Repositioning Refugee Students from the Margins to the Centre of Teachers’ Work

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Abstract: As several notable international scholars have argued, the standardised practices of schools are problematic for many students, since they reinforce the constructed identity of a predominantly white, middle-class, English-speaking society, reflecting the predominantly mono-cultural nature of the teaching workforce. Students located at the ‘margins’ of this institutional identity are constructed as a minority. These students are mostly from families that are socially or economically disadvantaged, and often culturally and/or linguistically diverse. Refugee students occupy an especially ‘marginal’ position on these criteria. They represent a distraction from what neo-liberal discourses have established as ‘central’ goals for schools, namely, a focus on outcomes rather than inputs, the use of standardised testing, and an auditing of student outcomes that places schools in competition with each other. Yet in the Western suburbs of Sydney, a region housing almost 10 per cent of Australia’s total population, where one third of the population is overseas-born, where half the world’s languages are spoken, and where approximately 80 per cent of all humanitarian refugees to NSW are settled, these ‘marginal’ students are more often at the ‘centre’. As a result of an increasing degree of school segregation over the past two decades, in some Western-Sydney schools, these so-called ‘minority’ students constitute a majority, and educating them is central to their teachers’ work. This paper reports on an action-research program based in several of these schools. It provides an account of a refugee support partnership that connects a University-based teacher-education program, local public schools, and a not-for-profit agency whose mission is to support literacy development. Research data from this program indicate that the provision of one-on-one tutoring by student teachers results in substantial gains in refugee-students’ cultural understandings and academic achievements. The program also transforms the student teachers’ understandings of what it means to be a ‘good teacher’.

Keywords: Refugees, Teacher Education, Transformational Learning, Neo-liberalism, Teachers’ Work

Introduction

HUMAN ENCOUNTERS LIE at the heart of teaching, and the effectiveness of a teacher depends on his/her ability to respond to particular young people in particular classrooms. To be effective, therefore, teachers need the autonomy to design learning activities that work for all their students, no matter how ‘different’ or culturally diverse these students may be (Connell, 2009). Over the past decade, increasing numbers of refugees from the Sudan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and more recently from Afghanistan have arrived in Australia: a very substantial proportion of them have settled in the western suburbs of Sydney. As young people from these refugee families arrived at school, their ‘differentness’ was at once conspicuous, insistent, and palpable. Many of them were unaware of the normative assumptions about what students should know and do in Australian

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schools. Very few of them possessed the multiple forms of social, linguistic, and cultural capital that are taken-for-granted in regular classrooms (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010).

This paper reports on research conducted in Western Sydney secondary schools that received and accommodated these students. It also reports on the role played by the Refugee Action Support (RAS) program, which is based on a partnership comprising the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), the University of Western Sydney (UWS), and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET). Through RAS, Secondary teacher education students provide tutorial support for refugee students. Within this formative period of their professional lives, beginning (or pre-service) teachers involved in RAS learn to envision the potential multiplicity of teacher identities. They move beyond the master-performer model of classroom teaching to embrace other identities, including cultural informant, coach and mentor. It is this expansion of teacher identities that has the potential of adequately meeting the educational needs of refugee and other marginalized students. While this research is set in the context of secondary schools in Sydney, Australia, its implications are relevant for schools and teacher-education program in other re-settlement countries, such as the USA, Canada, and the UK.

**Context**

Over the past two decades, long-term warfare, climate change, natural disasters, and economic disruption have provoked massive global displacements of human populations. By the end of 2008, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimated the numbers of displaced people at 67 million, of which 16 million were refugees and 51 million were internally displaced persons (UNHCR Global Trends, 2008). Rather than being accepted into wealthier countries, the vast majority of these refugees are accommodated by the world’s poorest countries. Hosting countries in the developing world are the principal destination for 80 percent of all refugees; Pakistan remains the major hosting country, accommodating over 1.7 million Afghan refugees (McCarthy, forthcoming).

Given the scale of current population displacements, on average most refugees now spend five to ten years in refugee camps where resources are poor and conditions harsh (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). Only a small fraction ever succeeds in entering resettlement countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK, or the USA. In 2008, fewer than one percent of the world’s refugees were accepted for resettlement (UNHCR, 2009). In 2008, Australia ranked second behind the United States in admitting refugees to the country. The US accepted over 60,000 while Australia accepted 11,000 out of a total 88,800 refugees who were resettled in 16 countries (UNHCR, 2009).

Many of the refugee students currently entering Australia come from families with very low literacy levels. For example, adult literacy in Southern Sudan is estimated at being only 24 percent, with adult female literacy half that at 12 percent (Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture, 2005). Many refugee students from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and other war-affected countries have never attended school. Even at age 14 or 15, they may never have held a pencil or sat in a desk (Community Relations Commission [CRC] 2006). When they arrive in Australia, they are not only entering a new country with a new language; they are also being introduced to the concepts and practices of formal schooling for the first time in their lives.
In the past, refugees entering countries such as Australia, Canada or the United States were described as ‘traditional’ refugees. They were ‘traditional’ in the sense that they came from countries with high levels of literacy and well-developed traditions of school attendance. Summarising research conducted in the United States, McBrien (2005) described how these groups achieved upward mobility, sometimes drawing on supportive governmental and social policies. Vietnamese and Cuban refugees provide clear examples of this phenomenon. Many refugees from these locations brought with them high levels of literacy; their children had attended school and had an understanding of traditional academic practices of schooling. The parents were mostly well educated and had high ambitions for their children (McBrien, 2005).

For those who fled in recent years from equatorial Sudan or from Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Somalia, and Afghanistan, the situations they left behind and the experiences they endured on re-settlement are distinctly different from those of ‘traditional refugees’. These have been referred to as ‘acute refugees’ (McBrien, 2005). Many of them have survived indescribable horrors and have escaped by walking hundreds of kilometres, crossing borders into neighbouring countries and seeking asylum in camps. They are unlikely to have high levels of education or vocational skills.

In conducting the research reported here, we met teachers who had worked for many years in low-income neighbourhoods, teaching students from families with language backgrounds other than English. Even these teachers found that working with recently-arrived refugee students involved challenges they had never faced before. Day by day, these teachers commit themselves to the creative work of connecting with refugee students, seeking to establish a basis for successful learning.

Increasingly, contradictory factors shape the working lives of these teachers. Almost all of them are employees of large education systems (few refugees attend private independent schools). They are almost universally under pressure to respond to a highly regulated environment which imposes compulsory national testing of students’ literacy and numeracy skills, and standardised definitions of what ‘quality teaching’ entails. Auditing systems such as these impose additional burdens on teachers. Their very significant achievements are obscured through media promotion of a standard league table mentality, inappropriately drawn from government measures (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010).

Locating Refugee Students at the Margins

Disturbing policy contradictions have emerged in Australia and in other countries where efforts are being made to provide an education appropriate to the needs of all children and young people, including those who enter through refugee settlement programs. Many governments have become overly committed to controlling and auditing educational outputs. The increasingly standardised education systems they promote often fail to provide adequately for students who fall short of taken-for-granted expectations regarding what young people at particular grade levels should know and be able to do (McCarthy & Vickers, 2009). This is particularly the case for refugee students.

A similar emphasis on standardization has been applied to teacher accountability, and to definitions of what ‘good teaching’ entails (Kleinhenz and Ingvarson, 2004; OECD, 2005). As Connell (2009) has argued, the imposition of these definitions of ‘good teaching’ as a yardstick for the profession are closely related to the auditing of educational outputs. Together,
these trends function to situate immigrants, refugees, and other disadvantaged students at the margins of the educational enterprise.

Many so-called ‘marginal’ students attend schools that are shaped by standardized policies such as these. Although a standard institutional formula may work for most, Apple (2002), Teese (2000), and others have argued that standardised institutional structures and practices are often problematic for disadvantaged students. A common thread in this literature is that mainstream schools reinforce the habitus and capital of our predominantly white, middle-class, English-speaking society (Ferfolja & Vickers, 2010). Students who are marginalized by social or economic disadvantage, or because they are from ‘different’ backgrounds and do not possess the cultural and linguistic capital associated with children from more privileged families, are often side-lined as a minority concern. Schools that serve these “minority” students are perceived to be problematic and also on the margins.

However, for schools in Western/South-Western Sydney, these students are no minority. This is a region where one third of the population is overseas born, where half the world’s languages are spoken, and where approximately 80 percent of all humanitarian refugees arriving in NSW were settled from 2001-2006 (CRC, 2006). For these schools, so-called ‘marginal’ students are more often the majority. In these contexts, providing for the ‘marginal student’ constitutes the central task of the school and defines the central purposes of teachers’ work (Vickers, forthcoming).

Like all immigrant children, refugees face the challenge of learning English. Unlike most other immigrants, however, those described as ‘acute’ refugees often cannot read and write in their own mother tongue, and mostly do not possess the literacy skills assumed by the standard curriculum. Understanding how Australian schools work as social institutions is particularly challenging. There are many taken-for-granted classroom behaviors which are assumed by teachers to be ‘natural’, when in fact they are the result of years of discipline and socialization: for example, how should one behave in formal and informal settings, what are the rules, and how should one relate to peers and teachers? (Ferfolja, et al., 2009).

The Australian government’s New Arrivals Program is designed to meet the initial needs of immigrant and refugee children, by providing English as a Second Language (ESL) support, with the intention of moving them into regular classrooms as quickly as possible. Newly arrived high-school-age students are entitled to four terms in an Intensive English Centre (IEC) where the focus is on learning English in a supportive context where teachers are able to modify the demands of the set curriculum. However, it has been found that four terms in an IEC is simply not enough to bring many refugee students to the point where they are able to succeed in a regular classroom (Brown, Miller & Mitchell, 2006). Given that schools are unlikely to provide the one-on-one support students need as they transition from an IEC to a regular classroom, community organizations are being asked undertake learning support programs to meet these needs.

**Disrupting the Standard Mode of Teacher Education**

The inclusion in regular classrooms of young people with only intermittent schooling violates normative institutional assumptions about what high school students ‘should be like’, posing a significant challenge for teacher-educators especially pre-service teachers. Conventional teacher education programs may be effective in establishing skills in classroom management and knowledge transmission, but they often fail to encourage the kinds of creativity, flexib-
ility and improvisation that are evident among experienced teachers who know how to work effectively with ‘marginal’ students (Dudderar & Stover, 2003; Gallego, 2001; Vickers, 2007).

During practicum placements, pre-service teachers are expected to develop and demonstrate techniques of classroom management and student control, and the ability to help students acquire the knowledges incorporated in mandated curricula. While it is possible to construct practicum experiences that could help beginning teachers establish effective relationships with marginalized students, often this does not happen through the standard practicum (Dudderar & Stover, 2003; Gallego, 2001).

Institutional constraints tend to restrict what beginning teachers can learn about young people’s lives, the communities in which they live, and the nature of their lives outside of school (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (2000) argue that when beginning teachers first encounter students whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own, their experiences may reinforce their pre-existing stereotypes about the ‘difficulties’ of working with these students, rather than lead to a disruption of such stereotypical thinking. Gallego’s (2001) research, which contrasted the experiences of trainee teachers in classroom-based practicums and community-based small-group settings, found that beginning teachers became aware of the limitations of standard practicum and particularly the confining nature of classrooms in reaching culturally diverse students. Vickers (2007) also contrasted the narrow kinds of learning that occur in the traditional ‘practicum’ with the learning that occurs when beginning teachers are able to work directly with young people in more ‘natural’ community settings.

Within the UWS secondary teacher-education program, a service-learning subject known as Professional Experience 3 (PE3) is a required part of the qualifying degree for the Master’s of Education students. PE3 represents a third ‘practicum’ alongside the two conventional classroom-based placements that are known as Professional Experience 1 (PE1) and Professional Experience 2 (PE2). The conventional PE1 and PE2 are 4-week block-placement practicums where most of the effort of pre-service teachers is focused on the preparation and delivery of classroom lessons in the Disciplines in which they aim to qualify (for example, Mathematics, Science, English). PE3 has a different focus. It provides a series of contexts through which beginning teachers become aware of the broader professional responsibilities carried out by public schools across Western Sydney. Through PE3 they provide 60 hours of service to targeted groups of young people.

RAS, as one option in PE3, focuses on assisting refugee students, providing beginning teachers with opportunities to forge personal relationships with and expand their understanding of the complex histories of refugee students. It is through the contrast with the traditional practicum that RAS participants generate the critical thinking that King (2004) suggests is essential to transformative learning.

**The Refugee Action Support (RAS) Program**

As already noted, RAS is a joint initiative of the NSW DET, the ALNF and the UWS School of Education. Through this initiative, refugee students in secondary schools receive after-school tutoring and in-school assistance aimed at developing their literacy skills and improving their participation and engagement in schooling. RAS began in four schools in 2007 and
expanded to nine secondary schools in 2008. To date approximately 260 refugee students have participated in the program (Naidoo, forthcoming).

RAS provides 12 weeks of one-on-one tutoring for refugee students. The research findings reported here are based on the experiences of pre-service teachers, hereafter referred to as the RAS tutors. From the perspective of UWS teacher-educators, RAS aims to create awareness among pre-service teachers of the learning needs of refugee students, disrupting the established institutional approach to classroom teaching that new teachers customarily acquire (Ferfolja et al., 2009).

The objectives of RAS include helping refugee students to 1) improve their English language and literacy skills, 2) develop their understanding and achievement of requirements in particular subject areas and 3) develop confidence to participate in classroom activities. Implicit in the RAS tutoring relationship is the assumption that close associations increase the cultural and educational capital of marginal students while improving the understanding and empathy of the RAS tutors for such students, who are often ignored in the activities of everyday classrooms.

Through RAS, tutors work in small group situations with supervision and assistance from coordinating teachers and community liaison officers. Beginning teachers participating in RAS are encouraged to reflect on their experiences as tutors and apply their insights to their eventual practice as ‘real’ teachers. RAS is organized so that the tutors have a traditional four-week block of Professional Experience overlapping with the RAS tutoring in the same school. All tutors participate in twelve hours of intensive training provided by ALNF at the beginning of each semester. During the 12 weeks of their RAS placement, ALNF also provides tutors with online access to resources and support.

In-class tutoring in schools is provided for three hours each Thursday afternoon, and is followed by two hours of after-school support. Some tutors attend classes with refugee students to gain a sense of the curriculum students are addressing. During the after-school sessions, tutors provide 1.5 hours of face-to-face tutoring: they assist students with different aspects of language acquisition, help them understand the content of different subjects, or help them work through assignments. The last half hour is a debriefing session with the coordinating teachers where the tutors discuss the events of the session, and receive feedback from the coordinating teachers on their own interactions with students. The coordinating teachers supervising the centres are usually teachers from local IECs. The Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) link refugee parents with schools, and provide cultural resources to tutors and students in the Centres.

**Researching the Results of RAS**

Ongoing program research was undertaken from the very beginning of RAS. A team of four researchers from UWS designed and carried out the research. This research: 1) explored the effects of RAS tutoring on the learning capabilities of refugee students, and on their adjustment to the culture of schooling, and 2) examined the altered perceptions of pre-service teachers about refugee students as individuals and as learners, as well as about the nature of teaching (Ferfolja, et al, 2009). The sample for the study included tutors from each cohort participating in RAS over two years; 2007-2008; making a total of roughly 80 tutors, and approximately 10 Coordinating Teachers who supervised the after-school centers during these years.
Student participants in RAS were not interviewed. Given the myriad pressures already on these students and the difficulties of explaining the research and gaining permission from family members, the researchers decided to focus only on the perceptions of the RAS tutors and the coordinating teachers.

Qualitative, semi-structured, open-ended questionnaires were the primary means of data gathering through focus group interviews held with each group of tutors at the beginning and end of their RAS experience; and through face-to-face interviews with coordinating teachers at the end of each semester. Transcripts were made from each focus group interview and for the coordinating-teacher interviews. These data were analyzed for major themes: these included topics such as: why the tutors participated in RAS, what they expected to learn from it, what they learned about refugee students; how they experienced working with refugee students; what insights they had into their students learning needs; and how RAS altered their perceptions of what being a ‘good teacher’ entails. Only data relating to the teaching experience and learning of RAS tutors are included here.

Transforming Perspectives about Good Teaching

During their RAS placements, most tutors built personal relationships with refugee students. Through these relationships, they learned the importance of knowing the individual back-grounds and histories of their students. They learned about cultural differences, and about gaps between what students knew and what schools expected of them. This type of interaction led to a personalization of the students by the tutors: they realized that you need to know your students in order to teach them. As one student said, “I was a bit of a blank slate when I came to these kids. . . I didn’t know anyone who went to school under a tree. So I think I’ll be very aware of what an alien kind of environment it is, just being in a classroom.” Another tutor stated that “what it’s about really is understanding what these refugee students are coming from; understanding their backgrounds and experiences as deeply as you can. You can never have anyone else’s experience, but you can try to understand.” Still another tutor was aware that

while there might be a huge gap from our education system, they also might have knowledge or skills that we might not focus on, so it always good to talk to them. . . and find out if they’ve got skills or knowledge that we might not necessarily use, but we can use once we know they’ve got those … they can build on what they have …

Tutors realized that students who sit quietly in the back of the classroom may simply not understand what is going on. As Gallego (2001) suggests, these insights contrast with what is most commonly learned through participation in the conventional practicum.

Other RAS tutors drew attention to the role parents play “expecting their children to go to the University, and the kids being afraid to tell them they’re having trouble.” Parents, they suggested, should be given greater assistance in understanding how the Australian education system works. “I would like to see the parents getting involved and knowing where their child is … and how much more they can help them within the community …. .” Tutors were deeply aware also that some students “had no parents—the Dad is dead and the Mother is still in the Sudan. He lives with his uncle and signs his own permission slips.” In another instance, one of the tutors stated that “There were some boys in our group who were living
by themselves, 17 year olds who didn’t have any family left, they all died so they were by themselves here, so it was a real surprise to me to think of these kids trying to get through all their school work and language acquisition as well as running their own household.”

This personalization led to tutors feeling uniformly positive about their students and their interest in learning, while being aware of the frustrations their regular classroom experiences generated. Through these experiences, RAS tutors were developing the sense of caring that King (2004) identified as being essential to transformative learning. As another tutor said, “These are good kids. They really want to learn.” “They want to go somewhere in life.” However, the difficulty refugee students face was expressed by a tutor who was aware that “they’re totally unused to the Australian context of learning, they don’t know. . . they’ve had to come in and learn English . . . and my coordinator (coordinating teacher) said that these kids were coming into Year 11 subjects with a Year 7 understanding of English. So . . . they’ve got a huge catch up to do with literacy.”

Many tutors spoke of the lack of consideration shown by classroom teachers for these students. “There was no kind of consideration for the fact that they had only been at the school for a short time, or that they had issues or anything like that. It was just like ‘you are going to get zeros, but try and get it done and get an award.” Other tutors mentioned the number and complexity of the assignments refugee students were given. “They were bombarded with assignments. . . . every week they had two or three assignments to complete, and knowing that they have literacy difficulties that was very hard to overcome.”

Other tutors spoke of the challenges involved in explaining concepts, ideas or words for which the students have no cultural context. For example,

you read through a passage and you expect them to understand particular things, but how do you explain Snow White to someone or the cultural significance of it, or the associated meaning?

In these passages we see examples of the defamiliarization King (2004) identified as critical to transformational learning. Defamiliarization is the process by which what is known and familiar becomes strange, and what is strange becomes familiar. We see the switch that has occurred as the tutors speak quite heatedly of the difficulty of the assignments given to students, and the indifference of many teachers to the learning needs of refugee students. Their growing awareness of the range of issues refugee students face becomes apparent through these transcripts.

Many of the tutors discussed the frustration exhibited by the refugee students they were coaching. Although they were committed to learning and initially highly motivated, once they were moved from the IEC into regular classrooms, they found that they didn’t understand the subjects being discussed, the implicit knowledges underlying the lessons, or the language used in the assignments. Some of them became extremely frustrated. Tutors spoke of the fact that often students in the homework centers only wanted to complete the set assignments. They had neither energy nor interest in learning the steps involved in understanding how one can make sense of an assignment. “They struggled to understand that you have to go through step by step, because they just want to complete their work; they just want the answer.” However, the tutors helped the refugee students to break down the assignments, step by step, to do the scaffolding and systematically write their answers. As they improved in their literacy and writing skills; students handed in assignments, and for the first time earned
grades for them. As Ferfolja & Vickers (2010) found, for students who attended regularly, RAS tutoring was universally effective in creating an understanding among students regarding what was involved in completing assignments.

Some RAS tutors felt there was a contradiction between the flexible approach that was needed in order to help these students, and the stress they faced as they approached the compulsory examination that every school student in the state of New South Wales is required to take at the end of Year 10. One tutor expressed the issue this way:

You are catering to their needs, that’s fine, but what about the actual system? Like they’ve got to sit the mainstream exam which is quite (damaging) to their ego when they give 110% and they think they know it with the task that you set for them, . . . and then they sit for a Year 10 certificate that’s up here (gesturing above her head).

What is apparent in these comments is the way tutors became aware of the limitations of regular classrooms, and the need to know their students in order to engage their interest in learning. One tutor spoke to this point when she said,

I went deeper into the content and made them understand what the content was and how it related to life experiences. They enjoyed that more than actually going through the work and them understanding the content made it easier for them to understand the scaffolds and the simple tasks that they had to do.

Of major significance to the pre-service tutors was the realization that teaching was a relationship: you needed to develop trust with your students. This reciprocity was reflected by a tutor who said: “. . . you showed them that you appreciate them and they appreciate you, so we weren’t just there as teachers and students. . . . we were giving them assistance and also talking to them about it.”

In general, the tutors felt their experience in RAS would carry over into their classroom teaching and make them more sensitive to the diverse learning needs of their students. As one tutor said,

Basically . . . at the end of the day you know how to scaffold and teach literacy skills and how to simplify tasks. . . So that helps in everyday class, because . . . when you go to these classrooms-- most of the students are lacking in literacy skills, so it helps you a lot.

There is a creative leap in this student’s understanding at this point, for she has come to the conclusion that good teachers are always seeking to discover what best practice is, or what it should be, for particular groups of students. Through her experience as a tutor to refugee students, she had learned that teachers need to explore a wide range of strategies in order to reach all their students.

**Conclusions**

This article has examined what pre-service teachers learned about effective teaching practice through their involvement in one-on-one tutoring with recently-arrived refugees enrolled in high schools in Western Sydney. RAS functioned as a disruption of students’ more linear
and regulated classroom-based practicum experiences. Through RAS, pre-service teachers became aware of the constraints that the standardized classroom imposes on refugee students, limiting the possibilities for acculturation and effective learning.

Experience itself does not automatically lead to these insights, but rather, as Gallego (2001) suggests, systematic reflection is an essential catalyst for such learning. This reflects King’s (2004) emphasis on defamiliarization, and the disruption of conventional thinking. Participation in RAS created the possibility for such transformations. Most of the tutors came to see refugees as young people who really wanted to learn, and became aware that standard schooling practices were not designed to respond to their needs. All the tutors became acutely aware of the ways in which the histories of refugees influenced their ability to comprehend what school is about, and how this contrasts with what teachers customarily expect.

The reflections analysed in this paper indicate that through their participation in RAS, tutors gained new confidence in working with refugees and with other marginalized students. In many cases they became advocates for these students, finding them to be motivated young people who hoped to succeed at school and were looking to make a decent life for themselves in Australia.

References


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Margaret Vickers is a Professor of Education at the University of Western Sydney. Her career includes senior appointments in the Australian Public Service and the Paris-based OECD. She has authored several studies on secondary schooling for socially and economically vulnerable populations, on early leaving and youth in transition, and part-time student employment. Over the past three years she has been working in Western Sydney schools, with African refugee groups, and with community organizations including the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation and the Australian National Schools Network. Through a series of inter-linked research and action programs, she and her colleagues have developed strategies for providing support for African refugee students and their teachers, including a focus on involving beginning teachers as refugee tutors.
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