




Effects of walking long distances by ECD learners in Shamva district, Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract—The education landscape Studies have been carried out on the effects of distance from home to school on the performance of ECD learners. Various factors that affect learners' academic performance, such as poor attendance, school dropouts, and poor academic performance, have been associated with long distances to school. The long distance to school affected the learners' health and educational achievements. This study adopts a social constructivist paradigm, a qualitative approach through a case study research design. Twenty parents and twenty ECD learners were selected from primary schools in the Shamva district, Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and participant observations. It is unearthed that when ECD learners walk long distances to school, it is a complex and heterogeneous problem that can lead to several issues. Long walking distances make ECD learners reach school very exhausted, resulting in poor concentration on the learning areas being taught and sometimes dosing in class, hence failing to learn effectively. This is because of tiredness. ECD learners' minds and bodies fail to work effectively and efficiently, hence their inability to learn. Thus, circumstances like this act as an obstacle and impediment to effective learning because learning requires calmness of mind, and if by any chance the learner is stressed, disturbed, nervous, harassed, annoyed, pissed off, or worried, he or she cannot learn effectively. The government and other concerned organisations should build additional schools to minimize the travelling distance the ECD learners cover. Further, the re-settlement of scattered villages while planning to establish new schools should be considered. Schools should be located at not more than one kilometer from the residences of the communities to be served.

Keywords: Educational performance, ECD learners, Educational systems, walking long distance

To cite this article (APA): Mutonhodza, L. (2025). Effects of walking long distances by ECD learners in Shamva District, Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Studies in Inclusive Education*, 2(1), 12-17. <https://doi.org/10.38140/ijisie.v2i1.1613>

I. INTRODUCTION

ECD Education comprises ECD - A and ECD - B, and grades 1 and 2 form the Infant School Module. Rio et al. (2024) posited that the educational system generally refers to the structure of all institutions and the educational opportunities within a country. It includes all preschool institutions, from family and/or early childhood education to kindergarten, primary, secondary, and tertiary schools.

Academic performance refers to the ability to grasp the essentials of a subject, which is reflected in the percentage marks obtained through valid and reliable testing methods (Baliyan & Khama, 2020). In this study, learners' performance refers to percentage marks scored in any assessment exercise. The closeness of a school to the learners' homes has become a useful consideration in establishing public or private schools. Schools should, however, not be situated close to noisy environments such as bus terminus, taxi ranks, busy informal markets, hospitals, highways, railway lines or stations, refineries, industries, or close to hazardous environments like rivers, steep hilltops, high-tension electric lines, or close to dreaded or awkward environments like mortuaries, burial grounds, and ritual shrines. Most important when considering school location is the population threshold and the distance children travel to school daily. This has become the concern of the educational planners who use population densities as a rough index of school location and expansion in improving services provided. Therefore, the

distance travelled to school in educational planning should be a sine qua non in the approval and location of schools. However, it piques the researcher that despite this, a staggering majority of young learners in underdeveloped countries like Zimbabwe have been observed to be walking agonising, frustrating, and extremely painful long distances to and from school every day, and barefooted, especially in the rural areas (Arubayi, 2005). People living in farm areas and peri-urban areas face a similar challenge. They must navigate through rugged and uneven terrain. Duze (2011) observed that another source of worry is that distance travelled to school is proportionally related to illnesses like absenteeism, juvenile delinquency, truancy, lateness, and general indiscipline. This has a significant bearing on the educational performance of such affected learners. Educational experts consider a distance exceeding two kilometers to school on foot too long for children between six and thirteen. If learners walk over two kilometers to school, the outcomes would not be in the best interest of both the learner and the school because the set, stated, and intended goals and objectives may not be effectively achieved.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This problem of ECD learners walking a long distance to school is not akin and unique to Zimbabwe alone. Long distances to and from school have been a topic of interest to scholars in various countries such as America, Europe, and the Middle East, and they are mainly prevalent in Africa. This factor may affect learners' academic progress and

performance (Melack, 2014; World Bank, 2019). The Zimbabwean government has stipulated that schools should be located not more than five kilometers from the residences of the communities to be served. Significant strides have been made to that effect, although the country still has some areas where learners as young as five walk for a distance exceeding five kilometers when going to school. Ncube et al. (2015) compared the distance travelled to school by learners in Tsholotsho district, Matabeleland North Province, and the effects of long distances on school attendance. He concluded that the location of a sizeable number of primary and secondary schools in Tsholotsho district was far away from the residences of the learners and had some ripple effects on school attendance. There is empirical evidence on distance travelled to school by learners and its consequent effects on school attendance in many parts of the country in Zimbabwe. Also, research evidence shows that young learners' long distances travelled to school are statistically positively correlated to high dropout rates in both primary and secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Most rural and farm areas of Zimbabwe have been observed to record large school dropouts involving ECD learners (Mutonhodza, 2024; Dube & Jita, 2018). Empirical research in Third World countries indicates that early school dropout positively affects the distance between schools and learners' homes (Vasquez, 2015). Other researchers have attempted to link the distance to school and the learners' academic proficiency. Learners who are less gifted academically may cite obnoxious reasons like the long distance between home and school to justify dropping out.

Suppose the average distance to school can be shortened, particularly for primary school learners. In that case, the learners get a vast opportunity and more time to dedicate to school studies, work at home or leisure activities. Learners' academic performance in schools, especially those in rural and farm areas, is limited by many educational problems today, ranging from a shortage of suitable and adequate teaching and learning materials such as textbooks, inappropriate infrastructure at school, and long distances covered by learners to school others. Adefunke (2015) observed that the distance to school in Bauchi State, Nigeria, made it necessary for the learners to use any kind of transport, like walking on foot. Learners can also use old, rickety bicycles. This resulted in truancy among learners, hence affecting their learning. Truancy or absenteeism affects learners because when a student is absent, his /her fellow learners proceed with learning and leave him/her behind. In addition, Melack (2014) established that long walking distances made learners reach school very exhausted, resulting in poor concentration on the subject being taught and sometimes dosing in class, hence failing to learn effectively. This is because of tiredness. Learners' minds and bodies fail to work effectively and efficiently, hence dyslexia and poor learning ability. Thus, circumstances like this act as an obstacle to effective learning because learning requires calmness of mind, and if by any chance the learner is stressed, disturbed, nervous, harassed, or worried, he or she cannot learn effectively. This can seriously impact young learners as they will be at a stage where they formulate ideas about going to school. They find attending school uninteresting and arduous (Mutonhodza, 2024).

The Standard and Newsday December 8 (2021) highlighted that about 40% of pupils in Early Childhood Development (ECD) classes fail to attend school due to the long distances they must travel to access education (Chikandiwa, 2021; Manika, 2021). Thabela, the then permanent secretary in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, on Newsday of 08 December (Chikandiwa, 2021) said that despite government efforts to ensure every child had access to education, several children were still failing to go to school because of different factors. Early life experiences, from conception until seven years of age, set a trajectory for good life-long health and well-being, with lower cardiovascular disease, non-communicable infections, and higher earnings. Hence, investments in Early Childhood Development are critical for children, communities, and nations (Zimbabwe Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2020). Thabela (2021) pointed out that parents and guardians make choices for their young children

regarding which school to attend, and foremost in consideration is the performance status of the school in national examinations and closeness to the home. It is therefore believed that the parameters of nearness or closeness to homes for approval and the location of schools are important since being too far from school could lead to complete dropout from the school system (Duze, 2011). Walking long distances to school affects ECD learners' daily school attendance, which, in turn, affects educational achievement.

Stanley et al. (2017) concluded that long distances to school can lead to poor attendance, dropout, and academic performance. Another source of worry is that distance travelled to school by ECD learners has some measure of relationship to ills like absenteeism, delinquency, truancy, lateness, indiscipline, and non-attendance to school. These ills, singly or combined, ultimately affect achievement at school (Duze, 2011; Oneya & Onyango, 2021). Long distance may force ECD learners to leave school early to avoid arriving home late (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This is typical of schools where hot sitting is practiced. This becomes so stressful for young learners. Therefore, the long distance to school results in less time used for productive learning (Muhia, 2015; Juneja, 2001). This concurs with Kiroto's (2012) publication cited in Muhia (2015), who states that long distances to school cause irregular attendance and temporary school withdrawals, leading to dropout. The learners arrive at school tired and find it hard to actively concentrate on the classroom activities. In the Middle East, Zeragaber et al. (2024) established that ECD learners who travel several kilometers daily might be disheartened from going to school and voluntarily prefer to drop out.

Parents get deeply worried about the safety of their children when the young learners must travel longer distances to school. In Zimbabwe, distance is a deterrent variable for the participation and achievement of learners in school (Chitondo, 2022; Wangombe, 2018). Chikwiri and Musiyiwa (2017) revealed that many ECD children in Zimbabwe's rural and urban areas still walk far longer. Accessibility and proximity in an area are among the most critical considerations of school location (Yemane & Tsige, 2022). Nhundu (2023) suggested that primary schools and daycare centres would be better located near learners' domiciles. As such, distance from home to school is essential for access to education.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study explores the effects of walking long distances by ECD learners in Shamva District, Mashonaland Central Province, Zimbabwe.

IV. METHODS

Research paradigm

This study is premised on the social constructivism theory because it resonates well with the construction of knowledge, which suggests that knowledge is constructed from experience (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020; Babbie, 2021). Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 38) claim that "social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences and meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas". The researcher will listen carefully to what people say or do in their life settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Adu & Okeke, 2022). The constructive paradigm was helpful as it enabled the researcher to uncover, understand, and explain mechanisms underlying the complex phenomenon of understanding educational systems by exploring the effects of long-distance walking by ECD learners when going to school.

Research approach

This study utilised the qualitative approach because of its strength in discovering more about genuine and unexplored problems. Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Babbie (2021) defined qualitative research as research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This approach was chosen because

it allowed the researcher to describe non-statistical inquiry techniques and processes to gather data about social phenomena. The findings require an interpretive, naturalistic approach to discuss the findings. This study explored the effects of walking long distances by ECD learners when going to school.

Research design

This study adopts the case study design. McMillan and Schumacher (2014, p. 370) defined a case study as, "an in-depth analysis of a single entity." The researcher opted for the case study as this study involves a bounded period and a small sample size in only primary schools in the Shamva district. In this study, data was extensively collected in selected primary schools in the Shamva district; therefore, it can be argued that it was bound. The case study method was chosen since it entails collecting extensive data to comprehensively understand the studied entity (Adu & Okeke, 2022). In this study, the researcher sought an in-depth understanding of the effect of walking long distances by ECD learners when going to school. The contemporary phenomena were investigated within a real-life context using multiple sources.

Participants

Twenty teachers and twenty ECD learners, four from each school, were purposively selected, in concurrence with the argument that a case study selects a small geographical area or a minimal number of individuals as the study subjects (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Eroglu & Kaya, 2021). The participants were selected for their appropriateness in identifying participants for data gathering. Purposive sampling was used in this study to select the research participants meticulously and cases that would provide rich, relevant, and insightful data in line with the research question. Purposive sampling allowed the study to focus on specific characteristics and experiences crucial to the study's objectives.

Data collection instruments

Semi-structured interviews

The researcher used interviews to solicit information from teachers on the effects of walking long distances to school by ECD learners. Interviews involve numerous crucial questions that make it easier to discover the parts that give meaning to the research. They also allow the interviewer to chase an impression of the interviewee or get them to explain a response more thoroughly. In addition, the responses given were immediately received, which means that semi-structured interviews have the advantage of ensuring a high response rate (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews have flexibility in allowing for the expansion of valuable data to the participants. Still, the researcher may not have considered it relevant beforehand (Gill, 2008). Thus, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to add new aspects that may not have been included in the themes covered during the interviews. They enabled the researcher to discover what others feel and think about their way of life. Through what the researcher has heard and learned, he can extend his intellectual and emotional reach across time, class, race, gender, and geographical divisions (Vicki et al., 2018). Interviews tend to be effective and flexible research tools, which assisted the researcher in understanding the effects of walking long distances to school by ECD learners.

Participant observations

This study dedicated quite a significant amount of time to observing some of the phenomena related to the current study. Of particular focus were the distance the ECD learners travelled to school on foot, their mood on the way to school, their punctuality, participation in classroom activities, their perception of early school experiences, and their performances in daily written and oral activities. The researcher also wanted to establish how the ECD learners felt when they arrived late for school and the teachers' perceptions towards ECD learners who arrived late at school. Most importantly, the researcher wanted to establish how teachers handle ECD learners who walk long distances to school when they show wanton signs of tiredness, fall fast asleep during learning time, withdraw and disengagement from classroom activities, play truancy, and frequently absent themselves, leading to school dropout.

Procedure

Before going into the field to gather data, the researcher obtained written permission from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education to conduct this study. The researcher also explained the purpose of the research to the officials before making appointments with respondents in the sampled schools before conducting the interviews. The researcher interviewed twenty teachers, four from each sampled school. The participants were questioned at their schools because it was more convenient. The interviews were approximately 20 minutes long on average. The researcher recorded voice audio and took shorthand notes of the interview proceedings in his notebook. The interview schedule consisted of themes since the researcher used semi-structured interviews. The researcher allowed the respondents to talk about their experiences, taking note of facial expressions and signs. This allowed the researcher to pose follow-up questions to assess better the participants' understanding of the problems they faced in schools. The researcher contacted the interviewees one week before interviewing them to determine if they were ready to participate in the study. Arrangements were made to interview the participants after working hours and conduct the interview at their stations. Permission was sought from the district education officials for the researcher to meet the participants on school property.

Data analysis

This study analysed data thematically. Data gathered through the semi-structured interviews and observations were analysed and presented thematically and in tables. Interpretations were based on the analysed and presented data. Interpretation was related to the findings and results of existing theoretical frameworks and showing whether these are supported or falsified by the new interpretation (Creswell, 2021). The researcher used reduced data, interpreted it, and derived insights from it by organising, summarising, categorising, and analysing it. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews and observations was organised through the rigorous process of data transcription, coding, categorising, labeling, and identifying themes to be analysed concerning the study's specific objective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study utilised other data sources, like participant observations, to enhance reflexivity and avoid bias. Rigorous data analysis techniques were employed by using multiple people in data coding. The researcher debriefed the participants after completing the study to avoid deceit.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were recognised to prevent harming or wronging others, promoting good, and being respectful and fair. Ethics is a set of moral principles and rules of conduct. Ethics in research relates to the application of a system of moral principles. Pham (2018) emphasises that it is vital that researchers respect the constitutional rights, privacy, dignity, and emotional state of their participants and the integrity of the organisation within which the research occurs, which is what the researcher in this study did. Participants had the necessary information to decide whether to participate in the research, including the aims, what will be involved, anonymity, and confidentiality (Pham, 2018). Thus, the researcher was guided by these ethical considerations throughout this study in the Shamva district. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants before the interviews and the observations. Unclear issues were clarified before the interview, and the participants willingly accepted to participate in the study. The anonymity of the respondents was ensured as all the participants did not disclose their names to protect their identities. Confidentiality was ensured to protect the participants against harm and to ensure their right to privacy. Guarantee of confidentiality, voluntary consent, the right to withdraw, and contact information were discussed before data collection commenced (Bryman, 2021). The participants were informed that they would withdraw from the study at any point if they felt uneasy about their involvement.

V. RESULTS

The research unearthed that the distance travelled to school has some measure of relationship to ills like juvenile delinquency, truancy, lateness, and indiscipline. If ECD learners walk over two kilometers to school, the outcomes would not be in the best interest of both the learner and the school because set goals and objectives may not be completely achieved. The distance travelled to school by learners has consequent effects on school attendance. The distance to school impacts the educational performance of ECD learners. Long walking distances made ECD learners reach school very exhausted, especially in the hot summer season. This resulted in poor concentration on the subject being taught and sometimes dosing off in class, thus failing to learn effectively and falling into some dyslexia. Some learners from ECD classes failed to attend school daily due to the long distances they had to travel to access education. Long distance to school led to poor attendance, dropout, and academic performance. The teachers lamented that bad weather in the form of rain, coldness, wind, dust, and hotness created unfriendly conditions for ECD learners, particularly those who must travel a long distance by foot. Many learners dropped out of school during the rainy and cold seasons. Some parents organised a shuttle car to ferry their children to school. Some failed because of financial incapacitation. All the teachers pointed out that the longer the travel time to school is, the more difficult it is for children to reconcile work and school attendance (Chitondo, 2022).

Drawbacks faced by ECD learners as walking long distances to school

ECD learners faced some drawbacks due to walking long distances to school. Such drawbacks include a slump in academic performance at the end of the term or year, poor self-esteem both at school and at home, poor and retarded self-concept, poor communication skills, disruption in the learning program, indiscipline on the part of the affected learners, a slump in the learner's ability to learn progressively, laziness, truancy, juvenile delinquency, cheating, disobedience, theft, and it eventually leads to permanent school dropout.

Walking long distances to school coupled with unfavorable weather conditions like rain, slippery roads, dusty roads, and general safety of ECD learners on their way to and from school on foot affected ECD learners' attitudes and perceptions towards school work. Some learners fell victim to instances of bullying on their way from school. This was attributed to the long distances travelled. Some failed to resist peer influence and misbehave while leaving school. Some of the learners were seriously affected by the hot weather to such an extent that they suffered from headaches and mild nose bleeding because of being exposed to the sun for a long time.

Reasons for ECD learners walking long distances to school

one of the seasoned teachers said,

"Lack of shuttle transport for ECD learners to school is one of the factors contributing to learners walking long distances to get to the primary school. When ECD learners walk long distances due to the geographical location of their homes, this creates negative attitudes towards schooling amongst ECD learners" (Teacher A).

One of the teachers reported that late coming is the first sign that learners are coming from homes far away from the school, yet the only option is to walk on foot, although some of the learners whose homes are very close to the school also arrive late at isolated times. During the winter season, the learners must wake up a bit earlier to get to school before lessons commence. As such, late coming to school persists before learners become chronic absentees. Teachers categorically mentioned late coming as an underpinning reason for learners walking long distances, some of whom must perform domestic chores like fetching water from the community borehole or well before going to school. One learner stated that late arrival caused him to be a chronic absentee. He said,

"Once I realise that I am late for school, I just decide to stay at home or play truancy because, if I am late for school, the teacher will be angrily waiting for me with a scaring whip" (Learner X).

Melack (2014) established that long walking distances made ECD learners reach school exhausted, tired, and hungry, resulting in poor concentration on the subject being taught and sometimes dozing in class, hence failing to learn effectively. This is because of tiredness. ECD learners' minds and bodies fail to work effectively and efficiently when they are tired and wake up when they still need to enjoy their sleep, hence poor ability to learn and, subsequently, poor educational outcomes. Thus, circumstances like this act as a barrier and obstacle to effective learning because learning requires calmness of the mind, and if by any chance the learner is stressed, disturbed, nervous, harassed, or worried, he or she cannot learn effectively. It was observed that besides affecting daily school attendance when ECD learners walk nearly 5km or more to school, this could lead to complete dropout from the school system. Duze (2011) made these same disturbing observations. Also, Ncube et al.'s (2015) findings are synonymous with the research findings in this current study. ECD learners get demotivated to wake up every day when going to school since every school term has its fair share of challenges in inhibitive weather conditions like rain, coldness, hotness, wind, and combinations of the above nasty weather conditions. Those who live close to the school would only walk a short distance to get to school or to get home when coming from school. During the rainy season, it was established that some ECD learners walked barefoot to school on a rainy day without raincoats or even umbrellas. During winter, some ECD learners in rural and farm areas walk to school barefoot on gravel roads and rugged terrains. This led the ECD learners to develop negative perceptions about going to school.

As such, the distance walked by ECD learners when going to school, coupled with unfavorable weather conditions, significantly influenced the way learners liked or hated going to school. A very few lucky ones who used shuttle cars for transport when going to school and coming from school did not feel that the distance to school was such an issue to them. They only openly detested when asked to wake up to prepare for school. Conversely, they would have adequate time to rest when they get home, do their homework, play, and do other activities.

It was also observed that some learners use footpaths that pass through bushy areas, endangering the young learners' lives. This left ECD learners exposed to dangerous reptiles like snakes. Some use footpaths that pass-through graveyards and community cemeteries where burials occur almost daily. Teachers reported no standard procedures and measures to deal with late coming involving ECD learners. Some teachers reiterated that a lack of a clear policy on controlling late coming gave rise to learners' absenteeism from school now and then because of walking long distances to school.

One teacher said,

"It is easy for us to control ECD learners who arrive late for school because they walk long distances, but there is nothing we can do to them as there is no policy to deal with late coming and truancy besides punishment. These learners are also aware that even if they arrive late for school or bunk classes, nothing can be done to them, especially because punishing learners or using corporal punishment to instill discipline is disallowed. The use of corporal punishment has been outlawed. There are no alternative measures to instill discipline for the ECD learners who report late to school because of walking long distances" (Teachers Z).

Another teacher said,

"Late coming plays a negative role in promoting learner attendance. Unfortunately, most parents are not bothered that their children arrive late at school. It would appear as if some parents in the farm areas do not even bother to find out when their children arrive at school compared to when the school lessons are expected to begin. Sometimes, the ECD learners do off immediately after entering the classroom" (Teacher C).

Duze (2011) noted that walking long distances to school greatly makes ECD learners reach school with empty stomachs, even though they would have eaten at home, and lateness negatively influences their academic performance. This was also established in this current study. ECD learners negatively perceived school work at this crucial foundational phase. The learners carry light snacks for their food at

school during break time.

Commuting learners are affected to some extent, both health-wise and educationally (Baliyan & Khama, 2020).

VI. CONCLUSION

Some ECD learners must walk long distances to school because, at times, they live in areas that are distanced from the other areas of residence; hence, even attempts to set up ECD and daycare centres will not yield much. Some ECD learners who walk long distances to school live in a small compound detached from the rest of the compounds that act as the school's catchment area. Under such a situation, opening even a daycare centre becomes highly impossible because of the limited number of learners. In addition, some parents cannot afford to pay for a shuttle car for their ECD children to use for going to school and returning home. The only option will be walking on foot, which is not ideal.

Teachers, school heads, and parents must know that the distance their ECD learners walk to school affects their educational performance. As a panacea, primary schools should have daycare centres that are better located, close to the learners' domiciles and areas of residence. To ease the effect of distance travelled on school attendance by ECD learners, an organized transporting system to and from school should also be considered, especially in the rural areas, farm areas, and peri-urban where almost every child treks long distances to and from school every day, even in adverse weather conditions on top of exposing young learners to dangerous reptiles like snakes. Such measures will help reduce arriving late for school and dropout rates. There are repeated calls on the attention of all stakeholders to critically address challenges related to issues of access, equity, quality, and relevance of ECD programs.

The study further recommends building more schools closer to where ECD learners live to avoid the long-distance young learners traveling to attend school. The schools are encouraged to engage in school feeding programmes so that children from low-income families can concentrate on studying without thinking about their empty bellies to mitigate against the challenges that may affect the learning programs due to long distances. They can involve community members and parents in contributing money to purchase food items and volunteer to cook the food so that children can eat at school. This extends to increasingly establishing nutritional gardens and planting diverse fruit trees that get ripe in different seasons in the school orchard. Parents and communities should cooperate with other stakeholders like the government and NGOs to address this long-distance challenge so that the children can attend school at an appropriate age. This goes a long way toward establishing a positive perception of schooling at this crucial foundational phase. Reducing learners walking long distances to school necessitates joint efforts across stakeholders. It was recommended that policymakers and parents ensure that the children stay closer to the school to avoid wasting time travelling.

VII. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest in this study.

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