

**A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH A STUDY ABROAD PROGRAM IN BRAZIL AND IN THE US****Sumita Chakraborti-Ghosh****Karee M. Orellana****Joseph Jones***Tennessee State University*

*The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in philosophies and perceptions of inclusive education between teachers in Brazil and teachers in the United States. As part of a study abroad program, a team of university faculty and graduate students from Tennessee traveled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in order to investigate their inclusive educational practices. Mixed-methodology approach was used including analyzing classroom and school observations, teacher and administrator interviews, and analysis of survey questionnaire. The participants were teachers from both private and public schools in the United States and Brazil. Results demonstrated that the Brazilian philosophy of inclusion is not exclusively related to special education and students with disabilities, but encompasses a more democratic ideal for all students, including those with disabilities and those from extreme poverty. Of all the teachers surveyed, the private school teachers in Brazil had the most positive perception of the overall role of inclusive education compared to their public school and American counterparts.*

**Introduction**

Proponents of inclusive education may differ from slight to moderate in their views about motivation and emphasis. When speaking of inclusion, some emphasize the rights of those who have been excluded by separation due to physical and/or mental disabilities, that is, children in special education (Lindsay, 2007). Others emphasize how it is the guarantee or the right of education for every child and the way to a democratic system of education. This latter viewpoint places emphasis on meeting the needs of all students such as the poor, those who must work to survive, those who are discriminated against, and those who drop out due to failure (Mantoan, 2008). This means that inclusion is an all-encompassing ideology in which the placement of special education students in the general classroom is a particular case of practicing inclusion. How teachers feel about the concept of inclusion would seem then to depend primarily on their understanding and usage of the term. According to Heward (2010), there is no clear consensus in the field about the meaning of inclusion; some view it as full time placement of all students with disabilities in general education, some interpret the term to any degree of integration into the mainstream (p.73). The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) believes that the term inclusion means all children, youth, and young adults with disabilities should be served whenever possible in general education classrooms in inclusive neighborhood schools and community settings which is supported and strengthened by trained personnel (CEC Ethics and Standards, 2009, p.255).

*Inclusion in the United States*

Controversies, research, and legislation have shaped a collaborative relationship between general and special education. A wide range of political, epistemological, and institutional factors have facilitated a more child-centered public education, (Hossain, 2012). Today, the inclusion movement focuses on two generations of practices: a) moving students with disabilities from segregated to general education settings; b) providing evidence based practices through the development of an effective evaluation system (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, Shogren, 2013). It also focuses on *What* and *How* it is taught than *Where* these students are taught (Turnbull, et.al. 2013). Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, and Knott (2006) stated that, *mainstream schooling is a key policy in the promotion of social inclusion of young people with learning disabilities* (p. 432). This social inclusion is tied to a sense of belonging and acceptance

(Voltz, Nettye, & Ford, 2001). Social inclusion, belonging, acceptance, and self-esteem are part of the argument put forward for the acceptance of inclusion. For example, Martins (2007) stated, Proponents of inclusion have argued in favor of its benefits primarily on social and philosophical grounds. For students with disabilities, they contend, inclusion can result in academic and social gains, better preparation for community living, and an avoidance of the negative effects caused by exclusion (p. 80).

Other arguments such as better student achievement, the improvement of teachers' professional skills, and the positive attitude of typical students toward students with disabilities are considered as reasons for moving toward an inclusive educational approach (Begeny & Martens, 2007).

Terminology is an issue to some extent. The term inclusion can have different emphasis depending on who is using it as mentioned in the introduction. Begeny (2007) acknowledged that inclusion is a term that speaks to the including of all students, regardless of abilities and backgrounds, in the regular classroom where all of their needs are to be met. Carpenter and Dyal (2007) call inclusion a *philosophy* where diversity is embraced and student's unique needs are met. There are those who make distinctions between the so-called pullout programs and inclusion (Rea, Mclaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002) where inclusion is the term used for a student always attending a regular classroom. Idol (2006) stated:

In the inclusive school, all students are educated in the general education programs. Inclusion is when a student with special learning and/or behavioral needs is educated full time in the general education program. Essentially, *inclusion* means that the student with special education needs is attending the general school program, enrolled in age appropriate classes 100% of the school day (p. 77).

Idol also made a distinction between the terms inclusion and mainstreaming. The placement of students with disabilities in the regular classroom for 100% of the time is considered as inclusion whereas mainstreaming, on the other hand, is when students with disabilities spend only a portion of their day in the regular classroom. A combination of these two approaches is what others refer to as inclusion. This combination is held to be the fulfillment of The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (1997) which supports the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE) where some students with disabilities may be in the regular classroom all of the time and others are not according to need following the continuum of services (Keefe & Moore, 2004).

Although inclusive education has been gaining momentum for a number of years in the United States, there are still many areas of concern in its implementation (Rea et al., 2002). One such area is that of professional development. Some of these concerns are (a) how to make modifications to the curriculum and instructional practices, (b) coordination between what is taught in the resource and regular classroom, (c) how to make child-by-child decisions on whether or not they should be in a general classroom, and (d) how best to go about the collaboration efforts between the special and general education teachers (Idol, 2006).

A variety of other topics are also treated in the literature on inclusion. For example, inclusion is seen as a way to accomplish an *equal opportunity* for achievement (Aguilar, Morocco, Parker, & Zigmond, 2006). The effect of inclusion on student achievement, which needs further study, is encountered in some articles (Hawkins, 2007; Rouse & Florian L, 2006). There are also studies on how an inclusive approach (in the broader sense of the word) to education helps in correcting the exclusion that poverty can bring (Preece, 2006).

#### *Inclusive Education in Brazil*

Mantoan (2008) expressed the general emphasis of the concept of inclusion in Brazil by stating that when all students are of *equal special concern in an educational system, then the democratic principle of an education for all is fulfilled* (p. 5). This concept of inclusion, as the approach of a democratic principle of education, is continually emphasized by many authors (*Fundamentos Para Uma*; Glat, Santos, Sousa, 2004). Although there is a strong emphasis on the democratic principle and equity for all, the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular classroom is also a central concern (Alencar, 1993).

The problems associated with implementation of inclusion for students with disabilities faced in Brazil are essentially the same as those found in the United States and other countries (Drodge & Shiroma, 2004). The training of teachers needs to improve (Glat, 2004; Sant'ana, 2005). Adaptations to curriculum and differentiated teaching need to take place (Sant'ana, 2005). Professional development is

an area of concern (Alencar, 1993). The required course work for new teachers should be expanded (Sénéchal de Goffredo, 2002). Finally, the basic fundamentals of inclusion and all that it implies must be learned and accepted throughout the education system (*Fundamentos Para Uma*). The literature indicates that the problems and concerns associated with the implementation of inclusion in Brazil are seemingly the same as those in the United States and the rest of the world.

Current initiatives of inclusion shows, that educators and policy makers are dedicated to provide inclusive services in Brazil. Hübner & Macedo (2011) mentioned in a case study about a teaching model which intimately dialogues with the inclusive education concept adopted by the Brazilian Ministry of Education. This model was developed by the teachers in the Clarisse Fecury School in Rio Branco, Acre, Brazil . This model prescribes that students with disabilities, students with pervasive developmental disorder as well as gifted students should all attend regular classrooms and receive specialized services when not at school, so they may enjoy the benefits of socializing with other students (Hübner & Macedo, 2011). Galery & Alonso (2011) also mentioned about a student with Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) was offered a chance to take a course on the particular subject area with other student. There the student were given an opportunity to have the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) methodology. The use of IEP was helpful to all the teachers in the school, but it was not the only change the course brought to the student. It also marked a paradigm shift in terms of the teacher's perception of students, lesson planning, and the role of evaluation. The teacher took a less *conventional* teaching approach, using task-based lesson plans, short duration activities, flexible assessments and other strategies, in order to be able to teach the same content, but with different teaching techniques (Galery & Alonso 2011). Ana Lucia Lago, a physical therapist Ana Lucia Rago (2013) shares her experience in developing inclusive educational programs in Brazil. She talks through a web-cast about the process and the partnerships required to develop a successful inclusive program ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrOvEOeaF-0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrOvEOeaF-0)).

## Method

### *Purpose*

For this study, there were two inherent purposes. First, a team from the Tennessee State University traveled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in order to observe and interview teachers and administrators regarding the implementation of inclusive education. Initial observations were conducted in schools in Rio de Janeiro and surrounding areas. Additionally, interviews were conducted with both pre-service teachers and special education professors from two area universities. Second, the study intended to compare the perceptions of inclusive education between teachers in Brazil and the United States. In order to fulfill this purpose a survey instrument was administered to both private and public school teachers in Brazil and in the United States. The following research questions were given:

1. How do Brazilian schools facilitate inclusion?
2. How does the Brazilian government support inclusive education? Legally? Financially?
3. How are teachers in Brazil trained to implement inclusive education?
4. What are Brazilian teachers' perceptions of inclusive education?
5. How do Brazilian teachers' perceptions of inclusion compare to the perceptions of teachers in the United States?

### *Participants*

Observation and interview participants included teachers and administrators in both public and private schools in Brazil. A total of three private schools and three public schools were observed. Additionally, the research team met with pre-service teachers and two professors of special education from two large universities in the Rio de Janeiro area.

While conducting tours of various schools and classrooms in Brazils, survey instruments regarding teachers' perceptions of inclusion were distributed to classroom teachers. Upon return from Brazil, these same surveys were administered to teachers in the United States as well. Survey participants included both private and public school teachers in Brazil and in the United States. In Brazil, 22 private school teachers and 24 public school teachers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of inclusive education. In the United States, 35 private school teachers and 38 public school teachers were surveyed. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the survey participants.

### *Data Collection Procedures*

This study followed a mixed-methodology approach. Observations and interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators in schools in Brazil. Two area university professors also participated in the

informal interview process. Additionally, survey instruments were used in order to obtain quantitative data from private and public school teachers regarding perceptions of inclusive education. Teachers from both Brazil and the United States participated in the survey in order to compare results.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Survey Participants**

	Brazil	United States
Private School Teachers	22	35
Public School Teachers	24	38
Gender		
Male	7	24
Female	39	49

### *Observations*

The observation data collected for this study can best be described as a reactive observation performed qualitatively. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) described observers using this type of data collection as observers who *do not seek to remain neutral or 'objective' about the phenomena being observed and often include their own feelings and experiences in interpreting their observations* (p. 275). Though every effort has been made to maintain neutrality, some personal interpretations may have been unavoidable.

Observations were conducted in six schools in the Rio de Janeiro area; three private schools and three public schools. The first private school observed served students at the elementary level. One specific kindergarten classroom served 12 students including a young boy with a severe, cognitive disability. Though he was socially included in the classroom, he clearly was not placed in an age-appropriate environment. While most of the kindergarten students were five years old, this young man was nine. He was included in classroom activities with the assistance of a classroom aide. The student's parents had paid for the aide to be in the classroom. The school's director explained that no financial assistance is received from the Brazilian government. According to the school's director, many private schools in Brazil refuse to accept students with special education needs into their programs.

The second observation was conducted at a private school that served students at the secondary level. The director shared with us that the school made a strong effort to include students with disabilities though they were unequipped to serve students with cognitive disabilities. While observing, the research team noted that the school was in the process of installing an elevator in the building in order to accommodate a student who used a wheelchair. Additionally, the school provides assignment and testing modifications to students who may require more extended time on tests and alternate homework and classroom assignments. The school director shared that they served 15 students with special needs in a school with an enrollment of 264. Government funding was not available to this school.

The third private school observed was a Catholic school under the Franciscan order. The school had been established to serve children from extreme poverty. The majority of the students in this school came from one of the most violent neighborhoods in all of Rio. Therefore, many of the student's homes are very unstable. The school desires to promote the democratic philosophy of inclusive education by serving students who suffer from extreme poverty and students with emotional special needs. Students with more physical needs are not a focus for this school and its facilities reflect this. The research team observed that students with physical disabilities would find it very difficult to navigate the school environment where stairs were often used. The four pillars of this school's philosophy included spiritual, cultural, academic, and vocational development. A bakery, welding workshop, and computer lab were all available on site. Most of the school funding came from the area's Rotary Clubs and a German-based Catholic bank.

In addition to the three private schools, the research team observed three public schools in the district of Niteroi located just outside of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Nelma Pintor, the director of special education department of Niteroi, provided the team with bus transportation in order to visit three schools: Escola Municipal Altivo Cesar, Unidade Municipal de Educacao Infantil, and Escuela Municipal Mestra Fininha. The school system of Niteroi strives to have a strong emphasis on inclusive education. The

schools in the system are divided into *cycles* with each cycle having a special education coordinator. Additionally, resource teachers are available at many schools in order to provide extra assistance to students with special education needs. Instead of serving students in pull-out or segregated settings, most students with special needs in the Niteroi systems are provided with extra-curricular opportunities. All teachers in resource rooms have specific training and share with the other teachers in their schools. Support personnel are also provided as needed.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are defined as *a form of data collection involving direct interaction between the researcher and the research participant, using oral questions by the interviewer and oral responses by the participants* (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 643). Three interviews were conducted with a school system administrator and two university professors.

The research team's first official interviews were conducted with the key officials from special education department for Niteroi schools district, the special education department at Universidade Federal Fluminense, and The State University of Rio de Janeiro. All participants shared information regarding Brazil's approach to inclusive education. Brazilian law requires a zero reject policy (similar to the one outlined by The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the U.S.) that states no child can be turned away from a school for any reason including a disabling condition. In Brazil, students began leaving segregated schools in order to enter into a more inclusive setting in the late 1980s. In 1988, a new constitution was written in Brazil that included laws for the inclusion of students with special needs. Brazil also participated in the Salamanca convention in 1994 where countries from around the world agreed to support the policy of education for all.

These in-depth interviews also revealed that students were served in a *general education classroom—pullout program*. These students are included and receive assistance from itinerant teachers who travel around the district working with students with significant impairments. Support personnel are also available as needed.

This interview provided a positive outlook on inclusive education in Brazil, but several challenges still need to be addressed. Teacher training continues to be a major hurdle. Teachers who serve children in kindergarten through fourth grade are not required to have any formal educational training beyond a high school diploma. The only educational training these teachers receive is a specific concentration of courses while still attending high school. In addition, since the idea of inclusion has caused teachers to rethink the entire concept of education, there is much debate about how best to serve students with special needs in the most appropriate inclusive settings.

According to the interview from a special education professor from The State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil does provide a federal definition for inclusion. Students with special needs have the right to be admitted to public schools regardless of financial support from the federal government. In Brazil, students have the right to social inclusion which encompasses not only students with disabilities, but others who may be marginalized due to poverty, family dynamics, or other social difficulties.

When asked if there are any limitations regarding the number of students with special needs who can be included in a general education classroom, the response was that *The law states that we must have no more than three students who have special needs in a general education classroom, but in practice this is not the case. We often have more and it is a concern.* During the interview, the team discussed the use and application of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in the U.S. public school system. When asked if Brazil provided something similar to the IEP, the answer was *No, we do not have anything similar to that... There is no accountability.*

Regarding the effort to include parents in the decision making process, a component strongly supported in the United States under IDEA and NCLB, Brazil has no such mandates. There is no requirement for parents to be consulted. *We have a serious lack of parental involvement here. The private schools have more though.* Finally, when asked about testing modifications and the availability of alternate assessments for students with disabilities, Dr. Glat offered that students are often given extra time on tests, a lesser number of test questions, or an alternate assessment altogether.

**Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education**

	Brazil		U.S.	
	Private	Public	Private	Public
1. All students with disabilities should be included in the regular classroom regardless of severity or type of disability.	3.23	2.92	1.74	1.92
2. All students with disabilities can be included in the regular classroom regardless of severity or type of disability.	3.27	2.91	2.09	1.95
3. Students with disabilities improve their social skills when placed in the regular classroom.	4.23	4.13	3.03	3.39
4. Students with disabilities do better academically in inclusive classrooms.	4.00	4.08	2.74	2.86
5. Students with mild/moderate disabilities can benefit from being in a regular classroom.	4.45	4.63	4.14	4.05
6. Students with severe/profound disabilities can benefit from being in a regular classroom.	3.41	2.61	2.56	2.24
7. Schools in Brazil are prepared to serve students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.	1.55	2.04	-	-
8. Schools in the U.S. are prepared to serve students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.	-	-	1.67	2.18

*Surveys*

A short teacher survey instruments were distributed to teachers in private and public schools in the United States and in Brazil in order to determine their perceptions of inclusion.. For convenience purpose for Brazilian teachers, the survey, was translated into Portuguese. The survey consisted of seven-items on a Likert scale. Respondents rated all seven opinion statements on a Likert scale from 1-5; strongly agree=5, agree=4, neutral=3, disagree=2, and strongly disagree=1.

**Results**

After the surveys were collected, the data from each survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. A mean score for all items was calculated in order to determine teacher perceptions of inclusive education. A mean score of three was considered neutral. A response of more than three demonstrated agreement with the presented survey item while, conversely, a response of less than three showed disagreement with the statement. Table 2 presents the results of teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. Results are broken down between country and type of school; private versus public.

**Discussion**

The information gathered by means of observations, interviews, and from surveys distributed to teachers in both private and public schools in Brazil and the United States provided the researchers with the data necessary to answer the five previously outlined research questions.

*Research Question One: How do Brazilian Schools Facilitate Inclusion?*

Based on the information gathered, Brazilian schools view inclusive education not just as a means of educating students with disabilities, but as means of providing educational equality for all students who are marginalized. Regarding students with disabilities, one private school that was observed sought to provide inclusive education to students with learning disabilities or physical disabilities, but felt ill-equipped to provide services to students with severe cognitive disabilities. Another private school was providing inclusive educational services to a student with a more severe cognitive impairment, though he was being educated in a classroom of much younger peers. Additionally, the student had an educational assistant that was provided at the parents' expense.

The public schools that were observed strongly supported the ideal of educational equality. Students with mild learning disabilities were fully included in the general education classroom setting while students with more severe disabilities were served in what was called a *general education classroom — pullout program*. These children received extra-curricular support and support personnel were provided on an as-needed basis.

*Research Question Two: How Does the Brazilian Government Support Inclusive Education? Legally? Financially?*

The Brazilian government has recognized the need for inclusive educational programs. Laws have provided a federal definition for inclusion though little to no federal funding is provided to schools for implementation. Similar to the IDEA in the U.S., Brazil also has a policy of zero reject, which means no student can be turned away from a public school education due to their disability. Unfortunately, information gathered in interviews stated that this is not always the case and schools in some areas of the country do continue to turn students away based on disability. Unlike the IDEA in the U.S., Brazil does not have a policy supporting parental participation or the use of an accountability instrument similar to the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

*Research Question Three: How are teachers in Brazil trained to implement inclusive education?*

Teacher training is a significant barrier to implementing inclusive education in Brazil. Teachers who serve students in kindergarten through fourth grade have no formal education training beyond high school. Those who teach children of this age level only receive education classes as a concentration at the high school level. Once teachers are employed, it is up to the school system to provide additional training. One school system that was observed, stressed that their teachers receive training regarding special education and inclusion through in-service. Resource teachers are trained by the school system who then provides additional training to teachers within their specific schools.

*Research Question Four: What are Brazilian teachers' perceptions of inclusive education?*

Based on data gathered from the survey instrument, teachers in Brazil had a positive perception of the inclusive educational philosophy, but were not as positive about their country's ability to implement this philosophy. Additionally, both private and public school teachers exhibited similar opinions.

When asked if students with disabilities *should* be included in the regular classroom regardless of severity, private school teachers expressed slight agreement (3.23) while public school teachers demonstrated slight disagreement (2.92). In answer to the item that all students with disabilities *can* be included in the regular classroom, the responses were similar to the previous question with the private being (3.27) and the public (2.91).

Both private (4.23) and public (4.13) school teachers in Brazil were in high agreement when responding that inclusive education helps students develop appropriate social skills. In regards to improved academic performance, the private school (4.00) and the public school (4.08) teachers strongly agreed that inclusive education is beneficial.

Regarding the level of disability, the private (4.45) and public (4.63) school teachers in Brazil strongly agreed that students with mild/moderate disability can benefit from being educated in the regular classroom environment. However, the teachers' opinions differed when asked about students with more significant disabilities. Private school teachers (3.41) agreed that students with severe and profound disabilities could benefit from being taught in regular classrooms, while public school teachers (2.61) disagreed.

Finally, when asked if schools in Brazil were prepared to serve students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings, both private and public school teachers expressed negative opinions ( 1.55 and 2.04 respectively).

*Research Question Five: How do Brazilian teachers' perceptions of inclusion compare to the perceptions of teachers in the United States?*

Overall, teachers in Brazil have a more positive opinion of inclusive education than their American counterparts. In reference to whether students with disabilities *should* be educated in the regular education setting, Brazilian private teachers were in slight agreement and Brazilian public school teachers were in very slight disagreement while American private and public school teachers expressed strong disagreement. Regarding whether all students with disabilities *can* be educated in the regular classroom regardless of severity, Brazilian private school teachers agreed, American private and Brazilian public schools were in slight disagreement, and the American public school teachers disagreed the most.

All teachers agreed that inclusive education benefits student's social skills, though Brazilian teachers were more positive about it. However, a more significant contrast presented itself with regard to the benefits that inclusive education has on student's academic skills. Brazilian teachers strongly agreed that inclusion benefits academic skills, while American teachers slightly disagreed.

Based on disability, all teachers strongly agreed that students with mild and moderate disabilities can benefit from being educated in a regular education classroom setting. However, regarding students with severe and profound disabilities, only Brazilian private school teachers expressed a benefit of teaching students in inclusive settings.

Finally, in response to the item regarding their country's preparedness to implement inclusive education, all teachers from both Brazil and the United States disagreed indicating that their schools were not prepared nor equipped to serve students in such a manner.

*Limitations*

This study presents several limitations. First, and most important, the small number of participants in this study makes it impossible to generalize to the entire population of either country. For this reason, inferential statistics were not performed. Additionally, a small number of Brazilian schools were observed which limited the researcher's ability to fully understand the entire Brazilian educational system. The entire study abroad experience took place during a two-week duration which contributed to a limited exposure to the nation of Brazil. Finally, the teacher participants in the study all represented teachers who work with students in the general education setting. Special education teacher perceptions were not gathered in this study.

*Future Recommendations*

As mentioned previously, this study included a relatively small number of participants. In order to attain a better understanding of the cross-cultural differences between teachers in Brazil and the United States, a larger sample size should be acquired. Additionally, future research would likely benefit from observing more schools in more areas of Brazil. This study concentrated on observing schools, interviewing personnel, and surveying teachers in the area of Rio de Janeiro. Schools and teachers outside of this large metropolitan area may possess different practices and perspectives of inclusive education. Future research would also benefit from comparing special education teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. Finally, in order to better understand cross-cultural inclusive educational practices across the world, further study should be conducted not only in Brazil and the United States, but in other countries as well.

*Summary*

The literature shows that inclusion is a worldwide concern. Within this concern, one can find a variety of emphasis. In the United States, the concept of inclusion is, for the most part, centered on the idea of placing the student with disabilities in the least restrictive environment where his/her needs can be met. There are a number of motivations for this such as better student achievement, acceptance, self-esteem, and the rights of the individual student. In Brazil, this same concept of inclusion is considered, but there seems to be a stronger mentioning of inclusion being the backbone of a democratic approach to education than is found in the literature of the United States. In this sense, Brazil uses the word inclusion when treating not only special education students but also the education of the poor and minorities.

Beyond this, there does not seem to be any large differences between the U.S. and Brazilian approaches to inclusion nor in the difficulties encountered in its implementation.

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