in the student teacher co-operating teacher relationship has been previously recognised in the practicum literature (Groundwater-Smith, 1993; Henry & Charles, 1985; Menter, 1989).

It has been argued thus far, that the practicum was a disempowering experience for the student teachers in this study, given the controlling influence of the two institutions - university and school. However, the student teachers were also subject to hegemonic processes in that they were contributing to their own domination by the school and university. For example, one of the student teachers explained in an interview why she had not spoken up in the staff meeting: "If I did say something, they might think 'hang on, you're only a prac. teacher.' The student teachers assumed a passive role in keeping with their view that they were 'only' student teachers". They modified their behaviour constantly to keep within the boundaries of what they regarded as acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for a student teacher which was based on their own previous experiences as student teachers and those of their peers as well as their interpretations of what 'significant others' at the school regarded as acceptable.

A recent addition to the literature on the practicum is the voices of student teachers themselves. Poirier (1992), a pre-service teacher, wrote:

> Power is the ability to act. It is the ability, right and capacity to exercise control...An educational conundrum exists that empowerment of students is the key to good education, yet my student teaching experience contradicted this. Instead, my personal sense of power was undermined. Conflict between empowerment and power (in theory and practice) characterised my journey as a student teacher. (p. 85)

The voices of my student teachers confirm this finding. They all associated being a student teacher with having no power and control - over themselves or the situation. This point was verified in the very last interview following the practicum. In Poirier's (1992) words, they did not perceive that they had any personal power.

What Happens when Student Teachers Consciously Reflect on their Practicum Experience?

While there were many dilemmas experienced by the students during their practicum, the research process with its focus on reflection, had a positive influence on how much the student teachers learnt from the practicum. It enhanced student teachers' learning because it provided an opportunity for the learning process to be personalised with the result that the student teachers felt valued as learners and more in control of their own learning. In contrast to the traditional practicum experience, it was an empowering process for them. The student teachers were able to personalise the experience by clarifying what was particularly significant to them and why this was so. These processes enabled them to learn about themselves with the result that they became more self-aware

and increased their self-understanding. Rogers (in Lasseigne, 1974) emphasised the importance of self-awareness in teachers:

> Rogers stresses that a teacher needs to develop self-insight and awareness if he [sic] is to become a real person to the student and that being real is very important to the teaching process. The teacher who is sensitised to his [sic] own needs and responsive to his [sic] own inner feelings is much more likely to be sensitive to the needs of students and have empathy for them when they have problems. (p. 24)

As a result of this increased awareness, there was a direct effect on the children whom the student teachers taught, as the student teachers were more perceptive to the children's needs and planned learning activities accordingly. Thus, the children benefited too from the student teachers consciously reflecting on their practicum experience. This point was confirmed by the school-based teaching personnel involved in the practicum. The teachers commented on the student teachers' improved classroom practices and one of the co-ordinators explained why she believed the process would have a long-term effect on the quality of their teaching:

> I've seen student teachers challenged about the process of learning for the first time. In the past, they've looked confident and can do it (teach), but this is not enough. These student teachers know why they do what they do. They will be better teachers as a result.

The focus on learning, as opposed to teaching, was significant for the student teachers in this study. The process of focusing on their own learning enabled the student teachers to engage in higher quality reflections than if the focus had been exclusively on their teaching. They went beyond a consideration of technical skills of teaching and considered some of the ethical and moral issues involved in teaching and learning. This is crucial, for, as Groundwater-Smith (1993) explained:

> Teachers are daily faced with practical, ethical choices: what is worthwhile knowledge? How should classroom interactions be managed in ways which are fair and just? How should one best communicate with parents and colleagues whose values may differ? (p. 1)

The student teachers in this study confronted these questions and other similar ones at various times throughout the practicum. They began to analyse the origins, purposes and context of their actions, and those of other teachers, rather than focusing on the immediate concern of accomplishing the task ahead of them. This process also enabled the student teachers to uncover some of the hidden curriculum of the practicum and in doing so, to challenge some of the covert messages they had received about teaching and learning. In this way, the learning for the student teachers in this study, was enhanced.

Moreover, in focusing on their learning, they were able to identify the various components of this learning, which included, not only the intended learning outcomes, as detailed in the subject booklet, but the unintended outcomes which resulted from their experiences in the school without being stated explicitly prior to the practicum. The unintended learning outcomes were particularly powerful as they involved changes in attitudes and reconceptualisation of concepts. For example, by the end of the practicum, the student teachers had challenged the particular conceptualisation of knowledge, as it applied to themselves, with which they had approached the practicum. The work of Berlak and Berlak (1981) has been selected to illuminate the student teachers' views. Berlak and Berlak (1981) distinguished between a view of knowledge as "accumulated traditions (that) have value external and independent of the knower", (p. 144), which they defined as public and a view of knowledge that is worthwhile to the extent that it is "established through its relationship to the knower" (p. 145) which they termed, personal. My intention here is not to create a dichotomy but to acknowledge the importance of both personal and public knowledge. Ginsburg and Clift (1990) claimed that the hidden curriculum of many teacher education programs communicated a conception of knowledge as public, rather than personal. This was the case for the student teachers in this study. They initially considered 'valid knowledge' was that prescribed by the university and the learning that was seen as significant was that which was outlined in the subject booklet. It was seen as a product. By the end of the practicum however, their attitudes had changed. They came to value their own assimilation of their experience, thus appreciating the importance of personal knowledge, as it was this view that was being encouraged by the research process. This increased their trust in their own view of situations, rather than denying their interpretation and deferring to others, and gave them confidence to be more actively involved in their own learning and take more responsibility for it.

One of the unanticipated outcomes of the student teachers reflecting on their learning, was that it had an impact on the co-operating teachers. They too started to focus on student teachers' learning and began to investigate their role in the light of what they needed to do to facilitate their student teachers' learning. During this process, they came to question the structure of the traditional practicum and the traditional roles of the participants in the process. They identified incongruencies between their beliefs and practices, asked questions of themselves and others and finally, suggested changes to the status quo, in the area of supervisory practices. The additional focus on the co-operating teachers, which continued throughout phase two of the study, illuminated vividly the notion that the practicum is a complex endeavour. It was not only the student teachers who interpreted their experience through a range of contradictory messages, incongruous expectations and a plethora of emotions. The co-operating teachers did this also. The practicum curriculum, together with the teachers' own experiences as student teachers, and their self-esteem, influenced how they interpreted their supervisory role.

THE PRACTICUM: A LEARNING JOURNEY?

The term 'learning journey' was chosen deliberately for the title of this study. First, I wanted to highlight the focus on learning. Too often, the practicum has focused on student teachers' teaching, to the exclusion of their learning. Haberman (in Howey & Gardner, 1983) stated that student teaching needed to be regarded as learning behaviour rather than teaching behaviour and Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1987) argued that it is necessary to focus on the student teacher's learning in the practicum, not just the children's learning. Second, the journey metaphor acknowledges that the practicum is one experience in a life-time of teaching/learning experiences. It is not a final destination. As Tremmel (1993) wrote:

> The practice of teaching is demanding, and the making of a teacher is not something that can happen in a short time, bounded by the sorts of stages we use to mark out academic life. Like all rigorous practice, the way of teaching demands a long journey that does not have any easily identifiable destination. It does not end with "pre-service", or graduation, or after one year, or after all the criteria are met. It is beyond all criteria. It is a journey that I believe must include a backward step into the self, and it is a journey that is its own destination. (p. 456)

The question mark at the end of the title, *The Practicum: A Learning Journey?*, is important because it raises the questions *Is it?* and *For whom?* In regard to the first question, a contradiction was evident in this study's findings. On the one hand, the traditional practicum in which these student teachers were involved was not a learning journey. Rather, it was perceived, as confirmed in the practicum literature, as a "series of hurdles to be got over" (Gibson, 1976) and as "a test to be passed" (Calderhead, 1988). On the other hand, the student teachers did experience a 'learning journey' as a result of the research process and a focus on reflection. They came to the realisation that having travelled the practicum road, their journey as a teacher and learner, had only just begun.

In considering the question, *For whom is the practicum a learning journey?*, a finding from this study, is that it can be for all participants. The student teachers were not the only learners in the practicum. The teachers were involved in significant learning also (as was the university supervisor). A practicum then can provide an opportunity for co-learning, where there is growth on the part of all participants. Cochran-Smith (1991) described such an approach to student teaching as "collaborative resonance" where "mutually constructed learning communities" are established, involving student teachers, school-based and university-based teacher educators. She asserted that the goal of teacher education is "more than teaching students how to teach. It is teaching them how to continue learning in diverse school contexts..." (p. 109).

The notion of continued learning is crucial when discussing the *quality* of practicum experiences. Feiman-Nemser (1980) described "educative experiences" as ones which "engage the learners' present capacities, needs and purposes in ways that contribute to richer experiences in the future" (p. 136). Such

experiences are to be compared with miseducative experiences Dewey (1904, cited in Zeichner, 1981-82) which are defined as ones which close off possibilities for further growth and professional development. In considering whether the practicum is a learning journey, one might ask the question posed by Zeichner (1981-82) over a decade ago: What is the *quality* of the experience in terms of fostering students'/teacher educators' capacities to learn from future experiences?

This study has provided some insights into how the practicum could be changed to more closely approximate a learning journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important implication (and challenge) of this study is to plan a practicum which is a more *empowering* experience for student teachers. As student teachers learn to take on more responsibility for their learning they will feel more in control of the practicum and their learning. This empowering effect should reduce many of the traditional tensions and dilemmas experienced by student teachers. It should also prepare them appropriately for their role as teachers in the future.

In order for student teachers to empower themselves, adequate structures or supports need to be established. Recommendations based on this study are that the traditional practicum needs to be restructured to:

- focus on the classroom, school and community;
- take account of both intended and unintended learning outcomes that result from a practicum experience;
- provide time for action and reflection;
- allow for individual needs to be met;
- create opportunities for collaborative learning situations.

Focus on the Classroom, School and Community

The practicum needs to be a whole school experience so that reflection can be upon the classroom, the school and the community. Schon (1987) recognised this aspect when he proposed a reflective practicum, where student teachers "would be encouraged to think of adapting to or coping with the life of the school as a component of their practice equal in importance to their work with children" (p. 323). Unless student teachers' whole learning is addressed from their field experiences, reflection as it occurs in the practicum will remain at a very superficial level with student teachers reflecting only on their teaching behaviour. While reflecting on teaching behaviour is certainly a start it has been stressed that if the reflective process is limited to a consideration of teaching skills and strategies, teaching becomes a mere technical activity (Zeichner, 1992). Challenging student teachers to reflect on their learning that occurs from within the whole school context is a step towards ensuring that they consider wider educational issues such as the match/mis-match between their beliefs and practices, what should be taught to whom and why and the social and institutional context in which teaching takes place.

Take Account of both Intended and Unintended Learning Outcomes

A practicum curriculum needs to be structured to take account of both intended and unintended learning outcomes. Both levels were experienced by the student teachers in this study but caused problems because they felt that the unintended learning outcomes were not valued by the university. This finding supports Smith and Lovat's (1991) assertion that in any definition of curriculum, there is tension between the notions of intended versus experienced learning. The student teachers identified two types of learning for themselves - what they were "meant to learn" and "everything else". The first level was that which was prescribed in the subject booklet where intended learning outcomes for final year students were stated. The second level referred to that which was not stated explicitly from the outset. This level was brought into the student teachers' consciousness as a result of the research process in which they were involved and allowed the student teachers to recognise a very much broader range of learning than the official intended learning. Arguably, the most important learning which occurred for the student teachers was that teachers need to be learners throughout their career. The student teachers in this study initially perceived the practicum curriculum as that which was prescribed in their subject booklets, which had a constraining effect on their learning. To optimise learning outcomes, the practicum curriculum needs to be seen as the total school experience provided to student teachers, whether planned or unplanned by teacher educators.

Provide Time for Action and Reflection

An effective strategy which assisted the reflection process for the student teachers in this study was structuring 'reflection time' into the school day. Reflection was not seen as something you did in your spare time but rather an important part of teaching and learning. The message conveyed to students was that this is a worthwhile activity, justifying taking time out from teaching. Brookfield (1990) claimed, "One of the most frequently espoused principles of skilful teaching is that of praxis, that is, of ensuring that opportunities for the interplay between action and reflection are available in a balanced way for students" (p. 50). He identified a problem with the ways in which learning is structured in classrooms. This has also been the case with the way learning has been structured in the traditional practicum:

> Despite the frequency with which teachers espouse the principles of praxis, ...it seems that the active component is given far more emphasis than the reflective...there is barely time to assimilate new ideas and knowledge, let alone reflect on these. There is apparently little chance for students to interpret what they are being exposed to in terms of their past experiences or to trace connections between new ideas and perspectives and their already evolved structures of understanding. The period of mulling over that which is reportedly needed for learners to make interpretive sense of what is happening to them is neglected. (p. 50)

Brookfield concluded, "If we take the idea of praxis seriously, or if we give any credence to models of experiential learning, then we must grant equal importance to periods of reflective speculation and periods of active engagement" (p. 62). While not advocating equal time being given to these aspects of the practicum, this study strongly suggests that they need to be granted equal importance. Providing time during the school day conveys the message that reflection is valued and expected.

Allow for Individual needs to be Met

One of the ways to encourage student teachers to be in more control of their learning is to negotiate the practicum more with them. Treating all student teachers the same does not result in them maximising their learning from the experience. As Calderhead (1991) wrote:

> Teacher education needs to take account of individual needs of student teachers. Student teachers come to teacher education with different background experiences and different orientations to learning to teach and consequently take different paths in their professional development. (p. 534)

Weinstein (1990) also made this point, "It is almost a cliche that teachers must understand their students and adapt instruction to students' needs. Yet as teacher educators, we rarely practise what we preach" (p. 53). The learning tasks set in the practicum must be more flexible so that they allow for more creativity among student teachers and for students to have opportunities to follow their particular learning interests. While there will be a need for minimum requirements to be met, there should also be enough scope for student teachers to negotiate some aspects of their assessment. In this way, the student teachers would be able to take responsibility for their own actions knowing that their learning journey was valued. Such an approach is in keeping with the Inquiry-Oriented teacher education paradigm outlined by Zeichner (1983), which views prospective teachers as active participants in the construction of curriculum content. As well as providing more flexible learning tasks, the learning environment must be structured in such a way to facilitate student teacher learning. That is, it must be supportive of individual learning journeys.

Create Opportunities for Collaborative Learning Situations

The student teachers in this study benefited from the support provided by collaborative learning situations - both informal and formal. The informal situations arose as a result of being placed as a group in the school, which the student teachers regarded as having a significant influence on their learning. The formal situations referred to the group meetings which were held as a part of the research process and the structured group meetings with the school co-ordinators. The traditional structure of the practicum has supported the traditional individualistic culture of schools, with student teachers teaching on their own and evaluating on their own, with the result that student teachers perceive the

practicum as a personal test (Sinclair & Nicoll, 1981). This needs to change. This assertion is supported by Zeichner (1992) who claimed that the individualistic focus on encouraging teachers to think by themselves about their work has hindered student teacher learning. Northfield (1993), in describing a recent school-based initiative, supported the notion of placing student teachers in schools in groups of at least four. Many other teacher educators also support the notion of collaboration (Brookfield, 1990; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Jalongo, 1990; Wildman & Niles, 1987). Given the disempowering effects of the traditional practicum, it is relevant here to consider Freire's (1973, cited in Shor, 1980) assertion that collaboration is essential. He explained, "Because disempowerment is social, empowerment has to be social...Collective work is a bonding experience for people...an exercise in collective work and group deliberation is therapeutically restoring" (p. 109).

If collaboration is to be adopted as a guiding principle for practicum, there are implications for the roles of all practicum participants and the process of supervision. Student teacher learning is not facilitated by our inspectorial model of supervision, the predominant model of the past, which viewed the process of supervision as 'direct, overt surveillance' (Smyth, 1993). An empowering model of supervision needs to be implemented which values student teachers as learners and utilises strategies which facilitate their learning. The traditional model of supervision then, along with the traditional practicum structure, will have to change. A model which requires supervisors to relinquish the role of critic and assume the role of facilitator is also being advocated in the literature (Cochran-Smith, 1991; Glickman, 1992; Nolan & Francis, 1992; Smyth, 1993). Student teachers must be prepared to assume some responsibility for the learning processes and outcomes of practicum. Training and development will be important for teacher educators, both school-based and university-based, to reconceptualise their role (and the role of student teacher) and address the question, *how is student teacher learning most effectively facilitated in the practicum?* There is a need for a genuine partnership approach to the practicum, based on participatory models of sharing ideas and collaboration (Fleet, Groundwater-Smith & Taggart, 1993; Gore, 1995; Schools Council Report, 1990; Standards Council of the Teaching Profession, 1995). Such partnerships will value the part that each participant has in the practicum, the relationship between participants and the learning processes and outcomes for pre-service teachers.

CONCLUSION

Teaching and teachers' work have changed. The Schools Council Report (1990) explained that this has resulted from changes to the make-up of the student population, an expansion of professional tasks and the adoption or assignment of more responsibility for individual or broader social problems. Such changes also demand changes in student teaching. The student teachers in this study experienced these new conditions as they worked alongside teachers in their practicum. As a result there were powerful effects on the student teachers. On completion of the study, they claimed that one of the most important learning outcomes for them had been recognising that learning to teach was only part of learning to be a teacher.

The practicum then, must change. It can no longer focus exclusively on learning to teach, with a single classroom as its focus. In order for the practicum to realise its potential as a significant learning experience for tomorrow's teachers, changes need to be made to the practicum, based on the notions of empowerment, collaboration and reflection. This maximises the opportunity for teacher educators to develop the practicum with students as a real learning journey.

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