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## A CURRICULUM REFERENCE FOR CHILDREN FROM 3 TO 6 YEARS OLD. THE PORTUGUESE REALITY

### ABSTRACT

The current Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool Education (children aged 3 to 6 years old) were defined by the Ministry of Education in 2016, after a very participative process that involved early childhood education professionals from all over the country, as well as teachers from institutions of higher education that train educators and carry out research in education for early ages. In this article, based on a reflection on the trajectory prior to 2016, which preceded the definition of these guidelines, testimonies of some professionals, trainers and researchers linked to childhood education, two of which authors of the document, will be analyzed. It's intended to understand the influence of these Guidelines, analyzing the innovations they implied in relation to the previous curriculum framework. A more detailed analysis will be made of what is planned for the area of "Personal and social training" and how these guidelines are articulated with the national reference that was defined for the educational system in "Education for citizenship".

**Keywords:** Preschool education; Curriculum guidelines; Citizenship education.

## UM REFERENCIAL CURRICULAR PARA AS CRIANÇAS DOS 3 AOS 6 ANOS. A REALIDADE PORTUGUESA

### RESUMO

As atuais Orientações Curriculares para a Educação pré-escolar (crianças dos 3 aos 6 anos) foram definidas pelo Ministério da Educação em 2016, depois de um processo muito participativo, que envolveu profissionais de educação de infância de todo o país, assim como docentes de instituições de ensino superior que formam educadores e desenvolvem pesquisas na área da educação e formação para as primeiras idades. Neste artigo, partindo de uma reflexão do percurso anterior a 2016, que antecedeu a definição destas orientações, serão analisados testemunhos de algumas profissionais, formadoras e pesquisadoras, ligadas à educação de infância, duas delas autoras do documento. Pretende-se compreender a influência destas Orientações, analisando as inovações que implicaram relativamente ao anterior referencial curricular. Será feita uma análise mais detalhada do que está previsto para a área de conteúdo da "Formação pessoal e social" e como estas orientações se articulam com o referencial nacional, que foi definido para todo o sistema educativo a nível da "Educação para a cidadania".

**Palavras-chave:** Educação pré-escolar; Orientações curriculares; Educação para a cidadania.

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## 1 PRESENTATION

In Portugal, early childhood education, under the name of pre-school education, is intended for children under 6 years old, age of compulsory schooling (Law No. 46/86).

For many years, like other countries, the work benchmark for preschool education was restricted to the principles of developmental psychology. Only in 1997<sup>1</sup> were the first Curriculum Guidelines for pre-school education defined by the Ministry of Education (which I shall refer to as the OCEPE). These first BSECs came about after a major debate at national level that mobilized professionals, trainers and researchers.

Almost 20 years later, in 2016<sup>2</sup>, an update of these Curriculum Guidelines was made. This new version sought to clarify and deepen some issues concerning the characteristics of curriculum development in pre-school education. This concern arises as a result of difficulties experienced and various suggestions in the national debate that supported the rationale for this work.

In the 1997 BSEC it was difficult to take the leap forward on the issues of developmental psychology and to begin to reflect on what learning content to work in pre-school education. In the 2006 BSEC, the main concerns focus on the process of curriculum development in a more systematized way, and the main challenge is to reflect the need to promote greater involvement of children and their families in the planning, development and evaluation of educational practices. But is this view shared by other players in the process? What were the main changes that occurred between 1997 and 2006? And how do the 2006 BSEC integrate and/or are integrated into other changes defined at the level of the education system, namely in the requirements made for citizenship education?

In this article, alongside the analysis of the current BSEC (2016), a reflection of the years leading up to them is made through some testimonies collected in a research work

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<sup>1</sup>LOPES DA SILVA, I., & NUCLEUS OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION (1997). Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education. Lisbon: Ministry of Education, Department of Basic Education, Center for Pre-School Education. Withdrawn from:

[https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Basico/orientacoes\\_curriculares\\_pre\\_escolar.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/Basico/orientacoes_curriculares_pre_escolar.pdf)  
To make it easier to read, we will refer to this document as OCEPE (1997).

<sup>2</sup>LOPES DA SILVA, Isabel, MARQUES, Liliana, MATA, Lourdes., ROSA, Manuela. Curriculum guidelines for pre-school education. Lisbon: Ministry of Education/Directorate-General for Education 2016.

[http://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/orientacoes\\_curriculares.pdf](http://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/sites/default/files/orientacoes_curriculares.pdf)  
To make it easier to read, we will refer to this document as OCEPE (2016).

that took place in March/2021. In this work, 6 interviews were carried out, by email, due to the confinement imposed by the pandemic.

They were interviewed: 2 trainers/research teachers from a higher education institution, who will be renamed A and B; an educator working as a technician of the Ministry of Education and who was part of the group that defined the BPES (2016) that will be renamed C; a researcher already retired who continues to collaborate with the Ministry and who coordinated the elaboration of BPES (1997) and BPES (2016), which will be renamed D; a kindergarten educator from the public network of the Ministry of Education of a municipality trofe de Lisboa, in an urban area, which works with a group of children from 3 to 6 years old and is also pedagogical coordinator of the institution's Department of Pre-school Education (which I will call E)<sup>3</sup>. The interviewees were chosen according to their availability and all gave consent for their answers to be disseminated in scientific publications.

Among other things, these interviews were aimed at identifying:

- What the 2016 BSEC brought back from the 1997 ones;
- What they consider most relevant to what is defined for the content area of personal and social training;
- How they consider that what is defined in the BCEEP is linked to the national strategy defined for citizenship education.

The emphasis given to this content area follows research and training work that I have been developing in the field of gender issues and education for citizenship in the early ages.

Being considered a cross-cutting area, because of course it's related to all the experiences that happen in the day-to-day of children, this area often ends up being approached too informally, with several difficulties being mentioned by educators about the way how to work.

Alongside the analysis of what is envisaged for the content area of 'Personal and social training', there is an attempt to reflect on how these guidelines relate to the national benchmark that has been defined at the level of 'Education for Citizenship' for the entire educational system.

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<sup>3</sup>Thank you to the interviewees Isabel Piscalho (A); Marta Uva (B); Liliana Marques (C); Isabel Lopes da Silva (D) and Teresa Matos (E).

The final analysis of the interviews and the various issues addressed, in relation to the current curriculum reference and their implications for training, is presented in the final considerations.

## **2 A CURRICULAR BENCHMARK FOR CHILDREN OF PRESCHOOL AGE**

It was only after the revolution of April 1974 that an effective evolution and recognition of childhood education began in Portugal.

When the Basic Law for the Education System was published in 1986, it confirmed the integration of pre-school education into the education system, stating that it's intended for children aged 3 years 6, the age of entry into compulsory schooling, without any reference being made to children under 3.

This differentiation, which still exists today, has had serious implications for children, families and professionals, highlighting the devaluation of the educational function of the institutions that host the smallest children.

In 1997, with the publication of the Framework Law on Pre-School Education (Law 5/97) and the drafting of Curriculum Guidelines, pre-school education is formally recognized as the first stage of basic education.

At the same time, the Curriculum Guidelines have brought a new way of conceiving pedagogical practices and the need to have a better grounding and explanation of their educational intent. After a long time in which there was mainly talk of the process of children's development, there is now talk of development and learning, and "content áreas" are defined for pre-school education as "areas of knowledge" with a "sociocultural relevance" (OCEPE, 1997). This development has involved, among other things, enhancing the role of early childhood education professionals as curriculum builders/managers. The changes introduced by the BSEC were supported by training and the organization of publications.

New Curriculum Guidelines are published in 2016. After the great national debate that preceded them, as had already happened in 1997, they defined a line of continuity, clarifying the fundamentals and principles of pedagogy for children (considering all children from 0 to 6 years old), as well as the concern with the articulation with school, safeguarding the specific characteristics of pre-school education.

In the 1997 BSEC, the main concern was to emphasize pre-school education as a teaching and learning area, as well as the need for prior planning of work, clarifying its educational intent.

In 2016 this concern continues, but there is evidence of a greater influence of the principles of childhood sociology, reinforcing the importance of children's participation in the whole educational process, both in its planning and evaluation.

Looking in more detail at the way the CEBS (2016) are organized, the document first presents an overall framework in which three topics are developed. A first one on the foundations and principles of pedagogy for childhood and how they translate a certain way of conceiving the child and the characteristics to which his education must conform. A second on educational intentionality, the role of the childhood education professional in curriculum management, reflecting the aims and organization of its practice in an interactive cycle - observe, plan, act, evaluate - that enables decision-making and its adaptation to the characteristics of children and the socio-educational context (LOPES DA SILVA, Isabel, MARQUES, Liliana, MATA, Lourdes, ROSA, Manuela, 2016, p. 5). A third topic addresses the issues of the organization of the educational environment and its relevance in the development and learning process.

This framework reflects well the different conceptions of children and their implications for educational practices. With regard to the 1997 BTEC, it's important to give more thought to what it means to plan and evaluate in pre-school education, particularly the questions of the assessment and the need for the participation of children, and also their families, in the whole educational process. The involvement of children appears as a right, a fundamental principle which in practice has demanding implications. This is perhaps the biggest challenge that the 2016 BSEC brings to Portuguese educators.

Then, in a second part, the content areas are presented. For each one there is an introductory text; an explanation with an indication of the global learning to be promoted; the presentation of examples and a synthesis of the learning to be promoted, with a set of reflection suggestions.

The defined content areas are as follows:

- Area of Personal and Social Training;
- Expression and Communication Area;
- Field of Physical Education;
- Field of Artistic Education;
- Visual Arts Subdomain;

- Dramatic Game Subdomain/Theater;
- Music Subdomain;
- Subdomain of Dance;

Mastery of Oral Language and a Writing Approach;

Math Domain;

- Area of Knowledge of the World.

These areas are very close to those already defined in the 1997 CEPOL. But it's an important innovation the examples presented with the global learning to promote in each one. The multidimensional area of Personal and Social Training perhaps deserves more emphasis, as it's always one of the areas considered more complex by various professionals of childhood education.

In a third and final section, a reflection is presented on: Educational continuity and transitions, analyzing how kindergarten can develop the potentialities of each child creating conditions for their success in the process of transition to school, in a perspective of continuity of learning.

### **3 THE CURRICULUM CHANGES DEFINED IN 2016. SOME TESTIMONIES.**

In the study carried out, as mentioned above, a first question was asked about what the 2016 BSEC brought back from the 1997 BSEC. The existence of continuity between the two documents has always been reinforced, and the main changes have also been highlighted during the interviews.

Starting with interviewee D, the 2016 BSEC, along with an update and reformulation, present new aspects such as "*Explanation of fundamentals and principles for all pedagogy of childhood, with a strong influence of children's rights (...)*". Regarding the role of the educator in the management of the curriculum is valued the perspective of the training assessment, "*assessment for learning, in which planning and evaluation are interlinked and the assessment of learning focuses on the progress of each child*". Alongside the changes made in the content areas, the presentation was also modified "*according to a common scheme in which components are defined and examples of how learning can be observed,*

*and examples of strategies to promote learning are presented*". The issue of carry-overs is also further developed with some working suggestions.

One of the changes referenced is the way of conceiving development and learning and the relationship between them.

Interviewee D stresses that while in 1997 the major concern was *"to counter the idea that preschool education was not about learning and focused on development, its goals being identified with the norms of development by age"*. In 2016, new concerns arise, including the concern to *'counter the colonization of pre-school education by compulsory schooling'* at a time when pre-school and primary school are operating in the same schools.

For the interviewee C as OCEPE (2016) introduced *"significant changes both at the organizational level"* and in the development of some topics. Of these he also highlights the Fundamentals and principles of pedagogy for childhood, *highlighting, among other aspects, "the importance of play (...) there is no opposition between play and learning"*. It also highlights the chapter on Educational Intentionality and the Planning and Evaluation cycle, as well as the changes defined for the Content Areas and the chapter on Educational Continuity and Transitions.

*"The main objective of these changes was not only to update the BSEC, after 19 years of its publication, but also to promote and support educators' reflection on educational action and to facilitate its implementation and access to diverse and dispersed documents (Circulars diverse from the GIP, Brochures from the BSEC, referentials of citizenship, websites, recommendations from the NEC, Convention on the Rights of the Child)"*.

Some of these amendments are also mentioned by the other interviewees, although not in such detail.

*"20 years have passed, it's natural that, above all, due to social changes (family and parenthood), the advance of technologies, of (re)organization/school administration and of 'new' theories/psychopedagogical principles are registered novelties"*. (Interviewed A).

It emphasizes the change in the way children are conceived *"the active role and importance of their participation as subjects and main agents of their learning"*. And it values the fact that there is a single chapter on educational intent and curriculum management, the emphasis given to *"evaluation in its formative and formative character"*.

It also considers that in the 2016 BSEC it's more evident how to conceive of education as a whole, from birth, the concern "*with educational (mis)continuity and transitions*" the greatest concern with "*early intervention, differentiated pedagogy and inclusion*". It also recognizes that there is now a better explanation of the different areas of content and "*development and learning objectives to be promoted in each area*".

For interviewee B as OCEPE (2016), they updated the previous ones, being "*very relevant with regard to the knowledge they make available and problematize, in particular with regard to the fundamentals of childhood education and also in the way they organize the purposes of educational action, looking ahead to the learning of the child, its assessment and the (self) evaluation of teaching practice*".

Interviewee E says that these new BBEPGs "*are clearer, with an organization that facilitates reading, with boards that question us and in a way can be a guide for reflections about practices*".

In general, they all stress that an important update has been made at the formal level and in the explanation of the fundamentals, organizational aspects, benchmarks presented for the various content areas. The further development of the educational intent part of the curriculum management process and the relevance given to the involvement of children in the whole educational process are considered to be the most innovative aspects.

#### **4 PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRAINING**

In the OCEPE (2016), the Personal and Social Training (FPS) content area is considered a cross-sectional area present in all work done in kindergarten. Like the other areas, the principles underlying the suggested work are based *on the recognition of the child as a subject and agent of the educational process whose unique identity is built up in interaction*. Based on the organization of the educational environment, Personal and Social Training develops in a relational environment in which children are valued and heard. With its own content, this area relates to all the others:

"(...) children's knowledge, curiosity and desire to learn are expanded through contact with the various manifestations of culture to which these areas correspond, allowing, simultaneously, to develop projects that mobilize them, in an articulate and globalizing manner" (LOPES DA SILVA, Isabel, MARQUES, Liliana, MATA, Lourdes, ROSA, Manuela. Guidelines, 2016, p. 33).



Considering their transversal characteristics, the apprenticeships referenced for Personal and Social Training are also listed in the remaining areas, in a progressive process in which pre-school education is an initial stage of lifelong learning.

Four components are identified: Identification of identity and self-esteem; independence and autonomy; awareness of oneself as a learner; democratic coexistence and citizenship.

Shortly after the publication of the BSEC, the National Strategy for Education for Citizenship - ENED (DGE/ME, 2017) was defined at the level of the education system as a whole (from pre-school education to the end of compulsory schooling) and different materials were built to support its development at national level.

At ENED the different domains presented are organized into three groups:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Group: Human Rights (civil and political, economic, social and cultural and solidarity); Gender Equality; Interculturality (cultural and religious diversity); Sustainable Development; Environmental Education; Health (health promotion, public health, food, physical exercise).
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Group: Sexuality (diversity, rights, sexual and reproductive health); Media<sup>4</sup>; Institutions and democratic participation. Financial literacy and consumer education; Road safety; Risk.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Group: Entrepreneurship (economic and social); World of Work; Security, Defense and Peace; Animal Welfare; Volunteering. Others (according to the needs of citizenship education diagnosed by the school and that fits into the concept of CE proposed by the group).

These groups have different implications: “[...] The first, obligatory for all levels and cycles of schooling (because they are transversal and longitudinal areas), the second, at least in two cycles of basic education, the third with optional application in any year of schooling” (DGE/ME, 2017, p. 7).

Returning to the study conducted, the interviewees, in general, consider that everything that is referenced in the OCEPE (2016) for the content area of Personal and Social Training is important.

*“All the components of personal and social education are important and seek to explain what is meant by PHS: The construction of identity and self-esteem,*

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<sup>4</sup>Media.

*independence and autonomy, self-awareness as a learner, democratic coexistence and citizenship. At a time when education for citizenship is advocated in compulsory education, I do not think that it can focus only on citizenship, without taking into account the other aspects”.*

Interviewee C underlines that: *“the construction of identity and self-esteem is a fundamental aspect that has implications in the other components, namely Independence and autonomy, Consciousness of self as a learner and Democratic Coexistence and citizenship”.*

Interviewee A recognizes as very positive the way the FPS is presented in the OCEPE and highlights the idea of the “progressive process that, carried out in the course of pre-school education, will have continuity throughout life” (LOPES DA SILVA, Isabel, MARQUES, Liliana, MATA, Lourdes, ROSA, Manuela. Guidelines, 2016, p. 38).

For B, all the dimensions/themes defined for this content area are extremely relevant *“however, given the role and the intention attributed to citizenship education in the educational system, I highlight citizenship and democratic coexistence by linking to the purposes defined in the National Strategy of Education for Citizenship”.*

The interviewee E appreciates the relevance given to transversality and highlights the four components *“Construction of identity and self-esteem; Independence and autonomy; Awareness of oneself as a learner; Democratic coexistence and citizenship”* that are presented in a very explicit and well developed way.

As regards the way in which the BSECs relate to the National Education Strategy for Citizenship, opinions are less convergent.

*“The component of Democratic Coexistence and Citizenship of Personal and Social Training was thought to link with Education for Citizenship and the online version has a link to the different aspects of Education for Citizenship. However, given the multiplicity of the strands of citizenship education, it was difficult to list them all or find a common thread, not least because the relationship between those published is not very clear. Thus, it was understood that education for citizenship as a whole, transversal to the development of the curriculum, developing in a certain way of living and of relating (for example, with the democratic organization of the life of the group) and that the approach of contents relating to citizenship, will have to be contextualized. For example, in the ‘technological world and use of technologies’ component of World*

*Knowledge, some aspects of the 'media education' component of citizenship education have been introduced" (Interviewed D).*

Contrary to interviewee D, C states that both the BSEC and ENED *"argue that the various dimensions of citizenship should be integrated into the curriculum, in the teaching and non-teaching activities, in the daily practices of school life and in its articulation with the community. In addition, the importance of citizenship issues is highlighted, being present in educational practices promoting the inclusion of all children involving pupils and students in active methodologies that offer opportunities for personal and social skills development. Another common aspect is the call for democratic school practices involving the entire school community"*.

Interviewee A stresses the importance of the areas "Human Rights, Gender Equality, Interculturality, Sustainable Development, Environmental Education and Health" being covered in both documents. It questions, however, whether the national strategy defined for citizenship education is in line with the one advocated in the BSEC: *"I note that the documents supporting the national strategy and relating to the Project for Curriculum Autonomy and Flexibility, Inclusive Education, in convergence with the Profile of Pupils Exiting from Compulsory Schooling and with Essential Learning could reinforce and illustrate more clearly the recommendation of citizenship and development education since pre-school education (even if of a transversal and transdisciplinary nature) and specifically mention the BSEC as a starting point or reference document, at a time when fundamental values need to be strengthened in order to develop tolerant societies and promote equity among young children"*.

Interviewee B considers: *"There is articulation, but it's neither evident nor immediate. Perhaps because these documents 'came out' out of time: the BSEC left in 2016 and ENEC in 2017. In any case, as I have already mentioned, although all the lessons recommended in this area of content easily fit into the areas provided for in ENEC, the most obvious is democratic coexistence and citizenship"*.

Interviewee D states that she believes that she is not very well developed, but that it's very clear what she intends to be experienced/reflected with children. *"The questions of citizenship are essential and have to be articulated and lived with an essential aspect of democracy, of respect for others, for the community, for the planet"*. As stated in the BSEC:

*"The promotion of greater gender equality is, inter alia, a fundamental element of citizenship education and the building of a true democracy. Dealing with differences without transforming them into inequalities is one of the great challenges of education today. It's up*

to the educator to develop an intentional action that leads to an effective equality of opportunity between boys and girls in the process of socialization experienced in kindergarten”. (LOPES DA SILVA, Isabel, MARQUES, Liliana, MATA, Lourdes, ROSA, Manuela. Guidelines, 2016, p. 39).

Testimonies seems to show, alongside the relevance of the area of Personal and Social Training, that all consider this area to be well presented and developed in the BCEEP. However, there is a need for better clarification of how these guidelines relate to the National Strategy defined for citizenship education.

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Alongside the extension of early childhood education to all children before school entry, international studies underline the need for curricular guidelines to ensure educational quality, facilitating the work of professionals and professionals and linkage with school (OECD, 2011; EURYDICE, 2009).

Quoting Sylvie Rayna (2013, p. 67), defining quality involves a process of joint construction of meanings, seeking to “make sense”. “Participation” in the definition of quality becomes fundamental.

In the process of building the BSEC (both the former and the current ones) this involvement was a concern that helped its ownership at the level of early childhood education professionals, trainers and researchers. The great national debate that accompanied its construction and dissemination was a reference for everyone.

In parallel with the training work, the organization of supporting publications, were actions that helped to disseminate these orientations. In 2016, it’s noteworthy as innovation that the organization of this dissemination work was done in partnership with the Association of Childhood Education Professionals.

If 1997 was a fundamental stage, 2016 appears as a moment of maturity of the work then started. If in 1997 (as is mentioned by interviewee D) the concern was to value the work of the educator as manager of the curriculum, the need to exist a more substantiated and contextualized planning of work, in 2016, educational intention gains an autonomous chapter, but other concerns arise: preschool education is the first stage of the educational system but is different from compulsory schooling. Finding this balance was one of the great challenges of the BSEC (2016).

At the same time, there is talk of the participation of children, and also of families, in the whole educational process. The child subject and agent of its development and learning process (LOPES DA SILVA, Isabel, MARQUES, Liliana, MATA, Lourdes, ROSA, Manuela. Guidelines, 2016, p. 12), is a principle that has gradually become more and more part of pedagogical discourse but is still far from a characteristic of educational practices.

“Democratic participation is an important criterion of citizenship: it’s a means by which children and adults can engage with others in making decisions that affect themselves, groups of which they are members, and society as a whole. It’s also a means of resisting power and its will to rule, and the forms of oppression and injustice that emerge from the uncontrolled exercise of power. Last but not least, democracy allows diversity to prosper. In doing so, it offers the best environment for the production of new thoughts and practices” (MOSS, 2009, p. 419).

This need has recently been reinforced, not only for pre-school education, but for the entire education system in a recommendation of the National Education Council (Recommendation 2/2021). This Recommendation, considering the trends in international studies, underlines the need to give a voice to children and young people in educational institutions.

The area of Personal and Social Training determines, among other things, the need to change the conception of children as citizens with rights, one of them being active participation in their learning process. This area of crucial content in pre-school education is sometimes overly diluted in the name of the necessary cross-sectionality that should characterize it. It’s a challenge that must be continued from initial training in an educational perspective for citizenship, taking into account the national benchmark.

In 2016, the publication of new Guidelines, rather than an update, was to deepen and clarify a number of aspects experienced by professionals, trainers and researchers. This development is recognized by all the interviewees in the study conducted. But its implications are always dependent on the way professionals appropriate this benchmark and the way it’s being worked on in training. The difference between the discourse and the practices is still great. In order to overcome it, greater support is needed, focusing on the specific nature of each context and the concrete difficulties of each professional.

Alongside the various content areas, Personal and Social Training needs to be further developed, since initial training and as evidenced by the study carried out, it has broader characteristics than those proposed by the National Strategy for Education to Citizenship.

However, professionals need to be heard to understand better: What are the difficulties experienced in implementing the principles defined by the BREAD (2016)? How is the area of personal and social training being worked on? Main difficulties experienced? These issues will form the basis of a study that is planned to be carried out in the academic year 2021/22 in some parts of the country through collaborative work between training institutions.

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