Transforming trauma-informed understanding into trauma-informed practice: The Reflective Circle Education Model

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Abstract

Trauma-informed practice in education applies neuroscientific knowledge of the profound impact of early childhood trauma on learning and emphasises the central role of the student-teacher relationship in recovery. In adopting trauma-informed understandings, teachers are required to change their current practices and strengthen their relationships with their students. This often requires a reassessment of the beliefs and values informing their practice and relationships and insight into alternate ways of responding. While recommendations in the trauma-informed education literature emphasise the need for schools to support teachers in this deeply reflective work, it is rarely included in implementation practices. This study trials a form of critical reflection, the Reflective Circle Education Model (RCEM), with a group of six teachers in a school in Victoria Australia over a school year. Teacher perspectives on the value of the RECM model to support trauma-informed practice are then discussed.

Keywords

trauma-informed practice, critical reflection, complex trauma, schools, teacher practice, teacher beliefs

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Introduction

'Trauma-informed' or 'trauma sensitive' education refers to a range of practices that 'realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery' (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 9). Recommendations for educators include strengthening the student-teacher relationship, providing safe, predictable and nurturing classroom environments and developing interpersonal responses that calm and regulate a traumatised student's emotional and behavioural reactions to fear (Perry, 2009). Trauma-informed literature also emphasises care for the educators, acknowledging that supporting traumatised students can be a source of teacher stress (Kim et al., 2021).

Students who have experienced trauma are more likely to demonstrate aggressive and/or avoidant behaviours during their schooling (Howard, 2019. The difficulty of providing a safe and emotionally rich environment for these students can be further complicated when teachers who are vulnerable to 'breathe in the emotions of those who have experienced trauma' (Ludick & Figley, 2017, p. 573) are experiencing high levels of negative emotions themselves (Southall, 2019). Charged with strengthening the critical student-teacher relationship, teachers are often required to exhibit high levels of self-regulation. Without a means of adaptively processing their strong emotional reactions and experiences, teachers often mask their feelings (Carson, 2007; Chang, 2009). Suppressing, faking or hiding of true emotions can lead to emotional exhaustion and ultimately burnout (Keller et al., 2014).

While the trauma literature clearly states that 'administrators at school and district levels should shoulder responsibility for embedding approaches and practices that encourage self-care and regulation for all adults in schools, including teachers and staff' (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 447), teachers are rarely provided with structures that support these aspects of their work (Howard, 2019). The explicit requirement of systematic structures to support the personal and professional work of educators is well described in trauma-informed school guidelines (Avery et al., 2020); yet, the structures to support teachers largely remain overlooked.

While allied health services have professional supervision models well established that support staff to process and reflect on their trauma-informed responses (Cortis et al., 2021; Newcomb, 2021), the education sector is yet to adopt similar support for teachers. This qualitative study trials a critical reflection model (Gardner, 2014) that encourages teachers to explore their underlying attitudes, understandings and beliefs that underpin their work. The value and efficacy of the Reflective Circle Education Model (RCEM) to support teachers implementing trauma-informed practices is then investigated.

Literature Review

The social support a teacher can offer a traumatised student can promote healthy emotional skills, healthy relationships and motivation to learn (Jennings et al., 2019). The interactions between a teacher and their traumatised student can '… soothe stress when they are positive and nurturing' and open the pathways for learning, however, '…harmful and distressing exchanges with others can magnify and entrench the brain-body responses to stress, further exacerbating the trauma' (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2018, p. 25). Teachers' understanding of trauma's impact and their beliefs and attitudes about trauma-informed responses can be important drivers of the social support they provide and determine their ability to act in trauma-informed ways (Berger, 2019; Metz et al., 2007).

Whether teachers' responses lead to 'nurturing' interactions or 'harmful and distressing exchanges' is influenced by teachers' own experience of emotional distress when managing the

behaviours associated with early childhood trauma; experiences which can leave the teacher feeling 'unsafe, overwhelmed, under-appreciated…, powerless and at times, helpless' (Howard, 2019, pp. 558–559). Building supportive relationships with their students becomes increasingly challenging when the behavioural difficulties associated with complex trauma have an impact on teachers' personal and professional well-being and sense of competence (Howard, 2019, p. 558). These strong negative emotions and associated lack of self-efficacy experienced by teachers have also been evident in more recent studies (Baxter et al., 2021).

For the important connection between teacher and student to develop, the teacher needs 'the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings and desires of children from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanour, expression and body language' (Van Manen, 1995, p. 44). This insightful ability underpins an empathetic student-teacher relationship, enabling a traumatised student to manage their own emotions and develop the necessary executive functions to learn (Hodas, 2006; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In trauma-informed education, it is recommended that teachers are provided the time and structures to 'reflect on a regular and ongoing basis'. (Avery et al., 2020, p. 394)

High levels of empathetic understanding and emotional regulation are needed to develop a trusted student–teacher relationship (Brunzell et al., 2016; Perry, 2009) and both require high levels of social and emotional competency from teachers. Teachers need to be 'culturally sensitive, understand that others may have different perspectives than they do, and take this into account in relationships with students, parents, and colleagues' (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 495). Despite the fact that they 'are constantly exposed to emotionally provocative situations and have limited options for self-regulation' (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 497), teachers are expected to model and elicit calm for their students. While managing their own emotional responses has been identified as a major stressor for teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), a structure for expressing and processing these emotions is yet to be included in trauma-informed school implementation. A recent analysis of trauma-informed educational approaches concluded 'it is essential … to also address the emotional stability and mental health needs of teachers and staff", (Frankland, 2021, p. 60) particularly given the challenges of recent COVID-19 school closures (Dooley et al., 2020).

Understanding the motivations and emotional reactions of a traumatised student is an explorative process, as both the impact and experience of trauma is unique for each child (Perry, 2009). Teachers also need to understand their own unique motivations and emotional reactions which require the opportunity for deep and critical reflection. Recognised in the recent National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education (Howard, 2021), schools are required to provide 'support, supervision and reflective practice to address the personal and professional impact of this work on educators' (Howard, 2021, p. 5).

Teacher Beliefs

The relationship between trauma-training and practice-change is strongly linked to what individual teachers believe (Avery et al., 2020). Teachers' beliefs are powerful determinants of learning outcomes for their students (Santos & Miguel, 2019), but less attention has been given to identifying and examining how those beliefs are enacted in schools: 'what teachers say and do in their classroom are governed by what they think and that teachers' theories and beliefs serve as a filter through which instructional judgements and decisions are made' (Farrell & Guz, 2019, p. 2). Teachers need the opportunity to explore these beliefs and how they are enacted within their classrooms. Exploring beliefs fosters changing practice, given 'the beliefs teachers hold not only shape teachers' pedagogy but also shape classroom interactions' (Li, 2013, p. 176). To understand

their relationships, teachers need the opportunity to reflect on their own emotions, values, beliefs and assumptions that inform their actions (Fook, 2010; Gardner, 2014). This self-reflection appears critical in enhancing teachers' social and emotional competency, strengthening the student–teacher relationship, and promoting the internalisation of healthy socio-emotional development for children who have experienced trauma (Alvarez, 2017; Diamond, 2015; Jennings, 2015). Deep levels of reflection and empathetic connection are required to fully understand another's behaviours (Schore, 2010). Therefore, after initial staff training in trauma-informed education, it is recommended that professional supervision and critical reflection be provided at a school level (Howard, 2021).

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection has long been a tool for the deeply interpersonal processing that trauma-informed education requires (Fook, 2010; Gardner, 2014). When combined with other colleagues' experiences and perceptions, critically reflective processes can become powerful sources of insight and change (Edwards, 2011; Morgan et al., 2013). Affording teachers the time and structure to critically reflect on their experiences and deeply explore personal challenges when teaching students from traumatised backgrounds is a critical step in the development of a trauma-informed school.

Critically reflective processes can provide the framework for teachers to explore their strong emotional reactions and the thinking that informs their practice through deconstructing the personal and cultural assumptions and values that motivate them (Morgan et al., 2015). Participants of an evaluative report on Early Adopters of Trauma-informed Care noted that where processes for reflection were included, greater impact on changed practice was reported (Dubay et al., 2018). However, structured processes for teacher critical reflection on their trauma-informed practices are yet to be described, implemented or researched in schools.

The Reflective Circle Education Model (RCEM). The Reflective Circle Education Model (RCEM) (Southall et al., 2021) trialled in the current study draws from Gardner's (2014) model of critical reflection, which has proven effective across health organsations. Gardner's model defines two distinct stages that structure the analysis of an experience, and through a series of questions, explores the feelings, thoughts, values and assumptions that are influencing the interaction.

The first stage deconstructs understanding of the significance of the experience for the person, identifying hidden or 'taken for granted' theory or assumptions underlying their thinking. Through examining where the theories or assumptions have originated, whether from family or individual experience or broader cultural norms, and questioning whether they fit with the person's preferred values and practices, the process can lead to deeper levels of personal insight and self-awareness.

The second stage reconstructs new ways of thinking and exploring how practices might need to change to fit how the person prefers to work or to better align with their fundamental values. Ideas about how to bring about such change and develop new strategies, identifying needed resources or research is then further explored (Gardner, 2014). This process can be implemented in a supervision session between one practitioner and their supervisor, or a facilitated group where the perspectives of all the participants contribute to the development of new perspectives as needed by the presenter of the experience.

The Reflective Circle Education Model (RCEM) (Southall et al., 2021) is designed as a group reflection of six to eight educators that is facilitated by one member of the group, either as an ongoing role or on rotation that shares responsibility among members. In this model, Reflective Circles (RCs) are normally run twice per school term, which means eight per year, in an Australian school. Educators remain in the same group for the eight sessions in order to develop increasing

levels of trust and closer bonds between members. The RCEM questions are provided with a clear structure, so facilitators are not required to be experts. The group designs their own protocols (agreed group behaviours) within the prescribed RCEM structure, and the facilitator asks/reads the questions in sequence, keeps the group to time and when necessary, provides reminders about the agreed protocols.

As stage one – the deconstruction stage (Gardner, 2014) – can require deep thinking and often considerable time to process in the group setting, the RCEM requires educators to reflect on and document their experience before the Reflective Circle (RC) session as a personal journal reflection. This journal reflection requires educators to identify their feelings about a particular experience, the meaning they derived from it and the contextual influences impacting that event. Educators then arrive for each one-and-a-half-hour RC with a summary of their journal entry – their 'story', to share with the group providing brief information about the experience and focussing on their current understanding of it. After sharing their five-minute summary, other perspectives on this experience are invited from the group – the 'sharing of wisdom'. Multiple perspectives are offered by the group about people in the 'story' through brainstorming possibilities. Each group member can offer possible positions or background to the experience and alternate ways of thinking about the behaviour or event. These perspectives reinforce that the meaning the person is making is not the only way of viewing the experience. Each educator has a further 5 minutes for this section. This forms the first round of the RC.

The next round – the reconstruction stage – asks each member how they would like to respond if the event they shared occurred again, which encourages articulating the changes they would like to make. They are then asked what resources or actions they may need in order to make their desired shift. Each member has one to two minutes for this summary.

The aim of this study was to trial a model of critical reflection to support teachers in the implementation of their trauma-informed understandings.

Methodology

Participants and Procedure

An expression of interest form to participate in the trial of the RCEM was distributed to the whole staff ($n = 46$) and 12 were received. Six teachers were selected (3 male and three female) for gender balance and to allow for a range of both age (between 24 and 62 years) and teaching experience (between two years and 40 years). Each teacher chose one student from their class as their focus for reflections throughout the year. The students, aged between six and 15, were described by their teachers as disengaged from classroom learning.

Six reflective circle sessions were held throughout the school year. Teachers were required to complete a reflective journal with phase one questions prior to each reflective circle. The questions asked them about their experience, the meaning they were making, the feelings associated with the experience and why it was important to them. The journal entries took between 20–40 minutes to complete. Protocols (agreed group behaviours) were designed by the participant group at the first reflective circle session. The group brainstormed what they needed in order to feel safe in the group and agreed to the following: be confidential, listen with a non-judgemental attitude, be positive, turn your mobile phones off, be on time, have our reflective story ready, don't cross talk. Each of the sessions was audio-taped and transcribed and all participant researcher names de-identified. Three, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were also conducted with each individual participant at the beginning, the middle and the end of the research project. These interviews explored the teachers'

views about their current teaching efficacy and their own knowledge growth throughout the process, as well as the value they saw in participating in the reflective circles. Interview questions asked participants to comment on changes they had observed in their thinking and practice and the impact, if any, of their experiences of the reflective circle on their personal and professional relationships.

Setting

A school in regional Victoria Australia catering for students between the ages of 6–18 years with a mild intellectual disability was selected. The teachers identified a high proportion of their students came from traumatic backgrounds, including some in out-of-home care. Permission to conduct the research was granted through the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (No: E15-135) and the State Government of Victoria Department of Education and Training prior to the research being conducted (DET No 2015–002,908).

Data Analysis

The data for this project included the individual written journal, the reflective circle discussions and the three one-hour interviews. The data was entered into NVivo (Version 12) (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018) for analysis. As the data was continually interrogated (Rice & Ezzy, 1999), patterns and themes emerged using an inductive process where data coding and analysis was driven by the content itself (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The themes were investigated and identified across the entire data set in order to explore the commonalities of experiences, rather than investigating unique or individual meanings and experiences found only in one data item. Three coders interrogated the data. Data excerpts were interpreted and codes identified for the meaning that 'lay beneath the semantic surface of the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 60). For example, the node titled 'Teacher Beliefs' required an interpretation of the text and analysis of its meaning. Where differences arose between coders, consensus through further discussion was sought. This process provided the first interpretation of the data and resulted in 52 nodes being identified. The content for each node was then further labelled by coder 1 with a gradually decreasing number of themes 'aggregated together to from a major idea in the database' (Creswell, 2002, p. 251). The second stage of the analysis was directed by the research question: How does the Reflective Circle Education Model support teachers in implementing trauma-informed education? And a more deductive process was employed to select from the themes already derived. The three coders then identified these larger themes through discussion and consensus of the content under each node. These are presented in the findings as: Developing insight, Multiple perspectives, Developing confidence, Shared concern, Time to process, Process negative feelings, Examining personal beliefs.

Findings

Developing Insight

Teachers placed high value on the Reflective Circle (RC) process to foster insight into how each student's background was directly connected to their unique experience of trauma. These insights were evident in the RC where teachers explored deeply the student's background and their deeper levels of understanding about their student's behaviours:

Well I think that it was because it's much deeper than that … it's got to do with what's on the inside of him from at home. It goes way back … I could find a solution to an incident and it's like putting a band aid on it, but really trying to understand his specific trauma made all the difference. (C, Reflective Circle Session 3)

Through structured time reflecting on what might be influencing student behaviour, teachers identified how the trauma impacted each individual differently, enabling them to develop uniquely responsive strategies for each student.

Multiple Perspectives

Teachers identified the broader perspectives gained through the RC process as central in broadening their thinking about a student and understanding their behaviour. All participants named the perspectives of others as critical to this understanding, typically saying:

I think getting the perspectives of different people, the Reflective Circles introduced to us … the perspectives of the child and the perspectives of the parent or researcher. And that's nothing I would have ever thought before because we don't necessarily take a situation and reflect on it from other points of view. You reflect on it, it's a self-reflection. So, that's what I really like about it … that it broadens your awareness. (S, Interview 2).

Developing Confidence

All participants believed they were judged by other staff and parents as ineffective or weak. Their sense of competence was challenged by their student's apparent lack of progress and often extreme behaviour responses. Through sharing thinking and experiences in RCs, teachers expressed growing confidence in their approaches and greater sense of efficacy. The agreement and affirmation of the group for a decision or strategy fostered their growing confidence. One participant said:

…you walked out [of the RC], not only feeling better if you had a really shitty week, or if the incident had really got you down, but you also walked out with some ideas or some directions of where you could go to try and resolve it or overcome or even deal with the situation, or how could I do it differently. It's great to have that camaraderie, I guess, within a small group where you feel you're supported, not being attacked. (J, Interview 2)

Shared Concern

RCs were an opportunity to share concerns about student behaviour and seemed to alleviate individual 'worry' as teachers realised other teachers also cared about the students:

… because these are our kids that we are concerned about, and they weigh heavy on your heart, and to be able to go and share it with people who also care, as much as you do. A burden shared is a burden halved, so … you're not carrying it on your own, and you've been supported by these people. (J, Interview 2)

Time to Process

Group reflection also provided the opportunity to process a student's repetitive behaviour, rather than ruminate upon it. Teachers valued time to process their experiences, which alleviated the negative emotions associated with constantly thinking about a student:

> …our workload is so busy that we don't get to have a dedicated time…to sit around with five other professionals and discuss that.… Whereas having that dedicated time, with people who are familiar with your student, who can provide those different perspectives or suggestions, or similarities to cases they've had and what they did in that situation is absolutely beneficial, such a relief. (J, Interview 2)

Processing Negative Feelings

Teachers also expressed a sense of relief that the strong negative emotions they were experiencing and expressing were a common experience for others. This sense of shared experience was often referred to as a strength of the RC process:

> I think there were light bulb moments, for sure. Everyone sort of went, 'Wow, it's not just me … you feel the same way. For me, seeing someone like M, who's so experienced and seems so calm and collected and just seems to know what he's doing - he is in the exact same boat and feels the same way I do, but he's just had a lot longer to learn how to, sort of, hide it. But it's still just as raw and, you know, just as apparent for him, as it was for everyone and I think that really came through that, 'Oh yeah, you're just like me'. (B, Interview 2)

Examining Personal Beliefs

The process of reflection in the RCs, particularly the online journals, encouraged teachers to examine their own beliefs and articulate background experiences influencing their current thinking. While teachers' family backgrounds varied, they all needed to challenge their beliefs in some way. For example,

> Respect, rules/compliance, equality are important values to me. My step-father was a military man and that had a big impact on my childhood. Military style disciple and anger is what I grew up with. (S, Online Journal)

In her final interview, S described how this changed for her through examining her personal beliefs in RCs:

> …well that power sort of stuff I suppose. But definitely discipline and control. I've never - I don't feel like I'm a control freak, but I've definitely see behaviour and consequences differently. Which is really good and it's less stressful for me too, I suppose. I don't get as frustrated with some behaviour because I don't see it, like, as naughty or as annoying because it's actually something going on for them. (S, Interview 2)

All participants valued examining such experiences to develop a deeper understanding and empathy for their student.

Discussion

The Reflective Circle Education Model (RCEM) provided an effective structure for this group of teachers to translate their trauma-informed understandings into more trauma-informed responses and interactions. Trialling new actions, attitudes or thinking after each Reflective Circle (RC) further embedded new ways of responding and facilitated the evolution of change for each teacher. Importantly, teachers also reported positive changes in their sense of competence and their connection to colleagues, reduced stress levels and a deeper understanding of the impact of trauma on the behaviour of their students.

Improved Sense of Efficacy

Initially, teachers consistently expressed the perception that their pedagogical and disciplinary decisions and competence relating to their traumatised student were viewed negatively by their peers. In the final interviews, however, this perception had changed as teachers reported a growing sense of confidence in those decisions. They valued the RCs for being able to articulate and critically reflect on their decisions, reinforcing their confidence in their actions. This was further strengthened by the sense of shared responsibility for those decisions from the group identified by several teachers as instrumental in reducing their anxiety about others' perceptions of their competence. Developing a critical attitude towards their own practice, articulating and testing their thinking through RC discussions, and feeling validated through group discussion was highly valued by these teachers. Rather than feeling overwhelmed or rendered helpless by these experiences, as reported by Howard (2019), these teachers were enabled to make a more conscious decision, informed by the group and immersed in a deeper understanding of the student. More trauma-informed responses replaced reactive responses and lead to feelings of greater self-efficacy.

Manage Emotions

Through the process of analysis on their experience, teachers could express and process their strong emotions, what Gardner (2014) describes as 'making conscious' the source of their feeling. This awareness led to some deep insights into the driving power of these teachers' feelings to influence both their practice and their interpersonal relationships. While the experiences they shared clearly demonstrated high levels of exposure to the emotionally provocative situations identified by Jennings and Greenberg (2009), the RC sessions provided the support to express and process their negative emotions and enabled them to reframe the thinking informing them. The validation of their feelings as legitimate and commonly experienced by everyone in the group brought a sense of relief and further developed their ability to remain calm in emotionally charged interactions with their student.

Changed Focus

As teachers play out their beliefs and values in the student–teacher interaction (Pianta & Walsh, 2014), their disciplinary decisions and the underlying values that inform them, are a critical influence (Osher et al., 2010). The reflective process in this study revealed teachers' value systems, originating from their families of origin, were challenged over time. There was a shift in emphasis from managing student behaviour through often punitive responses, to exploring the behaviour and what it might reveal about the student's traumatic background.

In the final interviews, several teachers reported their emotional or reactive responses to behaviour disruptions were replaced by a more considered, reflective response and a more empathetic understanding of the trauma behind their student's behaviours. RCs were effective in facilitating an important 'paradigm shift … from a focus on students' anger to a focus on the trauma students may have experienced that may have caused that behaviour'. (Smithgall et al., 2013, p. 404) This paradigm shift is a critical step in trauma-informed educational approaches as it strengthens the crucial student-teacher relationship and prevents re-traumatisation of the student (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2018). To facilitate the shift, teachers required dedicated time for critical reflection. As Morgan et al. (2015) contend, with investing time to explore and challenge currently held beliefs and the opportunity to trial new ways of responding, more teachers will be able to adopt trauma-informed approaches.

The Power of the Group

Learning about themselves as educators and feeling united as a group were aspects of RCs highly valued by these teachers. Over time, the group developed the capacity to offer and to ask for support from each other. Luthar and Mendes (2020, p. 147) explained that if adults in 'major socializing roles (parents as well as teachers) contend with high everyday stress, the most important protective factor is their ongoing access to supportive relationships'. The supportive relationships fostered in the group enabled teachers to manage the stress and frustration often experienced in their classrooms.

Teacher unity and mutual support have been identified as critical 'in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations' (Edwards, 2005, p. 169). The ability to work with others in the strengthening of purposeful responses to complex problems enhances professional practice as well as personal growth (Edwards-Groves et al., 2010). In the final interviews, the teachers identified the act of listening to the different perspectives of group members as the most valuable aspect of the RC and attributed the important 'shift' in their thinking to it.

The process of the RCEM develops 'relational expertise' (Edwards, 2005) in the context of complex social problems and classroom dynamics. Social problem solving was clearly evident in the RCs bringing deep insight to the teachers' interactions and pedagogical decisions. The RCEM's personal online journals allowed each teacher to start processing their experience, articulating the motivations behind their behaviour and responses. The strength of the RC group experience broadened teacher pedagogical responses and challenged their personal paradigms.

Limitations of the Study

The small sample size in this study and individual nature of the experiences for each of the six participating teachers, necessitates caution about generalisability. What was transformative for one teacher, had little relevance for another and no one revelation or understanding was applied to every member of the group. While the data was rich in supporting the professional growth these teachers experienced throughout the year, further trials of the RCEM in a range of settings are required before more generalised claims can be made. This process has begun, with some results reported in Southall et al., (2021).

Conclusion

Structured processes to support teachers in the ongoing translation of knowledge about trauma into trauma-informed practice need to be part of a trauma-informed school. These processes need to include opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their experiences, express their emotions, seek collegiate support and develop a deeper understanding of the impact of trauma for their own student and classroom context. Results of this study demonstrate the RCEM can play a central role in the implementation of trauma-informed education facilitating the personal and professional growth of educators as they interpret trauma-informed understandings into trauma-informed practices. While critical reflection and group supervision is often described in the trauma literature as an important feature of a trauma-informed approach, it is rarely a priority when implementing trauma-informed practices in schools. Addressing this blind spot in the current adoption of trauma-informed knowledges, has the potential to not only mitigate against the further traumatisation of students but to support the social and emotional health of their teachers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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