

2011

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### Recommended Citation

Shotsberger, P. (2011). High-Stakes Assessment: Is a Christian Ethic of Care Possible?. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 6(2). <https://doi.org/>-

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### Abstract

The No Child Left Behind Act, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), has fundamentally changed the landscape of education in the United States. Amidst the current debate over reauthorization of ESEA, it is vital that Christian educators consider the moral implications of continuing and expanding current policies, especially as they relate to high-stakes assessment and its impact on students and teachers. The focus of the article is the challenge a high-stakes environment poses for educators who truly desire to demonstrate a Christian ethic of care in their teaching and what Christian teacher education can do to respond effectively to that challenge.

## High-Stakes Assessment: Is a Christian Ethic of Care Possible?

Paul Shotsberger, PhD

### Abstract

The No Child Left Behind Act, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), has fundamentally changed the landscape of education in the United States. Amidst the current debate over reauthorization of ESEA, it is vital that Christian educators consider the moral implications of continuing and expanding current policies, especially as they relate to high-stakes assessment and its impact on students and teachers. The focus of the article is the challenge a high-stakes environment poses for educators who truly desire to demonstrate a Christian ethic of care in their teaching and what Christian teacher education can do to respond effectively to that challenge.

### Introduction

In 2002, the year No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law, my family and I moved to Ukraine and I became director of a network of Russian-speaking undergraduate Bible schools. In the nine years prior to the move, I had been a professor of mathematics education at a secular university in the southeastern United States. So, while I was on the mission field, I made it a point to keep up with trends in education in the United States at the macro level. Nonetheless, when I moved back to the United States in 2009 and began my current position as dean of the school of education at a Christian institution of higher education (CIHE) in the southeastern United States, I discovered that changes had taken place at the state and local level that had fundamentally altered the way teaching and learning was done in schools, primarily as a result of NCLB.

At my institution, the foundational dispositions taught to teacher candidates center around demonstrating a Christian ethic of care – toward self, students, colleagues, and community. This comes out of the work of Noddings and others (Katz, Noddings, & Strike, 1999; Noddings, 2002). These writers emphasize the need for ethical caring

in the context of public school classrooms. My institution has gone beyond this secular model of caring to include Christian principles from the Greatest Commandment and also the parable of the Good Samaritan, which represents Jesus' response to the question "Who is my neighbor?" Here is a list the dispositions, collectively referred to using the phrase "Educators who demonstrate scholarship within a Christian ethic of care," which are the foundational principles of teacher preparation at my institution:

- The teacher candidate demonstrates a Christian ethic of care towards self by exhibiting a biblical approach to life that is demonstrated by a passion for learning.
- The teacher candidate demonstrates a Christian ethic of care towards learners by displaying an enthusiasm about teaching as demonstrated by compassionate and respectful interactions with learners.
- The teacher candidate demonstrates a Christian ethic of care towards colleagues by engaging in collaborative work practices as demonstrated by compassionate and respectful interactions with colleagues.
- The teacher candidate demonstrates a Christian ethic of care towards the community by recognizing the community as an integral part of the learning process as demonstrated by valuing its pluralist nature.

Key aspects of these principles are the words "compassionate" and "respectful" as they relate to teachers caring for students, colleagues, and others.

Taken together, this Christian ethic of care is emphasized in every aspect of the school of education's teacher preparation programs. We have found that these dispositions set our candidates and graduates apart from those of other higher education institutions in our region. And it is these teacher dispositions that I fear are at-risk in the current

environment of high-stakes assessment engulfing P-12 education.

### **Background**

NCLB was the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) first passed in 1965. Touted as a milestone in bipartisan commitment to education, the statement of purpose of the NCLB legislation was “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 2002, Sect. 1001) Underlying this purpose was an assumed need for an accountability system that would provide comparability data for school, district, and state performance. This assumption, more than any other of the past ten years, has produced a seismic shift in the landscape of education in the United States.

Reauthorization of ESEA legislation is considered a priority by the Obama administration, and so the education community generally has been engaged in a debate over the merits of the principles of NCLB and what that legislation should look like in the future. It is worthwhile for CIHEs to deeply consider our position, both because we produce teachers for the public schools and thus have a stake in the debate, and because we possess a unique perspective that needs to be heard. As the rhetoric of the discussion becomes more reductionist, it is essential for CIHEs and schools of education to expand the debate, reminding decision-makers and others not only about the complex nature of teaching and learning, but also that the product of this enterprise is supposed to be an educated person whose character has been shaped through the process of education.

### **Effects of No Child Left Behind**

Supporters of NCLB make the valid point that if left to their own many states would probably still have no education assessment system in place, but that now, directly due to NCLB, all states have instituted an accountability scheme (Foster, 2008). Further, educators agree with some of the underlying assumptions of the NCLB legislation, namely that research-based instruction and high quality professional development will improve achievement (Roller, 2005). However, it is the practical

execution of these systems and principles that has been problematic.

Recent reports of the status of P-12 students and graduates entering college have compared the state of education today to the situation at the time that NCLB was signed into law. From these reports we see:

1. Lower retention and graduation rates in high school (EPE Research Center, 2010; Luke & Woods, 2008; Neild & Balfanz, 2006).
2. A widening achievement gap between low-performing, urban high school students and other students (Kozol, 2005; Lee, 2006; Perna & Thomas, 2009).
3. A lower quality of students entering college, particularly as reflected in their writing ability (Perna & Thomas, 2009; The Conference Board, et al., 2006).

Sweeping changes brought about by NCLB have allowed for regression in these key indicators, in some cases exactly because of the increased emphasis on high-stakes assessment (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005). Interestingly, discussion about reauthorization of this legislation (referred to now by the old name ESEA in an effort to disassociate current reforms from Bush-era efforts) has called for more, not less, of the same kinds of policies that have produced the above results. In the process, the rhetoric has become shriller, especially as it relates to the state of teacher education. The federal government has begun pointing an accusing finger at teacher education programs, using the transitive logic that failing students are produced by failing teachers are produced by failing schools of education. The extent to which state governments have bought into this logic was demonstrated during the first two rounds of the Race to the Top competition during which states introduced legislation that tore down the walls of privacy for individuals, allowing for data on P-12 student achievement to be directly tied not only to classroom teachers, but to schools of education that had produced those teachers. Objections will be raised later in this article about the ethicality of making such a connection, but first it is important to address the question of the quality of the assessments producing the achievement data. If the data are flawed in any way, the transitivity

argument falls apart, thus rendering the connections just mentioned nonsensical.

### **Assessment Under No Child Left Behind**

First, we need to understand what is meant by the term assessment. Assessments, interpreted broadly, can encompass informal or formal methods, including not only paper-and-pencil testing, but also observation, problem solving, projects, papers, and oral presentations. Toward the beginning of the assessment movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the vision of assessment was comprehensive, including testing in a wide variety of skills, over many grades, in many formats, for both summative and formative purposes (e.g., National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1989). However, NCLB encourages the use of only a narrow version of assessment.

For instance, in South Carolina there are two primary standardized assessments administered to elementary and middle school children: Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP) and Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS). PASS was created as the primary measurement instrument for NCLB reporting in grades 3 through 8, whereas MAP plays no role whatsoever in federal accountability. MAP is a nationally-normed test of English language arts and mathematics that is administered three to four times per year in South Carolina. The test is given on computer and so the results are immediately available, and teachers are encouraged to use the results in a formative fashion to monitor student progress through a particular grade. In contrast, PASS is a criterion-referenced paper-and-pencil test created for South Carolina. PASS includes tests in English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science; however, all four subjects are tested in only grades 4 and 7. All students are tested in English language arts and mathematics, but in grades 3, 5, 6, and 8 students are tested in social studies or science, not both. PASS is administered one time per year, in the spring, and results are not available until the next school year; thus, the exam can only be used as a summative, high-stakes assessment. MAP testing sends the message that monitoring student growth on a consistent basis, providing timely feedback to both teachers and students, and assisting students toward achievement goals is worth the time, effort, and expense of such testing. Seen through the lens of a Christian ethic of care, this is a powerful

message that is congruent with a caring perspective at all levels of education in the state. There is no such message emanating from PASS testing.

When we speak of federal and state-mandated assessments at the P-12 level nationally, it is important to understand that in the norm we are talking about timed paper-and-pencil tests, the format of which is primarily multiple choice, given in discrete grades, in only a few subjects, and intended only for summative evaluation of achievement (Engel, 2007; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). This version of assessment apparently is considered both necessary and sufficient by the federal government, state legislators, and the public at large. Of course, if the testing results were merely placed into a student's file and kept as a record of progress, this would be a non-issue. But these results are being used to make high-stakes decisions, including retention and graduation decisions for individual students, and decisions affecting funding and resources for schools and districts across the country. And even as the depth and breadth of these assessments become more limited, the implications and uses for the assessment data continue to expand. With the introduction of Common Core Standards (<http://www.corestandards.org>), assessment data will be used to compare states, determining federal funding for education at the P-12 and college levels plus a host of related spending such as business and employment incentives and the availability of college scholarships and tuition assistance. Noddings (2002) refers generally to this kind of standardized curriculum and assessment as “an ideology of control that forces all students to study a particular, narrowly prescribed curriculum devoid of content [students] might truly care about” (p. 95), which ultimately turns teachers' and schools' attention away from encouraging “the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (p. 94).

Further, if the P-12 curriculum can be standardized, there is no reason college curriculum generally and teacher preparation programs particularly cannot also be standardized. In fact, this was suggested in the recently released report to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called “Voices from the Classroom” (VIVA National Task Force Report, 2010), which recommended that there should be a national teacher education curriculum. Where this

comes into play for CIHEs is at the intersection of teacher education programs, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, the result of the merger of NCATE and TEAC), and the reauthorization of ESEA. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that CAEP is dependent on the U.S. Department of Education for direction, both of which are hoping for viable models for accreditation of teacher education programs to emerge from experiments ongoing in various states (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). In this environment, one can imagine a day in the near future when CAEP will place sanctions on schools of education connected to low-performing program completers and their students under new ESEA accountability requirements. It appears as if CAEP has no desire to be an advocate for schools of education, so there is little standing in the federal government's way that would prevent them from dictating policy to teacher preparation programs, including privates. In this scenario, what encouragement would there be for CIHEs desiring accreditation through CAEP to continue to promote dispositions such as a Christian ethic of care? There would be little.

### **Collateral Damage from No Child Left Behind**

But is that all CIHEs should be concerned about? Or are there deeper issues that need to be addressed? I believe there are, and they have to do with the foundational notions of NCLB and the potential effects of a reauthorization of ESEA that continues down the same path as NCLB. The effects I am referring to are not at the institution or state levels. They are at the student level, what some have referred to as the "collateral damage" resulting from NCLB (Luke & Woods, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Consider the following hypothesis: NCLB, with its emphasis on high-stakes testing, has not simply been ineffective in preventing a decline in retention and graduation rates in high school or stopping the achievement gap between low-performing, urban students and other students from widening; it is actually a causal factor in those trends. Luke and Woods (2008) conducted a review of NCLB and its effects to recommend whether or not the Australian government should undertake similar initiatives. The authors conclude,

In fact it is likely that the collateral damage of these policy initiatives in the form of lowering retention

rates and an increased achievement gap with service cuts to priority groups will have implications for the United States for many years. (p. 11)

Luke and Woods are not alone in their assessment. Diane Ravitch, a former Assistant Secretary of Education in the Bush administration, had been for many years an advocate of NCLB. However, seeing the effects of the law, she has drastically changed her position. "I came to the conclusion...that No Child Left Behind has turned into a timetable for the destruction of American public education" (National Public Radio, 2011).

Perna and Thomas (2009) suggest that high-stakes testing, especially the use of high school exit examinations, limits many students' opportunity to attend college. The report explored case studies from 15 high schools in five states, analyzing the impact of testing policies on predictors of college enrollment such as high school graduation, academic preparation, and knowledge and information about college. Among the findings, most participants (students and teachers) expressed the opinion that exit examinations reduced academic rigor of the high school curriculum, re-defining the academically-prepared student simply as one who meets the minimum standards reflected in the examination. Further, a barrier to college entrance is created by the lack of alignment between high school exit tests and college entrance examinations. Overall, the study concluded that, "...the emphasis on testing reduces higher educational opportunities especially for students attending low-performing schools by decreasing the likelihood of high school graduation, reducing attention to academic preparation for college, and shifting resources away from college counseling" (Perna & Thomas, 2009, p. 453). In this model of education, it is worth asking to what extent students are being cared for in a compassionate and respectful manner.

### **Effects of a Productivity Model**

Nichols and Berliner (2007) make the point, "Accountability in education is modeled on corporate efforts to increase productivity. This reflects a larger trend toward seeing society as modeled on the corporation rather than the family" (p. 18). The only BMW production factory in North America is just an hour drive from my home. I took a tour of the plant recently and was struck with the full implications of this corporate thinking for

education. The production of BMWs, as with all automobile manufacturing, is dependent on a vast number of smaller manufacturers for parts, which need to arrive at the BMW plant on time and without defect. If there is a problem with either the timing of the delivery or the quality of the parts, the supplier is fined or dropped from the supply chain. What is the analogy of this model for education? There is none – this is where the model breaks down. A focus on productivity and output makes sense only if the input can be controlled. However, as the president of my university says, “Parents send us the best they have.” In other words, we must take what we are given. Part of being an educator, as opposed to simply being an instructor, is the responsibility not only to teach but also to mold and shape the students we receive. In this model, teachers are active agents in the education of students, rather than passive enforcers of curriculum and testing. In order to accomplish education in this fashion, teachers need to establish feedback loops with students wherein students receive regular updates on their progress and have multiple low-stakes opportunities to engage in mid-course corrections of their understanding. Unfortunately, many legislators and bureaucrats consider this model of education to be wasteful, over-indulgent, and something that serves no purpose in our production-oriented society. In the factory model, the product is all that matters.

The same principle applies to teacher development. Just as some administrators and teachers see lower-performing students dropping out as a solution to high-stakes expectations, many politicians and bureaucrats seem to have a similar view of lower-performing teachers leaving the profession, either by choice or as a result of being fired. A key observation is that in both cases – students leaving school and teachers leaving the profession – the only thing that is improving is a rating on a state report card. No one is actually learning anything, not the student and not the teacher. No one is improving, personally or educationally.

### **The Moral Implications**

What are the moral implications of what is taking place? In 2005, the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy eloquently summarized many of these issues in its report “Ten Moral Concerns in the Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act”:

- The impossibility of all students reaching the 2014 goal of proficiency in math and reading, and therefore the inevitable discrediting of public education
- The inability of the system to recognize and celebrate individual student’s unique accomplishment
- The risk of students who are viewed as the cause of a school’s low performance being shamed by peers, teachers and the community
- The requirement for special education students to pass tests designed for students without disabilities
- The expectation that English language learners will take tests in reading English before attaining proficiency in English
- Blaming schools and teachers for their ineffectiveness in addressing problems that are not simply educational but also societal, in the process obscuring the vital and potentially life-changing relationship between teacher and student
- The focus on testing basic skills de-emphasizes the important role of the humanities, arts and child and adolescent development in creating a well-rounded, educated person
- Siphoning of federal Title I funding from educational programming to things like busing and paying for private tutoring firms, in an effort to have more students pass NCLB-mandated tests
- The legislation worsening the racial and economic segregation in metropolitan areas through labeling of those “in need of improvement”
- The demands made by the legislation that are not sufficiently funded to build the capacity that would close achievement gaps.

The report concludes by saying, “As people of faith we do not view our children as products but instead as unique human beings to be nurtured and educated. . . Our nation should be judged by the way we care for our children” (National Council of Churches, 2005, p. 2).

If the current educational situation is a tragedy of unintended consequences, the moral implications are catastrophic. High-achieving students with every advantage will find a way to succeed even under adverse circumstances. But what about students who are already at risk of failure and dropping out? What about students with limitations

(e.g., limited English language proficiency) who are expected to pass the same tests as all the other students in their grade? For that matter, what about the vast majority of students who are merely average performers on formal written tests? What kind of mindset is created among students when teachers literally begin the school year speaking about a test that will be administered at the end of the year? What kind of mindset is created among teachers and principals when they realize that if low-performing students drop out during the school year scores will increase on end-of-year tests? What kind of mindset is created among state legislators when they are presented with the possibility of millions of dollars flowing into their state from the federal government if they will but change laws designed to protect individual privacy?

Are you familiar with the Marshmallow Challenge? It is a problem-solving activity created by Peter Skillman in which teams of four persons are told to build the tallest possible free-standing structure out of 20 sticks of spaghetti, one yard of tape, one yard of string, and one marshmallow (<http://www.marshmallowchallenge.com>). The marshmallow has to be placed on top, and the teams have a relatively short time (less than 20 minutes) to complete their structure. Tom Wujec has conducted many workshops using this activity, and he has found that on average six out of ten groups will achieve a free-standing creation without any incentive other than the possibility of being the winner. One time he decided to up the ante on the competition by offering a \$10,000 prize of software to the team with the tallest structure. How tall was the winning structure? Actually, there was no winner. Not one group produced a structure capable of standing on its own. The high-stakes nature of the competition rendered the teams incapable of producing the desired product.

There is a saying that “stress makes us stupid.” To that adage I would add the corollary, “high-stakes assessment makes us stupid.” Rather than raising the level of achievement, high-stakes assessment actually increases the likelihood of failure. This is true not only for students, but also for teachers, principals, schools, districts, states, and ultimately society as a whole. A recent USA Today (2011) investigative study has raised the specter of widespread cheating on NCLB accountability testing across the United States. Nichols and

Berliner (2007) recount story after story of the depths to which individuals and entities will sink to meet the demands of high-stakes assessments, cheating at all costs and at every level. These findings confirm what has come to be known as Campbell’s Law, which states, “The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” (Campbell, 1976, p. 58).

### **Is a Christian Ethic of Care Possible?**

It is difficult to imagine how my institution’s dispositions mentioned in the opening paragraphs, or the idea of a Christian ethic of care generally, could be valued in the current educational environment. Nichols and Berliner (2007) note that “...the need to test has replaced the need to care, a corruption of the traditional role of teacher” (p. 73). As a dean, this is troubling for me. I feel as if my institution is holding its students to a standard that is both unrealistic and out of touch with modern educational practice. Further, what happens one day in the not-too-distant future when the federal government comes knocking on my university’s door, asking why our “failing” teachers are producing students who are neither ready for college nor for work? What is the appropriate response? Is there an appropriate response? CAEP policy is for schools of education to decide for themselves the dispositions that they will base their programs on. But as previously stated, CAEP seems to be in complete agreement with the U.S. Department of Education’s direction. Is it possible that in the future the federal government will determine that a school of education’s dispositions are inappropriate and must be changed in order to maintain accreditation? If we choose to retain these dispositions, will our graduates be considered non-certifiable and therefore non-hirable? This would be a natural outcome of Campbell’s Law.

### **What Can Be Done?**

It is time to speak out. Based on this review, the current NCLB-mandated environment of high-stakes testing devalues educationally sound practice in order to provide snapshots of achievement that require inordinate preparation, are simplistic in their coverage, and ultimately do not present a valid picture of student accomplishment. In this environment, a Christian ethic of care becomes



irrelevant as teachers are forced to focus exclusively on preparing students for testing and defending themselves against criticism of testing results that do not meet expectations. What can be done? Let me offer a few thoughts.

Many schools of education offer graduate programs that play an important role in shaping future leadership for schools, districts, and states. Graduate students should be engaged in extensive reading on all sides of the ESEA debate and forced to grapple with the implications of ESEA for their own future leadership. There is no reason to do away completely with high-stakes assessment, but are there other, more holistic alternatives than the current system? The ability to enter into this discussion will require that graduate programs provide a strong foundation in curriculum and assessment. Further, we should not leave moral concerns out of the discussion. Ethicality should provide the context within which the debate takes place.

CIHEs can also elevate the priority of moral concerns by refusing to participate in a state or federally-funded initiative when the ethics of that program are deemed questionable. In the fall of 2009, my institution was invited to send a representative to an organizing meeting in our state for the first round of the Race to the Top competition. The state department of education was looking for buy-in from teacher preparation programs in the form of letters of support and those willing to work on the state's proposal. Ultimately, we decided not to participate in helping the state develop a grant proposal. Beyond the fact that there seemed to be no role for private higher education institutions in the initiative, the most troubling aspects of the competition were the limited number of awards and what was expected of state legislatures in order to make their states eligible. The federal government, it seemed to us, had overstepped the limits of its authority in terms of both withholding education funds and infringing on states' rights. Perhaps the most shocking thing, however, was the extent to which institutions of higher education and state departments of education had become enablers of the federal government.

Along these same lines, I believe Christian teacher educators should also advocate that some kind of outside evaluation of the impact of any reauthorization of ESEA be written into the new

legislation. Currently, under NCLB, the federal government is both the instigator and the evaluator of the educational assessment system. Campbell, whose law was quoted earlier, had something to say about this situation over three decades ago:

*[The corruption of social systems] is a problem that will get worse, the more common quantitative evaluations of social programs become. We must develop ways of avoiding this problem if we are to move ahead. We should study the social processes through which corruption is being uncovered and try to design social systems that incorporate these features. (Campbell, 1976, p. 63)*

He uses the example of outside evaluators that acted as watchdogs in various performance-contracting studies. Who or what might engage in this oversight role with regard to a reauthorized ESEA? It would need to be a body that all parties involved in the system could agree would be unbiased in terms of its evaluation. This kind of inclusive dialogue would represent a major step forward for federal and state governments and would likely strengthen not only the evaluation of ESEA but also its implementation.

Finally, as a part of the above process, Christian teacher educators have a responsibility to change the language and overall quality of the assessment conversation that is currently underway. Noddings (2007) cogently observes:

*Without rejecting accountability, we might consider what is gained by using the richer vocabulary of responsibility. Responsibility and accountability point in different directions. We are accountable to a supervisor, someone above us in the hierarchy, but we are responsible for those below us...A sense of responsibility in teaching pushes us constantly to think about and promote the best interests of our students. In contrast, the demand for accountability often induces mere compliance. (p. 206)*

Shapiro and Gross (2008) further elaborate:

*Responsibility, while similar to accountability, can be perceived of as more inclusive by placing the onus for success or failure of students' achievement on society as a whole and not just on schools. Society includes taxpayers, legislators, parents, teachers, and administrators as well as the students themselves. This term is an ethical one. It is not associated with blame or budget. Instead, [it]*

*expects everyone to share in and care about educating the next generation. (p. 89)*

The above observations about responsibility versus accountability represent a much broader dialogue than is presently taking place. The current assessment system, with its emphasis on accountability, provides too many opportunities for blame and too few opportunities for shared responsibility. Further, the system assumes too much on the part of teachers, especially in terms of the support they are given for meeting the expectations of the system. As Cawthon (2007) notes, "Future reauthorizations of NCLB (or additional reforms) thus will need to go beyond measuring student achievement and focus on actually increasing our capacity to meet the educational needs of students..." (p. 486). This is a worthy goal, one in which a Christian ethic of care would be considered possible and even necessary.

### Conclusion

The debate over ESEA reauthorization and the future of assessment in education is in need of a broader, more informed perspective. It is time for men and women of faith to join in the discussion about ESEA before the opportunity for change is lost and a Christian ethic of care becomes an unaffordable luxury. As God admonishes us through the prophet Isaiah, "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (Isaiah 7:9b).

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