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Article

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected schools and the people within them. The move to remote schooling forced practitioners of school-based restorative justice to adapt and innovate, as theory and practice had almost exclusively focused on in-person instruction. In this paper, I first review some of the challenges, adaptations, and lessons during the pandemic. I then argue that restorative justice in schools offers new and unique potential to address needs of educational communities and the students, educators, and staff within them as in-person instruction returns. Specifically, I suggest it could contribute to rebuilding social connection and community, bolstering mental health, and addressing inequities. Finally, I end with limitations and future directions for considering these extensions and evaluating their impact. School-based restorative justice alone cannot be a panacea for these issues, but could be integrated into other supports and services to address the stark needs of school communities and of the young people whose lives have been so deeply impacted by COVID-19.

Keywords: schools; restorative justice; COVID-19; mental health

1. Introduction

COVID-19 and the resulting pandemic disrupted the daily lives of people of all ages across the globe. The impacts were not equally distributed, as social class and material resources, geography, race/ethnicity, and other factors correlated with differential risks for individuals and communities. While adolescents were one demographic group that was less vulnerable to infection and serious complications due to COVID-19, they still experienced intense impacts from the pandemic as their educational, social, and family lives were upended.

Schools are pivotal spaces for young people's psychosocial development. Key processes within them include interpersonal interactions, socialization, skill and intellectual development, values exploration, and future planning. These aspects of the school experience take shape as young people attend class, build relationships with teachers, other adults, and peers, and lay the groundwork for their future career, personal, and civic identities (Anderman 2002; Dahl et al. 2018). Intertwined with these developmental dynamics are the learning and socialization processes attached to interpersonal dynamics, including how harm, broadly conceived, occurs and is addressed in these settings. Young people learn about themselves, expectations of them, and civic responsibilities and norms via discipline and responses to behavior, as well as interpersonal interactions they have that involve tension and conflict (Flum and Kaplan 2012; Swanson et al. 1998).

Over the last several decades, restorative justice has become an increasingly prevalent framework for addressing harm in schools both in the United States (U.S.) and across North America, Europe, and Asia (Fronius et al. 2016; Gavrielides and Wong 2019). This movement, however, was also disrupted by the pandemic: in-person circles and conferences were not possible, harm and conflict looked different in online spaces, and social isolation and mental health struggles increased for many young people (Velez et al. 2021). Furthermore, many policy makers across diverse settings primarily focused on the academic challenges of the move to remote learning and the access issues for disadvantaged

students at the possible expense of discipline, social and emotional learning, and other related foci (OECD 2020).

The challenges to the growing school-based restorative justice movement were considerable, but the disjuncture also offered educators an opportunity to reassess established structures, reconsider practices, and experiment. Reflecting on the adaptations and unique context post-pandemic may offer potential for advancing this area of restorative justice. There will be silver linings within the return to in-person schooling, even as the continued reverberations of COVID-19 are present in students' socializing, mental health, and school communities. Restorative justice—with a focus on relationship building, healing, and rebuilding—can be an effective investment for schools as they look to re-form communities and thrive in the post-pandemic world. This opportunity links into an understudied potential of restorative justice in schools: to foster coping, resilience, civic development and engagement, and other positive psychosocial and developmental outcomes for young people.

This paper considers the influence of the pandemic on restorative justice in schools by discussing adaptations and opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how this rupture offers a renewed opportunity to explore the implications of such practices on young people's psychological development. First, I discuss the changes in restorative justice and virtual applications made by educators during the pandemic. Next, I describe the challenges and questions for educators and students as they return to in-person schooling, highlighting the possible role of restorative justice. Finally, I end with future opportunities for better understanding the potential of restorative justice from a lens of psychosocial development. Overall, the paper focuses on theoretical possibilities rather than practical implementation. The challenges and opportunities identified are broad and moving into the realm of application requires attention to contextual factors, such as previous experience of restorative justice in the school, local impact of the pandemic, and cultural norms and frameworks for education.

2. Restorative Justice in Schools during the Pandemic

Many school systems, particularly those in the U.S., have traditionally been predicated on vertical systems of punitive discipline controlled by teachers and administrators. In the late 1990s and 2000s in the U.S., this approach to handling behavioral issues and conflict crystallized around zero tolerance policies. The result was increased rates of suspensions and expulsions with a disproportionate impact on students with identities that are often already associated with unequal educational opportunities and outcomes (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and LGBTQ; Wadhwa 2016; Hoffman 2014). Since 2000, the detrimental impact of such punitive approaches has garnered increasing attention and empirical evidence. In the 2010s, schools in the U.S., and more broadly across North America and Europe, increasingly adopted restorative approaches in their schools and discipline systems. The nature of this implementation varied widely, from holding community-building circles to whole-school approaches, but the overall trend involved a recognition that punitive approaches were not working and restorative approaches offered promising alternatives (Fronius et al. 2016; Wadhwa 2016).

When COVID-19 led to widespread school closures and quarantines, however, these practices were deeply disrupted. School-based restorative justice had been almost exclusively predicated on in-person interactions. The core elements used in schools included circles and conferences, which drew on the relational focus of restorative justice to build inclusive communities and established systems of reparation to address harms. This foundation prioritizes the power of interpersonal communication and interaction to foster accountability, honesty, open listening, and sharing (Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie 2005). In their application in schools, the tools of restorative justice provide individual and collective benefits by rejecting discipline that excludes and isolates (i.e., suspensions and expulsions) in favor of face-to-face discussion. Prior to the pandemic, one of the few

online tools in use were virtual peace rooms, which were specifically developed to address instances of cyberbullying (Das et al. 2019).

The pandemic forced educational communities that had adopted restorative justice to adapt their practices to the new context of remote schooling. Quarantines and social distancing brought many changes to how administrators, educators, and students related to each other: classrooms became virtual, shared spaces for informal connection (e.g., hallways, lunchrooms) disappeared, and physical and social isolation caused some to struggle to feel a sense of community (Velez et al., forthcoming).

Educators responded in different ways, but there have been some themes emerging from the information practitioners have shared about these experiences. First, rituals and methods had to be altered to fit the online environment in which members of school communities were interacting. In some cases, this process simply involved using the same procedures or practices in virtual meeting rooms. For example, circles were run by having each student (by last name, birthday, or some other order) share or respond to a prompt. In other cases, the different online format sparked a re-imagination of some of these practices. Chat functions meant that students could engage with conversation asynchronously. The ability to turn one's camera off created circles where students were not be able to see each other. Students and educators struggled with numerous distractions (in the home or via technology), which were often more plentiful and different than in classrooms. Generally, facilitating circles and conferences became a more difficult task (Smith et al. 2020).

Second, the social and physical isolation caused by the pandemic created further obstacles to building connections and relationships. Schools employ various methods to create a restorative environment, but there are many ways that it takes shape and is deepened beyond formalized rituals and practices. Educators and students build community and trust, address conflict, and create a social environment through many small moments as well, such as brief interactions in the hallways, touchpoints before and after class or a circle or conference (for example, a teacher asking a student who shared something difficult to stay after to talk), and informal conversations in the lunchroom (Tillery et al. 2013; Pittman and Richmond 2007). The pandemic eliminated these opportunities for connection, laying groundwork for restoration, and follow up. To this end, educators noted the challenge of building relationships and fostering community, a foundational component of a restorative school (Velez et al. 2021). Importantly, this struggle was not simply between educators and students or among students, but also extended to creating bonds and community among school administrators, staff, and educators.

The relational focus of restorative practices also provided some educators and students with important supports during the pandemic. One acute challenge during remote schooling was the social and physical isolation, which was compounded by widespread quarantines, cancellation of public gatherings or events, and social distancing more broadly. Prior to the pandemic, depression, anxiety, stress, and other related mental health concerns had already been rising among adolescents in recent years. From early on in the pandemic, there has been growing evidence that the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic further stretched young people's coping and resilience (Lee 2020; Singh et al. 2020; de Figueiredo et al. 2021). While restorative justice may not be primarily therapeutic in nature and its application in schools is not directly framed as social and emotional learning, its focus on relationships, repair, and genuine horizontal engagement has the potential to support collective resilience and build key psychosocial skills. Stable, supportive relationships with adults have been shown to be a key buffer against adversity and trauma for young people, and belonging to a supportive community can further heal and help work through challenge (Cantor et al. 2019). Furthermore, a focus on social and emotional learning, beyond the academic material in classrooms, has also been shown to bolster community and mental health, particularly in relation to self-perception and belonging (Mahoney and Weissberg 2018). Restorative justice inherently entails attention to these dynamics.

More concretely in the context of COVID-19, disciplinary action and behavioral issues often declined in virtual spaces, while the need to connect, heal oneself, and belong to

a community grew with the challenges of isolation, quarantines, and experiences of or fear about the disease. Some practitioners described how their adaptations of restorative practices in the virtual space seemed to facilitate these processes for themselves and for participants (Velez et al. 2021).

Many educators and educational researchers are still processing the impacts of the pandemic, and so the adaptations, challenges, experiences, and lessons of school-based restorative justice during this time are nascent and not fully formed. Nevertheless, the themes and patterns described above point toward possibilities for the future of this work. The very nature of such a rupture—in this case, the move to remote schooling, increased psychosocial challenges related to fear of the disease and isolation, and widespread individual and collective impacts—offers an opportunity to reassess and consider the utility of new ways of relating and implementing restorative justice that were adopted in response to these circumstances. In the next section, I consider some of the challenges and questions for schools as the world begins to move slowly and disproportionately into a "post-pandemic" world, as well as the possibilities for new ways of conceptualizing restorative justice in educational settings.

3. A Post-Pandemic World: Lessons and Opportunities for Restorative Justice

The movement out of the pandemic has been halting, uneven, and uncertain. While many schools followed similar procedures during the first peak crisis of COVID-19 in 2020, the uncertainties, differential risks, sociopolitical pressures, and other factors are leading to differential processes as the pandemic continues. Still, across diverse settings, there are some common questions for school systems, individual institutions, and the people within them.

3.1. The Return from Pandemic Schooling

First, the return to in-person schooling requires a reintegration process for individuals and a rebuilding for communities. Quarantines, isolation, and remote instruction meant many young people's social lives were entirely upended. These dynamics led to feelings of isolation, challenges to social identities, and disappointment at missed experiences or milestones (de Figueiredo et al. 2021; Loades et al. 2020). At the same time, the return to in-person interaction everyday has brought increased social stress. Many people report worrying about their ability to transition back into social dynamics and relationships smoothly after the experiences of the last year and a half (APA 2021). These concerns must also be placed in the context of psychosocial development for adolescents: middle and high school are key times for forming social connections and identities. In the U.S. these processes were already shown to create stress and anxiety among many young people, possibly playing a role in the increasing rates of stress, anxiety, and depression in recent years (Arnett 2015; Eder and Nenga 2003; Twenge et al. 2018). Within this broader developmental context, adolescents who lived through the COVID-19 pandemic may experience heightened pressures and worry about their social lives given the disruption and isolation for 2020 and much of 2021.

The return to in-person school requires not only attention to these individual dynamics but also to collective processes as the very fabric and environment of educational communities must be rebuilt. The interpersonal and collective dynamics within schools are complex: the relationships between individuals; the systems and structures that guide interactions, decision making, and procedures; the psychosocial processes underlying students' sense of belonging, engagement and investment in the school; the various sub-groups that exist (Cohen et al. 2009). These dynamics have traditionally been built around the face-to-face interactions that happen between administrators, educators, students, and other members of the school community. Therefore, the various processes must be rebuilt with the return to in-person schooling.

Second, as schools return to in-person instruction, the people within them are dealing with trauma and other mental health impacts of the pandemic. As noted above, increasing

rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among young people before the pandemic were exacerbated by remote schooling and the actual impacts of the disease on themselves, their families, and their communities (Lee 2020; Loades et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2020). For some, these issues arose from the isolation and sense of disconnection. For others—and disproportionately for low resource and marginalized communities—the COVID-19 disease touched directly on the health and financial wellbeing of their families and communities. These direct experiences may have included death, loss of jobs or income, or intense disease; all of which could have been experienced as traumatic life events (e.g., de Figueiredo et al. 2021; Macias Gil et al. 2020; Millett et al. 2020). Importantly, students are not the only ones returning to schools with these challenges. Teachers and administrators were asked to quickly implement stark changes, at times with little support, in their roles as educators. Many parents, in turn, became de-facto instructors as they were asked to balance employment (or the stress of losing it) with overseeing their children's education at home (Davis et al. 2021; Muldong et al. 2021). The stress of these new expectations amid the pandemic could have been deepened by their own intersections with the disease, such as personally contracting COVID-19, having family members become ill, being isolated, and fearing contagion. All in all, the end of the pandemic, or at least a return to in-person schooling, may relieve some of the additional pressures, but still necessitates addressing the long-term impacts and possible trauma from this time.

Third, the impacts of COVID-19 have been disproportionate, as already marginalized communities have had greater exposure to the virus and more strongly felt the financial ramifications of the pandemic (UN News 2020). In terms of education, this dynamic has meant that students from these communities are more likely to have larger learning gaps due to COVID-19, to face hunger and financial distress in their families, and to drop out (Programme on Youth Unit 2020; Azevedo et al. 2021). School systems, as well as educators and policy makers, must address these inequities, which existed before the pandemic but have been further brought to the surface and deepened since early 2020.

3.2. The Potentials of Restorative Justice

Schools and educators certainly face other concerns, such as lost learning, absenteeism related to children needing to support their families financially, and increased community violence. The three detailed above are primary, widespread, and offer a fruitful space for considering benefits and opportunities for innovation for school-based restorative justice. At the core of restorative justice is a focus on relations, community, restoring and healing, and commitment to inclusive processes (Zehr 2002). While restorative justice is primarily about responses to harm and conflict, in school settings it is based in developing belonging, engagement, and trust among students, teachers, staff, and administrators (Braithwaite 2000). A first opportunity for restorative justice involves reframing its implementation to be oriented toward intentionally rebuilding community. In the U.S., restorative justice has taken hold as an antidote to the inequities and failures of zero tolerance disciplinary policies (e.g., Armour 2016; Wadhwa 2016). Within the post-pandemic context, this opportunity still exists but is complemented by the potential for the practices, environment, and ideals of restorative justice to be focused on (re)creating the social fabric and inclusive communities.

This connective benefit also serves to address a second, but perhaps more complicated, benefit to the mental health of educators and students. Restorative processes and environments that support community building and collective healing can address some of what drove rising anxiety, stress, and depression during the pandemic (Allen et al. 2018). In fact, schools are uniquely situated to be ideal spaces to address young people's psychosocial wellbeing and mental health, at least when they are supportive, inclusive environments (e.g., Manassis et al. 2010). However, employing school-based restorative justice as a mental health intervention is complicated and unproven. This framework may bolster students' sense of belonging and inclusive environments, but those areas cannot address all the drivers of anxiety, stress, and depression. These mental health challenges among young

people are linked to complex historical, social, and individual dynamics (de Figueiredo et al. 2021; Loades et al. 2020). It is possible that the benefits may only occur for some students who would be served by increased social connection or psychosocial restoration. Others may be dealing with traumas in their home, family, past or in other ways that necessitate more targeted supports. It is also possible, however, that more positive school environments and connections to peers, educators, and staff could facilitate therapeutic interventions as students may be more trusting of school personnel. These benefits are simply theoretical, and more development and investigation is needed to coordinate restorative justice with mental health services. This link—that is, between restorative justice and mental and physical wellbeing—is underexplored (Todić et al. 2020).

Lastly, while restorative justice does not entail a specifically academic focus (that is, it is not directly about grades and learning), its implementation has been attached to greater equality in educational outcomes. The connection is two-pronged. Improved school climates and belonging can lead to greater engagement in school and learning, including by simply lowering absences. Relatedly, some students will spend fewer days out of school because of reduced disciplinary exclusion through suspensions and expulsions (Braithwaite 2000; Fronius et al. 2016). These benefits can be mapped onto the systemic racism that drives students with marginalized identities to be disproportionately impacted by these dynamics. An implication of making this connection is that restorative justice can ameliorate some driving forces behind achievement gaps (e.g., Wadhwa 2016). In application in the post-pandemic context, this theoretical benefit of restorative justice could hold greater importance. As schools return to in-person learning, inequities have deepened or will return: the issues with discipline systems that existed before will not disappear, and it is likely that the uneven impacts of the pandemic on low-income and communities of color will lead to greater learning gaps for students from these groups. Importantly, however, the evidence on this point is mixed. It is not clear that a whole-school implementation of restorative justice leads to academic gains nor if there are factors that mitigate or enhance these possible academic benefits (Acosta et al. 2019; Fronius et al. 2016). Therefore, while restorative justice in schools may potentially contribute to addressing educational inequities deepened by the pandemic, more research and understanding of this connection is needed.

In summary, while schools face considerable challenges as they return to in-person learning following the pandemic, restorative justice offers potential to support educators and administrators in addressing at least three prominent concerns: rebuilding school communities, supporting mental health, and addressing inequities. Even during the pandemic, proponents of restorative justice pointed towards these possible benefits. For example, when schools first began to re-open after initial quarantines in 2020, the Learning Policy Institute called for the use of virtual circles as a pathway to promoting "less racially disparate suspensions and expulsions, fewer disciplinary referrals, improved school climate, higher-quality teacher–student relationships, and improved academic achievement across elementary and secondary classrooms" (DePaoli et al. 2020). This call, and more broadly the potential of school-based restorative justice outlined above, draws on theoretical foundations and the growing empirical base of research to apply to the context of the post-pandemic world. Still, the pandemic and its aftermath are in many ways unprecedented times. Such connections must be made with openness, flexibility, and reflection. The next section considers paths forward for striving to tap into these potentials while keeping this orientation.

4. Future Directions and Implications

Given these opportunities and the strengthening movement before COVID-19, it is likely that many schools will return to integrating restorative justice into their practices, policies, and environments. As noted above, these areas of potential for school-based restorative justice also point toward future directions for development, research, and practice. It is important, however, to recognize and consider the gaps in knowledge around

these possibilities, as well as the need for complementary supports. Little work has been conducted previously to understand how school-based restorative justice may connect with mental health (of students, educators, and staff). The post-pandemic world offers an opportunity to study the potential, but this exploration cannot come at the cost of practitioners, educators, or students. It must be coordinated with therapeutic services as well. Some of these models may develop organically or even from mental health-focused interventions. For example, in Milwaukee, one nascent program has developed a multi-tiered approach to mental health support in which the foundation and broadest intervention is a restorative justice-based peace education curriculum. These types of adaptations of standard school-based restorative justice must be analyzed with consideration of theory (i.e., is this truly a restorative justice program) and research (i.e., is it an effective approach to addressing mental health needs).

Similar questions apply to considering restorative justice as a possible contributor to addressing inequities deepened by the pandemic. A strong research base supports the connection between authentic, whole-school adoption of this approach and reduced behavioral infractions (e.g., Fronius et al. 2016; Wadhwa 2016). The effect on academic achievement is less clear (Acosta et al. 2019). Added to this question is the fact that while COVID-19's impacts were disproportionate on students belonging to groups that already faced oppressive structural, social, and historical dynamics, their learning challenges during the pandemic may be new. The range of contextual obstacles is considerable: closed schools, technological limitations in their homes or for their educators, mental health crises or traumas related to COVID-19 (e.g., illness or death of family member), increased pressures to contribute financially, and distracting or crowded home learning environments. Amid this complexity, it is unclear if the theoretical mechanisms by which school-based restorative justice could lead to improved academic outcomes apply. Again, it cannot be assumed—especially given the extent and urgency of these needs of young people across the world—that restorative justice will help address this concern, but rather it should be integrated into a multifaceted approach with an openness to studying its role and adapting to the changed context.

Lastly, a flexible mindset can also be brought to considering an entirely new framework for restorative justice through virtual practices. The sudden and unplanned move to remote schooling meant many practitioners became pioneers in a new potential frontier of using technology as part of restorative justice. This move came from the necessity of the situation. As the pandemic eases, it is important to consider if these processes can be honed and developed as a new area of restorative justice (Velez et al. 2021). A first step is systematically gathering what these adaptations and experiences involved. While some communities of practitioners shared ideas and strategies, many educators were also innovating within their contexts without much direction. The main resources for school-based restorative justice focus on in-person instruction and, thus, had to be adapted for virtual interactions. Some of the innovations and lessons may be informative for the continued development of school-based restorative justice, while others may push theorists more broadly to consider new avenues (such as the potential for virtual circles). The challenges faced can also reinforce the value and importance of elements that were already in place. Just as absence or illness can make one value presence or health, researchers and practitioners can catalogue and analyze what was missing during the pandemic and remote schooling to deepen understandings of what is foundational about in-person practices.

A second step that can be taken is studying what adaptations or changes are kept in educational settings and integrated into in-person schooling. Underlying such an approach is a bottom-up investigation of the development of school-based restorative justice. In other words, this type of investigation would move away from the current focus on implementation and success in school contexts to the adaptation, value, and innovation of practitioners and students themselves. Furthermore, this consideration would also push back on deficit frameworks about communities that have been historically, socially, or politically marginalized. For example, some students, including those from communities of color in the US, did

thrive, even as their neighborhoods were deeply impacted. Furthermore, some leaders and educators effectively adapted to provide robust and supportive educational experiences (Grooms and Childs 2021). Studying these successes would provide valuable insights into the future potential for school-based restorative justice while recognizing the strength and resilience of these individuals and groups.

Importantly, the focus throughout much of this paper has been on processes and dynamics within school-based restorative justice in the U.S. Many of the challenges and much of the potential for development extend across contexts, but must also be considered and adapted within the specific socio-ecological contexts. For example, while restorative justice may broadly offer an opportunity to support young people's resilience and coping through social connection, the specific potential and implementation must be attentive to cultural norms, national and local experiences of COVID-19, school settings, and the experiences of the student body.

These contextual factors will be important for considering the practical question of how to tap into these potential implications. There are resources available for specific ways that practitioners adapted school-based restorative justice during the pandemic (see Abrams and Wachtel 2020; DePaoli et al. 2020; Morneau 2020; Velez et al. 2021). These experiences, and others that will emerge in popular and academic media, can serve as useful starting points. However, schools and practitioners will have to engage in thoughtful and careful processes to consider the opportunities laid out in this paper given the continuing complexity, differential impacts and experiences of COVID-19, and various levels of pre-pandemic experience with restorative justice.

5. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has ruptured the lives and social dynamics of individuals and groups across the world, affecting institutions, financial systems, the health of millions, and more. While in many cases the beginning of these effects may have been sudden with whole societies shutting down rapidly, the emergence from the pandemic is a slow development that must inherently involve processing, healing, and transition. For young people, as well as adult educators, schools are a key space in which these dynamics will play out. As in-person instruction returns, schools must address the intensity and variety of needs related to the experiences of the last year and a half and this reintegration process into the future. School-based restorative justice holds potential for fostering the environments, interactions, and healing that is required. This connection is based both in the theory underlying restorative justice—with its focus on relations, restoration, and inclusivity—and the empirical research on its use in educational settings before the pandemic.

There are clear challenges and limitations to declaring it a panacea in the post-pandemic world. As laid out above, some of the potential benefits of school-based restorative justice in this context are understudied, new and untested, or may look different given the unprecedented nature of what school systems and the individuals who make up these communities are going through. This uncertainty, however, holds potential that must be explored and considered with open and scientific methods. The needs are too great and the potential of restorative justice to contribute to addressing them is too significant to ignore. Above, I have tried to lay out multiple specific areas where innovation and new possibilities exist. These must be developed and studied to evaluate the potential they offer.

Beyond the specific needs in the post-pandemic world, school-based restorative justice should also be considered more broadly in terms of its influence on young people's psychosocial development. Little work to date has considered the developmental processes that underlie children and adolescents' engagement with restoration as an approach to harm, as well as their motivation to engage with school-based practices and the influence of these experiences on their identity development (Velez et al. 2021). Without a doubt, the experience of the pandemic will mark the developmental trajectories of young people, in much the same way that living through the great depression shaped many individuals of that generation of youth (Elder 1974). Therefore, even as researchers and practitioners

should consider innovative school-based restorative practices to address the era-specific needs, these efforts can coalesce with a broader gap in understanding the psychosocial, developmental impacts on young people. Combined and conducted with authentic engagement with practitioners, educators, and students, this work would hold considerable promise for advancing restorative justice.

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