



Research

Queering early childhood practices: Opening up possibilities with common children's literature

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Abstract

The field of early childhood education has historically recommended best practices (Gomby, Larner, Stevenson, & Lewit, 1995; McDonnell & Hardman, 1988), while more transformative approaches suggest deconstructing such models (Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) through the exploration of culturally-relevant perspectives. While these perspectives allow us to address some multicultural issues, we propose that by queering such practices, we can develop more fluid understandings that can open up possibilities for practice in the field of early childhood education. In this paper, we use the folktale *The Three Little Pigs* to expose ways in which generalized identity categories can be shifted and destabilized—queered. We suggest that an analysis of three very different retellings of these stories through the lens of queer theory can be extrapolated to an analysis of three different approaches to early childhood education. Through the study of three children's literature texts, we explore the possibilities of queering early childhood practices and draw implications for opening up possibilities and embracing social justice in the early childhood context. Congruent with the best practices model of early childhood education, Walt Disney's *Three Little Pigs* (Disney, 1933/1948) follows the traditional tale with the wolf eating the first two pigs after he blows down their houses, and the third pig surviving because he used the best home

building materials. *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) bring a variety of perspectives to the tale—first through the eyes of the wolf who claims that he was “framed”, and second, through the eyes of empowered pigs who exit the traditional tale and create a new story with the wolf watching the dragon-protected three pigs from a safe distance—inviting the creation of new stories and altered realities. Through the use of queer theory to analyse these children’s books we seek to illuminate new possibilities for approaches to early childhood education.

Introduction

As teacher educators who are keenly concerned with social justice practices in education, we have encountered various levels of acceptance and resistance to our suggestions / recommendations / requirements that our students—pre- and in-service elementary school teachers in the Midwest and Southeastern United States respectively—read about and integrate a wide variety of multicultural issues into their teaching practices. Students may feel more accustomed to discussions of the usual race/class/gender trinity of multicultural education, but when we move into discussions of more traditionally tabooed topics—like gay and lesbian issues—resistance has often turned to outright hostility. Not all of our students are so resistant: while we have received requests for lists of children’s and young adult literature with gay and lesbian themes (and, subsequently, provided them), some of our students have expressed concern that, in their particular school setting, bringing a text containing so much as the word “gay” or “lesbian” could be a job-threatening act, particularly in early childhood classrooms. And, while we believe that it is important for all children to see concrete depictions of themselves in schools, literature, and curriculum, we also know that this is not a political possibility in all schools.

We argue that, while all teachers may not be able to include specific gay and

lesbian issues into their curricula, they can challenge normative identity practices and perceptions that play into homophobia. Queer theory helps us to challenge the concept of a fixed identity. Butler’s (1990) notions about identity as performance—that subjects act out the identities that have been placed upon them—challenge us to reject these identity characteristics as real, required, or true. When subjects do accept and, thus act out, the identities that they claim in a fixed way, it is often within a similarly fixed binary.

For instance, the idea that boy is opposite of and cannot be similar to girl, heterosexual is opposite of homosexual, or good is opposite of bad. One side of the binary configuration reifies the other by being what the other is not. We find Luhmann’s (1998) definition of queer pedagogy helpful in thinking about how queer theory can be used in an elementary setting: “a queer pedagogy [is one] that draws on pedagogy’s curiosity toward the social relations made possible in the process of learning and on queer critiques of identity-based knowledges” (p. 141) . In other words, how do the actions and relationships of people (rather than their identity categories) mediate their learning and understandings? How does the power that is wrapped up in particular identities usually determine the actions of those who claim those identities, and how can that power be

challenged? As Pinar (1998) claims, “queer pedagogy displaces and decenters” (p. 3).

In this paper, we use the folktale *The Three Little Pigs* to expose ways in which generalized identity categories can be shifted and destabilized, or queered. We suggest that a queer analysis of three very different retellings of these stories can be extrapolated to an analysis of different approaches to early childhood education. We compare three approaches to early childhood education by using select stories of the three pigs. *Walt Disney's Three Little Pigs* (Disney, 1933/1948), *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) show how, when identities are queered as they are in the third book, accepted practices can also be queered.

Like Luhmann (1998), we do not believe that homophobia is merely a problem of under representation, but also of particular beliefs that put people into boxes based on how they express sexual desire and perform gender. While we do believe that it is important to provide selections of books that represent the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) population, matching books with readers (Hade, 1997) does not necessarily equal social change. We posit that teachers can bring a queer lens to classrooms and books in ways that help children debunk the idea of what are normalized identity categories. We believe that, by using a queer perspective to examine identity and expectations of identity, early childhood educators can open possibilities for students to explore who they are and the identities they claim in ways that help them see multiple ways of performing these identities (Butler,

1990). While these may include GLBT identities, they might also include more commonly recognized or discussed identities, including, but not limited to categories of race, class and gender, and identity categories present but less often discussed in a public school forum such as religion or disability.

Approaches to Early Childhood Education

The field of early childhood education has historically recommended best practices (Gomby, Larner, Stevenson, Lewit, & Behrman, 1995; McDonnell & Hardman, 1988). Such practices are developmental and often built on culturally-specific information and assumptions. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1996), developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) is based on knowledge about how children develop and learn. For developmentally appropriate practices to be culturally relevant, we need to challenge our assumptions of how and at what age children learn as learning and development vary across cultural contexts.

According to Lillian Katz (1995), “[i]n a developmental approach to curriculum design...what should be learned and how it would best be learned depend on what we know of the learner's developmental status and our understanding of the relationships between early experience and subsequent development” (p. 109). In order to honor a diversity of backgrounds and contexts, early educators must understand that variations in development occur not only across individuals, but in larger patterns, across cultural contexts. In this article, we posit that by understanding and employing such a

stance, early educators are well-positioned to support and promote young children's development and learning.

NAEYC (1996) states that "[k]nowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by the program provides a general framework to guide how teachers prepare the learning environment and plan realistic curriculum goals and objectives and appropriate experiences" (p. 9). While this is a desirable goal, it is indeed an impossible one, as development varies considerably across cultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003). Examples of this include wide variation of the age when children learn to distinguish right from left and the age at which children can handle a cutting tool without hurting themselves—representations not of individual variation, but of how cultural contexts are intrinsic and integral to early development (Rogoff, 2003). Such differences may span years, yet while the NAEYC statement (1996) accounts for individual variation, it fails to undertake cultural patterns, not fully explaining how growing up in different cultural contexts shape a child's learning, development and values.

Wanting to move away from the belief that at certain points in the life span some kinds of learning and development occur most efficiently (Kuhl, 1994), many researchers have challenged and deconstructed best practices as a set of guidelines to be imposed onto children (Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) through the exploration of culturally-relevant perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

A decade ago, Gaile Cannella (1997) proposed the theoretical base that underlines the concept of best practices

and developmentally appropriate practices as normative. She suggested that by employing such guidelines, children who do not fit the theory are in some way not normal (Cannella, 1997). This does not only happen to children who are cognitively diverse, but those who live in cultural contexts that are not sponsored by educational agencies such as preschools and early education settings. Therefore, by employing such concepts, we are creating and upholding a norm by which all children should abide. Those whose cultural contexts vary from the norm are often viewed as neither belonging nor not developing properly. As a result, early intervention often occurs, to mediate and "fix" the children who do not fit the norm.

To depart from such a deficit-oriented perspective, culturally responsive teachers develop intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by "using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382). Education designed specifically for children from minority backgrounds is comprised of "culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content" (Hollins, 1996, p. 13). Culturally responsive teachers address not only the importance of cognitive development, but also the maintenance of cultural identity and heritage.

In this article, we recognize the value of such transformative perspectives (Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) that can move early educators towards understanding and offering responsive education to young children. We pose that while such perspectives allow us to address multicultural issues, we propose that by queering early

educational theories and practices, we can develop more fluid understandings which may open up possibilities for practice and research in the field of early childhood education.

Queer Theory in Education

Using queer theory to interpret pedagogy and determine curriculum requires that educators move beyond a multicultural approach that asks merely for inclusion and constant addition of multiple identities. According to Sumara and Davis (1999), “queer theory asks that the forms of curriculum and the relations of pedagogy be appropriated as sites to interpret the particularities of the perceived differences among persons, not merely among categories of persons” (p. 192). By using queer theory to think through curriculum and pedagogy, educators can focus on more closely on the individual diversities in their classrooms—even when, demographically, the students might look similar. Rather than merely including multiple identities and expecting students to adhere to common notions of those identities, queer theory requires that educators think “about what discourses of difference, choice, and visibility mean in classrooms, in pedagogy, and in how education can be thought about” (Britzman, 1995, p. 152). By being both culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1992) and attentive to power, difference and choice within various cultures, teachers can help their youngest students explore identities in less restrictive ways.

Bringing queer theory to approaches to early childhood education can help educators teach in transformative ways, rather than focusing on the boxes that children should fit in based on their various cultural markers. As Britzman

(1995) writes, “the queer and the theory in Queer Theory signify *actions*, not actors” (p. 153, emphasis in original). Queer theory invites us to challenge notions of best and developmentally appropriate practices that require students to fill those boxes. Queer theory also discourages teachers from making generalizing moves, such as worrying if a boy is too feminine, or accepting particular actions from boys and not from girls because, as the adage tells us, “boys will be boys.” Queer theory allows educators to help students explore how they culturally and intellectually respond to expectations of identity.

Text as a Model: Queering The Three Pigs

Using the texts of three different versions of the common fairy tale, *The Three Little Pigs*, as our data, we bring a queer lens to books that are easily accessible in early childhood classrooms. We posit that this analysis can be extrapolated to ways of looking at early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. The first book, Disney’s (1933/1948) *Walt Disney’s The Three Little Pigs* creates the normalized character with both illustration and text. The other two books, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), offer alternate perspectives on the characterizations established in the Disney (1933/1948) version.

The traditional tale: A best practice model

We use the Disney (1933/1948) version of the traditional three pigs fairy tale as an allegory for the best practices model. Like best practices, this traditional version is told over and over, serves as the base from which other stories are told, and relies on ideas (bad and good in the story, developmental milestones in best

practices) that are generally accepted without much challenge.

The archetypal story of the *Three Little Pigs*, repeated with some variation in Disney's (1933/1948) version, has three pig brothers who are setting off to seek their fortune. The first two are lazy and do not want to work too hard to build their houses, so they build them out of straw and sticks, respectively. The third pig, the hard working model brother, builds his house out of bricks. In the Disney book, the first two pigs just want to play and subsequently taunt the third pig as he labors to slowly build his brick house. He does not back down when his brothers tease him. He retorts, instead, that he will be safe when the wolf comes.

The wolf, meanwhile, lurks about, watching the pigs converse and build. While the pigs in this book are drawn in pink with big round eyes and made to appear carefree as they skip about, the wolf is drawn in opposite colors—black with slanted yellow eyes, and appears to slink behind trees as he plots the pigs' demise. The wolf's red tongue hangs hungrily between his sharp teeth as he luridly knocks at the three doors of the pigs' homes. He certainly looks the part of the "Big Bad Wolf". Like in the traditional tale, the pigs in the Disney (1933/1948) version tell the wolf that they will not let him in, not "by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin!" (unpaginated). The wolf, following tradition, asserts that he will huff and puff and blow the pigs' houses in. The first two pigs eventually seek refuge with their smarter, non-lazy brother in his brick house.

This traditional telling of *The Three Pigs* fairy tale corresponds, in our argument, to the best practice (Gomby, Lerner,

Stevenson, Lewit, & Behrman, 1995; McDonnell & Hardman, 1988) approaches that rely on assumptions about particular groups. The wolf fits into an archetype of evil and fills the role as expected. The smart and hard working pig saves the day by his industry and shows the other two that if you work hard at the onset, the fun can come later. On the final page of the Disney (1933/1948) book, the pigs are all singing around the piano after the wolf has disappeared forever. In this traditional version of the tale, good is good, evil is evil, and happily ever after comes, as long as you do the expected right thing.

If early childhood educators read this story through a queer lens with students, they can help them challenge notions of good versus evil identities. Teachers and students can also compare these stories by raising questions such as, Is the wolf always bad? Why is the wolf always depicted in this way? What qualities about the wolf do you admire? Questions that trouble such a simplistic and flat notion of bad or good can help children think about stereotypes that they have made about others based on appearances or group membership. Likewise, a queer lens can help students and teachers think about the wolf's desire. In the description of the wolf above, his tongue is hanging greedily out of his mouth. Clearly, through both text and image, he desires the pigs, and this desire is depicted as evil. Teachers who are thinking queerly can trouble the notion of desire as bad, as something to be punished, as it was for the wolf.

A new perspective: A culturally integrative approach

In Scieszka's (1989) *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!*, the tale is told from the wolf's perspective. He suggests that

readers call him Al and wants to debunk the notion of the “Big Bad Wolf” by telling, what he calls, “the real story”. He explains how he was just going to his neighbour’s house to ask for a cup of sugar for the cake he is making for his granny. The neighbour just happened to be the pig who built his house out of straw. Rather than blowing the pig’s house down, Al claims that he sneezed, causing the straw house to fall down and killing the pig in the process. Of course, being a wolf, he would not leave a “perfectly good ham dinner lying there in the straw”. The same general happenings occur at the next pig’s house made of sticks. By the time he gets to the brick house, Al has almost decided to just make his granny a birthday card instead of a cake when the third pig insults his granny. Al then goes crazy, by huffing and puffing. The police show up and haul him off to jail. The book ends with Al claiming that he was framed and “just for asking for a cup of sugar”.

Cleverly told, Scieszka’s (1989) text, and Smith’s illustrations, illuminates the ideas of multicultural education that integrates often marginalized cultural perspectives. Butler’s (1990) concept of binary identities is also evident in this story. The wolf, for example, states that his naturally chosen food preference is for animals that those who typically tell the story find cute. This, naturally, is what has cast him in the “Big Bad Wolf” light. However, while the wolf challenges the evil identity that is set for him, he still accepts that there is an evil/innocent binary, and, by the end of the book reifies this binary as he goes crazy at the third pig’s house. The wolf also tries to recast the pigs as rude when he claims how the pigs won’t even give him a cup of sugar for his granny’s cake. Again, these actions are reifying the concept in the first book that identities are

based on binary constructions of either being good or bad. While the wolf is adding an additional perspective to the story; he is not challenging the notion of categorical identities. Britzman (1995) notes that “the problem is that this liberal desire for recovery and authenticity, when it takes the form of inclusion in the curriculum (perhaps as an add-on, certainly in the form of a special event) attempts two contradictory manoeuvres” (p. 159). The wolf fails to challenge the certainty of identities by assuming that the pig is always positioned as good and he is always evil. The wolf does bring forth Rogoff’s (2003) notion that development is culturally biological, but does not make a further move that would allow for variances within cultural development. For example, how might the story change if the wolf was vegetarian or if the pigs lived together in the brick house they built together? At the end of the story, each identity fulfils cultural expectations.

This delightfully written book offers much for early childhood educators and their students to inquire when approached from a queer perspective. Students and teachers can compare it to the Disney (1933/1948) text to see how differently the wolf performs his identity. Teachers might challenge students to consider how the wolf’s desire is drawn and told in ways that make him seem more or less bad? Or, is desire represented similarly in both texts? Teachers can also ask children to imagine other possibilities for the characters if they were not cast within the good/bad binary, and to think about what happens when people are cast in one particular way. There can also be discussions that highlight how reading from non-traditional perspectives might be valuable, but at the same time they can also reinforce stereotypes.

A queered perspective: Fluid expressions of identity

The final book that we will discuss is Wiesner's (2001) *The Three Pigs*. Although this is a nonlinear text, it is probably the most easily accessed by early childhood teachers because it won the 2002 Caldecott Medal. While the book begins with the traditional line, "Once upon a time," the story is destabilized by the first turn of a page. For example, the pictures are presented in panels, and it is as though the reader is looking at the pages of a storybook lined-up next to each other on the page. However, as soon as the wolf huffs and puffs and blows the first pig's straw house down, the pig is blown out of the panels and onto the white borders of the page. As the pig leaves the original story, the style of the illustrations change. While the pig's back two hooves remain in the original panel, they are drawn in the original style. As he leaves the original story, the first pig says, in a cartoon bubble, "Hey! He blew me right out of the story!". The wolf, still in the original story, is shown looking for the pig under the destroyed house in the next panel. Weisner uses this illustrative style throughout the book, showing the wolf attempting to maintain the traditional story arch, while the pigs destabilize that arc.

Having escaped the wolf, the three brother pigs meet up and explore parallel worlds which Weisner (2001) conveys through his innovative illustrations. The format of the story and text continue to change. Moving in and out of the nursery rhyme "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle", the pigs continue to wander a white space filled with story possibilities. Travelling with them is the cat from the nursery rhyme. They come upon a dragon

and a prince. Again, the illustrative style changes, and with it, the pigs. The pigs usher the dragon into the white space, and all of the characters seem to be looking for the story that they want to enter. When the cat points to a page while asking, "What is this?" in a cartoon bubble, the pigs, the cat and the dragon find their way back to the original three pigs story. The story resumes with the wolf peeking in the window while the pigs, the cat, and now the dragon mill around the panels, still in the white border space. Finally, the dragon opens the door to the knocking wolf, who subsequently falls to the ground in surprise. Meanwhile the letters of the text on this page appear to be falling apart. Some are on the ground and some are flying up. Because the first parts of the sentences remain intact, the reader can see that the traditional text of the three pigs story is still on the page, even as it is being blown away. On the next page, a pig is catching letters with his hooves in one panel, and the dragon is catching letters in a basket in the next. The brick house building pig is still in the white border space and, in a cartoon bubble, invites everyone in to his house for soup. On the final page of the book, the pigs, the cat and the dragon are enjoying soup at a big kitchen table that has a center piece of the golden rose. The wolf can be seen watching the whole scene from a distance, and the words, "And they all lived happily ever aft" (unpaginated) float in the space above them.

Not only does this book take on the notion of how stories are told, combining nonlinear text with moving picture panels and changing illustrative styles, it also challenges the very notion of a fixed and absolute identity. Rather than accepting a story where the pigs are categorized as

victims, the pigs in this tale change the very nature of the story by creating a new adventure for themselves. Likewise, while the wolf follows the expected storyline, he never becomes the “Big Bad Wolf” of versions past. Instead, at the end of the book, he looks on with interest and does not disappear forever.

The addition of characters from other familiar nursery rhymes also adds dimension to the story. In particular, the dragon who is cast as a frightening creature to be slayed, is invited into the home of pigs who are usually on the run from the wolf. In this story, the pigs do not live in isolation and also open up their home to others who may be, in one turn, a ferocious creature, and in another, the victim of one who sees him as a threat. None of these characters live out their identities as expected, and all seems well in the final scene, the possibilities are open as suggested by the destabilized and incomplete final text, “And they all lived happily ever aft”.

This book, when brought to early childhood classrooms and intentionally read through a queer perspective, can be a touchstone text for helping young children and their teachers think about how to move in and out of cultural and social expectations placed on particular identity categories. Specifically focusing on the expectations and stereotypes placed on particular identities and asking students to think and talk about this text through a queered perspective is different from asking them to consider the different points of view of the characters. When using a queer lens there is a deeper look at *how* characters are performing their identities. Therefore, students and teachers can use these discussions to talk about how people perform the same

claimed identities differently. Further, when comparing Wiesner’s (2001) book with the others analysed in this paper, students and teachers can think about how different approaches to both characters and to people that they know or see can really change what actions are taken in books, or in everyday experiences.

Implications

Through our analysis, we have found that texts read through a queer lens offers insights into identity performance and expectations. We have drawn links between the texts and accepted approaches to early childhood education that helps trouble notions of these accepted practices. By beginning with the three texts we have analysed here, early childhood educators can bring a queered analysis to common classroom texts. The texts can help teachers and students think about the questions Talburt (2000) suggested for queer educational projects: “Where do identities live? In individual subjects? In communities? In practices? In relations?” (p. 7).

Holding these three texts next to each other, children and teachers can examine closely how particular identities are portrayed. Rather than a mere comparison of what is different and what is similar among the stories, educators can encourage students to talk *about* how the wolf in the second story (Scieszka, 1989) or the pigs in the third story (Wiesner, 2001) challenge the norms set for them by the first story (Disney, 1933/1948). This can then move to the identity categories that are present in classrooms. Teachers can then ask about the expectations of the girls and the boys. The discussion can then be broadened to the identities present in the school, the

neighbourhood, or the town. This could help students and teachers discuss an appreciation of how different people perform different identities (and how these diverse performances enhance communities), rather than merely tolerating them. By bringing other common children's stories into the conversation, understandings about identities be furthered and deepened. There could, for example, be a comparison of Cinderella stories across cultures. The teacher could then explore with children the outcomes of these stories, highlighting the gendered expectations across cultural contexts. We find that a queered lens focused on common children's books can help us think differently about how we approach both texts and larger pedagogical approaches with young children. By using queer theory to analyse children's books encouraged us to think about the implications of pedagogical approaches on student identity performances. This might might help early childhood educators develop fluid approaches to children that takes into account cultural expectations and experiences as well as the needs, choices and individuality of each student. With the textual example of pigs free to recreate their narratives (Wiesner, 2001) as a guide, teachers and students can re-imagine what identity performances could look like if they afforded themselves and others that same freedom.

We believe that this queer analysis of three versions of the *Three Little Pigs* has implications far beyond the ivory tower. Our analysis draws a line to the limits of best and developmentally appropriate practices (Cannella, 1997) and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992) when these approaches to

early childhood education are not done with an eye toward the diverse experiences of individuals. The implications of a queer lens on texts, and subsequently pedagogical approaches, include helping children imagine wider possibilities for themselves and others. Likewise, teachers who are not bound, as the characters are in the Disney (1933/1948) and Scieszka (1989) texts, by cultural expectations and binaries in their approaches to individuals, to teaching, and to themselves can change the ways that children experience learning. Re-imagining school narratives that break free of binary identity expectations could help early childhood students and teachers realize the potential of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992) for creating more inclusive classrooms for children, regardless of their claimed identities.

From text to classrooms: Queering the lens for social justice

In using these three texts of the *Three Little Pigs* as parallels to early childhood approaches, we see possibilities for action in classrooms. While we do not investigate all possibilities opened up by exploring parallels between multiple versions of a text through a queer lens, we suggest some implications for teachers and children, classrooms and communities. By exploring and deconstructing best practices and using a culturally relevant approach to teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992) we play with accepted identity roles in ways that empower the claimers of those identities. By doing so, early childhood educators can help children explore ways to escape stereotypes and expectations, and create different narratives for themselves. As proposed in this article, such practices can open up spaces for challenging the

commonplace and embodying a critical stance.

Employing culturally relevant and multicultural perspectives with a queered lens can help educators and students explore how culturally mediated relationships can be opened in unexpected ways, considering various cultural identities and fostering respect for difference. When members of the classroom and wider community begin to problematize and transform their notions of what is expected and unexpected from children, encounters with traditionally marginalized identities can be used as opportunities to grow and learn, rather than as a moment to reify feelings and ideas that maintain the binary privilege of the dominant identity. This is of importance because it opens up spaces for talking about and deconstructing intolerance and fostering respect for diversity within and beyond the classroom.

Our hope is that a queered early childhood curriculum will help young children grow into people who take actions that are both affirming of multiple identities and challenge traditional notions of identity and power. By taking a queer lens to books like these, we aim to encourage early childhood educators to similarly open the door for their young students to queer(y) all kinds of normative identities.

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