

Marshall Memo 53

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
September 13, 2004

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2. Going beyond assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning
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Quotes of the Week

"Many teachers do not plan and conduct classroom dialogue in ways that might help students to learn."

Paul Black et al. (see item #1)

"Look, we've told you we don't understand this. Why are you going on to the next topic?"

A secondary-school student in the U.K. (see item #1)

"Students will invest effort in a task only if they believe that they can achieve something. If a learning exercise is seen as a competition, then everyone is aware that there will be losers as well as winners, and those who have a track record as losers will see little point in trying."

Ibid.

"The mistake we have made at all levels is to believe that once-a-year standardized assessments alone can provide sufficient information and motivation to increase student learning."

Rick Stiggins (see item #2)

"[W]e can't just arrange for teachers to 'meet' and then assume that close scrutiny and productive adjustment of teaching practices will automatically ensue. In fact, we can't assume that teaching will be discussed at all."

Mike Schmoker (see item 3)

"To become competent readers, students need real stories in ordinary English with real action, comedy, and tragedy, stories that raise difficult questions, questions which the teacher might not anticipate, questions which students can't answer in unison."

Dennis Baron in *Education Week*, Sept. 8, 2004, p. 43

1. Using Formative Assessments to Improve Teaching and Learning

After the publication of their widely-read 1998 article on during-the-year, learning-oriented assessments (“Inside the Black Box”), a team of U.K. researchers continued their work with groups of secondary teachers, and in a lengthy article in this month’s *Kappan*, they share their latest thinking. The most important finding is that when teachers make good use of formative assessments, students learn more *and* score higher on rigorous exams. In other words, teachers don’t have to choose between teaching well and getting good test scores.

The article has five specific recommendations on how to improve teaching by using day-by-day feedback on student learning:

- *Improving questioning* – “Many teachers do not plan and conduct classroom dialogue in ways that might help students to learn,” say the researchers. For example, it’s very common for teachers not to give students enough wait-time after posing a question; a second or two after asking, most teachers move on to another student or answer the question themselves. This dynamic results in teachers using mostly questions that students can answer quickly from memory, without much thought. Teachers find it difficult to break this habit, but when they do (usually with the help of colleagues or a coach), they find that the quality of student answers and the level of discourse improves markedly. These steps were helpful to British teachers:

- Work at framing questions that are worth asking (big ideas, essential questions that students need to think about) versus questions requiring only recall.
- Increase wait-time to several seconds.
- Expect every student to have an answer and contribute to the discussion.
- Use every answer, right or wrong, to develop understanding. “The aim is thoughtful improvement rather than getting it right the first time.”
- Use rich follow-up activities that create opportunities to extend understanding.

- *Using comments vs. grades* – A striking research finding is that, for homework and assignments during a teaching unit, it is far more productive for teachers to give students written comments than to give scores or grades. This is because when students see a grade, they take it as a summative judgment on their work, shut down, and ignore any written comments. “We now believe,” say the researchers, “that the effort that many teachers devote to grading homework may be misdirected. A

numerical score or a grade does not tell students how to improve their work, so an opportunity to enhance their learning is lost.”

But not all comments are helpful; some are brief and have no more value than a grade. To promote learning, comments must: (a) say specifically what the student has done well, (b) point out what needs to be improved, and (c) give guidance on how to make the improvement. Teachers also need to build in a mechanism to ensure that students actually *use* the comments. One teacher developed a two-column sheet, the left-hand side for his comments, the right-hand side for students to give evidence that they had put the comment to work (e.g., a page reference in their notebook). Some teachers found it particularly valuable to have students spend class time rewriting a piece of work integrating feedback in a supportive environment. They found that this can changed students’ expectations about class work and homework.

- *Using self-assessment and peer assessment* – Teachers need to be transparent about what is to be learned in a unit and how students’ work will be evaluated. Giving rubrics and exemplars of proficient student work is an excellent way to make expectations clear and help students self-assess as they go along. But most students, especially low-achievers, need help evaluating their own work. Explaining scoring rubrics to students helps. So does giving students “traffic light” icons with which they can signal how they’re doing: green means they get it, yellow means partial understanding, red means they’re lost. A teacher can ask the whole class to think about which light applies to them, then ask for a show of hands for red, yellow, and green, and then decide whether to re-teach, pull out a group of red/yellow-light students, or organize students into green/red pairings for peer tutoring.

Once the table is set for self-assessment, peer assessment is a valuable adjunct. Peer help works because (a) students often accept criticisms from peers that they wouldn’t take seriously coming from a teacher; (b) students often understand the language that peers use better than a teacher’s; and (c) a student who is confused is more likely to interrupt a peer for clarification.

- *Formative use of summative tests* – The English researchers think that summative tests should be part of the learning process, not just final judgments. Effective practices include: (a) having students “traffic light” the questions on a summative test, enabling the teacher to use the red/yellow/green data to organize peer tutoring, re-teach, etc.; (b) in preparing for tests, an effective process was having students generate test questions themselves (and then answer them); this helped them think like assessors and get their heads inside the goals of the curriculum unit; and

(c) after a test, having students self-assess (solo or with peers) how their work might be improved.

The researchers go on to make a series of observations on their work with teachers:

- *Teachers need to delve into the psychology of learning.* Once teachers are thinking in terms of improving the learning results of all students, they are often eager to know more about how students learn. This leads them to take greater care selecting tasks, questions, and prompts to help move students along more effectively, and also makes them more attentive to the knowledge and misconceptions that students bring to the table. When teachers are constantly checking for understanding and being serious about real learning, students sometimes push back. One teacher was stunned when a student said, “Look, we’ve told you we don’t understand this. Why are you going on to the next topic?”

- *Each subject is different.* There is a spectrum of learning, from “closed” tasks with a single well-defined outcome to “open tasks with a wide range of acceptable outcomes. Math tends to be fairly straightforward in terms of the questions a teacher asks. In science, the information being taught is straightforward but many students bring misconceptions to the table (for example, that all heavy objects sink, or that the sun goes around the earth). The teacher’s challenge is to “open up discussion of such ideas and provide feedback that challenges them by introducing new pieces of evidence and argument that support the scientific model.” In language arts, peer assessment and self-assessment are particularly valuable because there are so many variables. Fortunately, the development of rubrics in the last 10 years has helped us put students in the driver’s seat of their own learning.

- *The type of feedback directly affects students’ motivation.* “Students will invest effort in a task only if they believe that they can achieve something,” say the researchers. “If a learning exercise is seen as a competition, then everyone is aware that there will be losers as well as winners, and those who have a track record as losers will see little point in trying.” Here are suggested guidelines:

- Feedback needs to tell students how they can improve versus how smart they are or what grade they will get. This is especially important for low achievers [and stigmatized populations – Claude Steele’s research at Stanford].
- Feedback in the form of scores and grades leads students to compare themselves to peers (ego involvement); feedback in the form of comments gets

students thinking in terms of how to improve (task involvement). Students who get comments outperform those who get grades.

- “In a competitive system,” write the researchers, “low achievers attribute their performance to lack of ‘ability’; high achievers, to their effort. In a task-oriented system, all attribute performance to effort, and learning is improved, particularly among low achievers.”
- The quality of feedback matters. If written comments are brief and merely shorthand for a grade, they won’t help.
 - *Teachers need to plan units carefully.* This includes thinking through “big ideas” and possible misconceptions and engineering lessons to maximize student thinking and understanding.
 - *These changes won’t come easily.* For teacher to adopt these ideas, they need to unlearn and change deeply-ingrained practices. The researchers suggest starting small (for example, with one class or one subject area), working with a supportive group of colleagues, and constantly measuring results.

“Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom” by Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2004 (Vol. 86, #1, p. 8-21), no e-link available

2. Going Beyond Assessment of Learning to Assessment for Learning

“The mistake we have made at all levels,” says Rick Stiggins in this important article, “is to believe that once-a-year standardized assessments alone can provide sufficient information and motivation to increase student learning.” Such tests, he says, are *necessary but not sufficient*. Stiggins believes that if we put new insights about day-to-day classroom assessment to work, we will see remarkable gains in student achievement: “Studies have demonstrated that assessment *for* learning rivals one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and that the use of assessment particularly benefits the achievement of low-performing students.”

Stiggins lists four mistaken beliefs about the use of assessment to improve schools and gives a more productive belief and action plan for each one:

- *Mistaken belief #1 – High-stakes standardized tests are good for all students because they motivate them to learn* (i.e., when the going gets tough, the tough get going). But tests will only get students to increase their effort if they believe they can succeed (which is more common among those who are already doing well in school). Students with a record of failure are neither invigorated nor motivated by high-stakes tests. For

these students to be successful, end-of-the-year tests *of* learning must be accompanied by classroom assessment *for* learning. Stiggins says we need to build learning environments “that help all students believe that they can succeed at hitting the target if they keep trying.”

- *Mistaken belief #2 – Adults are the ones who make student learning and school effectiveness happen.* Stiggins contends that our multi-million-dollar testing enterprise ignores students as users and decision-makers. This is a shame because students need to get involved for learning to take place. We need to look at assessment from the student’s perspective, he insists. For students, a test score or grade is something far more personal than it is for the teacher or principal. “The score or grade provides the information by which students decide whether or how they fit into the world of writers, readers, or math-problem solvers. Students read the score as evidence of whether success is even within reach for them... Students decide whether they are smart enough to meet standards, whether they have any reason to hope for success if they try. They decide whether meeting the standards is worth the required effort. They decide whether its is safe to try in the face of uncertainty – whether they are likely to succeed or be embarrassed by public failure.”

“We must stop being so adult-centered in our thinking about assessment,” says Stiggins. “We must build classroom environments in which students use assessments to understand what success looks like and how to do better the next time. In effect, we must help students use ongoing classroom assessment to take responsibility for their own academic success.”

- *Mistaken belief #3 – The instructional decisions that have the greatest impact on student learning are those made once a year.* The effects of this belief on student learning are obvious. In reality, “[m]any of the most crucial instructional decisions are made by students and teachers not once a year but every few minutes. Students decide if success is within reach and how to go about attaining it. Teachers diagnose student needs, allocate time, design and implement instructional interventions, judge student work, and assign grades.” For all this to work well, teachers need access to high-quality classroom assessments and training in how to use them.

- *Mistaken belief #4 – Teachers and administrators don’t need to know much about assessment; the professional testing people will take care of that.* In fact,” says Stiggins, “our collective assessment actions over the past 60 years reveal a fundamental lack of trust in teachers and school leaders to accurately assess the achievement of their students. We told teachers to teach and not to worry about assessment: someone else

will cover that." When teachers don't have assessment training and good materials, student learning suffers – leading to poor student performance on end-of-the year standardized tests.

Stiggins sums up: we must balance end-of-year standardized tests *of* learning with high-quality classroom assessments *for* learning, with students fully involved in record-keeping and communication during learning.

"New Assessment Beliefs for a New School Mission" by Rick Stiggins in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2004 (Vol. 86, #1, p. 22-27), no e-link available

3. A Discussion on Mike Schmoker's "Tipping Point" Article

In this cluster of articles in *Kappan*, two experts debate with Mike Schmoker on the February 2004 *Kappan* article in which he trashed strategic planning and urged educators to implement a much leaner, more results-focused process for improving student achievement (see Marshall Memo #25 for a summary). In the first article, William Cook, an expert on planning, insists that strategic planning in its pure form is visionary and idealistic and can only be done by an autonomous organization (i.e., not by a single public school). He scoffs at comprehensive school plans as "the singular, selfish obsession of an institutionalized mentality held by those dedicated to the status quo" and points out that it's possible "to be doing the wrong things right."

In the second article, Bruce Joyce points out that Schmoker's proposal (that teachers work in groups to study short-term cycles of teaching and learning, borrowing and generating ideas for improving practice, putting them into action, and studying the results) involves a fundamental change in the way American teachers work. He cites research on how cut off from their colleagues most teachers are and says that this may not be an accident: perhaps many teachers go into the profession "precisely *because* schools are workplaces of high isolation." Joyce cites the discouraging history of team teaching, the middle school movement, the Coalition of Essential Schools, and school-based management, none of which he thinks succeeded in cracking the culture of isolated classrooms.

Joyce (an authority on staff development) also bristles at Schmoker's bold assertion that "workshops don't work" and defends high-quality professional development – while conceding that it's rare. "In fact," he writes, "in the absence of good professional development, how are teachers to reach beyond their current professional repertoire?... They just need a few days of high-quality study." One major area for improvement in schools, he says, is how to assess student learning on a day-

to-day basis. Joyce thinks that it would not be irrational for teachers to resist Schmoker's brave new world; they've been burned by so many failed initiatives in the past. But Joyce says teachers should try: if they get into the pool by beginning to use formative assessments in teams, they will be impressed by the results and "commitment will follow competence."

In the third article, Mike Schmoker responds by pointing out the problem with Cook's future-oriented strategic planning (as opposed to planning based on specific, short-term efforts by students). He cites a large cadre of researchers who back up his assertion that "the moment [teams of] teachers begin to closely examine their lessons and the results of those lessons, instruction improves and competence increases."

But Schmoker warns that this won't happen without some leadership. He quotes Judith Warren Little's skepticism about unstructured, amorphous teacher collaboration: "She found that we can't just arrange for teachers to 'meet' and then assume that close scrutiny and productive adjustment of teaching practices will automatically ensue. In fact, we can't assume that teaching will be discussed at all. Distractions rush in, preventing the 'frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice' that Little found to be so essential – and so rare... Mere 'sharing' doesn't cut it: teachers have to continuously help one another to separate poor practices from more effective ones."

As for workshops, Schmoker doesn't buy Joyce's optimism that workshops by outside experts can deliver with any consistency. He quotes Dennis Sparks, the president of the National Staff Development Council, as saying that "any school faculty, working as a learning community, has all the intellectual resources it needs, right now, to vastly improve instruction and levels of learning. Outside expertise can be helpful, it is not essential." What's needed is for teachers to be given the mandate – and the time – to focus on common assessments, look at interim student learning results, and fine-tune their teaching accordingly. "In this simple scheme, teachers themselves – not outside experts providing 'staff development' – become the primary source of improvement as they *teach each other* the practice of teaching... [T]he most important research is the research they themselves conduct with their colleagues."

Schmoker describes the key role of the principal in getting this engine of improvement cranked up. Principals can be liberated from the frenetic pursuit of traditional "instructional leadership," he says, if they focus on results and implement these simple elements:

- Making sure that teachers have clear, explicit, well-aligned achievement goals;

- Monitoring teams to make sure they are meeting on a regular schedule and documenting their students' progress on their formative assessments;
- Giving teacher teams "collective autonomy" to craft their lessons and pursue the "how to" of teaching based on what they learn from assessments;
- Honoring and celebrating every success at every faculty meeting.

"When the Smoke Clears" by William Cook (p. 73-75, 83); "How Are Professional Learning Communities Created?" by Bruce Joyce (p. 76-83); and "Learning Communities at the Crossroads" by Mike Schmoker (p. 84-88) in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2004 (Vol. 86, #1), no e-link available

4. Practical Advice on Mentoring New Teachers

In this thoughtful article, a veteran New York educator shares his wisdom on how to forge a productive mentoring relationship with a novice teacher:

- *Mentors need to be carefully chosen.* "Simply bringing two adults together is no guarantee of success," he writes. Mentors will not contribute optimally if they are pressured into the relationship, if they do it mainly for honor or prestige, if they see their role as "fixing" a problem teacher or implementing district directives, or if they are too wedded to the status quo. Mentors need to be professional, experienced, mature, insightful, positive, supportive, empathetic, nonjudgmental, and interested in guiding newcomers on the path to professionalism, and they need to be able to apply these qualities in a sensitive and imaginative manner.

- *The mentor should touch base with the principal.* Expectations need to be clear up front, along with a plan for working with the mentee.

- *The mentor should get to know the school.* Walking around and getting the feel of the school's culture, policies, and practices is key.

- *The mentor needs to "read" the mentee.* Survival is the number one priority for most new teachers, and they will need specific suggestions (and not just a bag of tricks) to help them make it. But the mentor needs to be a good listener and not appear all-knowing. The mentee needs to feel able to "pour out feelings, to express worries, and to identify problems and questions that will become the basis for ongoing discussions." All forms of contact are important – in-person talks, e-mail, and phone.

- *Building trust is essential.* If the mentor is a nonjudgmental listener and shares mistakes he or she made as a teacher, an honest and open exchange can be established and trust can develop – gradually. In one mentor's words, "trust tends to be built slowly, through small steps. It is fragile. In everything from diplomacy to intimacy, it

is easier to obliterate than to create. It demands vulnerability and grows through small risks. And it grows when those risks are reciprocated....A friend reveals something personal, it is matched, trust deepens.” This can include interests outside school – movies seen, books read, etc.

- *Mentors should give practical wisdom, but also empower.* For example, the mentor might advise a novice teacher not to repeat student answers, to encourage interaction between students, and to teach a class specific procedures before breaking them into groups. But suggestions can only go so far: “[T]he task of helping someone grow calls for more than attempting to convert the experience of one person into the behavior of another. Mentors need to recognize that mentoring is a process of enabling another to act and of building on the mentee’s strengths, rather than one of imposing ideas and information from the outside.”

- *Mentor and mentee should keep logs.* These are useful in capturing insights that might otherwise be lost.

- *Mentors should give advice on activities outside the classroom.* New teachers need to understand the importance of non-classroom aspects of their job, e.g., working with parents, teaming up with colleagues, and getting involved in the life of the school.

- *The mentor needs to understand that times have changed.* A mentor may have come of age before high-stakes tests were introduced and needs to tune in to current realities. And a mentor may have a thing or two to learn from the novice – for example, computer skills.

- *Mentors have to avoid being saviors.* A new teachers’ discipline problems might be exacerbated by schoolwide chaos, and the mentor may need to intervene beyond the classroom.

- *Mentors can’t be needy.* A mentor who needs to feel superior will stifle a mentee’s professional development. [To quote Harry Truman on being needy in the nation’s capital, “If you need a friend, get a dog.”]

“The Why, How, and What of Mentoring” by Sidney Trubowitz in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2004 (Vol. 86, #1, p. 59-62), no e-link available

5. Time Management Tips from the World of the CEO

In this month’s *Harvard Business Review*, California management consultant Michael Mankins reports that corporations routinely squander their top executives’ time. In a typical company, leadership meetings are consumed by diffuse discussions of low-priority issues, many agenda items are not brought to resolution, and too many

decisions are never implemented. Sound familiar? Mankins goes on to share seven strategies used by successful companies to make the best use of leadership team meetings:

- *Deal with operations separately from strategy.* “These are distinct activities,” he argues, “requiring different modes of discussion and different mind-sets.” It’s hard to do justice to both in the same meeting.

- *Focus on decisions, not on discussions.* To avoid endless discussion without closure, there should be chatter about key issues by e-mail and phone before the meeting, so that during meetings, people are prepared to make decisions.

- *Measure the real value of every item on the agenda.* Agendas tend to be drawn up by collecting suggestions from members of the leadership team and typing them up. The problem with this is that some items are vastly more important to the bottom line [student learning] than others. The leader needs to *pare down* the list and sequence items in order of importance.

- *Get issues off the agenda as quickly as possible.* It’s important to have a timetable for making decisions so that items don’t linger on the agenda for long.

- *Put real choices before the team.* “Once the right issues are on the table and the clock is running, the most important requirement for effective strategic decision making is to present viable options.” The leadership team should have at least three alternatives – real alternatives – for any important decision.

- *Adopt common decision-making processes and standards.* This means using a common language, methodology, and set of standards for making decisions, which might mean discussing some items before the meeting and combining several related agenda items into a single discussion during the meeting.

- *Make decisions stick.* “[U]nless strategic decisions are translated into something tangible, they can become subject to reinterpretation or, even worse, fall victim to the silent veto.” It has to be clear and explicit what was agreed on, who is responsible for which action steps, when things need to be done, and who will check.

“Stop Wasting Valuable Time” by Michael Mankins in *Harvard Business Review*, September 2004 (p. 58-65), no e-link available

6. Transference – Understanding Who You Are to Your Subordinates

In this article, Washington, D.C. psychoanalyst, anthropologist, and management consultant Michael Maccoby examines the phenomenon of transference, which is when people bring other relationships from their past (e.g., with their father

or mother) to their dealings with their therapist or boss. “At its best,” writes Maccoby, “transference is the emotional glue that binds people to a leader. Employees in the grip of positive transference see their leader as better than she really is – smarter, nicer, more charismatic. They tend to give that person the benefit of the doubt and take on more risks at her request than they otherwise would. And as long as the leader’s reality is not too far from the follower’s idealization – and she doesn’t start to believe in their idealized image of her – this works very well.”

A CEO [or principal, or superintendent] who understands transference gets new insights into organizational and personal behavior and can develop the wisdom and compassion to be a great leader. But the danger of the flip-side is obvious, which leads Maccoby to give the following advice to leaders on managing transference (quoted):

- *Know yourself.* Get constant reality checks from family, outsiders, and ... associates. Build a team of close colleagues to help keep your perceptions grounded in reality.
- *Promote mutual understanding.* Make sure people know you. Share your foibles wisely. Don’t pretend to be what you’re not. Make sure everyone knows the rules that you play by and that you want them to play by.
- *Create a common enemy.* Buy time for self-knowledge and mutual understanding by rallying people against an outside threat. But make sure they don’t feel too threatened and that you don’t become too scary in the process.” [In a school, this might be the challenge of doing well on a tough standardized test.]

“The Power of Transference: Why People Follow the Leader” by Michael Maccoby in *Harvard Business Review*, September 2004 (p. 76-85), no e-link available

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo,

please e-mail: kim.marshall8@verizon.net

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo aims to keep busy principals and other educators very well-informed on important research and ideas in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, a former Boston teacher and administrator, is your “designated reader,” searching through 37 publications the week they come out, choosing the articles that are most relevant and useful to improving teaching and learning, and summarizing them in a brief e-mail. Some ideas will be familiar, reinforcing what readers already know, but others will be new and genuinely thought-provoking. Target topics include:

- *School leadership* – Building a professional learning community; effective teamwork; effective schools practices; supervision and evaluation of teachers; time management.
- *Effective teaching* – Key variables associated with high student achievement; professional development of teachers; teacher leadership and career ladders; multiple intelligences and brain research.
- *Curriculum* – Alignment and planning with the end in sight; teaching for understanding; new ideas in reading, writing, and math.
- *Assessment* – Aligned formative and summative assessments; using data and student work for continuous improvement; graphic display of student achievement data; standardized testing and the debate on standards.
- *Closing the gap* – Effective strategies to close the racial/economic achievement gap; the innate-ability/intelligence/effective effort debate; safety-net programs.
- *Positive school culture* – Student discipline; social-emotional learning; moral development; parent involvement; and community partnerships.
- *And...* – New areas of research; upcoming television and radio programs on education.

Publications covered:

(those read this week are underlined)

American Education Research Journal
American Educator
American School Board Journal
ASCD SmartBrief
Atlantic Monthly
Bay State Banner
Boston Globe
CommonWealth Magazine
Curriculum/Education Update (ASCD)
Ed. Magazine (Harvard School of Education)
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Harper’s
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Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Education Review
Journal of Staff Development
Middle School Journal
NASSP Bulletin
New York Times
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PEN Weekly NewsBlast
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal Magazine
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Review of Educational Research
Teachers College Record
Teacher Magazine

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