I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Editor on 14 June 2025 to check my spelling and grammar.

Section One

Age-appropriate teaching methods are used in early childhood education to promote holistic development in a variety of areas (Lunga, Esterhuizen and Koen, 2022). Two popular frameworks that represent this strategy will be compared in this research, Te Whāriki and the Foundation Phase curriculum. Although play is fundamental for promoting cognitive, social, emotional and physical development, these frameworks have different pedagogical approaches, philosophical underpinnings and guiding principles.

The Te Whāriki curriculum acknowledges that each person contributes their unique set of talents, abilities and qualities in addition to those passed down from family and ancestors. This emphasises the significance it is for children to have a strong sense of language, culture and identity. According to their traditions, children are viewed as naturally talented, whole and capable regardless of age or ability acting as living connections between the past, present and future, grounded in their ancestry (Ministry of Education, 2024). Additionally, it recognizes that every child has the right to equitable access to education, protection and the promotion of their health and well-being, as well as acknowledgment of their language, culture and identity. It upholds their right to self-determination, emphasizing the importance of respecting and fostering these fundamental aspects of their being (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Te Whāriki in New Zealand and the Welsh Foundation Phase are both extensive, play-based curricula that prioritise experiential learning for early childhood development. Activities that promote creativity, curiosity, language and social skills through both indoor and outdoor play are given priority in the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2019a; Welsh Government, 2019b). Similarly, Te Whāriki promotes a comprehensive strategy that incorporates experiences both within and outside the classroom, encouraging relationships based on mutual respect and trust (Education Scotland, 2020). To develop confident, capable learners, both curriculums emphasise the significance of identity, wellbeing and social competence (Veazey, 2020; Education Scotland, 2020). However, Te Whāriki and the Foundation Phase have somewhat different ideas. Peer learning, family involvement and

experiential, child-led inquiry are the main focusses of the Foundation Phase, which promotes wellbeing and social skills through a developmental, constructivist and sociocultural approach (Welsh Government, 2016a; Waters, 2016; Welsh Government, 2015a; Welsh Government, 2015b). In contrast, Te Whāriki is based on bicultural Māori values and emphasises identity, language and cultural competence. It is represented by the metaphor of a woven mat, which stands for inclusivity and interconnectedness and it emphasises respectful relationships as the foundation for education and wellbeing (Chan, 2019; Hamilton and Vermeren, 2016; Wood and Hedges, 2024).

The evaluation method used by Te Whāriki is mostly formative and narrative, focussing on children's abilities and objectives through storytelling as opposed to standardised tests (Veazey, 2020). Through incorporating family and community values, it encourages cultural inclusivity, equity and active engagement (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2021; Ward, 2016). While the Foundation Phase profile supports developmentally appropriate assessment through formative evaluation and observations, it offers a consistent baseline that is in line with end-of-phase results (Welsh Government, 2017b). With an emphasis on the environment and guidance from teachers to promote social and emotional development, the Foundation Phase highlights instructional practices that encourage active, exploratory learning (Welsh Government, 2016b; Jones, 2025).

To foster independence, self-discovery and experience learning in both indoor and outdoor settings, the Foundation Phase curriculum places a strong emphasis on play-based learning, combining adult instruction with child-led activities (Ysgol Ty Ffynnon, no date). In a supportive environment, this method promotes cooperative learning (Thomas and Lewis, 2016). Similarly, Te Whāriki promotes active, group participation while highlighting motivation, emotional intelligence and individuality. Learning Stories, which are culturally sensitive narratives that reflect children's development within a culturally responsive framework, are a formative assessment technique that supports children's development (Veazey, 2020).

Promoting equality, diversity and family involvement was a key component of the Foundation Phase. In addition to promoting safe spaces that encouraged independence, self-worth and world awareness through experiential play, it

acknowledged parents and other carers as the primary instructors (Welsh Government, 2015b). Similarly, Te Whāriki emphasises inclusivity, biculturalism and cultural identity. With an emphasis on respecting cultural backgrounds, languages and customs. The curriculum emphasises respectful, reciprocal relationships that support cultural values and community engagement to develop children's mana status, authority, self-esteem and sense of belonging (Education Scotland, 2020; Ward, 2016).

Through accessible, culturally sensitive settings that promote self-reliance and self-discovery, the Foundation Phase cultivates inclusivity by offering safe, engaging indoor and outdoor spaces catered to varied needs (Welsh Government, 2015b). Similarly, Te Whāriki promotes a flexible, child-centred curriculum with principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes. It places more emphasis on formative assessment techniques such as Learning Stories that highlight personal growth and goals than it does on strict standards (Veazey, 2020). Te Whāriki also emphasises the value of culturally relevant learning methods and community resources, guaranteeing that each child's heritage is acknowledged and respected, breaking down barriers and advancing equity (Ward, 2016).

Early childhood educators are the most qualified to make context-specific decisions on teaching and learning, according to Te Whāriki (Arndt and Tesar, 2015). Also, providing a flexible framework for regionally relevant curricula centred on inquiry, belonging and holistic development and encourages culturally sensitive evaluation techniques such as Learning Stories (Cameron *et al.*, 2023). Professional growth and appropriate training are necessary for its efficacy. Despite obstacles, Te Whāriki continues to be a forward-thinking, culturally sensitive curriculum that integrates a range of viewpoints to guarantee its continued relevance (One and Ewens, 2019).

According to research, the developmental outcomes of children are greatly influenced by the qualifications of teachers (Yang, Rahman and Sun, 2025). Growth at every stage is promoted by supportive learning settings (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018). Practitioners in Wales are required at least a level two qualification in Children’s Care and Development Practice (Welsh Government, no date) whereas those in New Zealand usually have a level seven degree, such as a Bachelor of Teaching in Early Childhood Education (Teaching Council of Aotearoa

New Zealand, 2021). Practitioners in the Foundation Phase are urged to acknowledge the prior learning of the children, provide options, challenge, encourage and support their continued development (Welsh Government, 2015b). Environmental assessments that link education levels to overall quality have shown that higher teacher credentials are linked to better early childhood quality (Campbell Collaboration, 2017).

With a strong emphasis on indoor-outdoor access and collaborative outdoor education bolstered by improved adult-to-child ratios, the Foundation Phase's emphasis on play-based, child-initiated learning and required practitioners to adopt structured play, active and child-led activities (Thomas and Lewis, 2016). Through hands-on, experiential learning that meets children's developmental needs and values equality, diversity and self-worth, the curriculum fosters holistic development (Welsh Government, 2015b; Ysgol Ty Ffynnon, no date). However, Te Whāriki emphasises respectful relationships to promote children's physical, mental and wellbeing while focussing on holistic development in both indoor and outdoor settings. Furthermore, to create self-assured students who regard themselves as engaged members of the community, a bicultural approach emphasises cultural identification and societal values (Education Scotland, 2020; Chan, 2019).

During the Foundation Phase, educators play a fundamental role in promoting comprehensive, child-focused education through implementing a variety of activities that strike a balance between planned instruction and child-led play. According to Wainwright *et al.* (2016) children learn fundamental skills when guided by peers or adults who offer experiences that are suitably challenging. It is the responsibility of practitioners to create curricula that prioritise experiential, practical and play-based approaches. Comprehensive staff training in modern teaching techniques is required for the effective implementation of these approaches (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016).

In Te Whāriki, teachers are equally significant in implementing an inclusive, culturally sensitive curriculum into practice. Through fostering children's agency, enabling full control of their education and tailoring curricular elements to their contexts, children actively engage (Hamilton and Vermeren, 2016). Teachers possess a high degree of professional knowledge due to the curriculum's comprehensive and wide-ranging

character to interpret and apply Te Whāriki successfully, practitioners require a thorough understanding of all the elements, concepts and learning objectives (Education Review Office, 2016).

Staffing was one of the biggest obstacles in the Foundation Phase, higher operating costs because of increased adult-to-child ratios intended to provide more individualised care (Taylor, Rhys and Waldron, 2016). Staffing ratios were intended to improve learning, but organisational priorities were sometimes given priority over pedagogical development. Absence of training made it difficult to switch to the Foundation Phase's child-focused approach, staff turnover, resource limitations and differing practitioner experience frequently impair curriculum quality (Welsh Government, 2015a).

There are comparable structural issues in Te Whāriki, teachers' capacity to fully engage with and implement the curriculum is impacted through leadership restrictions, such as the lack of time for curriculum creation and continuous support. Due to shortages of employees, frequent turnover and geographic remoteness, especially in remote areas, maintaining the high levels of professional knowledge required by the curriculum's comprehensive, holistic approach could be challenging (Education Review Office, 2018). Also, being culturally rich, the curriculum's emphasis on sociocultural and inclusive principles could be difficult to understand and regularly implement without the right tools and training (Hamilton and Vermeren, 2016).

The Foundation Phase and Te Whāriki both seek to promote holistic development, considering social, emotional, cognitive and cultural elements, acknowledging that children learn best in supportive as well as active settings. Early social and emotional skills are prioritised in the Foundation Phase given the knowledge that favourable attitudes towards learning provide higher results (Welsh Government, 2015b). As a reflection of its dedication to sociocultural inclusivity and identity, Te Whāriki also places a strong emphasis on values including family, community and belonging (Teschers, 2016).

Section Two

The idea of the unique child in early childhood education is examined in this study with an emphasis on how different assessment methods such as, Learning Stories and the Foundation Phase profile support undermine the acknowledgement of individual development. To emphasise their roles in promoting each child's distinct needs and strengths, which ultimately creates a more individualised and productive learning environment.

Every child has resilience, ability, confidence and self-assurance and these are all distinct individuals who are always learning (Worcestershire County Council, no date; Department for Education, 2024). Since learning starts with what each child can achieve rather than what their abilities cannot ascertain, it is imperative to recognise each child's uniqueness. Children learn best while taking charge of their education and become more aware of it (Louis, 2022; Whistler and Montgomery, 2024). As each child is unique, developmentally appropriate activities in nurturing relationships are fundamental to meeting children’s individual needs while providing the time, space and flexibility to explore (Welsh Government, 2023). Furthermore, reaching developmental milestones varies across time, as acknowledged by the concept of unique children (Department for Education, 2020; Wood and Hedges, 2024). There is a developmental track that each child follows, however because of unique experiences and situations, each child's rate of growth might vary greatly. To support each child's learning journey, teachers and practitioners recognise this variation and modify their instruction accordingly (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Children are competent, curious and engaged learners who contribute to the creation of knowledge. Meaningful connections with peers and adults may assist children develop their potential and lay the groundwork for self-assurance and active citizenship (European Commission, 2014 cited in Education Scotland, 2020). Equality and accessibility are guaranteed by recognising children as unique individuals and placing inclusive policies into place. Practitioners closely monitor early needs indicators, particularly for children with additional learning needs and provide timely support to support their development (Nottinghamshire County Council, 2022). Through engaging interactions and surroundings that foster

discovery, positive identity and cultural understanding, children's curiosity and resilience are fostered. Providing a welcoming environment where children can flourish, practitioners guarantee safety and treat every family with respect (Burke, 2018, cited in Cameron, McLachlan and Rawlins, 2017).

Children are known to develop at their own rate and customised activities that suit their developmental stage could be used to promote this process. The foundation phase valued children’s uniqueness and promoted exploration, both of which are significant for general growth (Welsh Government, 2023). Since each child's development is ultimately shaped by individual experiences, practitioners and carers may adjust to each child's particular requirements and circumstances as there is no one ideal approach to educate children (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018).

Children's interests, abilities and behaviours are recorded through Learning Stories, which includes changing conditions and emotional insights (Knauf, 2017; Famly, 2024). Through highlighting a child's personality and encouraging positive learning attitudes and closer family ties, these tales turn record-keeping into captivating stories (Early Childhood, 2024). Similarly, the Foundation Phase profile employed skill ladders and evidence-based documentation to offer a holistic perspective of development, facilitating early delay diagnosis and facilitating continuous evaluation (Welsh Government, 2022a; Welsh Government, 2022b). Additionally, Thomas and Lewis (2016) claims the Foundation Phase profile promotes openness and cooperative goal setting by emphasising continuous communication through written reports and parent participation.

Focussing on children as competent, active explorers and highlighting their passions, interests and abilities rather than flaws, is one of Learning Stories main advantages (Carter, 2010; Karlsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir, 2010 cited in Shaiyoa and Hou, 2021). These tales inspire confidence and enthusiasm in teachers by illuminating each child's unique learning preferences and approaches. Educators analyse children's viewpoints objectively, revealing assumptions and effects. Storytelling in children's language fosters family ties and allows for the creation of a customised curriculum (Boss, 2024). Moreover, through emphasising interests and capturing significant moments, Learning Stories integrate the voices of children and their families, encouraging shared ownership and fostering development (Escamilla *et al.*, 2021).

Similarly, the Foundation Phase assessment facilitated early ability assessment, enabling practitioners to identify developmental obstacles, skill gaps and adjust education to meet the needs of everyone. It offered a framework for monitoring progress across several domains and respects the individual developmental speed of every child (Welsh Government, 2015b).

As children's identities and learning paths change, Learning Stories record their experiences during educational transitions (Carr and Lee, 2019). This support of pedagogical reflection, children's autonomy and respect for their identities (Pacini-Ketchabaw *et al.*, 2015). Using baseline and end-of-phase assessments, the Foundation Phase profile's continuous assessment cycle facilitated seamless transitions, early interventions and curriculum development (Welsh Government, 2017a). Both strategies allow for the early identification of developmental changes and learning needs, with Learning Stories using in-depth narratives to capture subtle behavioural adjustments (Hargraves, 2020). The Compact and Full Profiles, two of the profile's structured evaluations, enable formative evaluation to direct instructional modifications and targeted support (Welsh Government, 2022b).

According to Fabian and Edwards (2023) Learning Stories places an emphasis on collaborative, culturally sensitive evaluation, with teachers interacting closely with children and their parents to guarantee meaningful assessment. Additionally, it is emphasised that their efficacy depends on professional knowledge, cultural expression and relationship-building. encourages consistent, standards-based assessment procedures by requiring teachers to use their professional judgement when monitoring and documenting development (Li, 2020). Furthermore, the Foundation Phase profile provided benchmark tests which were used formatively by teachers to direct instruction their efficacy is increased by openness and prompt feedback (Adams, McMillian and Wetzel, 2015). Benchmarks link education with career pathways, foster teamwork and professional judgement and make clear expectations for learners that are in line with national standards. By incorporating earlier assessment frameworks, it functions as comprehensive evaluation instruments that facilitate continuous professional discussion and moderation (Education Scotland, 2017).

Learning Stories have challenges with early childhood assessment, as evidenced by concerns regarding subjectivity, uneven quality and inconsistency with third-party expectations. Without standardised framework, their emphasis on personal stories may result in variability and the disregard of more general developmental abilities such as cooperation and patience (Salcin-Watts, 2019; Zhou, 2014, as cited in Shiyao and Hou, 2021). Also, depending too much on teachers' subjective assessments could result in stories that are visual and cognitively unclear to children and their parents (Shiyao and Hou, 2021; Knauf, 2018). Practitioners suggest using Learning Stories in conjunction with visual aids and anecdotal notes can enhance the comprehensiveness of assessments (Zhang, 2016).

Due to workforce constraints and workload pressures, creating high-quality Learning Stories requires a significant investment of time and resources (Niles, 2015; Cameron, McLachlan and Rawlins, 2017). Following periods of inactivity, teachers frequently find it difficult to precisely recall occurrences, which raises the possibility of mistakes or omissions (Alexander, 2015). Story quality is impacted by writers' subjective interpretations and skill variations, which compromise standardisation and, in turn comparability and dependability. Despite being approved by the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, questions remain about their dependability in time-sensitive settings that prevent thorough assessment (Jackson *et al.*, 2023). One major obstacle to effectively use Learning Stories as assessment methods is still time limits (Cameron, McLachlan and Rawlins, 2017).

Concerns have been expressed about the shallowness and narrow focus of learning Stories, which frequently offer surface-level insights centred on simple descriptions rather than relational, social or emotional aspects including patience, cooperation or teamwork (Zhang, 2016). Their ability to fully capture the spectrum of a child's growth may be diminished by this superficiality. To provide a more thorough picture of children's abilities and interests, practitioners support a multi-tool assessment method that incorporates images, videos, display boards and anecdotal notes (Zhang, 2016). This all-encompassing approach is consistent with Te Whāriki philosophy, which acknowledges the subjective and selective nature of assessment and stresses individualised evaluation without excessive comparison (Zhou, 2014 cited in Shiyao and Hou, 2021). However, Learning Stories are criticised for the post nature and possible bias for being written after events have occurred, which may

make it difficult for educators to remember exactly what children did, particularly when assessments take place outside of contact time (Alexander, 2015). This delay in time can compromise the accuracy and promptness of observations. Without a consistent format, quality and reliability can vary, although structured templates and frameworks, such those created by researchers in New Zealand, try to address these problems (Jackson *et al.*, 2023). In addition, practical limitations such as staffing shortages, interruptions and time constraints make it more difficult for educators to create compelling tales within their workload (Cameron, McLachlan and Rawlins, 2017).

The Foundation Phase assessment framework had similar limitations. It was primarily outcome-oriented and emphasised formative assessment and observation, which limited its capacity to fully capture children's development, particularly in the areas of Knowledge of the World, Welsh Language and Creative Development (Thomas and Lewis, 2016; Welsh Government, 2022b). The limited use of profile forms and a poor comprehension of developmental standards point to knowledge gaps among practitioners (Welsh Government, 2017a). Even though daily observations track development, this is often frequently fell short in evaluating intricate abilities or skills. Moreover, the lack of baseline data before admission and varying focusses made it challenging to compare assessments throughout stages (Davies *et al.*, 2013, cited in Taylor, Joshi and Wright, 2014).

Early childhood education could recognise and appreciate the individuality of every child. While the Foundation Phase profile offered organised, evidence-based assessments, Learning Stories foster emotional connections and cultural understanding. Both provide insightful information. Both have drawbacks, although foundation phase could have concentrated too much on results and Learning Stories may be subjective and time-consuming. A well-rounded, inclusive and responsive awareness of each child's development is ensured through a balanced approach that incorporates these and other techniques.

Section Three

Play fosters young children's creativity, curiosity and social skills, however transition from year two to year three which involves a structured formal curriculum that could be difficult. A smooth transition that promotes ongoing development requires an appreciation of the importance of play. It takes demanding planning and evaluation of pedagogical, developmental and emotional aspects to make this change. To ensure that children's holistic development stays at the forefront, it is significant to comprehend the basic role that play plays in early childhood education to execute the curriculum effectively and manage the transition smoothly.

In early childhood, play is an integral part of learning and development. It is defined as a spontaneous, self-driven activity that takes place outside of regular schedules and engages children without a set goal. Through helping children identify their strengths, play helps children become more self-aware and feel more valuable (Severino, Cabatic and Molina, 2024). Furthermore, play facilitates active involvement with the environment through offering a creative outlet where imagination takes the place of reality. Additionally, absence of play significantly impairs children's development in many areas including emotional, physical, and social abilities (Annet,2024). Early childhood exposure to a variety of play activities creates the brain connections necessary for overall development (Anna, 2024).

According to neurodevelopmental theory, play has an impact on brain development through enhancing executive skills including goal-pursuit and distraction management. Through discovery and interaction, this social character fosters cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional skills. Children learn by imitation and observation of their environment, participating in scientific-style discoveries (Yogman *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, play offers a secure setting for children to develop important life skills namely language, social interaction, problem-solving and cognitive abilities. Additionally, it fosters role development which serves as the foundation for future expansion and advancement (Irvin, 2017).

The value of play is supported by developmental theoretical frameworks such as Piaget's stage theory. Piaget emphasised the importance of active, exploratory learning and proposed that children actively move through consistent stages of cognitive development (Gray and MacBlain, 2015). Thus, play-based learning is

fundamental in early childhood education since it provides children interesting and purposeful opportunities to investigate their environment (Tekyi-Arhin, 2023).

Play-based learning encourages growth in abilities, inclusivity and pupil involvement. Vygotsky highlights the importance of play in the development of speech, cognition, self-awareness and self-regulation, whereas Dewey connects natural play to curiosity and critical thinking, which promotes scientific inquiry. Play activities that are led by children foster friendship, resilience, attachment and constructive social connections (Parker, Thomsen and Berry, 2022). According to the Welsh Government (2024) play also fosters interest development, problem-solving and decision-making. As Zosh *et al.* (2018, cited in Fisher, 2020) points out that play allows children to actively create knowledge through actions and cognitive involvement, in contrast to passive memorisation.

A sense of uncertainty and fear of the unknown are common throughout transitions which can cause anxiety and feelings of insecurity (Visković, 2018). An individual's mental, emotional and physical health are all impacted by these changes, which frequently result in elevated levels of stress and worry. Since stress is the body's normal reaction to challenges, it can lead to issues such as depression, tension in relationships, lack of sleep and trouble concentrating if it is not managed. Fear of failure, uncertainty, or feelings of loss are often the driving forces behind these problems. Excessive stress hinders adaptation, whereas moderate stress can inspire and motivate. Through identifying symptoms and triggers, individuals can create coping strategies, increase their resilience and preserve their wellbeing throughout times of transition (Omoseebi, Joseph and Ben, 2025).

When moving from play-based to more formal, academically orientated settings, children may find it especially difficult to adjust to changing venues and teaching styles (Skouteris, Watson and Lum, 2012, cited in Sims, 2019). Throughout life, change is unavoidable and early childhood is a time of significant internal and external change. The development of a healthy brain architecture is facilitated when children's health and welfare are supported during these periods (Baldwin, 2020).

A turning point that can cause both enthusiasm and fear is the move from early childhood education to the formal classroom. This time requires abandoning routines, relationships and familiar surroundings which can cause anxiety about the

future, role uncertainty and feelings of loss (Chikwiri and Musiyiwa, 2017; Kennedy *et al.*, 2012 cited in Harper, 2016). Sudden shifts in children's social and physical contexts can cause behavioural, cognitive, social-emotional and physical issues (Harper, 2016). Due to this, a secure educational foundation and the development of children depend on efficient transition processes. Despite simply copying the Foundation Stage setting, successful planning requires extensive planning, transparent communication and the sharing of best practices among stakeholders (Underwood, 2025).

Children may find it challenging to adapt to this change from play-centred to more structured academic settings, which could influence their general development (Jiang *et al.*, 2021). According to transition studies, there are notable pedagogical, institutional, social and cultural distinctions between early childhood and primary school that provide challenges for teachers trying to ensure smooth transitions (Broström, 2016; Neuman, 2000 cited in Burns, 2022). Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory explains children are active participants in their own development through relationships and interactions and the social environment and their agency have significance during transitions (Burns, 2022). Emotional and cognitive development could be hampered by a lack of support during changes. (Brooker, 2007 cited in Nicholson, 2018). While there is no universal measure for transition success, fostering a sense of belonging is a major predictor of effective adaptation. Support techniques could be customised to meet the needs of each child due to their unique backgrounds, experiences and personalities; some children need more regimented methods to help them cope (Surrey County Council, 2024).

Supporting children through transitions involves offering children a routine and consistency to prepare for and handle change. To meet the changing needs and interests of children, daily timetables could be flexible (Better Start, 2023). Effective transition-easing techniques include gathering data from parents and collaborating with other teachers. These strategies included establishing visits, gradually increasing formal education, connecting activities to interests and maintaining routines to help children settle in. It is also beneficial to talk to parents about the phases of transition and include children in familiarisation exercises such as touring new classrooms (Callanan *et al.*, 2017).

Making the switch to formal education is a fundamental time that requires adjusting to new social and educational settings. Building relationships is key to children's development to adjust to new teachers and curricula, which takes time (Marguerite and Linda, 2015). Despite academic demands, practitioners stress the value of building trust and personal relationships. Practitioners can better address individual needs and facilitate smooth transitions through strengthening relationships with children and families (Sollars and Mifsud, 2016).

Developmental, emotional and pedagogical aspects could be carefully considered while implementing a play-based curriculum and facilitating the shift to more formal educational settings. Designing successful curriculum modifications that promote children's overall development starts with an understanding of the basic role that play plays in early development. Understanding the difficulties and emotional complexities of transitions and implementing all-encompassing tactics, such as working with families and other environments, are equally significant for creating helpful and easy paths for children ongoing development.

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