

J. Elliott's Influence in the International Educational Field: The Spanish Case

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Resum

L'article comença amb el reconeixement de quan i com el treball de J. Elliott va influir en l'autora durant uns estudis de postgrau que van tenir lloc a Espanya i al Regne Unit, així com en els cursos en què l'autora va participar al costat de J. Elliott a Espanya.

S'hi identifiquen tres àrees principals en les quals J. Elliott ha contribuït al camp educatiu espanyol, aquestes són:

- En contrast amb el model procés-producte predominant, Elliott va advocar fermament per una visió pluralista de la pràctica de l'aula i de la realitat: l'ensenyament hauria de ser una font creadora d'aprenentatge, això és, canviar el propòsit de consideració en investigació, des de l'actuació dels estudiants fins a les activitats dels docents.
- A diferència del model procés-producte, l'autoexperiència està altament considerada: facilita i/o proporciona nombroses oportunitats per al desenvolupament de l'aprenentatge dels estudiants. El professor s'encarrega de l'escenari, però l'aprenentatge, finalment, depèn de l'alumne.
- La introducció d'Elliott a la recerca en l'acció al camp de la formació permanent va obrir la perspectiva professional del pràctic reflexiu, la qual es basava en una concepció diferent de la comprensió de la naturalesa del canvi social. Aquest model es basa en la capacitat d'actuar de manera intel·ligent davant de situacions prou conegudes i úniques.

Tot seguint el fil de les tres àrees d'influència principals el text aporta evidències de la manera com aquestes àrees s'han anat desenvolupant, quins camps es troben encara en pràctiques i quins han canviat atenent uns altres desenvolupaments recents.

Paraules clau: contribució d'Elliott, pràctiques d'aula plurals, aprenentatge de l'alumne, formació continuada, canvi social, recerca en l'acció.

Abstract

The paper begins with a personal acknowledgement of when and how the work of J. Elliott influenced the author during the post-graduate studies in Spain and in the U.K and in the courses that author participated in together with J. Elliott in Spain.

In the following, three main areas of J. Elliott's contribution to the educational field in Spain are identified:

- Contrary to the process-product model which then prevailed, Elliott strongly advocated a pluralistic view of classroom practice and reality: teaching should cause learning which means shifting the point of research consideration from students' performance to the activities of the teachers.

- In contrast to the process-product model, self-experience is highly regarded: facilitating and/or providing opportunities for the development of students' learning. The teacher sets the scene, but learning is ultimately the responsibility of the students.
- Elliott's introduction of action-research in the field of in-service training opened the view for the reflective practitioner of professionalism, based on a different understanding of the nature of the social change. This model is based on the ability to act intelligently in situations which are sufficiently known and unique.

Following these three main areas of influence, the paper gives details on how these areas have been developed further, which domains are still in practice and which have changed with regard to other recent development.

Key words: Elliott's contribution, Spain, pluralistic classroom practice, students' learning, in-service training, social change, action research.

Resumen

El artículo empieza con el reconocimiento de cuándo y cómo el trabajo de J. Elliott influyó en la autora durante unos estudios de posgrado que tuvieron lugar en España y en el Reino Unido, así como en los cursos en los que la autora participó junto a J. Elliott en España.

Se identifican tres áreas principales en las cuales J. Elliott ha contribuido en el campo educativo español, éstas son:

- En contraste con el modelo proceso-producto predominante, Elliott abogó firmemente por una visión pluralista de la práctica del aula y de la realidad: la enseñanza debería ser fuente creadora de aprendizaje, esto es, cambiar el propósito de consideración en investigación, desde la actuación de los estudiantes hasta las actividades de los docentes.
- A diferencia del modelo proceso-producto, la autoexperiencia está altamente considerada: facilita y/o proporciona numerosas oportunidades para el desarrollo del aprendizaje de los estudiantes. El profesor pone el escenario, pero el aprendizaje, finalmente, depende del alumno.
- La introducción de Elliott a la investigación-acción en el campo de la formación continuada abrió la perspectiva profesional del práctico reflexivo, basada en una diferente concepción de la comprensión de la naturaleza del cambio social. Este modelo está basado en la capacidad de actuar inteligentemente en situaciones suficientemente conocidas y únicas.

Al hilo de estas tres áreas de influencia principales, el texto aporta detalles de cómo estas áreas se han ido desarrollando, qué campos se hallan todavía en prácticas y cuáles han cambiado de acuerdo con otros desarrollos recientes.

Palabras clave: contribución de Elliott, prácticas de aula plurales, aprendizaje del alumno, formación continuada, cambio social, investigación en la acción.

Summary

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1. Introduction

In 1986 I met J. Elliott for the first time in a seminar organized by the Ministry of Education to show and introduce the most innovative methods and teacher education strategies for approaching the reform of the educational system to the academics, researchers and university professors. A few ideas became clear for me in this seminar: the importance of educational research for the practice in schools and the understanding that education and curriculum theory are politically in its nature. J. Elliott and B. MacDonald opened up a new understanding of the educational research role for the people attending this seminar. For a person trained in a specific field, in my case biochemistry, it was a realistic and attractive approach to educational research because it was based in data obtained in fieldwork, something similar to the tradition of the experimental sciences and far away from the traditional approaches Spanish educators used to work with.

A year later I was invited by the authorities of the Comunidad Valenciana to coordinate a seminar organized by J. Elliott for showing academics and teachers how to work in schools. The J. Elliott seminar was based in a school in Valencia where the teachers allowed the participants to attend their classrooms and to develop an action-research process from the practical and theoretical points of view. It was a very intense week. I learned the basic principles of action-research and a number of things about the peculiarities of my own way of working in schools with teachers. When the seminar finished I felt I had found a methodology for working as an educational researcher. I found the intellectual bridge I had been looking for since I left research in biology: the social sciences' specific methodology being adequate for studying educational issues. J. Elliott and his colleagues showed me the characteristics of working with this methodology in the field and the main theoretical issues of the qualitative approach. Since then, the need for studying and knowing more by means of action research and evaluation was inevitable for my professional career.

Further, I understood that for social change it is necessary to have agents to promote this change. The only possibility for change, however, is to re-think one's own role and performance in the position one occupies in the educational system. The main idea is that the only possibility is for us to change our own role in the educational field, and we should not try to change the others working in the field, but provoke their change because of our change. If we assume, as I do, that the change is systemic by nature, it is inevitable that a different relationship will be established among the different agents acting in the system.

I was working for a while with action research in my own classrooms and I learnt a few things about the teaching and learning process, but at the same time I understood that any improvement in the educational system needs the teachers as the unavoidable agents for educational change. Evaluation as a part of the action research cycle and as a holistic view of the educational process

was an excellent way to contribute to building up the frame for social change. Since then I have specialized in the investigation and performance of evaluation. The descriptive reports prepared by the evaluators and the classroom case studies became important elements to work with when implementing changes in the educational system.

From this perspective I am going to analyze the evolution of the main issues introduced by action research —after nearly 20 years of working with it in the Spanish educational context.

2. Three areas of Elliott's contribution to the Spanish educational field

I will summarize the most relevant contributions J. Elliott made to the educational field in our country in three points. Although other points could be incorporated in this list, I hope that most of the researchers in the field could be in agreement with them. First of all, what I define as the pluralistic view of the educational reality in classrooms; second, the analysis of the teachers' self-experience in teaching as a high quality element for teacher training; and finally, the new concept of teacher professionalism.

2.1. *The pluralistic view of classroom practice and reality*

When Elliott's concept of action research ideas started to be known (Elliott & MacDonald, 1975), the dominant approach to classroom research was still the process-product model: the goal of these types of studies was to describe observable regularities in teaching performance and to discover the cause-effect relationship between teaching strategies and learning achievements measured through students' achievement tests. The identification of such relationships were considered to be effective elements of teaching strategies and were formulated as technical rules, as elements of the process-product model and to be applied for teacher training activities.

The first important point of this view is that teaching causes learning. Because of that, researchers working under this paradigm assume that the main issue of these studies should focus on teachers' performances rather than those of students. This assumption also suggests that teachers are solely responsible for students' learning. The knowledge generated from such studies usually concludes with rules to determine teacher performances. This is based on the argument that teaching is a technology in which the teacher is the agent treating students to produce pre-conceived outcomes which are at the same time the objectives of the teaching. In this theoretical frame, learning is understood as a passive action directed by the teacher rather than self-directed by students.

The assumption of this causality between teacher performance and learning outcomes implies a complete division between the work done and the knowledge generated by teachers and researchers. The causal knowledge produced by the process-product model is based in objective facts which can be

tested independently of the fact that teachers are involved in their actions and performances. The production of knowledge does not require teacher participation; their role is to apply the knowledge produced by researchers. In other words, the rules formulated by the researchers should be uncritically learned and applied in educational predetermined situations to develop an understanding of the particular classroom situations where they work.

Elliott and many other colleagues conceptualize the problems of teaching in a completely different way. The teachers' experiences with students' learning were to be placed in a different theoretical frame and understood as a problem of achieving communication with students about the problems posed by the learning tasks (Elliott, 1984). The explanation of teachers' actions from their own perspectives ensures that the teaching and learning phenomena could be understood from their point of view. The classroom research was ready to assume all the issues of the action research. The dialogue that teachers and researchers should develop is a main issue in understanding the teaching and learning process going on in classrooms. However, to describe the effects of teachers' performance and actions, observations made by an outsider are not enough to understand the whole educational phenomena, even though it should be considered an epistemological advantage. Observations of educational facts may be susceptible to a variety of interpretations. Action research, in Elliott's words, first deals with the students' viewpoint, asking them directly. The observer's perception only comes from making inferences about their behavior.

The observers' descriptive accounts are checked against the recordings, but his/her interpretative accounts only can be cross-checked against accounts by teachers and their students. The production of the action research accounts involves collecting the point of views of all three: the observers, the teachers and the students. Teachers and students are, thus, involved in the research process. The process of collecting the accounts of the three—and the dialogue established in contrasting them—has been called triangulation.

The structure of the action research accounts and the methodology used for validating them shows the collaborative and educative nature of action research. Involving teachers and students in a triangulation procedure for validating observers' interpretations not only provides opportunities for understanding teaching and learning educational processes, but allows a pluralistic picture of classroom practices and, thus, of educational reality. The picture is completed with the institutional, social and political contexts where education takes place.

2.2. Self-experience: a high quality element for learning

The process model embodies a completely different set of assumptions about the relationship between teaching and learning, for example the aim of teaching is viewed as facilitating or providing opportunities for the development of students learning and understanding. The teacher should enable students to

perform certain learning tasks successfully, described as a set of conditions to be realized by the teacher. But the student learning task is ultimately the responsibility of the students. This theoretical model inasmuch as it specifies enabling conditions, embodies an active conception of learning and it is not assuming that it is caused by teaching.

The teaching actions should be described and defined from the teacher's perspective. In the context of teaching for understanding, the classroom research must adopt this point of view to produce valid accounts for research. Thus, researchers and teachers should be able to establish a dialogue with the same language about classrooms events. This enables the research to find a rationale and arguments, rather than causal explanations of facts. The communication between teacher and researcher has very important implications: the dialogue established can build up a better understanding of the educational process. Making this dialogue possible, action research enables teachers to have a tool to develop awareness and understanding about what they do in the classroom. Self-knowledge is, in Elliott's view, at the heart of a professional development process (Elliott, 1985a, b), involving teachers in a dialogue: the action research itself becomes an educational process. It should also be pointed out that participation in this dialogue is needed to be involved in the generation of research knowledge.

The kind of accounts described are produced as case studies. If the teacher is the author, they become a very important tool for learning from the teacher's self-experience, even though the classroom case study cannot be restricted to the teacher's explanation of his/her perspective and to the student-teacher interaction since the educative power to influence self-awareness may be weakened. The case studies should present evidence about the opportunities a teacher has to develop his/her understanding and awareness through reflecting on the alternative understanding held by students and observers.

The understanding involved in the professional development transcends the boundaries of the classrooms. The development of self-awareness by teachers in classrooms is constrained by the understanding that the teacher might have about institutional, social and political structures. At the same time the development of self-awareness may not be sufficient for the improvements needed for achieving a desired practice. In fact, at that point teachers will discover that in order to implement these changes, he/she must understand the structures which constrain freedom of action in classrooms. For Elliott's action research, the professional development of teachers must go beyond studying the teacher-student interaction in classrooms to focus on the structures which distort its educational function.

2.3. Action research as base of teacher professionalism

Action research has been largely confined to in-service teacher training rather than initial training, even though the opposite could be said about doctors of medicine or policeman. Elliott's work analyzed old models of professionalism

and sketched out a model of professionalism and its implications in teacher education (Elliott, 1993).

The needs of people in the western modern societies (characterized by discontinuous change) become increasingly complex, varied and open to redefinition. The boundaries among professional practices are in a constant process of redefinition and there is increasing pressure on different professional groups to collaborate in the provision of services.

But the expert model of professionalism matches a society conceived as stable and the social change can be steered by the state, as change is understood as an evolutionary progression in society. In this model, the acquisition of knowledge in proposition form («knowing that») and the development of competence are two different processes. Competence consists of the ability to apply knowledge in ways which generate correct practical responses to a situation. Proposition knowledge can be acquired off the job, while competence can only be fully developed through experience, acquiring by learning through it to recognize the applications of knowledge, drawing on the stereotypes that had evolved the professional culture. The «knowing that» is the foundation of the «know how» competence which is assessed on pre-specified performance outcomes.

On the other hand, the model of the reflective practitioner of professionalism is based on a different understanding of the nature of social change which is understood as discontinuous and unpredictable, where the social problems have no stable definition: they become situated, personal, controversial and negotiable through a dialogue with others. In this model, the role of the reflective practitioner is to participate in a process of collaborative problem solving. The relevance of the specialist knowledge can be determined and new knowledge can be acquired. In this context, professional learning is a dimension of practice.

From the perspective of the reflective practitioner model, professional competence consists of the ability to act intelligently in situations which are sufficiently known and unique which makes a response appropriate to be learned in situ. Then competence cannot be defined simply in terms of the ability to apply pre-ordained categories of specialist knowledge as we see in the other model described, but in those qualities of judgement and decision making which indicate the ability to make intelligent and wise responses in novel and unpredictable situations.

Learning according to the reflective practitioner model is learning to reflect holistically about one's own experience of complex human situations, a form of experiential learning. The outcome of this learning is the holistic understanding of particular situations which are stored in long term memory as case repertoires. As Schön (1983, 1987) points out, the professional knowledge in this model consists of confronting the new situation with the cases selected from memory and comparing it with them.

In Elliott's thoughts, action/research always has been very pragmatic, an important issue in the professional field even without forgetting the academic field which is mainly for increasing knowledge in such a field.

3. The Spanish case or how the action research was (or: is?) practiced in Spain

It is well known that the principles of action research are expressed in other ways if you go to other languages and different cultural contexts. In fact, many authors (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McTaggart, 1991) encouraged people to reinterpret action research taking into account their own discoveries, made in their own practice and in their own institutional and cultural contexts. Very important are the different research cultures of social inquiry where the action research is practiced. For example, it is possible to see that action research was pushed aside by the dominant positivist research ideology in the USA. The culture McCarthyism spawned (McTaggart, 1997) reduced the broad hegemony necessary for the colonization of social inquiry by the natural scientific method. There was, however, always some resistance: this struggle includes advocates of the validity of narrative accounts of personal experience as defensible knowledge. Some authors even pointed out its continuity with John Dewey's work.

On the other hand, in Central Europe (mainly in Germany) this shift was not so easy to install because there was a strong tradition of the critical theory. The academic debate ranged from expressing the powerful emergence of the politics of pluralism, post-structuralism and to post-colonialism in particular. These debates created space for narrative approaches to reporting educational experience: educators' experience and their work itself are important. But the question is —even if they are disciplined by the critique— to what extent they are to be regarded as research.

In Spain the educational research community was regarded as being weak and lacking recognition from the traditional scientific community. In a way, this helped introduce a new way of working in academic departments and other educational agencies, who supported the idea of innovations and the need of being incorporated into European trends, which were mainly inspired by the British educational reform of the sixties. Soon action research was well known in academic and educational terms, but the few debates around its theoretical principles only meant that action research was accepted, but not adopted. In many cases, the term action research was used to describe almost every educational research effort. But I can say that the most relevant issue of the action research in Spain was related to participation rather than to anything else. That means to define a new relationship of advantage and power between the researchers and those being researched from the methodological point of view: even though what is regarded as research is not a matter of methodology, since social research is about the politics of having arguments heard and before they are understood and accepted (CARE, 1989).

Action research has quite often been understood as (political) activism. In fact, when action research started to be implemented in our country it was the precise moment of political change: from dictatorship to democracy. It was the time when teachers and academics were more sensitive to changes.

It is also true that some of the efforts to objectify their own experiences lead them to control their work and professional lives. This is sometimes understood as a certain type of politics by critique, specially from those who are interested in other forms of the social organization of schools, in other ways of acting in and on social life, and in other ways of producing knowledge about education.

If I were to define the concept of action research according to John Elliott, I would say: it is about the explicit objectification of particular experiences and things that one would like to change in respect to the ongoing teaching and learning processes. The new insights and understandings produced for these processes show it is really research. The term 'participatory' in relation to action research assumes it is research done by people for themselves, viz. «learning to do it by doing it». It has been outlined before when mentioning the importance of the role of the teachers and their self-experience, their role as part of the inquiry process as researchers of the curriculum and teaching and learning processes developed in their classrooms (Elliott & Adelman).

Since then, teachers have often been involved in research projects, but not so often they have been the real participants, the ones who have the ownership of the research (theory and practice) as it should be in action research. The idea that has not always been understood is that action research is a collective reflection on practice about the forms of conceptualized classroom life. Because the ways may change in which experience is objectified and subjectivity is disciplined, the unavoidable commitment is to use the experience of concrete practice to lead future actions. The main issue is that action research is a collective activity, as the interpretation of the experience is more trustful if others participate. Changing particular aspects in classrooms has an impact on others and their help and consent is needed: the change on social life is a political issue which cannot be broken into bits.

On the other hand, it is possible to assert that action research is conducted in a community context rather than in an institutional one, which expresses something of the culture of the critical opposition work. Besides that, the interpretative character of this type of inquiry established credibility among participants and other people involved, testing the coherence of the arguments presented in a «critical community» (Carr Kemmis, 1986) or a community of «critical friends». There commitment is to checking the arguments, evidence and rationales included in the study. Explicitly, the validation of the data in the dialogue process means that action research only can work when there are appropriate communication structures which allow all participants to be permanent members and to identify themselves with the collective project of change. Although the activities in action research should be understood as real group activities, this is not realized in many situations: the people involved have different power, status and influence as easily happens in classrooms and in educational research. Working together is problematic and often leads to the failure of projects, if the participating groups (teachers, researchers, in-service trainers and administrators) do not manage to establish a communicative

and participating system of collaboration (Riquarts & Hansen, 1998). In the Spanish cultural context, the political ambiance in such a changing time was sometimes confused and not always prepared to incorporate teachers into classroom research, or more broadly, in educational research, development and dissemination. This was a completely new and different research approach for academics and policy makers who often would like to maintain control.

The action research understood in terms of John Elliott's principles is a type of research which means: share the concept, the process, the results and the decision about how the knowledge gained should be given publicity (Sáez & Elliott, 1989). It means ownership and responsibility for the production of knowledge, and obviously control of the whole process. Further, it is extremely relevant to take into account the different cultural contexts, because it otherwise might be a kind of cultural imperialism. This kind of research should be recognized as different to those types in which academics do the research, making teachers and students objects of the research, only promising them to receive the papers and other outcomes, and in this way, creating the illusion of participation. Sometimes it is possible to identify these approaches simply by looking at the language used for a thematic network, e.g. the terms and concepts used are from people outside the classroom. It can easily happen that by using a language appropriate for academic discourse, educational ideas may be lost: i.e. the language used is incompatible with the particular ways in which school life is organized. It is necessary to remember, too, that the concept of research has some inevitable connotations, that is: intensive study of an educational situation for producing knowledge, including ideas for informing practice. Besides that, action research brings along with it the capacity of learning how groups of people can organize the conditions under which they can learn from their own experience.

The emergence of a decentralized democracy in Spain provided a context—at least in principle—, where a more participative type of research became possible, but efforts to implement action research in our country raised the important issue about what could be understood by participation in institutional terms. Having teachers represented in innovation committees is not enough; apparently the entire changes in schools are only a precedent to individual teacher's development.

Institutions not only sustain themselves, but do so too for the designed reason to be implemented and sustained. Institutions and practices form a causal order in which the ideal and the creativity of the practice becomes vulnerable to the acquisition of the institution. The necessary collaboration for maintaining and developing the practice can easily be destroyed by the competitiveness of the institution. Leaving the practice in the historical institutions opens the view for identifying the contribution which action research can make to the different institutional and cultural contexts as well as for considering the tension created by the institutionalization of practice and the formation of the new institutional culture.

The institutionalization of particular kinds of educational work create particular kinds of words and activities to be selected, invented and constructed

to form the practice and the discourse of the school. The particularity of the new organization of the school finds its expression in certain types of social relationships. The Teachers Centers were the agency created by the reform to regenerate the in-service training strategy (Hoban, 2002), based on the British model, reinforcing the ideas of participation, the role of the teacher as a facilitator of students' learning and the exchange of professional practice. Action research has in some ways come to play a vital role as the methodology for teacher development and classroom focussed curriculum change (Sáez, 1997), even though deficits of knowledge might be stated in the incorporated teachers working on them: the need of support from academics on certain topics is vital. This makes the teachers centers vulnerable and creates difficulties for generating the type of necessary institutionalization practice.

4. What it is left of the principles of action research in Spain

At the moment, the term action research has nearly vanished from the educational debate, but this has not occurred without leaving traces: changes have been achieved, concepts have remained and practical work is still done, although not in the mainstream of educational research practice. Action research has survived until today in some areas and niches of the educational system (e.g. disabled students, professional social workers, teacher training colleges); it is still accepted in the organizational development of large industrial enterprises and social movements, but where have the action researchers gone to?

While the English action researchers are found in the Aristotelian tradition, the Spanish researchers are inclined to see their activities in the theoretical field. In fact, they favor a theoretical approach, developing their objectives and ideas before they are realizing them in practice. The English researchers look more interested and confident in dynamic processes, evolution and hypothesis. Even if they are wrong, they are interested in the clarification of aims and values, something which has to be solved in practice again and again. The knowledge generated in such a process starts as personally constructed at the local level, underlying the action rather than the general knowledge generated in some discourse of the social science. In England the action researchers started their project work in a very pragmatic way, based on their background experiences, which helped them win allies in the teaching force and local administration: improving the school and classroom practice through critical self-reflection. In Spain it seems to be the other way around: the starting point is the theoretical critique, and the struggles are about the way of doing research. The second order action research, proposed by Elliott, accepting that teachers and researchers have work on different levels, did not produce the desirable results: it is a contribution to the international community where the features and discoveries of the particular type of action research developed in Spain could produce a better understanding of the main issues involved in this.

Mainly influenced by the British action research, but by the German tradition as well, Spain provides an interesting site for studying the conflict

between participation, a centralized curriculum and teacher control, made by the inspection and assessment obligations. In the Spanish educational context, these necessary practices for institutionalization were never permanently adopted.

On another level, the traditional role of the universities remains an important issue: they still dominate and define legitimate knowledge production. It is still a reasonable assumption that academics are imperialistic in their relationship with teachers, because of the traditional way academics come to participate, because of their command of particular specialized discourses and perhaps because of the uncertainty of teachers, who have been forced to adjust themselves to the legitimation universities have given to the educational practice. In fact, the action research done does not contribute to increase the knowledge of what is going on in classrooms and schools, but to create—to a certain extent—simulations of curricula, proposed and invented by the researchers, which could be understood as «experiments». The relationship between teachers and academics has not changed, even though some teachers have been incorporated in the university system. We found in them important defenders of maintaining the traditional roles in the interaction which action research is promoting in the educational research field.

One of the main issues that action research is proposing, outlined in Elliott's thoughts, is that the production of knowledge is a theoretical reflection which emerges in the action research process in a way that the dualism between theory and practice disappears. But for making a contribution on this particular topic, the theoretical and intellectual tradition of the pedagogy was impeding this approach, since theory still is conceived as having a theoretical standpoint for the production of abstract knowledge.

An important number of handbooks have been written in the last decades where the terms and the conceptualization have elaborated on school life, and classrooms move away from the language used by the actors. The handbooks are important and they are produced because the action research occupies an academic space in the former departments of pedagogy as the theory of general didactics.

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