

Mapping the Hidden Discourse of Geographical Inquiry and Curriculum Change – Initial Case Study Responses to Geography Education K-10 in Australian Schools

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Abstract:

Within Australia, globalization, contentious connections with Asia, and an increasing concern with sustainable development and intercultural education have created a new educational framework and curricula. The Australian Curriculum is the tangible, multi-dimensional, and pedagogic catalyst to deliver capable, creative, culturally aware, future-focused, and critical education to all young people across the nation.¹ Within this context, Geography as unique discipline has been introduced from foundational years to the end of compulsory schooling. Australian teachers have responded to the implementation of this new curriculum with fear, reticence, resistance, brave enthusiasm, and pedagogic creativity. This paper analyzes these responses to geographical inquiry and curriculum implementation in the early stages of this process and considers the rationale, context, and potential impact on learning

Key words: inquiry, geography, pedagogy, curriculum, geographical literacy, global education

Introduction

Resulting from the Melbourne Declaration on Goals for Young Australians, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority is a dominant narrative that frames what all young people should know, learn, and be able to do within a nationalistic collective discourse about knowledge and power (Ditchburn, 2012). Geography is part of this curricular fabric to shape young people into globally literate and flexible workers who can participate in the knowledge economy.

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http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf

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However, the inherent inquiry nature of Geography is to question and experience ill-structured, messy issues about space, place, and people. This is a pedagogic tension within the new Australian Curriculum construct. The curriculum is designed for young learners to flex their cognition and respond critically to the world, yet it is also designed for teachers to implement in a homogenous and unproblematized dispatch mode. These tensions present an intriguing paradox to how teachers negotiate curriculum. This paper reports on the development of Australian Geography and how it is created by teachers in Australian classrooms.

Geography Curriculum Development

Australia has is one of the longest-standing politically stable liberal democracies in the Western and post-war world. This stability is derived from a federalist system of government that assumes that individual states and territories are responsible for such matters as education, and the Commonwealth Federal Government is accountable for trade, the economy, defense, and foreign policy. Recently, the neo-liberalist alignment of education with the economic future of the nation has resulted in an ambitious curriculum that aims to deliver creativity, critical thinking and employment skills. State and federal political governments have mobilized to shape and frame the values, skills, perspectives, and knowledge of young people. The Melbourne Declaration of 2008 presented this narrative and resulted in the creation of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Agency (ACARA) in order to draft, direct, and dictate the curricula. Geography since 2009 has been developed within this flurry of curriculum development. Documents such as the *Shape of Australian Curriculum: Geography* (2009) and *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum v2.0*² have been used to create the fingerprint for the new Geography curriculum. This fingerprint defined, with its ridges and wobbles, the nature of the discipline, the inquiry process, key geographical concepts, and the purpose of Geography in a post-modern context. Smudging this process were key stakeholders such as the states and territory education departments and bodies, The Geography Teachers' Associations, school sectors, and teachers. The result of this politicization was the new Australian Curriculum for Geography, which covers all ages of schooling.

What is Geography?

Geography is a way of being and knowing the world and is defined aptly as a form of "homo geographicus" (Sack, 1997). Geography is conceptualized as "inquiry into the real world that the

² http://www.acara.edu.au/resources/shape_of_the_Australian_Curriculum.pdf

students inhabit” (Kriewaldt, 2006a, p.159). Geography is living, enacted, and transformative. However, traditional approaches such as mapping, memorization of facts and countries’ names, keys, and coloring maps were seen as fundamental tools that enabled students to understand their world. This traditional approach within schools has stifled the critical metaphysical nature of Geography. According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Agency,

Geography is the investigation and understanding of the earth and its features and the distribution of life on earth, including human life and its impacts. It is the study of the many different “places,” or environments, which make up our world and is described as “the why of where.” Places are specific areas of the Earth’s surface, and can range from a locality to a country to a major world region. Geography answers our questions about why places have their particular environmental and human characteristics; how and why these characteristics vary from place to place; how places are connected, and how and why they are changing. Geography examines these questions on all scales, from the local to the global, and over time periods that range from a few years to thousands of years. It also looks forward to explore ways of influencing and managing the future of places including their environmental, economic, and social sustainability. (ACARA, 2009)

Geography in this form was about inquiry. This inquiry was bounded within the discipline parameters of people, places, and spaces. To see and to interpret, students would need to use tools such as graphs, maps, data, and visual representations. Geographic knowledge was the lens to understand questions such as scale, sustainability, environmental impact, and globalization. Yet Geography within the literature is nuanced with multi-dimensional spaces and ideologies (Puttick, 2013). Geography is polytheistic. It is about seeing the world from multiple vantage points and scales. The discipline is not about “Geography but a site of geographies” (Puttick, 2013, p. 357). This space enables students to enact “geographic thinking” (Kriewaldt, 2006b, p. 25).

This definition focused on inquiry processes, knowledge, and understanding of the physical and human spaces and interactions. Combined in this definition were both the coherence of the discipline as a unique body of knowledge and processes and multiplicity of geography as an inquiry about physical and human sites (Kriewaldt, 2006a; Maude, 2014). Geographical thinking embodies both.

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Geographical Thinking

Geographical thinking involves metacognition and reflection. Metacognition is a process of awareness (Kriewaldt, 2006b) that enables evaluative judgment. Students are challenged to see, understand, and explore how their thinking or opinion can influence or impact an issue, space, place, or people. Geographical thinking is a critical and divergent way of organizing and transforming spaces. Students are encouraged to see interaction and change as being mutable processes. This metacognitive stance is assertive, grounded in constructivist discourse about learning being active, self-motivated, and regulated (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Geography must be enacted, not taught from texts. The intent is clear: The Geography curriculum focuses on active student-centered inquiry learning.

Geography involves action, fieldwork, and investigation. In fieldwork, students acquire their understanding using a range of tools. Fieldwork is at the heart of learning Geography, but the approach to fieldwork is problematic. A less student-centered approach may involve the ubiquitous clip board with students following, capturing, and recording all the tasks directed by the teacher. This example highlights the inherent tension between the curriculum and the pedagogic impulse of teachers. Teachers in this traditional example appear to be using an inquiry approach to learning geography, but it is in reality a programmed procedural approach that relies heavily on teacher instruction. In contrast, geographical thinking involving metacognition and an evaluative stance that enables students to pose questions for field investigation, select the appropriate tools to acquire their data, and choose how it will be communicated or resolved. This form of fieldwork is a more complicated effort; it requires teachers to enact sensory, discovery, guided, and problem-solving experiences.

Geographical thinking is a process of looking at phenomena, looking around and beyond this (Puttick, 2013). Consideration of multiple geographical perspectives and positions opens this discipline to concepts about contestability and geographic change, and it involves examining data to form conclusions from different viewpoints and rigorously substantiating the stance or action undertaken.

This broader conceptualization of geographies is perhaps the intent of the new Australian Curriculum. The initial framing of the curriculum identified a range of concepts and international models that included an understanding of place, key concepts, and human interactions (Maude, 2014). Within the Australian Curriculum, the rationale for the study of Geography includes these aspects:

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Geography is a structured way of exploring, analyzing, and understanding the characteristics of the places that make up our world, using the concepts of place, space, environment, interconnection, sustainability, scale and change.³

However, the pedagogic impulse of schools is to prescribe, mandate, and control. Geography in this context has been historically presented as an “outdated, objectivist perspective” (Puttick, 2013, p. 358). This approach has stifled the cognitive and creative challenge posed by geography courses in the past. The new curriculum has reopened this possibility for teachers to enable geographical thinking by focusing on inquiry with their students. Furthermore, the cross-curriculum perspectives that focus students’ attention on Asian connection, sustainability, and Indigenous Peoples provide students with opportunities to engage with divergent perspectives (Maude, 2014). Paradoxically, the prescription and politicization of Geography within this nationalized Australian curricular process has exerted an impetus for inquiry, student-centered teaching, and cognitive dissonance in the classroom.

The Pedagogic Risk

The Australian Geography curriculum is provocative, dangerously intellectual, and steeped in educational risk-taking. Teachers are faced with this enormous curriculum change and potential subversions to their practice. This challenge is exacerbated by the reality that few teachers from K-12 have formal pre-service or discipline knowledge or training in Geography. Studies suggest that over half of classroom teachers in Victoria who taught Geography in 2003 (prior to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum in 2008) were not trained sufficiently in Geography (see Kriewaldt’s study (2006a) showing that 43% of teachers in 2003 within Victoria were not adequately trained). Similarly, in New South Wales (NSW), primary pre-service teachers were not likely to elect to study Geography beyond an often singularly or compulsory entry level university course (see Gibson & Wechmann’s 2012 study of pre-service teachers in New South Wales in 2011, showing that only 2.4% of a potential 927 students elected to undertake further study in Geography).

Research Study: Methods and Data Sources

Case studies of 12 primary schools in Australia were conducted from term 2 until the end of term 4. These schools were located in different geographic regions of New South Wales and included

³ <http://v7-5.australiancurriculum.edu.au/humanities-and-social-sciences/geography/rationale>

four schools in regional areas and eight schools in metropolitan areas. Four schools had communities with low Socio-Economic Status (SES) and eight schools had very high SES communities. Case Studies consisted of interviews with teachers, reviews of programs and documentation, and student work samples.

A multi-site case study method was selected to show how curriculum construction and pedagogic choices were being made in a range of contexts. The intent was to analyze how school context may mediate the curricular experience from teachers' perspectives.

According to Yin (2009), case study methods comprise multiple data sets such as interviews, physical artifacts, documents, and observations. To facilitate this collection of rich and contextual data, the researchers must insert themselves into the context. This approach is informed by the paradigm of "inquiry from the inside" (Evered & Reis Louis, 1981). In this paradigm, the researcher must understand the social and political values of the organization and understand the nuances and agency of the participants. This is an invaluable tableau of the context of the organization and enables research to be contextualized. Multi-site case studies offer a range of different experiences and contexts. Identifying common casual or co-relational factors that influence curriculum construction across settings makes the process more rigorous. To penetrate each school context requires relational trust, credibility, and immersion into the cultural context of the system.

As the researcher, I was participant in the mis-en-scene of curriculum enactment. At each school, I was involved in reviewing curriculum documents, scope and sequence plans, assessment tasks, and rubrics. As a participant, I was privy to teacher discussions and dialogues about curriculum choices, successes, and limitations. In undertaking interviews, teachers were invited to share what had occurred from their perspective. Some of the interviewees were school leaders and other interviewees shared classes or ownership of different stages. The interviews provided another lens to understand the ontological phenomenon. Being the active participant in the research provided me with the opportunity to see the norms of the school, the capacity of a range of teachers, and the requirements of curricular change. In this messy context, I was a trusted insider who could detect what may be unconscious, silent, or part of the grammar of each place. The limitation of being native to the study was controlled by the multi-site approach. Each site and interaction varied according to the school and teachers involved. Factors that arose across multiple sites were therefore treated as worthy of further exploration and analysis. Additionally, the thickness and richness of a multi-site case study provided a more complete

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picture of what was happening in the classroom and the wider school approach to the new Geography syllabus.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Details of the Case Studies

Total Number of Schools	Regional	Metropolitan	High SES	Low SES
12	4	8	8	4

The following table provides background details for the participants in the study. It should be noted that more female and experienced teachers were interviewed and observed due to the staffing composition of the school. The highly feminized teaching profile within Australian schools is historic and fairly typical of Australian education. The large number of experienced teachers is indicative of current teacher demographics nationally.

Table 2: Gender and Experience Levels of Teachers in the Case Studies

Total Number of Participants	Number of Male Teachers	Number of Female Teachers	Number of Early Career Teachers (1-3 years teaching)	Number of Experienced Teachers (4+ years teaching)
49	8	41	8	41

Interview Results

In these case studies, the following table showed how teachers and schools have engaged with the tools, the inquiry process, and the concepts. In the interviews, teachers were asked about their initial approaches to the syllabus and plans for implementation in the classroom and across the school. Teachers were asked to consider what they needed for support or how they might improve their practices. An analysis of the responses identified some main themes and provides an indication of how many teachers approached the new curriculum regardless of gender or career experience.

In the results, emergent themes about the following aspects were detected:

- Geographical thinking evident in approach to curriculum and practice.

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- Geographical tools and innovation adopted with support.
- Willingness and capacity to use inquiry approaches with Geography curriculum.
- Community of Practice critical in the development and emergence of geographical thinking.
- Desire for continued support, school and system leadership to transition to further and deepening levels of inquiry.
- Assessment practice not well aligned to classroom inquiry practices.

The table below shows percentages of the teachers across the four schools combined where the key themes were detected.

Table 3: Summary of Themes Emerging from the Case Studies

Themes	Percentage of Responses N=48 teachers
Geographical thinking evident in approach to curriculum and practice.	78%
Geographical tools and innovation adopted with support.	69%
Willingness and capacity to use inquiry approaches with Geography curriculum.	75%
Community of Practice critical in the development and emergence of geographical thinking.	78%
Desire for continued support, school and system leadership to transition to further and deepening levels of inquiry.	62%
Assessment practice not well aligned to classroom inquiry practices.	88%

These themes showed that geographical thinking was a critical component of the approach to the new Australian Geography curriculum. This was detected in the perspectives, planning, and practical approaches in the classroom. There was evidence of strong inquiry practice, and

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teachers incorporated fieldwork studies using geographical tools when provided with guidance and support. Reservations about assessing the inquiry approach and geographical thinking surfaced, yet this did not limit teacher- and school-based enthusiasm and creativity in adopting and implementing the Geography curriculum. A critical factor in determining teacher attitudes and confidence in applying geographical inquiry was support. Evidence indicated that collaboration, shared stories, and innovations were key factors in translating the pedagogic risks and intent of this geographical inquiry. This has been defined as a Community of Practice.

A Community of Practice is "... an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other, finding ways inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils' learning" (Stoll et al., 2006, p.3). Communities of Practice enhance individual and collective teacher capacity (Stoll et al., 2006). Developing professional learning communities that link current teachers with pre-service teachers to build this capacity is critically important for the future (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

These responses show that teachers were willing to engage with many aspects of the curriculum yet were desperately seeking leadership and space to try and share new approaches. Some schools and teachers wanted confirmation or guidance from nearby schools. There was a need to share practice and find resources together. Emerging from the interviews was a grassroots Community of Practice. Teachers wanted to share and be nudged along by their colleagues. There was an understanding and a commitment to teach well and explicitly. The interview comments suggest that teachers were developing some resilience and adaptability to meet the new curriculum demands. Yet there was a common desire to have leadership either from the school or from a key system provider. Schools had responded by deputizing key teachers to plan, undertake professional learning, and lead others. Teachers generously shared their knowledge with others at their school and across schools.

Assessment was an important component of these discussions. There was a sense that the assessment was not there yet, even once programs and resources were developing well. This seemed to be another area of challenge with which the schools engaged. The quality of the learning and the success of the curricular enactment was tested against the assessment. This indicates a high degree of teacher care for the new curriculum, albeit sometimes a lack of confidence.

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Documentation Analysis

Documents comprising planning programs, meeting minutes, lesson plans, scope and sequence plans, assessment tasks and samples were collected from the school sites. These documents were analyzed using the emergent themes. The following table shows the types of documents collected and the emergent themes detected.

Table 4: Summary of Document Types and Emergent Themes

Document Description	Geographical Thinking	Inquiry Evident in Questions or Tasks	Knowledge and Depth of Understanding	Use of Tools, Incorporation of Fieldwork	Creativity, Flexibility
Lesson Plans	√	√		√	
Programs	√	√		√	
Assessment				√	
Scope and sequence documents		√			
Meeting minutes	√	√		√	√
Program rationale or overview statements	√	√		√	√

A review of the documentation including scope and sequence documents, assessment task schedules, and units of work revealed how teachers were engaging or at times resisting the pedagogic risk and opportunities of the syllabus. Analysis of scope and sequences showed a general misunderstanding about the depth of the content, sequencing of topics, and an ignorance of the geographical concepts. Schools typically were teaching both topics in one year

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rather than undertaking a deep investigation of one topic sustained over the year or across a semester. Scope and sequence documents showed at times more focus on Science and Technology and less on Geography as part of the Human Society and Its Environment Key Learning Area. Evidence from these documents indicated that teachers and schools were engaging with inquiry questions rather than mapping these to relevant outcomes, often misunderstanding how spirals of inquiry could be coherently framed to build conceptual understanding. There were gaps in recognizing how to build a sustained and deep level inquiry or how to build relevant understanding. There were attempts to domesticate the new curriculum. A clear example was the reluctance to forgo the much-loved topic of Antarctica for the new Diverse and Connected World topic in stage 3 (for Year 6 students aged 11-12).

This evidence suggests that teachers were interested and willing to engage with inquiry learning yet lacked the collective capacity and skills to negotiate the curriculum. Deconstruction of the curriculum was an important step in bringing the nature of Geography into reality. Teachers felt that they must follow bullet points and cover every topic, place, and context, often at the expense of the stated inquiry question. These documents reveal an inherent tension in curricular practice. Curriculum that is enforced or collectively imposed is not easily owned or understood. As a result of the increasing prescription of standards and quality assurance and registration processes, teachers feel concerned to break open a new curriculum and subject it to critical interpretation and reconstruction. Yet the challenge posited by the new Geography curriculum is a call to take pedagogic risks and open the learning to inquiries relevant to our national, local, and global contexts. The role of the teacher in this curricular discourse is paramount. Teachers must disassemble each syllabus direction, outcome, and concept and refashion these to provide an inquiry experience that teaches requisite and agreed skills, tools, and concepts. In a sense, teachers are conduits for the learning experience. Failure to engage with the bullet points of the syllabus causes a blockage in the experience, dilutes the intent of the curriculum, and may have an adverse effect on student motivation and interest.

Observations of classroom and school practice

Classroom observations were undertaken across the four sites. These included fieldtrips, practicals, demonstration lessons, and open-classroom activities. The observations were recorded across different stages from Early Stage 1 (Foundation years) to the end of Primary school (Year 6). The following table contains a summary and analysis of the observations of classroom practice and student samples.

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Table 5: Observations of Practice across the Classroom from Field Notes

Key Findings	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students from ES1 to Stage 3 have engaged in guided fieldwork outside the classroom.• School playgrounds, local parks, and beaches have been mapped, sketched, photographed, and sampled.• Schools have engaged with local issues and sites.• Year 1 uses aerial maps to lay out places such as schools, shops, libraries, roads, parks within a defined context and then challenge each other about the interconnection and use of these spaces for different purposes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Geographical Inquiry and evident use of tools.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In Year 1, students have been working with a town planner (parent representative) to consider how spaces and places are planned to meet people's needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Geographical thinking being enacted in new ways that involve communities and consider multiple perspectives.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ES1 students have explored playgrounds at home and in other contexts and have created new spaces or installations to show their connection and care of a place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Openness to geographical thinking and the concept of agency.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In stage 3, students have explored a community issue or geographical change. This has included students considering development proposals in their community and writing, representing, and sharing their responses based on geographical data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Geographical thinking being enacted in new ways that involve communities and consider multiple perspectives.

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<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Global connections have been explored in Year 6.• This has included students investigating important issues such as migration, trade, aid, and climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Transformative citizenship enabled through inquiry practices and geographical knowledge and data.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Next year, several schools will host a local short film festival about these global issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Citizenship and action.

In these examples, guided and independent fieldwork is identified. The types of tasks and tools used in these experiences suggest that teachers are developing messy forms of fieldwork to activate geographical thinking about spaces, places, and people. There was evidence that fieldwork was less about procedural documentation and more about seeking to understand a place or site and its purpose, form, and impact on its context. The discovery and sensory practices were evident in the home and playground contexts that students investigated.

The inherent agency of geographical thinking was discernible in the observations of different classrooms. Students were responding to planning or environmental concerns in a range of ways following intense investigations. These examples included letters, short movies, or multimodal texts to community organizations or the parent community. The meta-cognitive opportunity of the curriculum was being realized in these contexts. Students were actively engaged in thinking about their global or local community, critically considering issues of justice, equity, accessibility, wealth, and cultural capital. In these examples, Geography was becoming transformative. The inquiry was authentic and living and led to an outcome or response. Responses were critically shaped by the multiple data sets and perspectives students had explored. Geography was committing young people to act or respond about issues that affect their lives and the lives of others.

Understanding the intent and direction of the Geography curriculum was a critical disruption to these initial responses. As classes and teachers worked with the new curriculum throughout the year, there were moments of breakthrough, crisis, and chaos. These disruptions and fractures included professional learning, frustration at not having opportunities to undertake relevant fieldwork, or the development of a culture of learning within schools. School leadership teams that supported and challenged teachers to grow a professional consciousness about the intent

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of the curriculum were critical to this process. It opened up a space to see the possibilities of the curriculum and authentically engage with inquiry and with geographical tools and concepts. Professional learning communities and the ongoing system provided critical injections of knowledge or new perspectives for teachers' professional consideration. Understanding the nuances and approach of the curriculum provided direction and reassurance to schools and individual teachers about their pedagogical approach. Units of work and lessons that were "dead in the water" due to limited teacher knowledge were resuscitated. Teachers moved beyond survival to stretching students to consider geographical change or scale. Interactions between spaces, places, and people and the inclusion of multiple perspectives and data became central to mobilizing the new teaching. The linear presentation of one topic followed by another was questioned. Coherence was sought between topics, concepts, and contexts.

Conclusion

These case studies indicate that teacher engagement with Geography was robust. Resistance and domestication was identifiable in some contexts, but these responses could be successfully redirected with curriculum leadership, professional support, and conversation. The lack of training and deep discipline knowledge that was anticipated to be a major obstacle was less problematic than teachers' skill levels in curriculum deconstruction and negotiation. Curriculum discourse was critical to successful pedagogic risk in the classroom. This discourse could be initiated by school leaders, system providers, and professional teaching associations, and when these were all assembled there was increased engagement with the curriculum. Such a voice is a powerful agent in enabling the Australian Curriculum to achieve its vision of producing creative, culturally aware, and critical young people. However, the curriculum intent is not a sufficient foundation to achieve such lofty and aspirational aims. Within the context of Geography as a transformative discipline, teachers and school leaders need a professional space to critically enact the curriculum. Such space is difficult to find and realize in an increasingly pressured and regulated industrial context that often prescribes rather than energizes responses. A teacher taking some pedagogic risks with curricula is not new terrain yet within more recently in an era of increased accountability these risks have become increasingly hazardous to professional practice and reputation. Within this study, teachers were able to successfully navigate some of these potential hazards. Driven by curriculum leadership, the experience of these schools and teachers of implementing the Geography Curriculum has been messy, challenging, and highly rewarding.

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