

# *Teacher Agency in the Context of Curriculum Reform: An International Scoping Review*

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## **Abstract**

In parallel with neoliberal curriculum reforms taking place over the globe, teacher agency is increasingly recognized as a worthwhile research topic. Although the concept of teacher agency is fast becoming an educationally worldwide concern, there is little agreement on its conceptualization. Additionally, despite its real significance to educational changes, no previous study has attempted to collate international evidence on teacher agency enactment and how to support such agency in large-scale K-12 curriculum reforms. Therefore, this scoping review aims to: (1) clarify how teacher agency has been conceptualized in relation to curriculum reform; (2) uncover teacher's experience of agency in government-initiated reforms; (3) identify factors that possibly influence teacher agency. Following the procedure recommended by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), the author finally selected 10 empirical studies published in peer-reviewed Scopus indexed journals that met the inclusion criteria. Findings reveal that varied concepts and frameworks have been adopted to capture the complexity of teacher agency as it relates to system-wide curriculum reforms. It is also found that teachers in reviewed studies largely experienced tension and demonstrated different levels of agency across curriculum reform contexts. As emerging from the literature, their enactment of agency was supposedly impacted by personal, structural and cultural conditions. Whereas strong professional belief and collaborative school culture were the most likely to enable agency, contradictions between tools of the new curriculum and teacher's experiences and beliefs seemed to considerably constrain it. Implications for researchers, policy makers, school leaders and teacher trainers are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher Agency, Curriculum Reform, Scoping Review

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## **Introduction**

Over the last decade, teacher agency has received increasing attention in educational research, which can be seen in parallel with curriculum reforms taking place across nations. Globalization, human challenges, and the ills caused by the education system themselves have prompted many countries to implement comprehensive curricular reforms to prepare students for the 21st century (Gouédard et al., 2020). Notably, many of these reforms have adopted neoliberal features such as decentralization, accountability, learning outcomes, and standardization (Fu & Clarke, 2019; Ryder et al., 2019). This movement has placed teachers at the center of the curriculum, who are held accountable for measurable outcomes (Fu & Clarke, 2019), and are thought to be policy actors holding the key to successful implementation of educational reform (Min, 2019; Ryder et al., 2018; Scanlon et al., 2021). Increasingly, teacher agency has become a worthwhile research topic in the context of system-wide curriculum reforms.

Although a large volume of literature has explored teacher agency, the number of review papers on this topic is limited. Cong-Lem (2021) reviewed teacher agency in general; Miller et al. (2020), teacher agency for inclusive education; Chisholm et al. (2019), teacher agency in language arts teaching; and Hinostroza (2020), teacher educators' agency in higher education context. However, no previous study has provided an overview of the literature on teacher agency in the context of curriculum reform.

To date, there has been little agreement among scholars on how teacher agency is conceptualized (Cong-Lem, 2021). Therefore, my first goal in this review is to clarify how researchers have defined teacher agency in relation to curriculum reforms and identify the theoretical frameworks they have used. Second, I expect to unearth teachers' experience of agency in national curriculum reforms and shed light on the factors impacting such agency.

The following questions guide my work:

1. How is teacher agency conceptualized in the literature as it relates to large-scale curriculum reform in K-12 education?
2. How do teachers experience agency in their country's curriculum reforms?
3. What are the enabling and constraining conditions for teacher agency in the context of large-scale curriculum reform?

## **Method**

To explore the extent to which this topic has been researched, I utilized scoping review and followed the procedure recommended by Arksey and O'Malley (2005).

### **Identifying the research question**

It should be noted that my focus was on *teacher agency* as a concept and the context was large-scale curriculum reform in K-12 education. I used research questions from the most promising articles to construct specific guiding questions for the review.

## **Identifying relevant studies**

The database search was Scopus due to its reliability and accessibility. I excluded books, book chapters, conference proceedings, essays, editorial introductions, and commentary from my search. I also excluded papers that were written in a language other than English. Guided by the research questions, I established the following criteria for final inclusion:

- Be peer-reviewed journal articles
- Be published in English language
- Report empirical results
- Focus on teacher agency (these words must be in the articles' title)
- Provide a clear conceptualization for teacher agency
- Highlight large-scale state-initiated curriculum reform in K-12 education as the context (curriculum reform must be the keywords and/ or included in the abstract and/or the reform context must be clarified in the literature review).

Used search queries were:

- *Teacher agency* OR *teacher agencies* (in title); AND *curriculum reform* (in title, abstract, keywords); AND NOT *university* (in title, abstract, keywords); AND NOT *college* (in title, abstract, keywords).

I got 22 results for this search string.

## **Selecting studies**

Next, I read the abstract, headings, rationale, and research questions of 22 candidate articles to find the ones matching my inclusion criteria the most. After the screening process, 10 articles were selected.

## **Collating, summarizing and reporting the results**

Selected papers were presented chronologically with descriptive information as follows.

Study	Participant	Setting	State of reform	Research method
Biesta et al. (2015)	6 classroom teachers	1 primary school, 2 secondary schools	Scotland	Ethnography
Bergh & Wahlström (2018)	10 teachers	Secondary schools; rural, middle-sized town, large city	Sweden	Qualitative
Fu & Clarke (2018)	8 physics teachers	1 high school, major city, mid-east China	China	Ethnography
Ryder et al. (2018)	13 science teachers	10 schools	Sweden	Qualitative
Fu & Clarke (2019)	10 physics teachers	1 top-ranked high school, major city, mid-east China	China	Ethnography
Min (2019)	605 teachers	Public primary schools; rural, urban, and suburban areas	Korea	Quantitative
Willis et al. (2019)	4 English teachers	2 senior secondary schools (1 regional government, 1 non-government)	Australia	Action inquiry
Poulton (2020)	6 teachers	1 state-funded primary school, metropolitan, multicultural students	Australia	Case study
Kneen et al. (2021)	19 Pioneer expressive arts teachers	8 primary schools, 8 secondary school, 2 special schools, 1 through school	Wales	Qualitative
Scanlon et al. (2021)	1 experienced PE teacher	1 post-primary school	Ireland	Case study

Table 1. Summary of selected papers

## Findings

### Participants, setting, and methods

As depicted in Table 1, ten articles covered 682 participants with varying teaching experiences. Three studies investigated high school teacher agency, whereas the rest focused on primary and secondary school teachers. Participants came from rural, urban, and suburban areas, mostly from public schools. The majority of them were classroom teachers; some were subject teachers in Physics, Science, English, Expressive Arts, and Physical Education. Interestingly, most research projects were conducted in Western countries where reforms were newly implemented, with only three studies carried out in the Asian context where national reforms have been underway for a long time.

Concerning research method, only Min (2019) utilized a quantitative approach; all the other adopted a qualitative research design. Three studies employed ethnography, two used case study design, and one utilized action inquiry with interviews, researcher' observations, field notes, teacher's reflections, and text analysis as the main sources of data. The other three collected data through interviews and observations.

## Conceptualizing teacher agency as it relates to curriculum reform

The first set of findings concerned this question: How is teacher agency conceptualized in the extant literature as it relates to large-scale curriculum reform in K-12 education?

Theoretical Framework	Studies
Ecological perspective	Biesta et al. (2015); Poulton (2020)
Social cognitive theory	Fu & Clarke (2018); Min (2019)
Sociocultural perspective	Ryder et al. (2018); Willis et al. (2019)
Dewey's transactional realism	Bergh & Wahlström (2018)
Combined approaches (Ecological model, structuration theory, Campbell's notion of moral agency, Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework for human development, figurational sociology)	Fu & Clarke, (2019); Kneen et al. (2021); Scanlon et al. (2021)

Table 2. Theoretical frameworks used in reviewed papers

As shown in Table 2, different theoretical approaches were employed to conceptualize teacher agency; the most used was the ecological perspective. According to Biesta and colleagues (2015), “[T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act *by means of* their environment rather than simply in their environment”; in that sense, agency is not understood as a capacity “residing in individuals” but as an “emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction” (p. 626). To understand the achievement of teacher agency, studying the dynamic interplay between iterational, practical-evaluative, projective dimensions, and school ecologies is crucial (Poulton, 2020).

The next popular framework adopted was Bandura's social cognitive theory (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Min, 2019). Following Bandura's definition, Min alluded to teacher agency as “intentional acts” (Min, 2019, p. 2) that are shaped in interactions with environmental and personal factors. Teacher agency is emphasized as an individual capacity that is influenced by two factors: (1) teachers' self-efficacy and outcome expectations, and (2) the school culture in which they work. In contrast, Fu and Clarke (2018) concentrated on Bandura's concept of collective agency. Nonetheless, Fu and Clarke (2018) noted that teachers' individual and collective agency and curriculum reform “are studied as a complex system” and “neither agency nor structure is discussed without the other” (p. 48).

Ryder et al. (2018) and Willis et al. (2019) employed a sociocultural perspective and seemed to define teacher agency similarly. Ryder et al. (2018) alluded to teacher agency as “the professional goals of the teachers” and “the choices teachers make concerning their working practices” (p. 539) while Willis et al. (2019) described agentic teachers as those who “engage with new policies and make informed professional judgements about the design, practice, and consequences of classroom curriculum and assessment” (p. 234). However, whereas Willis et al. (2019) highlighted contextual factors and conceptualized agency as “a social role that is negotiated in practice, often in the collective of the classroom, or with peers in the broader collective of schools” (p. 234), Ryder et al. (2018) argued that it is personal goals and biography, separated from the broader structure, that determine teachers' agentic actions.

Adopting Dewey's transactional realism, Bergh and Wahlström (2018) focused on teacher agency “in the intersection between the ideal and the realistic”, associating it with “experiences in relation to the normative content of the curriculum” (p. 136) that are

“experienced by individuals in their interactions with a social and material environment” (p. 139).

Unlike the scholars mentioned above, authors in the other three studies combined different theoretical approaches. Despite using the ecological model by Priestley et al. (2013), Scanlon et al. (2021) examined iterational, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions from Elias’s figurational lenses to better capture the complexity of teacher agency. Fu and Clarke (2019) and Kneen et al. (2021) used theoretical combinations to achieve their research goals. Whilst Kneen et al. (2021) employed Bronfenbrenner’s ecological framework for human development to examine pioneer teacher agency at the micro, macro, and meso levels, Fu and Clarke (2019) adopted structuration theory and Campbell’s notion of moral agency to better probe teachers’ moral agency.

Although there was no clear consensus among researchers, agency was generally characterized by conscious, intentional choices and actions *of* or *by* teachers, which influence and are influenced by the broader contexts in which teachers play a part. However, researchers seemed not to agree on the extent and in what ways the environment or the structure affects and interacts with teacher agency. The debate also centered on whether agency is an achievable state or an independent social factor. Despite differences in opinions, most researchers agreed that teacher agency exists in highly complicated relationships with different factors in relation to the curriculum. Thus, curriculum reforms provide a rich context for exploring teacher agency.

### **Teachers’ experience of agency in the context of large-scale curriculum reform**

It was obvious across ten studies that teachers were positioned as the main curriculum enactors in official reform discourses. However, the degree to which they felt autonomous seemed to vary. Teachers in Korea and China were supposedly entitled to more autonomy and influence over the curriculum (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Min, 2019), whereas teachers in Sweden and Australia appeared to have less (Bergh & Wahlström, 2018; Poulton, 2020).

In all cases, however, visible was the tension felt by teachers following the introduction of new curriculum. Swedish teachers in Bergh and Wahlström’s (2018) study reported serious dilemmas between idealistic and realistic aspects of the curriculum, whereas some interviewed teachers in Ryder et al. (2018) felt seriously untrusted and deprofessionalized.

Facing conflicts and tensions, teachers in the reviewed studies developed responsive strategies that in turn reflected their level of agency. In many cases, teachers were stuck in negative experiences and found it difficult to enact agency, as Biesta et al. (2015) clearly demonstrated. As these authors pointed out, expressions of insufficient agency included teachers’ reliance on new curriculum discourse to justify practices, “blaming students” (p. 631), “reluctance to rock the boat”, “strong anxiety about curriculum development” (p. 633), and “lack of discourse around purpose and values” (p. 635).

Nevertheless, some teachers found room to manoeuvre and exercised agency. Teachers in Bergh and Wahlström’s (2018) study, for instance, used curriculum change as an opportunity to reflect on their previous teaching beliefs, envision and adjust their practices to the new curriculum. In other cases, policy changes even led to creative tensions where teachers were motivated to try out new approaches (Ryder et al., 2018), collaborate with colleagues (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Kneen et al., 2021; Ryder et al., 2018), propose alternative assessment plans

(Poulton, 2020), protect students from negative aspects of the reform (Biesta et al., 2015; Fu & Clarke, 2019), rearrange curriculum content to enhance students' engagement (Scanlon et al., 2021), and mobilize different pedagogical methods to promote student learning (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Scanlon et al., 2021).

In short, teachers in the reviewed studies encountered tensions and dilemmas in reforms to varying degrees. In many cases, dilemmas remained unsolved, and the level of agency was weak. There existed, however, cases where teachers successfully negotiated multiple forces, resolved contradictions, and acted agentially. The following part offered possible explanations for this.

### **Enabling and constraining conditions for teacher agency**

In the context of large-scale curriculum reform, what are the enabling and constraining conditions for teacher agency? Three conditions emerge, including personal, structural, and cultural. As these conditions facilitate or hinder teacher agency in different ways, I will clarify the effect of each condition.

#### **Personal conditions**

*Professional beliefs.* In half of the studies, teachers' professional beliefs were identified as an important factor contributing to agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Bergh & Wahlström, 2018; Min, 2019; Poulton et al., 2020; Ryder et al., 2018). As argued by Ryder et al. (2018), teacher's intentionality and personal goals created room for agency itself despite the imposition of external forces. Supporting this claim, Min's (2019) quantitative results confirmed a positive correlation of teachers' high levels of self-efficacy and outcome expectations with agency in curriculum practices. By contrast, "superficial understanding" of the reform and lack of a clear educational vision possibly restrained agency (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 636).

*Professional expertise.* In Australian assessment reform, teachers' familiarity with proposed changes, experiences with external assessment, adaptability (Willis et al., 2019), and assessment literacy (Poulton, 2020) were found to positively influence agency level. Deep content knowledge may facilitate Chinese teachers' agency (Fu & Clarke, 2018), whereas access to collective experiences of previous curriculum changes provided interviewed Swedish teachers with a broader repertoire to manoeuvre (Bergh & Wahlström, 2018).

#### **Structural conditions**

*Effective school management and leadership.* This factor was mostly recognized as a contributor to teacher agency (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2020; Kneen et al., 2021). Accordingly, strong leadership shielded teachers from accountability and pressure to follow top-down system-developed materials (Poulton, 2020), provided resources (e.g., time, funding) for curriculum tasks (Kneen et al., 2021). In Fu and Clarke (2018), the role of the principal's leadership was highlighted. The principal in this study was described as effectively facilitating collective agency formation via continued encouragement and guidance; more importantly, his ability to maintain collective efficacy allowed the reform initiatives to be sustainable.

*Dynamic interactions among teachers and between teachers and the social structure through concrete curriculum activities.* At the school level, the willing involvement of all physics

teachers in a curriculum design activity in response to Chinese reform requirements showed how collective professional activities paved the way for agency (Fu & Clarke, 2018). In Kneen et al. (2021), cooperation among a group of Welsh pioneer teachers in building a curriculum framework illustrated how agentic engagement at the macro level could take place.

*Policy mediator support and outsider interventions.* As claimed by Ryder et al. (2018), policy mediators who act as brokers between policymakers and school communities could facilitate teacher agency. Besides, interventions from outsiders such as university researchers or teacher educators may encourage teachers to seek out and test alternatives (Willis et al., 2019; Scanlon et al., 2021).

However, several structural conditions were identified as limiting teacher agency.

*Contradiction between the new curriculum's tools and teachers' past experiences and beliefs.* In Bergh and Wahlström (2018), prescriptive knowledge objectives and continuous assessment were discovered to contradict with past collective experiences of teachers, therefore, constrained imagination of future teaching. In Fu and Clarke (2019), the conflict between reform mandates (e.g., student-centered approach) and traditional practices of college entrance examination required teachers to carefully negotiate between these two ends. In Poulton (2020), newly introduced summative assessment tasks contradicted many teachers' existing beliefs, limiting teaching decisions and preventing teachers from realizing their own aspirations.

*Lack of mechanism allowing flexibility.* "Contextual continuity, such as timetabling structures or planning routines that were seen as not able to be questioned" (p. 244) could create a constraining condition (Willis et al., 2019). Rigid timetabling was also confirmed by Kneen et al. (2021) as a main factor that might deactivate agency in curriculum reform.

*Lack of policy coherence.* Another constraining factor could be incoherence in reform implementation. Biesta et al. (2015) referred to this as "confused discourses encountered in schools" (p. 636) whilst Scanlon et al. (2021) uncovered a lack of assessment guidelines for teachers at the start of the implementation stage, leading to later anxiety.

*Lack of access to a wider professional discourse.* According to Biesta et al. (2015), "the absence of a robust professional discourse about teaching and education more generally" (p. 638) was likely to result in teachers' inadequate discourse to critically engage with the reform policy, thereby limiting their agency.

## **Cultural conditions**

*Collaborative and supportive school culture.* Positive professional relationships were widely claimed to enable teacher agency. Whereas supportive teacher-principal rapport facilitated teachers' exercise of curriculum autonomy at the school level, strong colleague relationships encouraged teachers to enact agency in the classroom (Min, 2019). Other studies confirmed that trust-based and respectful relationships with co-workers and school leaders were crucial to teacher agency in curriculum transitions (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Poulton, 2020; Willis et al., 2019). "Students' plasticity" (Fu & Clarke, 2019, p. 62), "student responsiveness" (Willis et al., 2019, p. 243), and "student engagement" (Scanlon et al., 2021, p. 57) were also sources of teachers' commitment to agency.

*Assessment culture.* Based on reviews of studies, it emerged that assessment culture did matter to teacher agency. Accountability culture with formal assessment pressure (e.g., high-stake exams, learning outcomes) may significantly limit teachers' agency as they are placed in a precarious position (Biesta et al., 2015; Fu & Clarke, 2019; Kneen et al., 2021; Poulton, 2020; Ryder et al., 2018; Scanlon et al., 2021). However, it also forced many teachers across contexts to learn how to balance local autonomy with external accountability (Bergh & Wahlström, 2018; Fu & Clarke, 2018).

## **Discussion**

As part of this scoping review, three questions were asked to better understand teacher agency in state-launched curriculum reforms, and discover conditions that support and impede such agency:

1. How is teacher agency conceptualized in the literature as it relates to large-scale curriculum reform in K-12 education?
2. How do teachers experience agency in their country's curriculum reforms?
3. What are the enabling and constraining conditions for teacher agency in the context of large-scale curriculum reform?

According to the results of this review, there is little clarity on the concept of teacher agency amidst reforms. Most of the research reviewed in this paper appears to have avoided defining teacher agency. Chisholm et al. (2019) also found similar results, and I agree with these authors that further studies should formulate an unambiguous definition of teacher agency. Moreover, the review shows a trend of combining different concepts and approaches to form the theoretical basis, which on the one hand means teacher agency is under-conceptualized and needs further theorization (Cong-Lem, 2021), on the other hand, signifies the complex nature of agency. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson's ecological perspective (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2013) dominated ten reviewed articles as the most dominant framework, confirming its popularity in teacher agency research generally (Cong-Lem, 2021). Although Cong-Lem (2021) advocated a unified framework to study teacher agency, I would recommend that, given the dynamic curriculum changes, scholars apply various theoretical frameworks to capture multifaceted aspects of teacher agency before attempting a better conceptualization of it. Notably, Scanlon et al. (2021) and Ryder et al. (2018) affirmed that agency appears to be a process rather than a product, which helps to theorize teacher agency. My suggestion is that future researchers consider viewing agency as a transformative process that occurs over time (Sannino, Engeström, & Lemos, 2016). A possible research idea is to explore how and under what conditions teacher agency emerges and transforms during different stages of curriculum reforms.

Regarding the second research question, teachers in all reviewed articles were found to have struggled with curriculum shifts. The explanation for the widespread stress teachers experienced will be discussed in conjunction with answers to the third question.

The most likely cause of teacher tension is the conflict between personal factors and structural and cultural forces. In the cases of Sweden, Australia, and Ireland, main contradictions occurred between neoliberal reform features (e.g., grading, national testing, prescriptive objectives, accountability) and teachers' autonomy (Bergh & Wahlström, 2018; Poulton, 2020; Ryder et al., 2018; Scanlon, 2021). In China, where exam-oriented tradition predates neoliberalism, the primary contradiction seemingly exists between imagined reform

intentions (e.g., student-centered approach, less workload) and real-life traditional expectations for teachers (performance in the competitive college entrance exam) (Fu & Clarke, 2018; Fu & Clarke, 2019). If left unresolved, *contradictions between the new curriculum's tools and teachers' past experiences and beliefs* might escalate into severe tensions, deactivate teachers' personal goals, limit teaching decisions, and constrain agency.

That is why *a collaborative school culture, dynamic interactions between teachers and the social structure through concrete curriculum activities, effective leadership, and a good assessment culture* can all help to support teacher agency. While professional support from the principal and other teachers is likely to assist teachers in transforming frustration into collaboration and creativity, an “assessment culture that acknowledges teachers' professionalism and student needs” (Poulton, 2020, p. 46) generates a safe environment for agentic teaching decisions. Therefore, in curriculum reform, principals are recommended to negotiate between policy messages, school realities, and social expectations, secure teachers from unreasonable external requirements, organize concrete curriculum activities for teachers to interact professionally with reform mandates, and build a trust-based collaborative school culture.

Tension and dilemmas can also result from contradictions among structural and cultural elements, such as those between school discourses (Biesta et al., 2015), between new pedagogical approaches and the current school structure (Kneen et al., 2021), and between official documents and implementation stage (Scanlon et al., 2021). Contradictions can also arise from a lack of coherence between policies at various levels (Poulton, 2020). This explains why, as previously stated, a *lack of policy coherence* and a *lack of mechanisms allowing flexibility* are regarded as constraining structural conditions for agency. For that reason, policymakers, besides school leaders, play an important part. They are advised to ensure coherence at all levels (Ryder et al., 2018), actively organize platforms for discussion, and set an action agenda involving stakeholders (Scanlon et al., 2021). Effective shared sense-making strategies across layers, as demonstrated in Finnish educational reform, are critical to the success of large-scale educational reform (Soini et al., 2021). Moreover, two studies in this review suggest that policy mediator groups connecting policymakers and practitioner communities could be established to support reform implementation (Kneen et al., 2021; Ryder et al., 2018), which accords with Priestley et al.'s (2021) suggestion.

Finally, contradictions might occur between different dimensions within personal factor. For example, in Biesta et al. (2015), teachers' inability to critically engage with reform discourses resulted from their own conflicting professional beliefs, whereas in Kneen et al. (2021), teachers' reluctance to change may have erected barriers to reform efforts. On the contrary, strong *professional beliefs* and *expertise*, as indicated in this review, *acted* as critical conditions that enabled many teachers to respond agentially “despite or perhaps *because of* the constraining conditions” (Chisholm et al., 2019). However, to overcome internal contradictions, teachers' efforts alone seem insufficient. Structural conditions such as *outsider interventions* and *access to a wider professional discourse* might be needed. Teacher educators and university researchers are strongly encouraged to collaborate with schools on reform implementation. Importantly, as suggested by Biesta et al. (2015), “access to robust professional discourses about teaching” (p. 638) should constitute a critical aspect of teacher education and continuous professional development.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings indicate that diverse concepts and frameworks have been adopted in the reviewed papers to capture the complexity of teacher agency. It was also discovered that teachers experienced significant tension and demonstrated varying levels of agency across curriculum reform contexts. According to the literature, their exercise of agency was influenced by personal, structural, and cultural factors, with implications discussed above. It is important to note, however, that this review has two limitations. First, it relied solely on one research database, which might have limited the number of papers reviewed and may have resulted in selection bias. Secondly, it excluded valuable insights from non-English sources, which should be addressed in future reviews.

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