Why educators have problems with some students

Understanding frames of preference

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Abstract *Some educators believe that if they do their jobs properly, all their students will learn, and school will be a happy, productive and comfortable place for everybody. The reality is that not everyone has the same preferences – for teaching and learning. Recounts research that shows what the differences are between educators and students who might be characterized at-risk. Also included are administrative implications.*

Introduction

People who become professional educators see their futures in terms of helping others, structuring logical learning sequences and environments, and offering the citizens of tomorrow things which are valuable and important. They see their students as ready receivers of what they have to offer and presume these students will thrive. If students are indeed prepared to receive the help, learning opportunities, and things of value, then schools are marvelous places for stimulated minds. Students are motivated, and they move through the various continua unimpeded, for the most part.

But school is not often the ideal and idyllic environment where all is well and there are no problems. Students who are not motivated by their teachers, by school, or by life in general, do all in their power to interact in a way to get what they need. These students are often characterized as *at-risk*. Part of this interaction is "connecting" with the teacher.

> One aspect of managing a student successfully is related to whether the student and the teacher are "connecting" along open doorways of communication. If there is miscommunication, we can predict that negative coping strategies will be used by both the teacher and the student. These negative coping strategies are correlated to the personality part the individuals are using and the positive energy they have available. (Knaupp, n. d., p. 8).

Negative coping strategies of teachers are usually sanctions for misbehavior or breaking the rules. Negative coping strategies for students usually involve inappropriate behaviors to get their needs met (with or without their conscious awareness). On a broader plane, administrators fall prey to the same interaction problems as do their staff. They expect others to see the world in the same way they do and to go about their jobs with the same preferences. Failure to acknowledge different perceptions and needs can lead to ineffective administration.

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Purpose of the study

Connecting with others is at the heart of communication – defined best as when one understands what another wants to be understood (Johnson, 1972). The key to this understanding is listening to how one offers a message. The model is simple, but the practice is difficult. People are in positions to listen at least one-half of the available communication time – students find themselves in listening situations 65-90 percent of the time. But what if the preference for taking in information is other than listening. What then?

The *purpose* of this research was to determine what preferences for communication educators have by discovering the distribution of their personality types (and the attendant preferences for communicating) and their ability to interact with other personality types.

Review of related literature

Generally, teachers demand that students conform to the way in which they are to learn and to behave. Yet, not every student is comfortable with this prescription. Students have differing learning styles and ways of processing information (Gregorc, 1982; Kolb, 1984; McCarthy, 1980), and preferences of intake modes (Barbe and Swassing, 1979). Implications concerning personality characteristics were described by Myers and Briggs (1943, 1976, 1985) and Noland (1978). Most of these models attempt to depict an individual with regard to one or several aspects of personality and suggest that the individual functions in life and in learning situations with the manifestations of that characterization.

Using Kahler's (1982) Process Communication Model (PCM) to identify personality types and preferences, Gilbert (1994) reported a relationship between the interaction energy and performance (grades) of students. This relationship was a comparison of student personality type and teacher-designated grades. If one interprets a grade (criterion-referenced performance) as the ability of the student to meet the teacher's expectations, it is not surprising that those most like the teacher will fare particularly well. Table I shows the significant correlations ($p<0.05$) derived from the previous research (Gilbert, 1994).

The PCM (Kahler, 1982) was generated from a clinical model. It has been used with more than half a million people on four continents – in business,

Table I. Correlations of interaction energy with student grade-point average

Personality type	
Reactor	0.4101
Workaholic	0.3660
Persister	0.3591
Dreamer	0.3396
Rebel	0.0889
Promoter	-0.2496

industry, and now, education. PCM asserts that individuals are composites of six personality types and places each type in one of four quadrants on an assessing matrix (Figure 1). (The two axes of the matrix describe continua from Involved to Withdrawn and Intrinsically – to Extrinsically-motivated.) It was hypothesized for this research that teacher types tend to be more Intrinsically-motivated, spanning the full range from Involved to Withdrawn. Poor-performing (at-risk) students fall into the quadrant which describes them mostly as Involved and Extrinsically-motivated. Those types that had the weakest correlations *need* playful contact (Rebels) or incidence (Promoters) to stay energized and prefer to interact with others like themselves. Their main preferred intake mode is *kinesthetic* – provided on a limited basis by most teachers.

Another study focusing on aspects of process communication showed similar results: "a student's grade is significantly affected by the student's personality type base" (Wallin, 1992, p. iii). Teachers trained in process Communication may positively affect student performance through understanding student needs and preferences (Hawking, 1995). However, teachers who used the "Learning styles inventory" showed mixed results in improved achievement of at-risk ninth graders (n=21). They suggested these results were attributable to the attitudes of the teachers and their enthusiasm toward the program (O'Sullivan *et al*, 1994).

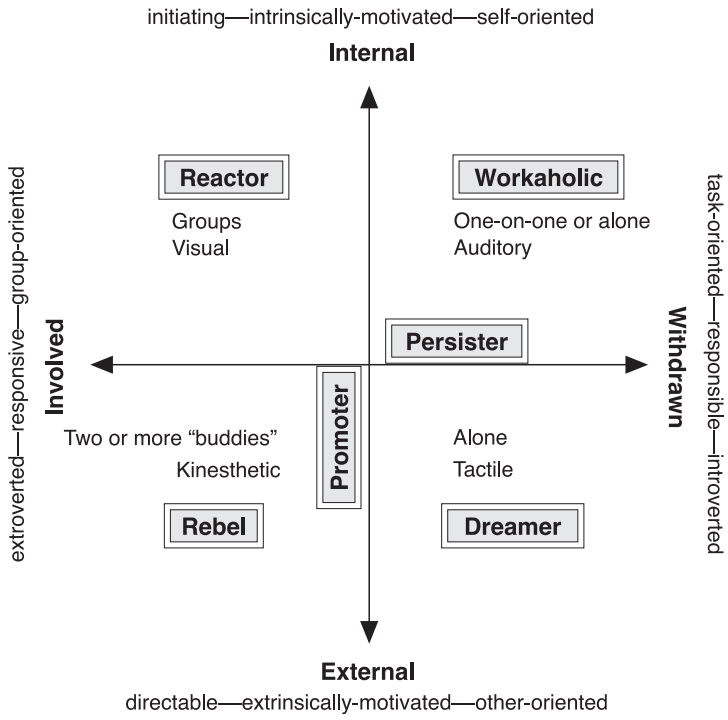

Figure 1.
Assessing matrix for educators

Gilbert (1992) related the impact of one school district's outcomes of implementing the PCM. All certified staff underwent an intensive three-day workshop on PCM concepts. The self-reported one-year results were:

- Employee turnover was reduced from 43 percent to 5 percent.
- Employee satisfaction and morale were at all-time high.
- Student achievement increased at all levels.
- Failure rate (7th and 8th grade) was reduced from 20 percent to less than 2 percent.
- Discipline referrals were reduced significantly to less than 2 percent on any given day.
- Graduation rates increased.
- Students entering post-secondary education increased from 19 percent to 43 percent.
- Satisfaction of parents and students toward schooling improved "significantly".

Dealing with a diverse group of students may confound a teacher's ability to individualize activities or learning input necessary to motivate those students who do not respond readily to the predominant mode of instruction. Learning to listen carefully and critically were key aspects of improved student involvement (Coty, 1994).

Pierce (1994) highlights that Murray's 1938 work, *Explorations in Personality*, reflected important concepts:

> ... personal needs, defined as motivational personality characteristics, represent tendencies to move in the direction of certain goals, whereas (the classroom environment) provides an external situational counterpart that supports or frustrates the expression of internalized personality needs. Therefore, situational variables found in the classroom environment may account for a significant amount of behavioral variance (Pierce, 1994, p. 38).

With regard to the needs of at-risk learners, "A climate that is focused primarily on production and outcomes reinforces (student) insecurities (about classroom performance). They associate the classroom environment with failure; expecting to fail, they often do" (Pierce, 1994, p. 38).

Environmental and instructional flexibility provide ways in which all learners can be motivated. Subscribing to this approach allows educators to explode one of the long-standing myths: "You can't let them move around; they are too disruptive" (Pope and Beal, 1994, p. 7). Moving away from traditional patterns by recognizing different learner needs gives teachers a plethora of approaches (and permission to use them).

Many educators limit the way in which they offer and process information. Sometimes even good teachers may assume mistakenly that teaching strategies that worked previously will work with all children. Educators must listen

carefully and collaboratively to communicate successfully (Wilmore, 1995). Knowing how to accommodate different patterns and perceptions expands the effective interaction most educators seek.

Kahler (1988), using Berne's Transactional Analysis as an underpinning for an organizational parable, described the six personality types of his PCM: Reactors, Workaholics, Persisters, Dreamers, Rebels, and Promoters. None is better or worse, more or less acceptable, more or less intelligent. Kahler likened personality structure to a six-storey condominium, where the first floor represents a foundation ("Base") – strongest personality type- and where each of the remaining floors is represented by the other personality types; there are also below-ground places where distress patterns are experienced. This generated order of personality types is set at about age seven years, and the ability to move to these different "floors" of one's personality is measurable and predictable. Each personality type has different sets of behaviors, perceptions, and motivators that influence how one learns and how one teaches. Most students and professional educators limit how they *process* reality by utilizing only one or two of the six available floors of their personality structure.

As one moves higher in one's personality, each successive floor is more sparsely "furnished" – that is, one has less psychological energy. Even though one can move throughout the structure and access any of the floors (personality types), there are two important concepts to keep in mind – (1) one will stay on the floor where motivation is the strongest until the need at that floor is met, and (2) one will only be able to move to other floors insofar as there is sufficient energy. What this means in education is that teachers have to get their own needs met before they can attend to the needs of others – students and colleagues. If a teacher needs recognition for work or acceptance of convictions, he (most people who need these things are male) will not be able to provide the playful contact needed to motivate those who need that contact until they can move to that floor in his structure. Also, if that floor is not well-furnished, he will not be able to stay there very long and will drop into something more familiar, *inviting* those with whom he is interacting to come with him.

Figure 2 shows a "sample" personality condominium (one of 720 possible combinations of the six personality types). This individual is described as a Persister (Base) in a Workaholic phase. This person is most likely (75 per cent) male, who would view the world through his *beliefs* and *values* (his Persister-base perceptions) predominantly and be motivated most easily through *recognition for work and time structure* (his Workaholic-phase needs).

Unique features of the PCM include a questionnaire validated for purposes of determining the personality structure of individuals, what their psychological motivators are, how they take in (learn) and give out (teach/share) information, as well as predicting the negative behaviors a person will manifest when in distress. This aspect of predictability, as well as the need to measure compatibility, is why Kahler's model is used by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in the selection and training of astronauts.

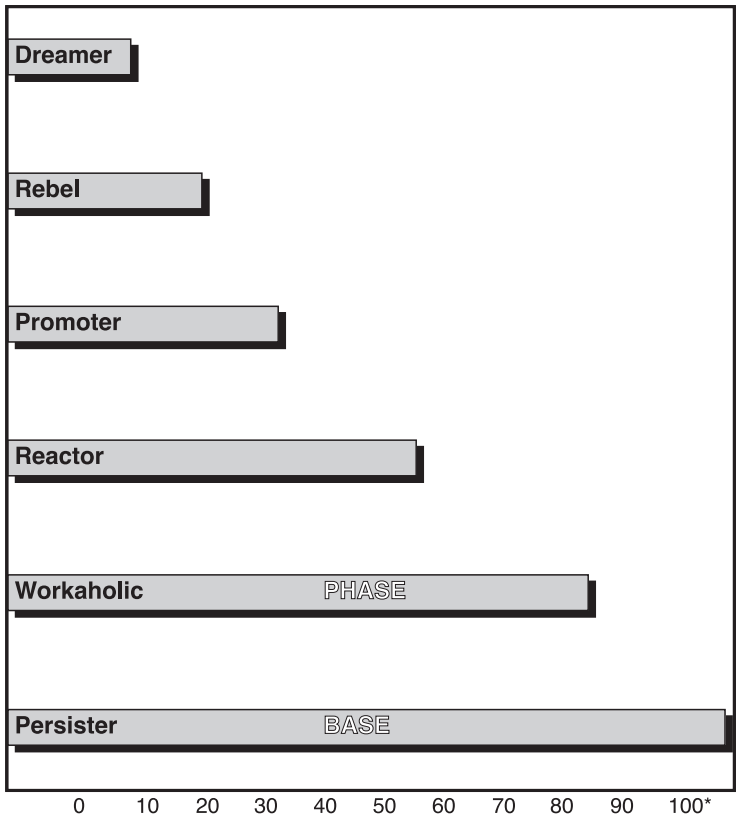

Figure 2.
Sample personality condominium

Table II encapsulates some of the key components of the PCM. The Frames of Preference indicate the strengths, perceptions, and needs of each of the six personalities. The predictable behaviors observed when needs are not met (defined as *distress*) are also arrayed. Also listed are suggestions for *intervention* and *prevention* to help educators intercede for others in distress or assist with preventing distress.

Methodology

Sample

Professionals representative of all levels of education were drawn from ten sites in Arkansas. More than 300 educators participated from public, private and parochial sectors at collegiate and pre-collegiate sites. The sample was purposive because of limited funding for the research and convenience of travel.

The original research design only included university faculty in a college of professional educator preparation. Because teachers are teachers, regardless of

Table II.
Frames of preference

Type	Reactor	Workaholic	Persister	Dreamer	Rebel	Promoter
Strengths	Compassionate, sensitive, warm	Logical, responsible, organized	Conscientious, dedicated, observant	Imaginative, reflective, calm	Spontaneous, creative, playful	Adaptable, persuasive, charming
Perceptions	Feelings	Thoughts	Beliefs	Reflections (inactions)	Reactions (likes and dislikes)	Actions
Needs	Acceptance of self; sensory stimuli	Recognition of work; time structure	Recognition of work; convictions	Solitude	Contact	Incidence
First degree distress	Wants to please others; overadapts	Expects perfect self; overthinks for others	Expects perfect others; focuses on what is wrong	Has to be strong to survive	Tries harder; feigns lack of understanding	Expects others to be strong
Second degree distress	Appears confused; makes mistakes; invites others to criticize	Critical about time, fairness, responsibility issues	Preaches, crusades, critical about details	Withdraws; is embarrassed; overly shy	Blames others; acts irresponsibly; invites negative sanctions	Manipulates; break rules; sets up negative drama
Intervention	Nurture; stroke verbally	Clarify issues; provide facts/data	Acknowledge beliefs; recognize value of work	Allow private time/ own space; direct to action	Interact playfully, with high energy	Focus on exciting ways of doing things; provide lots of activity
Prevention	Comfortable workplace; group activities; personal connection	Clear time frames; rewards for accomplishments	Obvious rules and structure; projects that appeal to belief system	Projects to be done alone; permission to withdraw; limited group activites	Playful contact; acceptance of play *before* work	Short-term assignments; positive competition; physical involvement

Source: Adapted from Kahler (1988)

the venue or audience, the decision was made to expand the sample to include professional educators from the pre-collegiate arena as well. Complete profile data were gathered from 322 subjects.

The sample was predominantly female (74 per cent) from tax-supported (94 per cent) secondary schools (55 per cent). The sites included one university, two elementary schools, one middle school, three high schools, one school district, one private school, and principals from a state-wide parochial system.

Instrumentation

The data collection instrument was the Personality Pattern Inventory (PPI) (Kahler, 1982). Kahler's work has its foundations in transactional analysis, which suggests that certain ego states (parent, adult, or child) describe behavior. Each person has an individual structure of personality types – a base, the strongest part, and each of the other five personality types in decreasing strength. The PPI also reveals one's phase to another part of the structure-individuals may move to another part of their personality structure and be motivated pre-eminently by fulfilling the needs of that particular personality type. Change in phase occurs in two-thirds of the population, and 99 percent will phase when resolving long-term, intense distress with a particular life issue; one percent will phase as positive change occurs for those people. Each personality type has character strengths, psychological (motivational) needs, communication preferences, and predictable patterns and behaviors that occur when one is in distress.

The PPI asked for responses to 22 items. Since each item was designed to establish a pattern of preferences, individuals may choose up to five of six possible responses, ranking each from most to least preferred. Respondents may choose no answer to any item.

Previous responses from more than 5,000 people established certain patterns and indicated certain anomalies. Four patterns of *questionable validity* were established: "Fake good conscious" and "Fake good unconscious" indicated an individual wanted to be seen in a favorable light ("social acceptability"); "Fake bad conscious" indicated the individual perceived the instrument as a test; and "Fake bad unconscious" indicated the individual was under some physical or emotional distress when completing the PPI.

The instrument was reported to be valid and reliable. A total of 204 items were administered to 180 people, representing each of the identified personality types, to determine face, concurrent, and predictive validity. Only items with a correlation greater than 0.60 ($p < 0.01$) were accepted for inclusion in the final inventory (Kahler Communications, n. d.).

The data used for this research were the Base, Phase, Perceptions, and Interaction span determinations from the PPI. The demographic categories were: gender, site, educational level of work (elementary, middle, high, central-administrative), and sector (public, private, parochial).

Procedure

Educators at each site were administered the PPI. Instructions were given by the researcher as to how to complete the inventory. (The group was told it was an "inventory" (in an attempt to avoid the "Fake bad conscious" anomaly described above).) Participants were asked to select no more than five responses to any one item and then to rank the responses in order of preference. Completion of the inventory was first to be done in the question booklet and then to be transferred to an electronically-readable response sheet.

Response sheets were processed electronically, and an inventory was generated for each respondent. A data file was then created using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. For the purpose of this study, the composite descriptive data are arrayed below.

Results

Educator types

The respondent educators predominated with three personality types – Reactors ("*feelers*"), Workaholics ("*thinkers*"), and Persisters ("*believers*"). This array is explained because of the probable reasons people choose education as a profession: Reactors are *compassionate, sensitive and warm* and want to help others; Workaholics are *logical, responsible and organized* and can structure learning activities in sequences, in a timely fashion, and in rational ways; or Persisters are *conscientious, dedicated and observant* and understand what they believe is valuable and important to teach and to be learned.

Of the group, 86 percent were Base reactors (37 percent), Workaholics (11 percent) and Persisters (38 percent), and 78 percent were Phase reactors (24 percent), Workaholics (26 percent) and Persisters (28 percent). Almost 70 percent of the group were either Base or Phase reactors, Workaholics or Persisters, or a combination of two out of the three. These data show this group of educators was 9 percent Base rebels (with no Base promoters) and 14 percent Phase rebels (11 percent) and Promoters (3 percent). The comparative data between the general population and the research sample (n = 242; not all participants completed a PPI) are shown in Table III.

It was noted that none of the sample group of educators was Promoter-based – that is, no one who chose education did so from a base of being *adaptable, persuasive and charming* and experiencing the world through actions. Also

Personality Type	General population (%)	Educator sample base (%)	Educator sample phase (%)
Reactor	30	37	24
Workaholic	25	11	26
Persister	10	38	28
Dreamer	10	5	10
Rebel	20	9	10
Promoter	5	–	3

Table III. Distribution of personality types

noteworthy were the data indicating that 19 percent of the group was Reactor base/Persister phase and 17 percent of the group was Persister Base/Reactor Phase. People whose Base and Phase are the same have not experienced a need to move above their base characteristics – that is, their perceptions, needs and other aspects of their personalities are all drawn from their base. The base and phase frequencies are shown in Table IV.

The concept of *Phase* is unique to the PCM and adds to its comprehensiveness. Experiencing a phase change is occasioned usually (99 percent of the time) by long-term, intense distress with a particular life issue and the resolution of that distress. One then moves to the next level of one's personality structure and "lives" there – taking on the character strengths and other trappings of that personality type. The most intriguing aspect of *phasing* is that one's motivators change. If one is a Reactor (Base) in Persister Phase, then that person is most easily motivated by *recognition for work* and *acceptance of convictions* – these are the psychological needs of Persisters. However, that individual still experiences the world most easily through feelings (Reactor perceptual preferences), but, in this case, will appear more like a Persister, in many of the words, tones, dress, and environmental preferences of the Persister-type person.

In some instances, Base and Phase are the same. That is, one's strongest personality is the same as that from which the individual is motivated in most situations. In the study, 14 participants demonstrated this pattern – Reactor/Reactor (4), Persister/Persister (3), Dreamer/Dreamer (4), and Rebel/Rebel (3).

Interaction span

One of the more interesting categories generated from the Kahler PPI is Interaction span – the amount of relative energy (on a scale of 100) one has to deal with other personality types. Given the distribution arrayed above, it is not surprising that most educators interact most easily (with the most energy) with others like themselves. The data also showed a comparatively low amount of energy of educators in interacting with those most dissimilar to themselves. Table V shows the Interaction span of the research sample.

Educators have high levels of energy to interact with Reactors, Workaholics, and Persisters. They also have a commensurately low amount of energy to

	Phase						
Base	Reactor	Workaholic	Persister	Dreamer	Rebel	Promoter	Total
Reactor	4	23	48	13	9	2	99
W'holic	7	–	13	2	2	5	29
Persister	34	32	3	5	10	3	87
Dreamer	2	–	4	4	–	–	10
Rebel	4	3	3	1	3	3	17
Pr'moter	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	51	58	71	25	24	13	242

Table IV.
Educator demographics

interact with Dreamers, Rebels, and Promoters. What this means in practical terms is that those students who are most like them will thrive, and those least like them will flounder. These data continue to support the relationship between the interaction energy and performance (grades) of students (Gilbert, 1994).

What these data also show is that the respondent educators may have difficulty moving to another form of teaching to accommodate the needs of learners who may prefer alternate forms. Since three personality types (Dreamers, Rebels, and Promoters) are more externally-motivated and educators are more internally-motivated, likely miscommunication may be the order of the day in classrooms where this mismatch occurs.

Implications

The most conclusive outcome from the research was verification of predominant educator types and their potential to interact with others. Not surprisingly, educators have the potential to interact most easily with others like themselves. However, the sample demonstrated very limited potential to interact with those unlike themselves – types which comprise 35 percent of the general population, are more extrinsically-motivated, and who may respond more preferably to something other than the typical auditory and visual emphases in most classrooms. What this means is that educators should consider the preferences of those unlike themselves and find the *energy* and *strategies* to deal with them effectively, rather than insisting that others adapt to what is most comfortable for educators. Accomplishing this shift in approach requires that educators arrange to get their own needs met and find sufficient energy to deal with others using different perceptions and motivational techniques, especially since many of these *others* might be categorized as at-risk.

A positive example of meeting the needs of the different types of students follows (thanks to Roxanne Lee, a PCM-trained teacher from Sheridan, Arkansas). The activity was to determine rate of speed by applying the component variables of distance and time. The class was divided into groups of two to four students. Each group had a battery-powered car and a stopwatch. Their task was to name their car, run it over a 15-foot course, and take the average of five runs. Each group's average was then used to predict which car would win a 25-foot race and what the order of finish would be. Finally, the race was run and the results were compared to the predictions.

Reactor	68
Workaholic	68
Persister	72
Dreamer	31
Rebel	35
Promoter	24

Table V.
Interaction span of educators

Workaholics and Persisters were interested in the *rules* of the activity, the *structure* of the racecourse, and the *data*. Rebels liked the group nature of this *fun* activity, especially the *creative* naming of the car. Promoters were energized by the *incidence* (number of activities). Reactors *enjoyed* being with a group and wanted everyone to *feel good* about what they were doing. Dreamers functioned best as data recorders, being *left alone* to do their part. All students had an integral part in the lesson and had their needs met through the variety of approaches to the activity.

Administrators, too, can adapt appropriately in dealing with their colleagues, students, and other stakeholders. These wise administrators must find ways to keep themselves energized and thus be able to move to the various "floors" of their condominia to interact effectively with others. For example, a Workaholic supervisor would couch comments and direction in *thinking* terms – "What do you think our options are?", The Reactor (predominantly female) supervisee would become distressed at the lack of *feeling* and *personal acceptance* she needs. A more appropriate interchange might start with "I *appreciate* working with you. You add the *personal* touch we need". Then any structured or thinking piece would be received more positively. The supervisee would be energized to where she could move to her Workaholic floor. The Workaholic might find it tedious to do the necessary "stroking", especially if Reactor were one of his higher floors, but he would be more successful if he could find the energy to motivate his supervisee from where she prefers.

The PCM provides the keys to opening the right doors. Knowing what preferences various types of individuals have and what happens when they are distressed can furnish useful information for positive interaction – provided administrators can get into their "elevators" and move into another's *frame of preference*.

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