

The Dunedin Safer Schools Safer Communities Initiative: *A Narrative Approach to Community Collaboration*

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Abstract

Based In 1997, a number of community agencies in Dunedin came together to express their concern at the disproportionate number of young people coming to their attention suffering from the profound effects of bullying and harassment on their lives. These concerns developed further, and as a result the Dunedin Safer Schools Safer Communities (SSSC) initiative was born. Central to the working of the initiative were the ideas and practices of narrative therapy. Some interesting issues arose as we tried to maintain those ideas and practices in a collaborative context in the area of bullying/harassment in schools. The negotiation of the power relation proved to be the most difficult aspect of the work of the initiative.

Introduction

The Safer Schools Safer Communities initiative represents a collaborative process that has sought to draw together the motivation and knowledge of adults and young people in the Dunedin community and beyond, to work on developing positive and respectful ways of standing up against bullying and harassment. Research has shown that some of the best outcomes for improving the health of young people are achieved through an holistic approach and with collaboration and partnerships with different sectors (Lavin et al., 1992, cited in Dickinson, 2001). The ideas shared in this paper represent the collective thinking and writing of many people and do not suggest final answers, but a sharing of experiences. We want to enable others to share in our work and thinking, so that they can draw from it in a manner that is useful to them.

An overview of the initiative

The 1997 starting point for the initiative was individual young people raising their concerns about the effect of bullying and harassment in their lives. This concern was recognised at a networking meeting for all those agencies that worked with young people in Dunedin – these included the police, counsellors, psychologists, public health nurses, government agency workers, and the youth advisor to the Dunedin City

Council – and it led to the formation of a special interest group which was hosted by the Youth Specialty Service of Healthcare Otago, our regional health provider.

Over time, the interest group meetings began to investigate the possibility of taking a collective approach with schools. Some workers were concerned about how schools might view this approach. A public forum was held, and from this grew a comprehensive collaborative process of sharing concerns, interests, and resources. This in turn led to the first signing of the City of Dunedin Safer Schools Safer Communities Charter. The charter-signing acknowledged a comprehensive journey involving many voices with an interest in the well-being of youth. We believe it has been finding a way in which to begin to hear the variety of voices present in our community as a whole that has enabled us to draw together commitment for seeking respectful change. When the meetings first began, people had no idea of what might happen as a result. No one would have envisioned that part of the outcome would involve creating and signing a charter. What follows is a chronological account of the process, some of the problems we encountered along the way, and some thoughts about why it was that these problems were occurring.

Finding ways to listen in the beginning

The first difficulty surfaced early on. This difficulty could be named as a “difficulty in moving forward”. The people in the interest group did not come together with a “purpose”; rather they came together with a “concern” (bullying and harassment). Because bullying and harassment likes to take a powerful position, the group had to be wary of replicating bullying and harassment practices. Some (but not all) of the group members had an interest in narrative ideas and practices (Bird, 2004; White, 2004; White & Epston, 1989; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Narrative ideas and practices have at their heart the notion of decentred practice and an awareness of the reproduction of power relations in counselling/therapy (Bird, 2004; White, 1997). Some group members were keen to acknowledge and negotiate the effects of power relations as they were constituted within the relationships in the group. To this end, some group members were aware that often only the loudest voices are heard at group meetings. They wanted to overcome this problem from the outset. The beginnings of finding a way to listen and hear were discovered and experimented with in the initial group meetings. In these meetings we recognised that having a strong voice and making this voice heard over others supported the idea of “being seen”. Being able to capture a significant amount of air-time suggested that the speaker had a strong case to be supported.

In time we learnt that support established in this way may have considerable costs in terms of interpersonal and interagency relationships. The outcome of such strength

may be shown in an initial patronage of the idea, but behind the scenes limited commitment may exist because it has been gained by a loud voice rather than by genuinely shared agreement. The result of such practices, when starting out, was a feeling that each meeting gained a small amount of ground then often became bogged down. Group members sometimes went away feeling disenchanted, and it seemed like each meeting had almost to make a new start, rather than consolidate understanding. This feeling continued to dog the group as it moved forward, but we were committed to keeping a process that did not buy into “power over” tactics. Some of the rationale for this is explored further on in the paper.

What eventually developed was a flexible core group working party (herein referred to as the initiative), which aimed to build links with workers, agencies and schools. The small core group of workers focused on developing a process that was accessible – allowing entry and re-entry, as well as ongoing conversations with those not able to attend meetings. People who were not able to make regular meetings were asked if they would be prepared to make themselves (and their agency’s services) available for specific tasks. Such tasks ranged from mailing out information/minutes and presenting at workshops to making the financial structure available to hold specifically sourced funding. This enabled the initiative to call on a wider group to fulfil roles and tasks as needed. In one sense this enabled the development of a structure that breathed – expanding to meet the needs of running large forum meetings and reducing again to enable the type of effective planning that works best in a small group setting. Overall, it enabled the initiative to grow in stature as more workers developed flexible links and experienced the real benefits of being associated with the initiative. Perhaps readers can get a sense already that this initiative was not working within the bounds of “usual practice”. For instance, we resisted both forming a committee with designated “officers” such as “secretary”, “chairperson” and “treasurer”, and also the idea that one agency should “take” or “hold” responsibility for the initiative. The feeling was that if this were to happen it would mean the initiative may become the responsibility of someone and very quickly lose its “collaborative” context.

We were committed to the idea so eloquently expressed by Jonella Bird (2004, p. 159) that “whenever people are assigned to a socially sanctioned role which entitles them to assess, treat, and act on behalf of others ... a power relation is generated”.

Collaboration in a competitive environment

The second issue that arose was the notion of working collaboratively across agencies (and later across schools). The people who had initially expressed concerns about the reports of bullying and harassment were not people working in schools, but it was

perceived that much of the bullying was happening in schools. We wondered how we might approach schools with our concerns without entering into blaming language. We were also worried that schools might not be willing to talk openly about bullying and harassment since this is such a sensitive issue in today's environment.

If we take the stance that New Zealand has become a more competitive environment to live and work in since the economic and social reforms that took place between 1984 and 1998 (Carpenter, 2001; Codd, 1999), then we have to acknowledge that there may be a pull from workers and agencies to pit themselves against other agencies and their initiatives. Alongside this issue is the fact that many workers are working relatively independently, which necessitates having a strong voice to ensure they survive in the present environment.

Schools are no different. They also function in a competitive environment (Gordon, 1999; Lauder et al., 1999; Lee & Lee, 1999). Prior to 1990 all New Zealand schools were controlled by central government under the auspices of local education boards. Zoning policies meant that schools had a catchment area from which their students came. There had been few changes since the 1877 Education Act, which advocated free, secular and compulsory schooling. Invariably schools had the same resources and produced similar outcomes. On reflection, it seems that more sharing within the school, between the teachers, and between schools was common then. Since the 1989 reforms New Zealand schools have been self-governing (run by Boards of Trustees), and have been encouraged to develop their own culture to suit the needs of their students. Zoning was removed, therefore competition between schools to attract students is high, and there is a strong focus on academic achievement. Schools and educational institutions are most often in direct competition with each other because some students attract higher funding, and the more students the more money, meaning higher wages can be paid to attract more qualified staff and better resources. Some (Lee & Lee, 1999; Shelton, 1998) argue that this competitive model has created a climate of "winner and loser" schools, where strong schools go from strength to strength and schools in poorer areas struggle to attract students and begin the downward spiral that low numbers and low academic achievement encourages.

According to Peters and Marshall (1996), the emphasis on a new culture of enterprise and competition is part of the discourse of the new right, which represents a deliberate and sustained attempt at cultural reconstruction. At the heart of this attempt is the notion of "enterprise culture", and central to this notion is the importance of reconstructing education so that it will deliver the research skills and attitudes required for New Zealand to compete in an increasingly competitive international economy. They go on to suggest that for children school will be the institution that

ascribes value and quality to the enterprise culture by defining which knowledge is important knowledge, and by inculcating such knowledge through a curriculum which will itself be infiltrated by the enterprise culture.

Given this, we wondered: (a) why schools would want to collaborate, and (b) how collaboration between institutions and agencies could work within the current quasi-market approach to education.

Introducing a theoretical lens

When working within narrative ideas and practices it is important for us to be continually reflexive (to look beyond what we see and break from its “taken for granted” influences). To invite reflexivity we want to move for a moment to a theoretical perspective so as to try to make sense of a practical difficulty. If we place the SSSC initiative and narrative ideas and practices within a poststructuralist worldview, and our educational institutions and some agencies within a structuralist worldview, then we begin to understand, and can make some sense of, the problems that began to arise in sustaining collaboration and working with the power relation.

It is generally accepted that the characteristics of the structuralist view involve the idea that: (i) general laws and truths may be attained by way of reason, science and technology; (ii) there is determinacy of meaning in any text or event, and (iii) the subject/self/individual has real ontological status or existence (Held, 1995, p. 9). By way of contrast, the poststructuralist view: (i) rejects general laws and truths in favour of local unique personal contextualised “truths”; (ii) claims there is a plurality of meaning in texts and events, and (iii) proclaims the death of the subject/self/individual, that is, it denies the real existence of the subject in terms of ontological status (Held, 1995, p. 9).

This difference has a great deal of influence because, we suggest, the work of SSSC is in direct conflict with the structuralist view. We are suggesting that educational contexts and some agencies still operate within the grip of a structuralist framework. The language that supports this worldview includes terms such as hierarchical top–down power; policies for all (for fairness); correct ways of being (codes of practice); rules for attendance; set procedures for dealing with difficulties; correct channels; quality assurance; strict guidelines; learning outcomes and objectives, and assessment exemplars. We work within a liberal education model in which personal autonomy is a central aim, and the notion of choice has now become a dominant theme.

Bullying and harassment is about power, and the structuralist view of power is different to the poststructuralist view. To further understand the poststructuralist view of power we need to consult with Foucault. Power, according to Foucault (1980),

does not allow itself to be localised and fixed. Power is positive, productive and relational. For Foucault all social relations are power relations. Moreover, power and knowledge directly imply one another (Foucault, 1979). Foucault focused attention on the power *in* knowledge rather than the power *of* knowledge.

Foucault's question about power is How: "How is power exercised?" (Marshall, 1996, p. 115). When Foucault talks of power he talks of relationships of power (Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1982, 1988). To understand institutions (and therefore schools and some agencies) we have to understand the mechanics of power relations within them. Foucault suggests that power is associated with practices, techniques and procedures. It is exercised rather than held, a property of relations, manifest through practices. Finally, power does not have a necessary central point or locus. Rather it is employed at all levels, has many dimensions and is evident in all social networks. As Townley (1994, p. 8) points out, reconceptualising power as a relational activity has several implications for the way it is studied:

Power can no longer be portrayed as "external", something which operates on something or someone. It is integral to that relation. It is also "productive" in the sense that it creates "objects". Power is positive and creative, not just negative or repressive. (p. 8, emphasis in original)

On reflection, we can see that the way we were thinking about power and trying to "do" collaboration fitted with Foucault's ideas about power. The *exercise* of power therefore was a central issue, both in schools, where the practices, techniques and procedures which render power effective are quite structured, and also in the workings of the initiative. This, however, was not clear to everyone at the time, and if it had been it would have helped the group process. At the time we knew that what we were doing was *different*, but we could not really put our finger on why it was so *difficult*.

It was evident to us that the way we viewed power and the practices and the procedures that we used would be important in both the process of the initiative and any outcomes the initiative may produce.

Now, returning to our description of how the initiative developed, we want to move on to explain the process whereby schools were invited to join the initiative, bearing in mind that our actions were fuelled by the need to be acutely aware of power relations.

An invitation to schools

The starting point for our approach to schools was an *invitation*. The idea of an invitation was drawn from Alan Jenkins' (1990) work, and focused the attention of the

interest group on opening a dialogue with schools. We wanted to work together on the issues. The focus of the invitation was a general statement and question:

Young people have come to us and expressed their concern at the bullying and harassment which is taking place at school. We share their concerns. What do you think of these concerns?

We found that our approach was met with equal concern from schools, and many schools indicated that they *were* interested in working together in a collaborative way both with each other and with agencies. To be met by such a welcome from schools was for many of the community workers in the group a real surprise. We believe that schools agreed to take part because of the way we invited them to “share the concern”, rather than to “take the blame”. The extent of the positive responses encouraged some more “open thinking” and further speculation about the possibilities for developing an ongoing dialogue that would serve to help schools and agencies to understand each other’s different perspectives.

Working with schools

In order to hear and understand these different perspectives, several forums were held in the Dunedin Civic Centre. At the first forum, schools were interested in knowing how we could assist them. There were a variety of ideas that sprang to mind, but we were mindful that we did not want to do anything that was underpinned by the thinking that “this is what a school *should* be doing”. So we drew together comprehensive information to support the way a school *could* go about developing policy and practice with which to deal with the issues.

What was more important for us, and in line with our narrative philosophy, was the development of ideas and practices that would assist us in working *with* schools.

When schools were asked what *they* wanted from us, some schools said they had heard about the anti-harassment work done at Selwyn College, in particular the Selwyn College model for peer mediation training, *Taking the Hassle out of School*. This model of mediation is anchored in narrative ideas and practices in that it respects and acknowledges young people’s competencies and resources. It was identified as a way in which to provide something for schools that would be effective in enabling them to introduce into their schools a way of having conversations about problems. We also believed it would encourage them to reflect on, and make public, the competencies and resources that already existed in schools.

Selwyn College in Auckland had worked to devolve power in the school system by changing management structures to enable all teachers to have a voice in the

management of the school. According to those at the school, this in turn had created increased space for the voice and participation of students to be honoured within the management structures of the school (Lewis & Cheshire, 1998, p. 29). A commitment to the devolution of power at Selwyn College is believed by Selwyn teachers and students to have created significant cultural change. They suggest that flow-on ripples have occurred as a result of this; for example, the student body has also organised itself differently. The learning that came from Selwyn College's experiences became important, not only for our work with schools, but also for our work with the initiative.

The initiative decided to approach Dorothea Lewis and Aileen Cheshire, the guidance counsellors at Selwyn, who with support from David Epston developed the model of mediation, and invite them to share their knowledge with others.

Individual schools made the decision as to what level of involvement they would have, based on their state of readiness. Three schools expressed a specific interest in *developing* mediation programmes at that time, so Dorothea and Aileen visited these schools and worked with school staff to begin the process they had developed at Selwyn. Alongside these specific workshop visits, a two-day workshop was offered to all schools interested in *investigating* mediation.

The manner in which the workshops took place reflected the quality of the collaborative relationships that had been developing between agencies and schools. Health Promoting Schools provided part of the funding and schools provided the rest. Mirror Counselling administered the money. The venue for the training was provided free of cost by the Dunedin College of Education.

Adopting this approach was thought to offer the best opportunity to maximise the use of agency funding. It brought "outside knowledge" into the city, and also generated a forum in which sharing could take place. At the same time, it supported those schools that had real motivation to get on with their work in developing mediation programmes. This shows that schools could decide where they were in the process of making their schools safe and could drive the development at their own pace. Apart from this specific training event, most of the work done by the initiative involved forums. These will now be explained in more detail.

Structuring the forums

It seems that some of the "most appreciated" aspects of the work we have undertaken so far have been providing forums for people to come together and share their ideas and experiences, using questions to structure discussions. For much of the time, those attending a forum split into three broad groups – students, school staff, and agency workers. Each group was provided with a set of questions to frame their discussions,

and then they reported back to the other groups. Our experience has been that finding good questions has been a very important part of the process of encouraging honest, non-competitive discussions to take place. To this end, we have found the work of Cheshire and Lewis helpful in guiding our thinking (Cheshire & Lewis, 2000; Lewis & Cheshire, 1998, 2000). For example, at one particular forum the following questions were used:

- How did you decide to begin the work and where did you begin?
- What is your school currently doing regarding “Safer Schools”?
- What supports and/or challenges the work?
- What have you noticed happening in your school that tells you the work of “Safer Schools” is having an effect?

At these forums people working within each context had an opportunity to become aware of the wider community of concern (Epston, 1995). Thus they experienced a sense of shared responsibility and ideas instead of an isolated struggle burdened by blame and resistance.

Deconstruction conversations

Both at forum meetings and in the work done in schools, attention was paid to the way in which conversations about bullying and harassment were structured. Because of the sensitivity of the problem of bullying and harassment in relation to school reputations, a deconstructive process seemed most useful in that it is “less adversarial and more playful than critique or confrontation” (Monk et al., 1997, p. 302). So again, in keeping with narrative ideas and practices, the questions used for discussions within and among schools were designed so that people’s own knowledge and experiences could be brought to the fore, appreciated and shared, in order to provide a wealth of possibilities from which participants could choose to move forward in their own ways.

Each school context has its own particular discourse or ways of speaking, with certain “taken for granted assumptions that lie just beneath the surface of many conversations” (Winslade & Monk, 1999, p. 22). In turn, these discourses have a powerful influence in shaping the lives of the people within them, and as Winslade and Monk note, “... it is hard to notice how these assumptions structure relations between people and even shape the functioning of institutions” (p. 53). Understanding school discourse therefore seemed to be a useful beginning point given our concerns that we find safe ways of talking between schools. Within those conversations people were invited to “subvert taken for granted realities and practices” (White, 1992, p. 121) and begin to expose the ways in which bullying and harassment influence our lives.

By way of illustrating this, something that has been of particular interest has been “noticing” how each school finds its own way to *begin* – where the initial interest comes from and how it evolves. Not surprisingly, it is often school guidance counsellors who initiate the work within a school. However, it is also very noticeable that once students are given an opportunity, they are often very powerful and enthusiastic participants within the process. White (1995) suggests that developmental ideas about young people’s ability (or lack of) to handle the responsibilities involved in tackling such complex problems as bullying and harassment often prohibit us from consulting with them about such matters. However, White also suggests, “... when we get in touch with how active children [and young people] are in routinely consulting one another, and what this means to them, we see this myth dismantled” (p. 54).

For example, in one school the guidance counsellor began by drawing together a small group of students interested in addressing bullying and harassment in the school. These students began by asking the principal for a copy of the school policy on harassment, discussing it, and offering suggestions for change to the governing board. So began the process of change within the school.

In another school, a group of students became aware of the Safer Schools initiative, and asked to attend a forum after having some concerns about a particular student in their school suffering from the effects of bullying and harassment. They then returned to their school and asked the principal if the school could become involved with the Safer Schools initiative.

Other schools have used discussions with parent groups as a starting point, and still more have begun with conversations between guidance counsellors and school principals, who have then consulted staff before bringing students into the process.

It has been important that people working within the SSSC initiative respect the people within each school and carefully research cultural knowledge already available before proceeding. As Kotze and Kotze (2001) remind us, “Only if participants benefit from the research [work] will it contribute to ethically acceptable ... knowledge” (p. 11).

The charter

As mentioned previously, we did not know that a charter would eventuate from our forums and conversations among schools and agencies, however the idea of schools signing a charter was something that was suggested reasonably early on in the development of the initiative. While this was considered to be in general a good idea, it was also recognised that introducing a charter would lead to some big questions. These would include: Who should sign? Who should decide who should sign? If all schools

can sign, what does this communicate about the value of the charter? What if someone's level of commitment is merely wanting to be seen signing? With this question in mind, is it better for a school that "has work to do" to be signing sooner rather than later? Are they better to be part of the process rather than working outside it? Is this a charter that should just be signed by schools? What about community agencies? Should they not also have to consider these issues? Indeed, where do agencies and the wider community stand? If only schools signed, was the initiative looking to "stand over" them rather than work in partnership?

We have not been able to arrive at definitive answers to all these questions. However, we have certainly found that asking them, though time consuming, is a useful process that has enabled us to work more effectively. Again, it has been necessary to acknowledge the reality that these things are not easy. There are no simple answers, but with an open dialogue it is possible to negotiate problems in a way that can lead, in the long term, to safer places for all.

We now think that the charter has come to be about questions, and it has provided *some* answers. It has provided something to recognise and it helps to draw together people's work. It has provided a focus to have conversations about what constitutes commitment to the charter and how it can be demonstrated. It has drawn attention from observers both inside and outside New Zealand, who ask how has it been possible to reach a point at which people will make a written commitment and how might it be possible to do this elsewhere? It has most certainly provided a larger voice for standing up against violence in our community. We now know that the charter is part of the journey *towards* safer schools and communities, and not the destination.

In November 1999 nine high schools and one intermediate school signed the first City of Dunedin Safer Schools Safer Communities' Charter. The charter contained six principles, summarised as follows:

1. Zero tolerance to bullying and harassment.
2. Recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
3. Inclusion for all, regardless of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, gender, sexual orientation, appearance, and abilities.
4. Clear guidelines as to what constitutes acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour.
5. Clear lines of communication for dealing with bullying and harassment.
6. Promotion of safe and secure environments and collective responsibility for others' safety.

The signing took place in the Civic Centre, with each signatory school bringing along their principal, a student representative and the chairperson of the Board of Trustees to explain how their school had gone about the process of deciding to be part of the Safer

Schools Safer Communities initiative. For most, it had involved a lengthy process of student, staff and family questionnaires; much discussion and debate; the overcoming of resistance, and eventually some agreement on how they would go about making *their* place safer. It was an inspiring ceremony, with beautifully designed charter documents that the school representatives (including the student representative, principal and Board of Trustees representative) and the deputy mayor signed. These documents are now framed and proudly displayed in schools.

On the basis of the support generated for the signing of the charter, in 2000 we managed to secure almost \$5000 in funding from the Ministry of Education. This allowed us to employ a worker, albeit for very limited hours, to provide a central point of contact for the initiative. We found this worker's role to be helpful in promoting the idea of the charter, as well as providing a focal point for holding and distributing information. The question of ongoing funding remains a problem with which we continue to wrestle. One of the initiative's greatest strengths has been that it is not identified with, or answerable to, one particular institution. It may be, however, that this has made attracting funding particularly difficult. However, along with the liaison worker, forums held since the signing have helped to keep the initiative's work visibly alive and growing.

The present situation

At the end of 2002, the SSSC initiative, along with students from the Dunedin College of Education, carried out research to measure the effectiveness of the charter in schools. Seven Dunedin schools who were charter signatories agreed to the "bottom up" research (Foucault, 1980) that we hoped would be useful for each school in deciding what their next steps towards maintaining a safe environment would be. The research involved random interviews of male and female students of different age groups in each school. The results remain confidential to the schools involved; however, they have shown that the effectiveness of the charter bore a direct relationship to the passion with which the charter was held in the school. For example, schools that actively promoted the charter by referring to it in school assemblies, maintained peer mediation teams who actively worked against bullying and harassment, and had clear harassment policies, seemed to have students who were very aware of the charter's existence in their school and understood what it meant to them as students.

We continue to see the charter as a living document rather than a document that demonstrates the "safeness" of a school. The signed charter displayed in a school foyer indicates that the school has recognised its commitment to maintaining a healthy

school environment and that this commitment is ongoing. We believe the charter has to be lived out each day as an ongoing commitment to safety and change.

In 2003, through grants from both the Dunedin City Council and Zonta, we were able to employ a worker who visited schools to invite them to begin to address their ongoing safety needs. Schools were encouraged to use the checklists in the *Guidelines for Mentally Healthy Schools* resource (Dickinson, 2001) for this purpose. We also extended the invitation to South Otago and North Otago schools. Most of the original schools and many new ones participated in the signing process, which took place towards the end of 2003. There were planned local signings in Balclutha and Oamaru also.

Conclusion

While this is the end of the paper, it is not the end of the story. The initiative has continued and has evolved with time. Many of the founding members are no longer involved. This has been the nature of the initiative, which is quite demanding of time, energy and commitment, so we have become used to the way people move in and out of the initiative, giving what they can when they can. We see this as being an example of “an organisation that breathes”.

Being involved with the initiative has brought with it its fair share of highs and lows. We believe in hindsight that narrative ideas and practices were the key to the collaborative process within both the larger forums and the smaller working group, because those involved in designing and facilitating the meetings brought that knowledge to those processes. Other participants experienced meetings that were engaging and effective and forums where people were heard. They experienced the process moving forward. We believed and still believe that relationships of power are crucial both to collaboration and in dealing with issues around bullying and harassment. Trying to keep our focus on power relationships and negotiating the effects of the power relation as it was constituted through the myriad relationships that took place was the major challenge of the initiative. This paper has explored some of the challenges and successes of working collaboratively across schools and agencies on the issue of bullying and harassment. We do not claim to have come up with any working model that can be espoused. What we hope we have done is to present part of our journey in a time and place, and demonstrate that there are no answers – only questions.

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