

*Lost in Translation: First Year Physical Education Teachers' Experiences with Teaching Sudanese Refugee Students*

Christopher Francis Baldwin

Australian Catholic University, Australia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyse and explore the experiences of eight first year physical education teachers who have taught Sudanese refugee students. Interviews were conducted at the end of each participant's first year of teaching. The findings of this study highlight the vast different learning styles of students from Sudan and the strategies that these teacher's trialled and incorporated into their lessons in an attempt to minimise the disruptions that they experienced when first introduced to the students. The results of this study, together with information from the literature, suggest that the training and education of teacher's in Australia must incorporate strategies for teaching students from different backgrounds, cultures and living situations to better facilitate the inclusion of them in school based activities and learning.

### **Beginning physical education teachers**

In their first year, physical education teachers become aware of the many complexities and difficulties that are involved in the teaching profession. Not only must they overcome these, they must also grapple with the additional intricacies that are part of being a first year teacher beginning their teaching career (Hardy, 1999).

Physical education teacher's induction into the teaching profession differs slightly from that of other teaching subjects. Physical education may be less stressful because in previous research there has been no mention of the reality shock that tends to accompany the experiences of other subject classroom teachers (Sparkes, Templin, & Schempp, 1993; Thevenard, Haddock, Phillips, & Reddish, 2009; Tinning, McCuaig, & Hunter, 2006).

The initial years of teaching for beginning teachers is extremely important in their development of knowledge and understanding in the classroom environment (Mtika, 2010). These early years in a beginning teachers career determines whether they will remain in the profession, as well as what kind of teacher they will become (Thevenard, et al., 2009). Researchers have suggested that the first years of a teacher's career are actually learning years for the teacher out on the job (Hardy, 1999; Ibrahim, 2012; Thevenard, et al., 2009).

Research has suggested that beginning teachers are not always provided the necessary support they need and as a result can suffer from reality shock which can lead to the premature departure of them from the teaching profession (El baz-Luwisch, 2005). "Beginning teachers have real learning needs that cannot be grasped in advance or outside the context of the classroom" (Ibrahim, 2012, p. 540). Classroom management, motivation of students, juggling workload, assessment and marking, reports, parent interviews and dealing with individual difference are just some of the day to day tasks that today's teachers have to deal with.

### **Teaching in a global world; the new challenge for beginning teachers**

The ever increasing migration rate along with ever increasing numbers of refugees seeking asylum and residency status in countries free from war and oppression has meant that education systems across the world have had to become more accommodating for students attending schools from non-native backgrounds (Knoblauch, 2001). Whilst many schools and governing institutions of schools have begun to make arrangements and put policies and procedures in place for dealing with these students, teacher training education has maintained its traditional stance of teacher training meaning teachers are not trained and equipped to deal with students that arrive in their classes from these often traumatic backgrounds (Australian Government, 2007).

In Australia, a country that has a history of migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), education has tended to be 'inter-cultural' (Turner & Fozdar, 2010). Much existing research has focused on ethnic minorities from non-refugee populations (Turner & Fozdar, 2010). Little or no research has attempted to look at refugee populations and how the educating of students from refugee populations is carried out, or how teachers dealing with refugee students manage teaching these students the

curriculum. Turner and Fozdar acknowledge that low levels of literacy, significant cultural difference and possible trauma related to displacement experiences make educating refugee students quite difficult and challenging for teachers, schools and their fellow classmates alike.

Since 1996 Australia has resettled more than 20,000 Sudanese born individuals (Australian Government, 2007). Many of these individuals have been students; some of which enter schools throughout Australia. Their traumatic upbringing in Sudan where many have witnessed atrocities performed on parents, siblings, friends and even strangers present the teachers who will be teaching these students with great challenges. This paper looks at eight beginning teachers in Sydney, Australia who teach physical education in primary and secondary schools. Their experiences with teaching Sudanese refugee students and the challenges and triumphs they experienced during their first year of full time teaching forms the basis for this research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-year physical education teachers engaged with Sudanese refugee students in their physical education lessons. The questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do physical educators, who are in the first year of their teaching deal with students from different cultures, specifically Sudan in this study?
2. What onsite measures are in place to assist first year teacher's deal with the different dynamics of learning styles present in students from Sudan?
3. How do first-year physical educators describe their experiences with teaching Sudanese refugee students?

### **Method**

The primary source of data for this study was interviews conducted with the new beginning teachers at the end of their first full year of teaching.

#### *In-Depth Interviewing*

The researcher carried out multiple open ended questions with multiple interviews used (Alvarez & Urla, 2002; D. Kvale, 1996; S. Kvale, 2007). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The raw transcribed interviews constituted the primary data set for subsequent analysis (Berg, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Elliott, 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Sparkes, 1995; Wengraf, 2001).

Each of the beginning teachers was interviewed twice at his or her home or a mutually convenient and acceptable location during the summer schools holidays (December – February). The purpose of the first interview with the beginning teachers was to establish autobiographical contexts for understanding the participants' reasons for becoming a physical education teacher, their experiences during their teacher training course and their goals for the next twelve months with respect to their teaching. The information collected in this first interview informed lines of questioning for the follow-up interview.

At the end of the first interview, the second interview was scheduled to be conducted approximately two to three weeks later which allowed enough time for the first interview to be transcribed and a preliminary analysis done. The second interview concentrated on what each participant's first year as a physical education teacher was like, and how their teaching had to 'change' to enable the inclusion of the Sudanese refugee students in their classes. Questions included the following:

- Moving on to your teaching this year, tell me about your first day/week of the school year. How did you come to be placed in this school? Were you aware about the schools intake of Sudanese refugee students?
- Compare how you taught in the beginning of the school year with how you teach now. How did you learn to teach the way you do now? Why did you change? or, What allowed you to maintain some of your teaching style throughout the year?
- Upon reviewing your first year of teaching and the University teaching course that you recently completed, do you feel like your teacher training adequately prepared you for teaching? Why/why not?

This is only a brief sample of the questions used in the interviews with the beginning teachers. A number of additional questions were asked to elicit responses from the participants that addressed what their actual first year of full time teaching was like and how as teachers they were called upon to modify and adapt their classes to cater for students needs.

### ***Participants***

The participants for this study were eight physical education teachers who completed their first year of teaching during the 2012 school year. They taught full-time at the primary or secondary school level in Sydney, NSW, Australia. The physical education teachers were selected to ensure representation by gender and level (primary and secondary), public and private, small and large schools. Recruitment of participants for the study was done by contacting physical education teacher educators and school administrators throughout Sydney, Australia.

A list of potential participants who fulfilled the requirements noted above was generated and then used as the basis for the selection process.

**Table 1 Participants' schools and number of refugee students enrolled at their school**

Name	School description	Number of refugee students in school
Damien	Catholic primary school in Auburn, NSW	28 students, school's enrolment totals 311
Ebony	State public primary school in Campsie, NSW	19 students, school's enrolment totals 338
Grace	Catholic primary school in Enfield, NSW	30 students, school's enrolment totals 299
Joe	State public high school in Sydney, NSW	71 students, school's enrolment totals 882
Lyndal	Private high school in Gosford, NSW	45 students, school's enrolment totals 603
Matthew	Private high school in Hunters Hill, NSW	33 students, school's enrolment totals 1100
Peter	State public high school in North Sydney, NSW	63 students, school's enrolment totals 1209
Sarah	Catholic primary school in Wollongong, NSW	89 students, school's enrolment totals 336

#### *Working with the Data*

The transcripts were read and carefully reviewed for thematic elements that were common to each participant's case. Profiles were then created that described how their particular experiences in their schools shaped their first year of physical education teaching.

The transcripts were divided into data units for each research question which represented a single point of information pertaining to each individual teacher's experience in their school. The transcripts were then reviewed again to identify thematic elements that appeared to be common across individual cases (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Categories, themes, and tentative hypotheses about relationships were developed as the intermediate products of inductive reasoning (Buchbinder, 2011; Mello, 2002; Seale, 2003).

#### *Trustworthiness*

To ensure trustworthiness of procedures used while conducting this project, two methods described by Guba and Lincoln (2004): peer debriefing and member checking were utilised. The peer debriefer, with whom I met biweekly throughout the period of data collection and analysis, had access to all the data that were collected, this included research logs and interview transcripts. The central purpose of periodic meetings with the peer debriefer was to ensure that the findings were grounded in the data, rather than in my own expectations and dispositions. Member checks were possible in that follow-up interviews were conducted. In addition, participants were given their own profiles to review and were invited to provide written feedback.

## **Analysis and Interpretation of Data**

The analysis and interpretation of this study are reported in two sections. The first section provides profiles of two of the eight teachers and how their particular schools operated and supported or didn't support their first year of teaching. The two selected participants to be reported on marked the width of the spectrum of the beginning teachers' experiences in their first full year of teaching. One teacher, Joe, was challenged daily and found his first full year of teaching frustrating and tiresome. Sarah, the other teacher, had lots of support and actively shaped aspects of her classroom teaching. The second section of the paper summarizes the themes common to all participants. Collectively, these are brought together to relate the purpose of the study and respond to the research questions.

### **Teacher profiles**

#### ***Joe***

Joe's first year of teaching took place at a State Public high school in Sydney. He taught health and physical education to students in years 7-10. The isolation and lack of support he encountered from his fellow colleagues in his first full year of teaching made his ability to plan engaging and innovative lessons for his students quite difficult. Whilst Joe acknowledged that he was assigned to the "beginning teacher support team" overall, he had a difficult time trying to implement a curriculum that would move students toward his goals of knowledge and skill acquisition for lifelong participation. The problem was manifested even further by the inclusion in his classes of three Sudanese refugee students who Joe happily admitted he had no idea of how to teach them and engage them in his lessons.

Joe felt confident as he began his first year of teaching as he felt that his student teaching experience had provided him with the opportunity to become acquainted with the school routine as well as the necessary lesson planning and behaviour management. As a student teacher, however, Joe had not had to deal with faculty peers, parents, and administrators, as well as classes that had students with extreme learning needs. In addition, he had not been responsible for the curriculum, and above all, he had not been alone in a classroom environment.

Joe was not completely alone in his first year of teaching. Along with the beginning teacher support team, he also met regularly with a colleague teacher, roughly once a fortnight. John, a senior physical education teacher, taught at Joe's school, and was assigned as his mentor teacher for the year. Both teachers' taught lessons together on Wednesday and Fridays which allowed Joe to develop some confidence in the planning, preparation and execution of physical education lessons.

Joe's biggest challenge in his first year of full time teaching was dealing with students from non-English speaking countries which is something Joe had not had to do at all during his teaching practicum. Specifically now, Joe was in a school that had a student's population of 882 students of which 71 were classed as refugee students. These refugee students had little or no education background, nor did any of them understand the concepts of sitting in a classroom and listening to the teacher talk; now Joe was suddenly responsible for three of them in his classes, and he needed to ensure that they were learning and participating in the lessons and not distracting or interfering with his teaching or the learning of the other students.

Health and physical education in the school Joe is teaching at is not a strong priority as he commented during his interview. “Some of the other teachers, the principal, and even the parents do not place a lot of emphasis on physical education which can often make planning and preparing for lessons difficult”. Joe discussed how in his beginning teacher support group he has made mention of the difficulties in catering for the Sudanese refugee students in his class. He discussed how other beginning teachers in the group have also discussed their difficulty in engaging them in classes as well.

I was frustrated at my lack of success in engaging and teaching these students in my health and physical education class, so I brought it up at our meeting and it turned out I was not the only one. The deputy principal who chairs these meetings however was not very helpful and became dismissive of our problems citing that we just need to get a grip with teaching and get the job done. We were like, but we have not had any training or professional development in how to teach these students.

Joe fought very hard to maintain his goals during his first year of being a physical education teacher. Although he wanted his students to enjoy physical activity like any teacher, he also wanted them to learn something in his classes, not just play games and his fear was that because he lacked the skill to teach and engage the refugee students that were in his class, his classes turned into just mere games. Joe also lacked the ability to communicate with the parents of the Sudanese students. When he called parents at home to discuss problems with what their child was doing in class, he was confronted with a language barrier that he or the school could not break, giving further rise to frustration.

Joe’s experiences were further compounded by the Sudanese students in his classes’ inability to concentrate on the task at hand. Joe commented that:

I would often be giving instruction to the students on technique, such as how to hold a cricket bat, or how to dribble the basketball and the Sudanese students would be talking to each other or looking elsewhere...It was very off putting for me, I would chat to them and tell them to pay attention but a minute or two latter they would be doing it again.

Despite the negative experiences including the lack of training, professional development, professional support from the school and the inability to communicate effectively with parents Joe persevered with his efforts to provide what he considered to be a sound physical education program. He indicated that whilst it has not been easy, and he has often gone home at the end of the day wondering what I had achieved, he felt that he had made sufficient progress in getting to know and understand the Sudanese students and the experiences that they bring to the classroom. He discusses that:

It’s a trust thing, it took a long time to establish with the students, and partly because for a lot of them they come from such a traumatic background, and are used to running and hiding. PE and sport seems to be a great ‘break out’ time for them to play and have fun, something I imagine they have not had a lot of opportunity to do in their lives.

Asked about his thoughts on his education and being properly trained to deal with these types of students Joe remained fairly positive and upbeat about his course:

Look on one hand it is easy to say that Uni did not properly prepare me for the world of teaching but then that is true of any job; it's not until you put there that you really learn the ropes and start to gain valuable experience and knowledge about what you need to do. It would have been nice to have some knowledge and background on what to do and how to engage these students but Uni's can't prepare you for everything!

### ***Sarah***

Sarah taught physical education to students in Grades K-6 at a Catholic primary school in Wollongong. Sarah's experiences during her first year were in stark contrast to that of Joe. The facilities at the school were amazing for a primary school; two large gymnasias, a 33 metre swimming pool, two tennis courts, two outdoor basketball courts, and three spacious multi-purpose playing fields. The facilities, in conjunction with the variety of equipment available, allowed Sarah to teach virtually any activity that would be appropriate for primary-age school children.

Sarah had freedom to design her own physical education program. Sarah explained that as a result of her autonomy she had found it easy to adapt her teaching methods and goals of cooperation, skill acquisition, and enhancement of students' self-esteem to her new environment. Sarah was also able to address the Sudanese refugee students in her classes quite well. Unlike Joe, who taught 15 of the 71 Sudanese refugee students that attended his school, Sarah as a primary physical education teacher would teach all 89 Sudanese refugee students across the week at her school. The school with which Sarah was teaching was well prepared for the specific and special learning needs that the Sudanese refugee students would require. A specialist Sudanese teacher was placed at the school all week; this 'tribal' figure was a member of the local Sudanese community and was a contact between the school and the parents, as well as doubling as a translator for both the students and parents when communicating with the school and teachers.

Sarah, being a physical education specialist in the school, was the only PE teacher present. She acknowledged that at times this was difficult but nevertheless made good friends and contacts in the other teachers that were teaching at the school. Sarah added:

It could get a little lonely sometimes with no other teachers to talk to on the subject matter of PE; but most of the time it was fine; and there were always an abundance of students willing to come up and chat and want to play.

Whilst there were good support structures in place within the school and with the aid of a local Sudanese community liaison officer also placed in the school, Sarah acknowledges that she did have some challenging moments. One such challenge

which she recalls quite freely was a lunch time playground duty that she was doing and a large school yard fight broke out between a number of the older Sudanese and Lebanese boys on the playground. She felt quite intimidated at attempting to step in a break up the fight as not all of the boys were small and tiny. She comments that:

This one day when I was on playground duty I was quite scared and intimidated for both myself and the boys fighting in case one of them got seriously hurt. Attempting to move in and break up the fight was also quite confronting.

Asked about her thoughts on her education and being properly trained to deal with these types of students Sarah was very complimentary and praise worthy of her pre-teacher education training:

I really enjoyed my Uni course and I believe that it properly prepared me for the students that I would be teaching. It gave me a great core knowledge set that of course I have added to since beginning teaching, but I was never led to believe that my Uni course would provide me with all of the answers....and guess what it didn't! But I believe it provided me with the necessary skill set to get my job done and done well!

### ***Beginning teacher's common experiences of all participants***

Each of the beginning teacher's described how throughout their first full year of teaching physical education in the various schools they all encountered difficult and confronting moments not only with the Sudanese refugee students in their classes, but also the mainstream white Anglo-Saxon students. Though each case was different, there were some similarities that occurred amongst all eight teachers. Six factors were identified as being the most significant characteristics common to each of the beginning teachers: the physical education facilities, the presence or absence of teaching colleagues, the scheduling of physical education classes, the community environment, communication amongst staff, students and parents and the actual students. In addition to the six significant factors that were explicitly identified by the participants as influential during their first year of teaching, important contextual conditions could be inferred from close examination of the interview transcripts. Unarticulated factors (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) were implicit in many of the stories, and some of these appeared to be sufficiently common to the first-year experience to represent additional themes of influence in the process of learning to teach physical education in schools. These unarticulated factors included: the role of physical education in the schools, the teachers' sense of efficacy, the teachers understanding of refugee students, and the realities of teaching in school versus what the teacher expected whilst at University (see Table 2).

**Table 2 Common school factors to all participants**

School factors	Description
<i>Most significant</i>	
Physical education facilities	Teaching areas affected activities that teachers could teach
Presence or absence of colleague teacher	Colleague present had mixed views, no colleague present enjoyed the freedom, but also would have liked someone to guide them and let them know they were doing things right
PE class schedule	Not enough time, poor timings throughout the day
Community environment	Lack of local parks was an issue for some of the teachers
Communication	Poor levels exhibited between staff, students and parents, lack of understanding of teachers by students and parents
Students	Not used to education structured environments, required more intimate support to become accustomed to school routine
<i>Unarticulated</i>	
Role of PE in schools	Some schools viewed PE as not an important subject, teachers often had to advocate the need of the subject and its importance
Teacher's sense of efficacy	All of the participant teachers felt some form of success in their first year
Teacher's understanding of refugee students	No experience or knowledge of how to deal with and teach refugee students, a need of training and professional development to assist teachers in feeling more confident and comfortable
Realities of teaching versus expectations of teaching whilst in University	Reality of a lot of 'on the job' training was acknowledged by the participants

The themes in Table 2 summarise the results of this study and respond to the research questions. The discussion that follows does not attend to the themes individually, but focuses instead on several subtle points within the themes.

These beginning teachers were characteristic of many first-year teachers in that they were expected to perform the same duties as a seasoned veteran in the education system. Although many of the participants were assigned mentors, the participants found these mentors to be of little help beyond learning the daily routines of the school.

Also, like other beginning teachers, most of the novices experienced "reality shock" (Ibrahim, 2012), but in the case of these beginning teachers there was an additional cultural shock with the teaching of Sudanese refugee students. Nearly all participants reported that they had not anticipated such inadequate facilities, their rigorous teaching schedules, or the lack of support received from supervisors and colleagues especially in terms of how best to include and cater for the diverse learning needs of the refugee students. Moreover, with few exceptions, their stories indicate that they were not prepared to confront the social and cultural forces within the school community with respects to the refugee students.

The nature of physical education and its consequent place within the school and wider community clearly indicated to a number of the beginning teachers that they were teaching a subject which is not regarded with the highest of status. In terms of facilities, a number of the teachers were forced to conduct their classes in areas and with time allocations that were less than adequate for instruction and were forced to do so with fewer resources than would be considered minimally adequate in the classroom. Sarah seemed to be the only teacher in the group who had adequate equipment and facilities to conduct her lessons. The remainder spoke quite poorly of their PE setups. Grace's situation exemplifies her belief that facilities strongly influenced her curriculum and her goals for her students. Grace's reactions to her facilities were typical of many participants in this study:

The conditions in the school for teaching and assessing physical education are a total joke. I have a lopped sided basketball court that is on a 45degree slope, a small cow paddock oval that I am not allowed to use as it seems there may have been asbestos buried underneath it, and I have a hall that swelters in the heat because there is no air-conditioning, not to mention the hand me down bats and balls I have which predate World War II.

Mixed messages were reported on regarding the presence of a colleague teacher. Some of the participants who did not have a colleague teacher present indicated that this allowed great flexibility for them as a teacher in how they taught and programmed their classes. This absence was generally reported in primary schools. These teachers who did not have a colleague present also indicated that it would have been nice for someone to let them know what they were doing in class was correct. The participant teachers that did have a colleague present were a little uncomfortable as they indicated it was like they were back doing their practicum's and needed to be supervised at all times. Matthew indicated his feelings on a colleague teacher being with him during some of his lessons:

It was kind of a catch twenty-two situation. On one hand I didn't like it because I am a qualified teacher now and don't need to be supervised at every point of my lesson, while on the other hand it was handy to have someone there at different times to support me and back me up, so yeah, difficult to give a definitive positive or negative attribute to it.

The scheduling of classes while not a hugely negative area for the first year out teachers still proved to have some frustrations. Generally these surrounded the lack of communication surrounding the timing of classes. This tended to be an issue more so with the high school teacher's who taught a combination of theory and practical based lessons. The primary school teacher's did not have a choice in classes as they taught practical lessons all day. The community environments too were not a hugely negative experience for the students; however one participant did mention that this was the worst part of her PE lessons when taking the students down to the local park. Ebony commented that:

Taking 12 year olds down the road to the park is hard enough at the best of times, combine this when you have a group of students that have never been able to walk down the road in their own country for fear of being chased or attacked and you can imagine that a simple five minute walk can end up taking the better part of the entire lesson because they stop at every house to look and stare and talk.

Communication proved to be a critical issue that all of the beginning teachers identified needed to improve in the schools they were teaching in. Whether it was communication between colleagues and themselves, between students and themselves or parents and themselves overall the participants felt that this was an area that let them down considerably. The participants responded to these problems in ways that reflected individual skills and dispositions, as well as the unique features of each school. For example, conversations in the interviews often touched on the participants' need to feel some sense of success in their day to day exchanges and encounters with the staff and students. At many of the schools, however, it was difficult to sustain any such practical sense of accomplishment due to the high degree of non-English speaking background that many of the refugee students brought to the schools.

The participants reported consciously altering both their teaching behaviours and their teaching objectives so that they would be more congruent with what they perceived to be the norms of their schools. Indeed, all of the participants who reported having to adjust their teaching styles and goals also indicated the firm belief that if (or when) their situation changed they would (and could) return to their earlier teaching methods.

The participants' commitment to the teaching profession was a constant powerful message that came through the interviews, despite the many challenges that the beginning teachers faced. Joe acknowledged that his intentions to keep trying to get the best out of all of his students:

It's been a long and challenging year...there have been times when I have felt like it wasn't worth it, but overall I feel as though I did achieve something...and it can only get easier from here!

Joe's sense of efficacy in his teaching was not attained through his students' level of achievement and participation, but rather by his feeling that he had made a difference

in their personal lives and instilled some thought of the importance of physical education.

Many of these first-year teachers were able to look beyond the limitations of their schools, their University education and their experience and feel at least some sense of having done worthy work. Although it may have been necessary to modify their initial intentions and plans of what would work in the classroom with the students, many of these teachers were able to look forward to a second year in the same school with a degree of optimism. There were however, some teachers that believed the cultural and social climates and difficulties that they encountered in their first year within the school and community were just too difficult and would not improve. Those teachers decided not to leave teaching, but to leave their present posting in search of a school that might provide better support.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study, when added and compared to the information provided in the literature, suggest that despite some modest efforts, many primary and secondary schools provide inadequate support for beginning teachers. First-year physical education teachers, like other beginning teachers, still learn the ropes alone, especially if they are employed as a PE specialist in a primary school. Moreover, the subject matter of physical education presents unique problems in accomplishing the transition to professional teaching because of its needs on equipment, timetabling and its constant need to advocate itself against other key learning areas (Hardy, 1999; Sparkes, et al., 1993).

Additionally, these beginning teachers have also had the challenge of integrating and including a number of Sudanese refugee students into their classes, students that for many of them had never heard of or came across and certainly did not receive any training on how to deal with them in their University degree.

The study provides insight into how eight first year physical education teachers engaged with Sudanese refugee students in their physical education lessons. At the time of the last interview, six of the participants had intended to remain at their schools. Ebony and Joe had sought and found employment as physical education teachers at other schools. Despite their struggles to reconcile what was promoted in their teacher education programs with what was possible in their schools, all participants wanted to continue teaching physical education.

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