

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES OF EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS IN ENSURING CONTINUITY BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL STAGES

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Abstract. This research paper addresses the issue of the professional competencies of educational professionals necessary for ensuring continuity between educational stages. The professional development of educational professionals implies the continuous development of competencies aimed at improving the quality of work, enhancing the development of children/students, and raising students' achievement levels. The aim of this research was to identify which professional competencies of educational professionals are necessary for achieving continuity between educational stages. The study employed descriptive and comparative methods, as well as the scaling procedure for determining the attitudes of preschool educators, primary school teachers and teachers toward given statements, using a Likert-type attitude scale. The research sample consisted of answers received from preschool educators, primary school teachers (from the first till eight grade), and high school teachers. The total number of teachers participated is 80. (N=80). Considering that rapid social and technological development brings new roles of preschool educators, primary school teachers and high school teachers, which continuously require professional improvement and the upgrade of knowledge and skills, we strongly believe that the results of this research may help us find out deeper insight into potential issues in pedagogical practice with the regard of development of professional competencies of educational professionals for ensuring continuity between educational stages.

Keywords: continuity in the educational system; discontinuity in the educational system; unified action of preschool institutions and schools; professional competencies of educational professionals

Theoretical approach to the problem

Ensuring continuity in the educational system contributes to the correlation between preschool and school system and represents a shared responsibility of kindergartens, schools and families, in order to jointly facilitate children's transition

into a new environment while respecting the individual characteristics and rights of each child.

Continuity is a term that encompasses educational programs, policies, and practices which are focused on the providing conditions so that children and families they come from would be included and engaged in terms of a stable social and physical context of educational institutions and within that they have stable and supportive experiences over time. Continuity in the educational system enables the development and correlation of curricula, goals and tasks, maintaining close relationships between children and teaching staff, as well as among children themselves. When these relationships are implemented in a high-quality and continuous manner, they lead to better developmental and learning outcomes for children¹. Certainly, it should not be overlooked that the achievement of continuity among the levels of education and upbringing is significantly shaped by the age-specific characteristics of children (students), the established relationships between scientific and educational knowledge, as well as by the particularities of a people's tradition and culture within diverse social contexts.

The continuity of education refers to the correlation between one educational level with another, thereby facilitating children's transition from preschool institutions to school. Primary school and each subsequent level of education structurally and content-wise build upon previous levels and represent an upgrade of knowledge, skills and habits. Curriculum and organizational correlation between preschool with primary education is an important assumption for achieving continuity within the educational system².

The preschool education curriculum must anticipate what will follow in the primary school curriculum, which in turn should accept and strengthen the effects of educational work at the preschool level. It actually refers to vertical continuity, which implies the interconnection of these educational levels, with the aim of facilitating the transition from a lower to a higher level in accordance with children's developmental capacities. The principle of unity of educational impact also indicates horizontal continuity, understood as the alignment of all factors that influence children's development and learning at a given moment, primarily the kindergarten and the family³.

Discontinuity between kindergartens and schools is determined by the fact that conceptual differences between these institutions exist. Kindergartens focus on providing basic care and a sense of security, as well as on acquiring basic experience of collective life, cooperation, and mutual action. Cognitive development is not neglected, but it is fostered less directly, through play and freely chosen activities, while respecting children's interests and abilities. In this way, the opportunity to learn is provided and foundations for further progress in school are established, with particular emphasis on social and emotional development and the development of creativity.

In school, the focus is placed on educational activities and cognitive development, stimulating intellectual abilities through the acquisition of basic skills such as: writing, reading, basic mathematical operations, and fundamental knowledge of natural and social sciences. Schools place demands on children's independence. However, school regulations, curricula, teaching methods, and content often insufficiently encourage students to being independent and self-initiative. Children have to be prepared to accept the obligations imposed by school. Based on the opinion and pedagogical research, discontinuity in the educational system is most often experienced by children through: changes in their living environment, differences in classroom organization compared to preschool settings, discontinuity in curricular content (language and communication, and differences in ideologies between kindergartens and schools⁴.

Many authors agree that competencies cover three elements: professional knowledge, professional skills, and an individual's personal potential. Some of the authors mention the similar definition by highlighting three levels of competencies: competencies that extend beyond education, and have a cross-curricular and socio-cultural significance. The second level is related to all subjects within an educational field, which can be equated with professional knowledge. The last level refers to specific competencies formed within certain school subjects, where this level represents professional skills⁵.

Learning and professional development relevant to educational professionals are considered as integral parts of their everyday activities. Professional development implies the continuous development of competencies aimed at improving job performance, enhancing children's/students' development, and raising student achievement levels. One of the pillars of improving educational quality in the competencies of educational professionals as measures of knowledge, skills and attitudes whose possession contributes to successful learning, development, and well-being of children and students⁶.

The development of professional competencies is essential for working with children at all levels of education. Competencies imply that educational professionals possess the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching practice. According to the Rulebook on standards of competencies for the preschool educator profession and their professional development, a competent preschool educator acts autonomously and responsibly in accordance with ethical nature of preschool educator practice and their complex, dynamic and context- dependent character⁷. Such competence is based on the creative application and critical examination of professional knowledge, skills, and values within a changing social and educational context. The rulebook defines preschool educator competence through: direct work with children, development of collaboration and learning communities, and development of professional practice. Competence of a preschool educator in direct work with children includes knowledge of the holistic nature of child development,

the interdependence of social, emotional, cognitive, motor skills, and language development, knowledge of various learning strategies, knowledge from different sciences, arts, and culture, communication and participation of children, health of preschool children, and social protection. The forms of knowledge mentioned above require the following skills from an educator:

- To create a safe environment for a child,
- To build trust-based relationships, to develop a feeling of safety through trust-based relationship,
- To observe and to listen to children for the purpose of identifying and understanding children's developmental needs,
- To empower children to cope with conflicts,
- To monitor systematically progress by doing activities together, to encourage and to support initiatives and choices of children, to enrich children's experience through play, to listen and to support diverse forms of student expression,
- To plan and implement meaningful projects, and topics that make sense to children and based on their interests, to develop projects focused on tracking students' progress,
- To develop program focused on key competencies for lifelong learning,
- To bring local, national and cultural heritage closer to the children while encouraging their participation in cultural creation, to include students in local projects, events and activities⁸.

The development of collaboration and learning communities includes knowledge related to cooperative learning, work with families, and cooperation with the local community. To develop cooperation preschool educators, need to have skills by engaging in dialogue with colleagues, to reexamine and build beliefs about children and learning. Also, it is essential that educators together with colleagues reexamine, in a critical manner, culture and structure of a preschool, collaborate with colleagues from other institutions. An educator plans their professional development and improvement. They encourage open communication with families, and involve parents in decision- making processes⁹.

The development of professional practice includes knowledge of goals and principles of preschool education as well as knowledge of various procedures and techniques of planning, monitoring, documentation and evaluation procedures. It also implies the knowledge of work in diverse contexts, understanding the position of preschool education at local, national and international levels. It also implies the awareness of social and economic trends that have impacts on the preschool work. Moreover, it refers to the requirements set to educators along with the knowledge of technology use. In order to apply the knowledge, preschool educators are required to possess certain skills so that their work is based on contemporary theories of development and learning. Furthermore, preschool educators are required to raise awareness and reexamine personal principles and beliefs about children. It is

essential to critically assess and develop their practice, to plan educational work flexibly based on constant students' tracking and listening. Preschool educators are expected to develop a pedagogical framework in a preschool where inclusion is promoted. Furthermore, they are expected to combat discrimination and injustice, foster intercultural dialogue, and cooperate with families and local communities¹⁰.

According to the Rulebook on standards of competencies for the teaching profession and their professional development¹¹, teaching competencies are defined as an individual capacity demonstrated in performing complex educational activities. They are aligned with learning goals and outcomes and ensure professional standards of successful teaching. These competencies refer to: competencies for the educational area, subject and methodology, competencies for teaching and learning, support for students' personal development, communication and cooperation. According to this rulebook, the role of a teacher is multiple, because teachers develop key competencies of students that enable them to work and live. Also, they provide additional support to students coming from vulnerable groups, gifted students, and students with developmental difficulties. A teacher is supposed to possess competencies related to violence prevention in schools. Moreover, they should motivate students to learn, and understand educational system, principles and goals. Furthermore, they should be familiar with the school regulations, strategic documents and relevant international documents and apply them in education accordingly. It is crucial for teachers to understand social context of education and schools, to express themselves both in oral and written form based on the Serbian language rules or the language teaching is conducted. Lastly, they should be competent to use information and communication technologies¹².

In contrast to the competencies required by the preschool educators, referring to the direct work with children, the development of collaboration and learning communities, as well as professional development, teachers are required to develop competencies for a teaching area, a subject they teach, and teaching methodology, competencies for teaching and learning and competencies for supporting the development of students' personalities. These teaching competencies cover different knowledge and skills like: knowledge of the scientific disciplines to which subjects belong, has a thorough knowledge of the relevant field and is familiar with the curriculum of the subjects they are responsible for teaching. It is essential for teachers to know basic goals and results of education, to possess didactical- methodological knowledge necessary for subjects they teach. Furthermore, teachers are required to understand technologies associated with the scientific field they teach. Moreover, they are expected to have knowledge of students' cognitive development, the nature of learning, different teaching styles, as well as the nature of thinking and the formation of scientific concept. It is important for teachers to understand the physical, emotional, social and cultural differences among students, to be familiar with students' psychological, emotional,

and social development, and to understand different types of motivation and ways of motivating students¹³.

As opposed to the competencies of preschool educators, who mostly plan and conduct their activities through play, teachers plan their work and implement it through curricular content, by paying attention to and taking into account the curriculum and achievement standards. They pay attention to the time management, and plan the application of appropriate teaching methods, and techniques and forms of instruction. Teachers plan activities based on the knowledge and experience that students possess and encourage critical, analytical and divergent opinion among students. They also plan approaches and strategies to foster students' self-confidence and self-esteem.

Preschool educators monitor children's psychophysical development within the context of the preschool curriculum, whose content is permeated with play-based activities, both those that are systematically planned and those chosen freely by the children. They monitor children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and creative development, as well as the development of speech and motor skills, with a focus on the continuous development of their overall potential and the establishment of healthy habits.

Teachers connect curriculum with students' prior knowledge and experiences, as well as with their current and future needs. They evaluate the effectiveness of their own methods based on students' achievement and use continuous assessment of students' knowledge, which provides students with feedback on their performance¹⁴.

The professional development of preschool educators and teachers is a long-term process through which, by means of learning, practical work, and research activities, knowledge is expanded and skills and abilities are developed, thereby fostering the competencies necessary for working with children. The professional development of preschool educators and teachers is an open, dynamic, and permanent process that involves, in various ways, the transfer of new knowledge and skills from different professional fields and scientific disciplines into practice. Furthermore, professional development entails monitoring European trends with regard to improving quality and continuity in the educational system. The professional competencies of education should be viewed as a requirement of general importance for the profession, as well as an internal need of the individual for continuous development, as they become part of the process of improving educational practice¹⁵.

Successful education professionals are supposed to have conscious motivation, high-quality general and professional education, strong intellectual abilities, and well-developed personal traits. The new roles of education professional require continuous reflection, new competencies, visions and aspirations, a renewed spirit and perseverance, along with a personal educational philosophy¹⁶.

Research methodology

The aim of the research was to determine whether educational professionals recognize the importance of ensuring continuity between educational stages. Descriptive and comparative methods were applied, along with a Likert-type attitude scale for the purpose of finding out the attitudes of preschool educators, primary school teachers and high school teachers. Preschool educators, primary school teachers (from grades 1 to 8), and high school teachers participated in this research. The total number of participants was 80. (N=80). The research was conducted in May and June 2025. in the following schools in Sjenica: Preschool "Maslacak" (N=20), Primary school "12.decembar" (N=15), Primary school "Svetozar Markovic" (N=15), Gymnasium, (high school) "Jezdimir Lovic" (N=15), Technical and agricultural high school in Sjenica (N=15), Republic of Serbia.

The following research tasks are determined:

1. To determine whether a unified approach among preschool educators, primary school teachers, and high school teachers is achieved within the system of institutional preschool and school education in the Republic of Serbia with regard to the attainment of curriculum goals within this system.
2. To examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the attitude of preschool educators, primary school teachers, and high school teachers regarding the need for and possibilities of achieving vertical continuity within the system of institutional education.
3. To examine whether preschool educators, primary school teachers, and high school teachers within the unified system of education in the Republic of Serbia require professional development to enhance the competencies needed to promote vertical continuity with regard to the attainment of the curriculum goals of preschool institutions and schools.

Results and discussion

The analysis of the statements from the applied attitude scale was conducted using a Scree plot, in order to define the optimal number, which is considered to make an important contribution to this research (Figure 1).

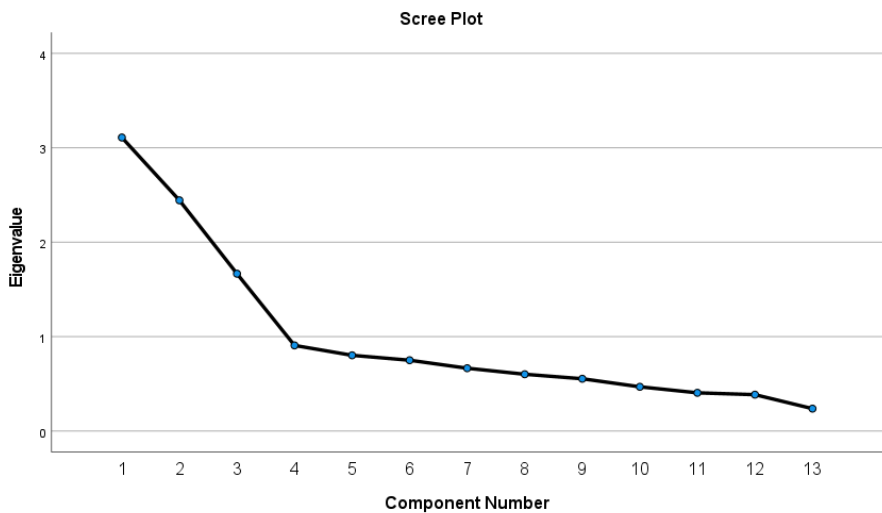


Figure 1. A Scree plot used to identify the principal statements in the research

The scree plot suggests that no substantial changes in eigenvalues are observed beyond the third statement. Therefore, the three first statements are considered optimal solutions based on the scree plot, representing the main and most important dimensions in our study.

In order to better understand the results, the statements mentioned above are shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. The statements (components)

Item numbers by components (C)		STATEMENTS
1.C.	I5	It is important that, through professional development programmes, educational professionals engage more with topics related to the abilities of children and young people for lifelong learning.
	I6	Cooperation with education professionals from the preceding and subsequent levels of education, in relation to the level at which they work, is essential for further high-quality practice and the successful achievement of educational outcomes.
	I7	For effective cooperation with colleagues working at the preceding and subsequent levels of education, education professionals require professional support.
	I11	Cooperation among education professionals at all levels of education can significantly contribute to the high quality development of children's/students' capacities for lifelong learning.
	I12	In order to ensure the successful attainment of curriculum goals, joint professional activities are organized for education professionals at all levels of education.
	I13	The development of education professionals' competencies aimed at fostering children's/students' capacities for lifelong learning requires systematic professional development, supported by educational and other institutions at the local and national levels.
2.C.	I2	Education professionals lack basic knowledge of the concepts of continuity and discontinuity between levels of education.
	I8	Education professionals are not sufficiently familiar with the educational objectives achieved at the level that precedes, and the level that follows the one at which they work with children/ students.
	I9	Education professionals are not sufficiently familiar with the educational and developmental goals pursued at the level that precedes, and the level that follows the one at which they work with.
3.C.	I1	During their education, future education professionals study curriculum content related to the importance and possibilities of achieving continuity between levels of education in the Republic of Serbia (from preschool institutions, through primary and secondary schools to universities)
	I3	For the high-quality professional development of education professionals, it is not considered important to address issues related to achieving correlation between levels of education within our system.
	I4	While working with children/students, education professionals sufficiently engage in developing the capacities of children and young people for lifelong learning process.
I10		It is unnecessary for an education professional working with children at any level of education to be familiar with the basic content and outcomes of the programmes implemented at the preceding and subsequent levels.

For categorizing statements to components that indicate the research variables (characteristics), a criterion of a statement- component correlation coefficient greater than 0,4 was applied. After rotation, the first component comprises statements I5, I6, I7, I11, I12, and I13, the second component comprises statements I2, I8, and I9. Finally, the third component has statements I1, I3, and I4. The statement I10 is not joined to any of the components, so it was not necessary to be included into the research.

Based on the identified statements, the following characteristics were measured:

- For the first component, the perception of the importance of cooperation among education professionals at all levels of education, along with professional development and support in this cooperation (hereinafter referred to as cooperation and professional support, or CPS),
- For the second component, the perception of education professionals' unfamiliarity with the concept of continuity, as well as the educational and developmental goals of other levels of education at which they work. (hereinafter referred to as unfamiliarity with continuity, or UC),
- For the third component, the perception of the importance of education professionals' development independent of the achievement of continuity between levels of education. (hereinafter referred to as professional development without continuity, or PDWC).

By calculating Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient, the first component yielded a coefficient of 0,753, indicating good measurement reliability. The second component yielded a coefficient of 0.808, indicating very good measurement reliability. The third component corresponded to a coefficient of 0,651, indicating highly acceptable reliability of measurement taking into account the interpretability of the statements (Table 1).

Table 2 presents the values of the descriptive statistics for the variables.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the variables of continuity education and professional support in cooperation

Variable	Median	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max	D p
CPS	26 (18)	26,07	3,63	14 (6)	30 (30)	2,222 <0,001
UC	10 (9)	9,35	3,36	3 (3)	15 (15)	0,104 0,354
PDWC	10 (9)	9,72	2,60	3 (3)	15 (15)	0,278 0,015

Note: The theoretical values for each variable are provided in parentheses. Min represents the minimum possible value of the variable. Max represents the maximum possible value of the variable. The theoretical median represents the neutral value of the variable.

The sample median value for CPS (cooperation among education professionals at all levels of education, as well as professional development and support in such cooperation) is 26 and is notably higher than the theoretical median of 18, which represents a neutral attitude. The arithmetic mean is 26,07, which is also higher than the neutral value, and based on the t-test, this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0,001$). Cohen's d confirms this conclusion, as $d = 2,222$ represents an extreme effect size. This indicates a significantly positive attitude among education professionals toward the importance of their cooperation at all levels of education, as well as professional development and support in such cooperation.

The sample median value for UC (education professionals' unfamiliarity with the concept of continuity between different levels of education) is 10 and is higher than the theoretical median of 9, which represents a neutral attitude. The arithmetic mean is 9,35, which is also higher than the neutral value, and based on the t-test this difference is not statistically significant ($p = 0,354 > 0,1$). Cohen's d confirms this conclusion, as $d = 0,104$ represents a weak effect size. This indicates that education professionals are uncertain and do not hold clear attitudes regarding whether their colleagues working at different levels of education possess basic knowledge of the concept of continuity, along with the educational and developmental goals that are pursued.

Even though they are aware of the importance of cooperation at all levels of education, based on these findings it may be assumed that within the system of institutional preschool and school education, a unified approach among preschool educators, primary school teachers and high school teachers is not achieved, or is achieved to an insufficient extent, with regard to the attainment of curriculum goals within the system.

The sample median value for PDWC (education professionals' development independent of the achievement of continuity between levels of education) is 10 and is higher than the theoretical median of 9, which represents a neutral attitude. The arithmetic mean is 9,72, which is also higher than the neutral value, and based on the t-test this difference is statistically significant ($p = 0,015 < 0,02$) with an error probability of 2%, Cohen's $d = 0,278$ represents a moderate effect size. As the distribution of the PDWC variable is not normal, the significance of the difference is detected due to a small number of extreme values rather than across the entire sample. This indicates a positive attitude among education professionals toward the importance of their professional development, independent of the achievement of continuity between different levels of education.

It is evident that education professionals recognize the importance of their continuous professional development. However, their attitudes suggest that they do not perceive the importance of achieving correlation between levels of education within our system.

To examine whether attitudes toward the requirements and possibilities of achieving continuity between levels differ significantly across groups defined by job position, the Kruskal- Wallis test was employed (Table 3).

Table 3. Analysis of variance for the Variable UC (education professionals' unfamiliarity with the concept of continuity between different levels of education)

Group	Median (9)	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Min (3)	Max (15)	H p
UC	8,5	8,70	3,89	3	14	7,036 0,071
TPS	11	9,37	2,91	4	12	
TPS	10	8,45	3,19	4	12	
THS	12	10,81	3,08	4	15	

Based on the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test, the differences in UC scores (education professionals' unfamiliarity with the concept of continuity between different levels of education) observed in the table cannot be reliably classified as statistically significant. (They are only important at an error probability of 8%, $H=7,036$, $p=0,071 < 0,08$, $p > 0,05$). To determine with certainty whether differences exist and between which groups they occur, the Mann- Whitney test is used.

According to the results of the Mann- Whitney test, the differences between preschool educators and secondary school teachers ($Z=1,788$, $p= 0,074$) as well as between primary school teachers and secondary school teachers ($Z=1,744$, $p=0,076$), reach significance only at an error probability of 8% and therefore cannot be reliably considered statistically significant. The difference between primary school teachers and secondary school teachers is statistically significant at an error probability of 2% ($Z=2,744$, $p=0,013 < 0,02$), which is commonly accepted as statistically significant in the social sciences. Among the remaining pairs of groups, no statistically significant differences were found based on the available data ($p > 0,1$). Therefore, based on the presented data, it can be reliably concluded that secondary school teachers significantly more often believe that education professionals are not sufficiently familiar with the concept of continuity between different levels of education. Among the remaining pairs of groups, the attitudes are homogeneous. It was also confirmed that preschool educators more often consider a specific focus on continuity to be unnecessary compared education professionals at other levels of education. Secondary school teachers hold the opposite view, both in comparison with primary school teachers and with preschool educators. These results point to a new research question regarding the quality of the preparatory function of preschool education, given that the research findings confirmed that preschool educators do not recognize the importance of continuity and unified action within the education system.

Conclusion

The professional development of education professionals involves the continuous development of competencies aimed at improving the quality of work, fostering the development of children/students, and raising students' levels of achievement.

The aim of this research was to determine whether education professionals recognize the importance of developing professional competencies in relation to achieving continuity between different levels of education. Through the specified research tasks, we sought to determine whether unity of action among preschool educators, primary school teachers (from the grade 1 till 8), and high school teachers is achieved within the system of institutional preschool and school education in the Republic of Serbia with regard to the attainment of curriculum goals. Additionally, it was important for us to identify potential differences in the attitudes of preschool educators, primary school teachers, and high school teachers regarding the need for and possibilities of achieving vertical continuity, as well as to determine whether they require professional development to build competencies for achieving such continuity.

It is indisputable that the achievement of continuity between levels of education and upbringing is largely determined by the developmental and age-related characteristics of children (students), the nature and structure of the relationship between scientific and educational knowledge, as well as by the specific features of a particular people's cultural and historical tradition within different social contexts.

The research results confirm that education professionals hold positive attitudes toward the importance of their cooperation at all levels of education, as well as toward professional development and support in facilitating such cooperation. They also do not hold clear views on whether their colleagues working at different levels of education possess basic knowledge of the concept of continuity, along with the education professionals and pedagogical goals pursued at those levels. Furthermore, based on the research results obtained from our sample, it can be stated that within the system of institutional preschool and school education, unified action among preschool educators, primary school teachers and high school teachers is either not achieved or is achieved insufficiently with regard to the attainment of curriculum goals within this system. Education professionals recognize the importance of their continuous professional development. However, their attitudes suggest that they do not fully perceive the importance of establishing continuity between different levels of education. High school teachers more frequently emphasize that education professionals are not sufficiently familiar with the concept of continuity between different levels of education and consider it important to address this issue. However, unlike education professionals at other levels of education, preschool educators generally do not perceive a need to engage in achieving continuity.

As we have already noted, we believe that the results of our research can significantly contribute, on the one hand, to shedding light on potential problems in

pedagogical practice, and on the other hand to improving that practice, which could enhance the achievement of continuity within the unified system of education in the Republic of Serbia.

NOTES

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