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The Student-Oriented Classroom: A Method of Improving Student Conduct and Satisfaction

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Reinforcement procedures have been effective in remedying classroom problems. The present method used many of these reinforcement procedures in a program that maximized student responsibility and included behavioral contracting, self-correction, positive practice for mistakes, token economy, individualized codes of conduct, parental feedback, self-selection of extensive reinforcers, and frequent student–teacher conferences. One-half of the students in a fifth-grade class were given the new program while the other half served as a control for 1 month The measures included reports of problems as defined by the students as well as by the teacher and by independent observers. As compared with the pretests and the control group, the new program resulted in fewer problems as reported by the students, the teachers, and the observers. Greater student and teacher satisfaction can be achieved by a behavior reinforcement program that emphasizes the role of the student.

Behavior modification procedures have been demonstrated to be effective in improving the conduct and learning of students in the classroom (see summary by Sulzer and Mayer, 1972). As Winett and Winkler (1972) and O'Leary and Drabman (1971) have pointed out, classroom management procedures, sometimes including behavior modification procedures as well, typically are directed at controlling the students in line with the teacher's desires. Yet, it appears that reinforcement procedures lend themselves very easily to a student-oriented approach (see discussion by

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O'Leary, 1972), since positive reinforcement by definition is concerned with doing things for the student rather than to the student. The present study attempted to use classroom behavior modification procedures in such a manner that the student had substantial individual responsibility and received substantial satisfaction (reinforcement).

The behavioral contracting procedures originally developed for adults (Sulzer, 1962), has been extensively used in classrooms for both social (Brooks, 1974) and academic (Williams & Anandam, 1973) behavior, with the teacher largely deciding which behaviors will be designated for change. The present study gave the students a large role in establishing both the social and academic objectives in the contract.

Another major procedure, also developed initially with adults (Ayllon & Azrin, 1965, 1968), is the token economy procedure, wherein the student earns points which are exchangeable for subsequent reinforcers that the teacher has decided to make available (O'Leary & Becker, 1967; Barrish, Saunders, & Wolf, 1969). The present program emphasized the role of the student by having the students play a large role in determining what reinforcers would be available, and for which behaviors, and allowing the students to revise these rules continually.

A major strategy in behavior modification is to praise desired behavior and to ignore misconduct (Thomas, Becker, & Armstrong, 1968). Yet, as discussed elsewhere (Azrin & Powers, 1975), severe or persistent misconduct usually requires some type of penalty such as time out (Briskin & Anderson, 1973), reprimands (O'Leary & Becker, 1968, 1969), and loss of points (Bailey, Wolf, & Phillips, 1970). More commonly, in many classes that are not reinforcement oriented, the teacher uses penalties such as criticism, detention, exclusion from class, spanking, referral to the school principal, suspension, and isolation. The present program, in contrast, reacted to misconduct from the perspective of self-correction and positive practice. This strategy requires that, when an individual makes a mistake or misbehaves, he has to correct or even overcorrect himself and to practice the correct mode of behaving. Although one may classify required self-correction as a punishment procedure, the procedure emphasizes restitution and educative practice rather than subjective aversiveness. Overcorrection, self-correction, and positive practice have been used with the retarded to teach toilet training (Azrin & Foxx, 1971; Foxx & Azrin, 1973), correct mealtime behavior (Azrin & Armstrong, 1973), nonaggressiveness (Webster & Azrin, 1973), and elimination of stealing (Azrin & Wesolowski, 1974); and with normal children to teach toileting (Azrin & Foxx, 1974), elimination of bedwetting (Azrin, Sneed, & Foxx, 1974), and proper conduct in a small special education class (Azrin & Powers, 1975). The present method used the overcorrection and positive practice strategy in a normal classroom as part of the general objective of

having the students take the responsibility for their actions rather than imposing penalties that were designed simply to cause annoyance.

Another feature of the program was the frequent (daily) teacher–student conference designed to give each student the opportunity to make continuing changes in his individual program and to obtain frequent feedback as to progress, as has also been true of other behavioral programs (McLaughlin & Malaby, 1972). Frequent feedback to the parent has also been used in behavioral programs to structure home-based reinforcement (Bailey, Wolf, & Phillips, 1970). The present program also used this feedback but reduced some of its apparent aversiveness since the student was being evaluated on dimensions of behavior which he himself had selected.

The present study used these behavioral procedures of contracting, token economy, positive reinforcement, teacher–student consultations, parental involvement, and self-correction in such a manner as to maximize the role of the student in a normal classroom. Each of these procedures has been used individually in some previous programs to promote student responsibility. The present program used all of these procedures and modified each of them so as to maximize student self-determination. Also in line with this student orientation, the present study measured the satisfaction of the student and not merely the satisfaction of the teacher or outside observers as the dependent variable.

METHOD

Subjects and Experimental Design

Twenty-four students, aged 10–12 years in a regular fifth-grade public school classroom were included in the study. The teacher had requested assistance after 3 months of the school year because the students were uncooperative and fighting during that time. The permanent teacher was assisted by a student teacher. The students were divided into 12 matched pairs, matching being based on the number of problems the teacher scored for a student on the teacher's rating of student problems (described below). Two of the pairs were not included in the data analysis since one of each pair transferred to another school during the study, leaving 10 pairs of students with 8 boys and 2 girls in each group for data analysis. Additional students entered the class during the school year, but were also not included in the data analysis. The number of students in the class averaged about 25. A coin toss determined which member of each pair was assigned to the Regular Instruction vs. the New Instruction. The seating was rearranged such that the Regular Instruction students were seated on one side of the room and the New Instruction students on the other. To assure the difference in treatment between groups, the student teacher was primarily responsible for the Regular Instruction Group, whereas the permanent teacher was primarily responsible for the New Instruction Group. The permanent teacher supervised the student teacher to ensure that the students in the Regular Instruction Group were being taught in the usual manner. The students were told that a new program was being used and the assignment was based on chance. The students seemed to accept the difference in procedures the same way that they viewed differences in style of instruction between any two teachers. After 1 month, the control group was given the new procedure such that all students were now in the new

program. Measures of student and teacher satisfactions were obtained on the day before the new program began, again 1 month later, and finally at the end of the year, 6 months later This design thereby provided a within-subjects comparison for all students in that the pretest scores could be compared with the post-treatment scores. By initiating the treatment 1 month later for half of the students, a partial control was achieved for spontaneous changes in behavior by a between-group comparison after the 1-month period. The two groups were conducted concurrently in the same classroom.

Response Measures

(1) Students listing of problems. Each student was given a list of 20 common complaints by students and he circled those that were a problem for him. Examples: getting to do enough fun activities, the teacher being nice to me, getting all the help I need.

(2) Teacher's listing of student problems. The teacher was given a list of 58 common complaints by teachers about students, 42 of which concerned conduct problems and the remainder concerned classwork problems. For each student, the teacher circled those problems which applied to that student. Examples of complaints were: fights, argues with teachers, breaks school rules, doesn't pay attention, school-work messy or incomplete, does not do homework.

(3) Experimenter's observations of student behaviors. Two observers scored the students conduct over a 3-day period for a total of 3 hr at random times during the day. The observers ascertained from the teacher what the class rules were for that day, then observed the students in systematic succession scoring each student (+ or −) as to whether he was following the rules at the onset of each 30-sec observational interval. A different student was observed every 30 sec and the observer scored only what the student was doing at the very onset of the 30-sec period. This method of recording provides a measure that can be interpreted as percentage of time spent in the behavior given reasonable allowance for sampling variability. This measure was taken 1 month after the treatment group had been in the new program but the control group was still receiving the usual teaching method.

Teacher's Satisfactions: Class-wide Rules for Students

A list of 12 rules was established as a starting point that all students agreed to follow to please the teacher. These rules were arrived at by having the teacher list the rules that she would like the students to follow, then discussing each rule with the class as a whole, asking each student individually for his suggestions and approval, and finally obtaining a consensus or near-consensus. During the discussion, the initial rules were modified and the students suggested some of their own, such as no hitting and no name-calling, which were adopted. The teacher deliberately included some desires that would be easily satisfied by almost all students, such as not being late for class, as well as some of the more problematic rules such as finishing required work on time.

Student's Satisfaction: Class-wide Rules for the Teacher

The teacher agreed to a set of rules that she would follow for all students. This initial set of "teacher agreements" was established in the same manner as the initial list of "rules for students." The students stated their desires, each of which was discussed on a class-wide basis with each student discussing and making suggestions about each rule, after which the rule was adopted on a near-consensus basis in a form that was also agreeable to the teacher Those rules for the teacher included: (1) a polite reminder by the teacher when a student forgot an agreement, (2) establishment of a list of privileges that would be available to any student who met his agreements, (3) individual conferences with the teacher daily if desired, and at least once a week, (4) the opportunity to self-correct a mistake or misconduct to avoid a penalty, (5) constructive, rather than critical, feedback to the student during the individual

conferences, and (6) the continuing opportunity to make personal or class-wide changes in the rules.

Individual Rules

The initial class-wide rules were modified continuously during the individual conference periods (described below) when the teacher requested changes specific to the individual student's academic and conduct status. The students similarly requested changes to meet their individual desires. For example, a student might ask for a change in seat location, a period of time to do reading he has selected, a change in the arrangement of furniture and materials in the classroom, more help in math, that the teacher talk to Jimmy about teasing, permission to read a novel when he finished assigned work early, doing special projects rather than the regular social studies assignment, etc. The teacher might ask a specific student to do such things as extra work in math, or to participate more in the reading class by volunteering at least once each day.

Positive Action Statements as Rules

In making requests of each other, the students and teacher often phrased their requests in negative terms such as the students requesting that there be no hitting or no criticizing or the teacher requesting no lateness, no inattentiveness, no sloppiness. In this program, they were taught to make all statements of rules refer to what the other person should do, rather than not do. The rules therefore stated that the desk should be clean, the students should help each other, say nice things to each other, be in school on time, etc.

Contract Agreement

A formal written statement was used for all agreements between the student and teacher. Additions and changes were made on this form which was kept in each student's desk. The contract was signed by the teacher and student at the time of the initial class-wide agreements. The student and teacher shook hands on the contract which was reviewed at each individual consultation when the teacher rated the extent to which each agreement was followed.

Individual Consultation and Feedback to Students

The teacher provided a brief (1–3 min) consultation each day with each student, often in the course of walking from one desk to another. A longer period (5–10 min) was provided weekly. In these consultations, the teacher reviewed and evaluated the existing agreements and exchanged requests with the students for additions, deletions, and changes in the agreements. In providing feedback for the agreements, the teacher rated how well the student had followed each agreement (poor, okay, or good), filling in all of the Good ratings first in order to establish a positive atmosphere, and stating briefly the basis for each rating. For example, regarding "Doing Nice Things for Others" the teacher might say "That was kind of you, Sue, to help the others move their desks." If the teacher had no opportunity to evaluate the item, the student rated himself and mentioned the basis for the rating. The students initiated the consultations if the teacher did not.

Reciprocity between Student and Teacher

Several procedures were used to promote the feeling of mutual helpfulness between student and teacher during the individual conferences. (1) They alternated in making requests of each other, the teacher and student never making a second request until the other had made one. (2) One could never refuse a request outright, but rather was obligated to suggest an alternative solution to the problem if the request was unacceptable. Example: "I can't move the library area to that side of the room, but I could move it over here. Would

that be all right?" (3) Before making a request to solve a problem, the individual stated what was satisfactory about the current situation and then requested an improvement. Example: Teacher to student, "You are doing well in the math class and you always answer the questions I ask. Can you agree to speak louder so that all of the students can hear you?" Or, student to teacher, "I like the free time period. Can it be changed to 15 minutes instead of 10 minutes?" (4) In requesting a solution to a problem, the individual must suggest some specific procedure for achieving the solution. Example: Instead of saying "You don't give me enough time to finish my work," a student would be asked to say "I would like to have 5 minutes extra to do my assignment."

Classroom Privileges as Reinforcers

A list of privileges was established jointly by the teacher and students at the start of the program for use as reinforcers when the agreements were followed. These included opportunities such as using a tape recorder, going to the library, using a phonograph, leading a spelling quiz, and leaving early for recess or lunch. The students and teacher equally suggested several possibilities and decided on the acceptability and duration of each through class discussion as well as agreement by each student. The privileges were characterized as daily or weekly, two of the daily privileges being available whenever all agreements had been rated "good" the previous day, whereas, three of the weekly privileges were given for a similar rating for all agreements the previous week. This initial list of privileges was continually revised in response to requests by the teacher or students during the individual consultations.

Make-up

The make-up or self-correction procedure was taught and role-played with the students as a method whereby they could assume adult responsibility for their mistakes or misbehavior by having them correct the situation themselves rather than having the teacher unilaterally imposing penalties. Whenever the teacher gave a rating of "poor" or "okay" on the agreement evaluations, the rating could be changed to a "good" if the student self-corrected the situation. Similarly, the students were told to self-correct whenever the teacher pointed out a problem or, better still, even before the teacher reminded them. The basic rules in the make-up procedure were (1) to apologize to the person who was upset, reassuring him of your good intentions, (2) to tell the person what you will do now to correct the situation, (3) to tell the person what you will do in the future, (4) to state what the rules for proper conduct are. Examples of this procedure for common problems are as follows. When a student talked out loudly, disrupting a class: "I'm sorry, Mrs. _____. I didn't mean to make so much noise and disturb you. Next time, I'll be quiet when you're talking or raise my hand first the way we are supposed to do." For fighting: "I'm sorry I hit you, Jill. I like you and you're my friend. Next time I think you took my stuff, I'll ask you about it first. We shouldn't fight." For name-calling: "Jimmy, I shouldn't have bad-mouthed you. You're one of the neatest guys I know. Next time we argue about something I'll think about what I'm saying. We all agreed not to call each other names."

Make-up Plus Positive Practice

The make-up procedure was considered sufficient on the first or second mistake, especially if the incident was minor. If the incident occurred repeatedly, however, a positive practice procedure was required in addition to the make-up procedure. Positive practice meant that the student was required to describe and rehearse what he should do in the future regarding the problem incident and to practice the appropriate opposite reaction. For example, for a repeated instance of hitting another student, the offender would be required under positive practice to describe to the teacher various alternative verbal statements he

could make next time and to practice saying them to the teacher such as, "I'll tell him first not to bother me, I'm busy," or, "I don't want to fight." Since the opposite reaction to hitting is helping or praising, practice of the opposite consists of statements such as, "I like playing with you," "You're my friend," "Can I help you with that?," "Your clothes look great." The procedure was used for errors or disruptions such as tardiness in class, not beginning or completing an assignment on time, teasing, making noises in class, running in the corridor, pushing other students out of the way who were in line, etc. First the student engaged in the make-up procedure (above) and then the positive practice. The procedure was conducted either at the time of the incident when convenient for the teacher, or, otherwise, at a time when the teacher had the time such as during recess, lunch time, after school, or a scheduled privilege period. The procedure was conducted orally or in writing and occupied 5–10 min. In the very rare instance that a student refused to perform the positive practice first, he was required to remain for the duration of the period in his seat or room until he had written out or discussed the appropriate manner of reacting.

Reminder

To encourage self-control and responsibility, the teacher did not impose penalties for omissions or disruptions. Rather, a polite reminder was given to the student pointing out the existence of the problem, so that the student could spontaneously engage in the correction or in the make-up procedure described above.

Parental Feedback

Feedback and parental involvement were arranged by mailing to the parent a copy of the teacher-rated student's agreements each week. The parents had been informed by telephone and by letter of the nature of their child's program. The function of the weekly report was described as providing them with feedback and they were encouraged to give their child praise and special privileges for good performance to show their pleasure. Since the feedback report consisted of the teacher's ratings of agreements which the student had made, the report served primarily as a method of securing parental praise rather than the usual report of deficits or misbehaviors.

Progress Display

Each student maintained a record of the number of agreements he had satisfied on a graph which was posted on a class bulletin board. A conspicuous symbol (stars) designated the fulfillment of all agreements, so that simple examination of the graph quickly revealed that a student was fulfilling all of his objectives.

Positive Request Procedure

The students and the teacher were taught by role-playing to precede any criticism or request for a change with a statement of what was pleasant that the person had been doing. This positive request procedure assured a positive, pleasant context when the student and teacher made agreements, as well as when the teacher reacted to some student misbehavior. The students were also encouraged to use this approach when requesting a change of behavior of other students.

The "usual" method of instruction did not include contracting, nor student establishment of rules for themselves or for the teacher, nor regular reports to the parents, nor student selections of privileges, nor the make-up or positive practice requirement, nor the progress display of agreements satisfied, nor the positive request requirement. The usual method did include, however, a simple token economy procedure whereby the students earned points for good behaviors during each week; a free-time period was given on Friday afternoon to

the students who earned the number of points specified beforehand by the teacher. During this free time, the students could use a phonograph, a tape recorder, or other recreational items. Problem behaviors were reacted to by warnings, short-term exclusion from the class, sending the student to the principal, spankings, and reports or conferences with the parents.

RESULTS

When the student described his own problem (student's perspective), about 3.7 problems per student existed for both groups (Fig. 1). After 1

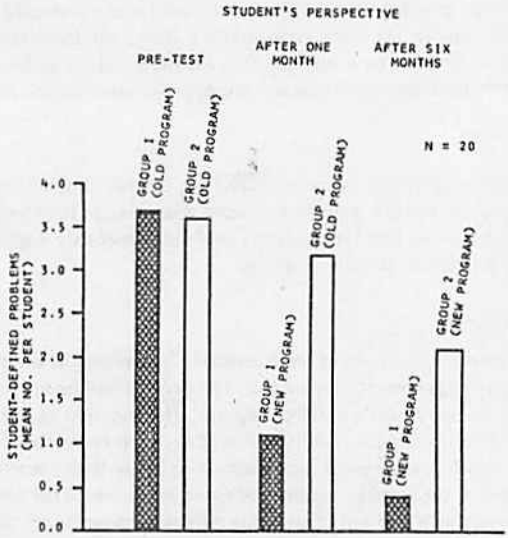

FIG. 1. Comparison of the students in the student-oriented group with those in the usual teaching group. The measure was the number of problems which existed for the student as defined by the student. The pretest measure was obtained immediately before the new program was put into effect, whereas the later measures were obtained 1 and 6 months later

month, the students in the student-oriented class reported a reduction of 70% to 1.1 problems whereas the students in the usual-method class had a reduction of only 10%. After 6 months, when both groups were receiving the new program, the student-defined problems had decreased to 10% of the initial level for Group 1 and to 40% for Group 2. The results from the teacher's perspective were similar (Fig. 2). The pretest showed that both groups had the same number of teacher-defined problems, 7.2 problems per student. One month later, the student-oriented students showed a reduction of 75%, whereas the students in the usual-method class had a reduction of 38%. Six months later, when all students were receiving the new program, the problems had decreased by 96% for Group 1 and by 87% for Group 2. A t test of correlated means after the 1-month period showed that the reduction of problems was not statistically significant for

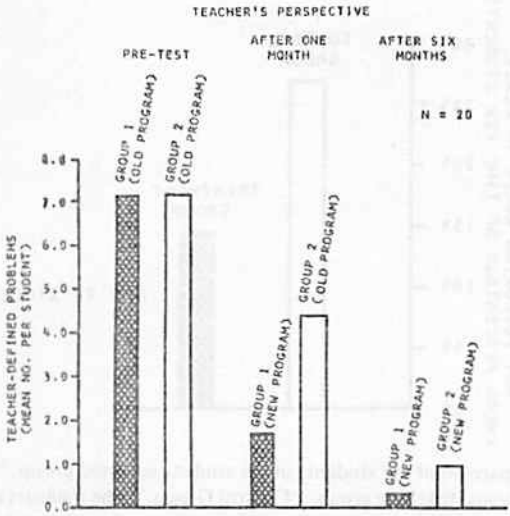

FIG. 2. Comparison of the students in the student-oriented group with those in the usual teaching group. The measure was the number of problems which existed for each student as defined by the teacher. The pretest measure was obtained immediately before the new program was put into effect, whereas the later measures were obtained 1 and 6 months later.

the control group, whereas the reduction of problems was statistically significant for the student-oriented group whether the problems were student defined ($p < .01$) or teacher defined ($p < .02$). The results of the observations by the two outside observers confirm this difference (Fig. 3). The observers' records showed that the students in the usual-method group were not following the rules on 27% of the observations whereas the students in the student-oriented group were not following the rules on 14% of the observations. The difference between the groups was statistically significant ($p < .05$). Calculation of the correspondence of observer judgment showed that interobserver agreement was 96%.

As a secondary index, questionnaires were given to the parents, teachers, and students for them to rate the program subjectively. On a scale of 0–5 where "0" indicated "complete unhappiness" and "5" indicated "complete happiness," the parents, teacher and students all gave an average rating of 4.5 or greater for their happiness with the program.

DISCUSSION

The present program seemed to succeed in improving classroom conduct by using behavior modification procedures that emphasized the desires and responsibility of the students. The program reduced the number of class problems, as seen by either the teacher, independent

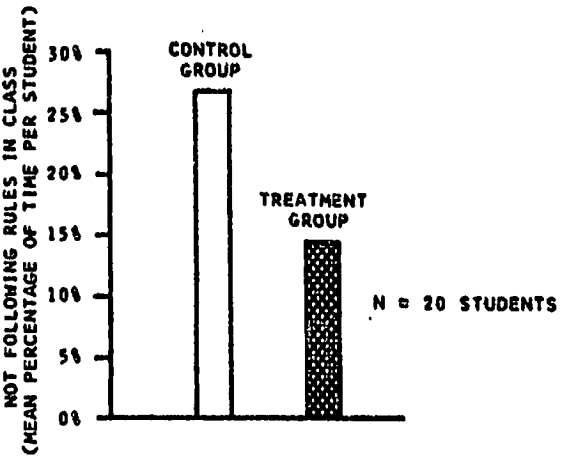

FIG. 3. Comparison of the students in the student-oriented group, "Treatment Group," with those in the usual teaching group, "Control Group." The measures were taken 1 month after the new procedure was put into effect. The measure of not following rules was taken by two observers and was based on the teacher's definition of the classwide rules. The 20 students were equally divided between the two groups.

observers, the parents or most important, perhaps, by the students. The problems were reduced substantially by about one-half according to the independent observers, by about two-thirds according to the students, and by more than 90% according to the teacher. The improvement endured throughout the remainder of the school year.

The improvement in the classroom cannot reasonably be attributed to the recording bias of the teacher since the measures obtained from the students and the independent observers also showed improvement. Nor can the passage of time reasonably account for the improvement since the problems had been reported as existing for the entire 3-month period prior to the start of the new program and the problems persisted for the additional 1-month period while the student teacher continued use of the old procedures. It is theoretically possible that the student teacher was responsible for the high level of problems during that 1-month period. This possibility is contraindicated, though not excluded, by the fair similarity of the response measures during the student teacher's use of the old method to the permanent teacher's earlier use of the old method. For example, when the student teacher continued use of the old method, the students reported only a 10% change in their problems as compared with the level reported when the permanent teacher used the old method. Nevertheless, future studies would be more definitive if repeated measures were taken during the baseline period and/or the roles of the teachers were counterbalanced with respect to the treatment conditions.

The distinctive aspect of this procedure is the treatment of the student as a partner with the teacher, jointly establishing standards and privileges and jointly revising them on a structured daily basis in accord with their different and changing desires and experiences. This concern for the participation of the client or student (or patient) has been exemplified in the daily structured session employed in the original token economy with mental patients to encourage the patients to satisfy their individual desires (O'Brien, Azrin, & Henson, 1969). Similarly, the reciprocity counseling procedure for marital problems encouraged both partners equally to establish joint standards and satisfactions for each other (Azrin, Naster, & Jones, 1973). Behaviorally oriented classrooms generally show special concern for the student by emphasizing positive reinforcement, minimizing criticism or punishment, arranging special privileges, avoiding labeling of the student, and other student-oriented concerns. A recent example of this trend toward student responsibility in behavioral programs has been to allow the student alone to determine the token-exchange ratio for correct answers to arithmetic problems (Felixbrod & O'Leary, 1973) or geography questions (Glynn, 1970). The present program extended this concern for the student by making student responsibility a central concern and directed all of the class procedures in that direction. This student-oriented concept should not be interpreted as an abdication of responsibility by the teacher and a presumptive assumption of authority by the students. Rather, the students in the present program were assuming adult-like responsibilities for self-correcting, or making up for, their occasional mistakes, and participated as partners with the teacher in setting standards for themselves while assisting her to meet her responsibilities.

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