

**Primary Teachers' Confidence in
Religious and Moral Education in Scottish
Non-Denominational Schools**

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a small qualitative study that investigated Scottish primary teachers' confidence in Religious and Moral Education (RME) within the new curriculum known as 'Curriculum for Excellence' (CfE). The study was carried through face to face interviews with five primary teachers based in two Scottish local authorities. The study has identified that while teachers are confident with their pedagogical knowledge of the subject, they are less confident regarding the level of subject knowledge they have in the subject and about their professional engagement with CfE particularly citing the vagueness of the curriculum and difficulties they face in drawing out learning outcomes and expectations in their teaching of RME.

Background Context

The relatively new (introduced in 2009) Scottish curriculum known as "Curriculum for Excellence" (CfE) covering ages 3-18 stipulates that Religious and Moral Education (RME) should be offered as one of the eight core areas of the curriculum. (Matemba 2015). In CfE the importance of RME lies on the fact that it provides essential educational experience for children and young people in a country that while liberal in its attitude to religion nevertheless embraces plurality in all its various forms (Scottish Government 2009a). In support of RME as a legal requirement in Scottish education since 1929 (Matemba 2015) CfE is keen to emphasise the need for RME to draw material content not only from religion but also from views that are independent of religion (Scottish Government 2009a). In this way the CfE hopes to provide learners with a relevant learning experience that is sensitive to the religious and cultural diversity of the country.

Historically Scotland operates a different system of education from England and Wales (Humes and Bryce 2013). Since 1918 Scotland has operated a dual system of state funded schools comprising of non-denominational schools and denominational schools (*de facto* Catholic although also including a few Episcopalian schools) (Conroy 2014). As part of the dual educational arrangement, historically Scotland offers two types of Religious Education (RE): a Catholic curriculum known as *Religious Education* and largely confessional in-line with the Church's religious needs and the other known as *Religious and Moral Education* designed for 'secular' schools (i.e. non-denominational) and thus largely multi-faith and phenomenological in nature (see Scottish Government 2009a; Scottish Government 2009b).

One of the key features of CfE is that it is an 'open' curriculum which requires teachers to fill in their content in a system of education where teachers have increased autonomy (Priestley 2010). In such a curriculum teacher confidence, knowledge of material content and pedagogical competence are necessary if teachers are to fully satisfy the demands and expectations of the of the curriculum's four capacities towards producing learners who are 'successful', 'confident', responsible' and 'effective contributors' (Scottish Executive 2006).

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In this study the generic term 'confidence' is understood to comprise three elements: first, 'cognitive' related to a person's knowledge of their abilities, secondly, 'performance' concerning their ability to do something and finally, 'emotional' related to their feeling of being comfortable regarding the former two aspects (Norman and Hyland 2003). Thus, related to teaching confidence can relate to teachers' knowledge of a subject (i.e. material content), their performance or ability to teach the subject, and how comfortable they are with the aforementioned aspects (see Shriner et al. 2010). Regarding RME in particular, evidence from relevant literature suggests that the majority of classroom teachers in Scotland lack confidence teaching RME (Conroy et al. 2013) despite the subject being a compulsory curricular area that must be legally taught in schools. As Matemba has reported due to the lack of confidence, teachers tend to offer RME through proxies rather than teach RME 'proper' - that is RME firmly aligned with the expectations of CfE (Matemba 2015).

Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this section comprises materials from Scotland, the rest of the UK and where relevant from other countries. The literature review presented focuses on (a) teachers' engagement with pedagogical approaches (implicit and explicit) in RME, (b) level of subject knowledge in RME and (c) issues related to RME within CfE. Most of the literature I have reviewed is drawn from journal articles although where necessary key reports and relevant books have been reviewed as well.

Explicit and implicit approaches to and of RME

In education, pedagogical approaches are teaching strategies that encompass the aims, curriculum content and methodology teachers can adopt for their teaching (Alexander 2004). Given the multifaceted and contested nature religion in public education during the past three decades or so there has developed different approaches for the subject which schools and indeed countries have adopted to suit their particular needs (Buchanan 2005; Matemba 2005). In this study I will focus on two pedagogical approaches, namely 'implicit' and 'explicit'.

An explicit approach can be defined as the teaching of various world religions focusing on such things as core beliefs, festivals and other visible aspects of religion while an implicit approach can be defined as the teaching of religion as an accompaniment to an overriding moral issues such as 'sex and relationships], 'social cohesion', 'abortion', 'caring' and so on (Conroy et al. 2013). At the core of the phenomenological approach is the idea that religion in public education should be approached from a non-confessional standpoint with teachers adopting a professional rather confessional attitude towards teaching and learning in Religious Education (Barnes 2007).

Scholars who advocate for non-confessional approaches to Religious Education such as Barnes (2007), McCreery et al (2008), Teece (2010) and Wright (2007) see both the implicit and explicit approaches as giving the contemporary teacher of Religious Education some confidence towards the subject essentially because religion in public schools is premised on a non-confessional approach (McCreery et al. 2008; Teece 2010; Wright 2007). In a secular setting explicit and implicit approaches are widely accepted by the majority of teachers in Western countries because these approaches allow religion to be approached from an outsider's perspective that apparently is free of bias (Copley 2008; Wardekker and Miedema 2001). It is suggested that such approaches have provided teachers with some confidence because they do not have to teach religion from a confessional standpoint which most of them object from due to professional and personal reasons (Matemba 2014c).

In England, the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NARE) (NARE, 2013) reports that less than 5% of teachers feel confident teaching Religious Education mainly due to lack of knowledge about religion and how such knowledge is to be taught (i.e. pedagogical approach) (NARE 2013). Jackson, Barnes and others highlight that the effectiveness of RME's content is in direct correlation with the pedagogical approach taken by teachers, and that teachers with low confidence in their chosen pedagogical approach will teach a lesson that is likely to be ineffective (Barnes 2001; Jackson 2004). Drawing both from explicit and implicit approaches Barnes and Wright think that for a teacher to teach the core issues of religion a teacher must also possess good knowledge in order to generate an effective learning environment (Barnes 2001; Wright 2007). As a consequence teachers who are not confident with their own knowledge may only focus on the implicit aspects of RME – that is emphasising only on moral issues or those issues that avoid to address religion as a core issue in RME (I'Anson 2004).

Subject knowledge in RME

Related to the issues highlighted in previous section, a number of scholars such as McCreery et al (2008), Lundie (2010) and Conroy et al (2013) are emphatic on the point that teachers' knowledge of a subject is directly in relation to the confidence they have teaching that subject or a lesson from that subject. They show that teachers who have poor subject knowledge have lessons which contain very limited, narrow, factual information which in turn lead to poor pupil engagement (Conroy et al. 2013; Lundie 2010; McCreery et al. 2008). Furthermore, Wheelahan (2010) has suggested that a recent worldwide trend is the downgrading of knowledge in modern curricula, due to the increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches (Wheelahan 2010). As a result of this downgrade an erosion of the distinction between academic knowledge and everyday knowledge is occurring, leading to a lack of confidence for teachers. It is an argument made recently by Hazel Bryan and Lynn Revel who say that Religious Education teachers who lack confidence in religion tend to use avoidance techniques such as focusing on interdisciplinary issues that do not relate to religion (Bryan and Revell 2011).

Given the contested and complex nature of Religious Education approached from non-confessional standpoint teachers who lack subject knowledge are unable to teach areas of Religious Education that deal with competing truth claims of religions, and as such further diminishing their level of confidence in the subject (see Bryan and Revell 2011; Conroy et al. 2013). By contrast, from a general educational perspective Young and Muller (2010) report that teachers who have good subject knowledge plan and implement tasks better are more skilled in asking and answering questions, and that such teachers are able to provide the correct level of work for all pupils in the class (Young and Muller 2010). Pertaining to Religious Education in Scotland others such as Matemba observe that teachers with adequate knowledge of religion are confident in their approach of the subject resulting in effective teaching and useful learning in RME (Matemba 2015).

RME within Curriculum for Excellence

Although Scotland does not have a prescribed national curriculum *per se*, (in practice all public schools use CfE (Hayward 2007), CfE provides a national framework which guides teaching and learning for all children from the age of 3 to 18 (Priestley and Humes 2010). In this section the main purpose is to examine RME in CfE in government documents and where relevant extant literature and whether, if at all, teachers have confidence to effectively interpret CfE guidelines in planning, teaching and learning in RME.

Examining RME in CfE the one feature that becomes apparent is that it does not detail how teachers should approach the learning outcomes (Matemba 2015). CfE only provides broad statements covering the three main strands of Christianity, world religions and developments of beliefs and values (Scottish Government 2009a). Pedagogically one also notices that RME within CfE comprises both explicit and implicit approaches. The implication here is that when non-confident teachers turn to CfE for guidance, it may provide assistance, but equally it may cause confusion because the guidelines are broad and thus a teacher needs to have subject knowledge and pedagogical competence in order to plan and teach coherent lessons (see Grant and Matemba 2013).

In general terms, Priestly (2010) suggests that CfE has multiple weaknesses when policy is translated into practice, namely that a vagueness of specification in pedagogical terms within various curricular areas exists (Priestley 2010). It is therefore evident that a teacher's interpretation of policy guidelines is dependent to a large extent upon the confidence they have within the specific curricular area where the guidelines apply. For teachers with confidence and subject knowledge the autonomy within CfE gives them greater control and the latitude to choose the content and approach they see fit for their classes, while unconfident teachers may want more directed curriculum guidance regarding what to teach and which pedagogical approach to use (Priestley 2010).

Thus, the vagueness of specification in material content and pedagogical terms can have serious implications for the unconfident RME teacher who also lacks subject knowledge. In his recent study Matemba found that many RME teachers in Scotland are unsure about which pedagogical approach is best for them to use for their lessons within CfE, and even which issues (i.e. material content) to cover in their RME lessons (Matemba 2014a). A study by Grant and Matemba (2013) has highlighted that owing to lack of subject knowledge in many schools teachers are not assessing religious knowledge 'proper', and instead they seem more interested assessing students' generic skills such as listening, working in groups, enthusiasm and so on (Grant and Matemba 2013). Clearly there issues with teacher confidence in RME within CfE, and as Grant and Matemba here also highlight, lack of subject and pedagogical knowledge is adversely impacting on teachers' confidence in interpreting CfE learning outcomes.

The literature reviewed here provides evidence of the confusion surrounding pedagogical approaches in RME, which coupled with a lack of subject knowledge and with the new demands of RME within CfE is playing a major role in a lack of confidence that many teachers are currently experiencing. This in turn is causing in some cases teachers to avoid teaching 'religious' aspects of the curriculum. Clearly, teacher confidence in RME is an issue that requires attention in exploring ways of overcoming the problem.

Methodology

In this section we will outline methodical issues related to the research that informed this study. First, it describes the context of the study detailing where the research was conducted. Second, it outlines the research question and aims of the study. This is followed by a description of the research methods, on to a section that details the ethical procedures for the study. Fifth, it describes participants who took part in the study research are noted, and finally, highlights the limitations of the study.

Context of schools selected for study

The study is based on data that was collected from research participants from three rural schools in Scotland. Two of the schools were based in the same local authority (South

Ayrshire) while the third was based in a different local authority (Dumfries and Galloway). As is common with rural schools in Scotland such as declining pupil numbers and teacher reluctance to teach in those areas (Bennett 1996; Williams et al. 2000; Wilson and Brundrett 2005), all three schools had small student populations as can be seen in the table below (Table 1). As we can see from this table, due to small pupil populations these schools had composite classes.

Table 1. Coding and profiles of schools selected for study

School Code	Number of Classes	School Population P1-P7
A	1	11
B	3	58
C	2	24

The three schools were selected because they were easily accessible to the researcher in terms of distance, and also for the fact that during different times of his teacher education training he had experience being in all the three schools.

Research question and aims of the study

This study investigates Scottish primary teachers' confidence in RME and is guided by the following main research question: *how confident are primary school teachers in RME in Scottish non-denominational primary schools?* In attempting to address this question, the study focused on three related aims:

- To examine primary teachers' knowledge of and confidence in employing implicit and explicit pedagogical approaches to RME.
- To assess primary teachers' confidence of their material knowledge of religion in RME.
- To analyse primary teachers' confidence related to how they plan and teach RME within the expectations of CfE.

Research methods

This was a qualitative study which used key informant interviews (n = 5) as the main data collection method (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). These were semi-structured interviews were based on an interview schedule that had open-ended questions. Relevant research suggestions that semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions are useful because this allows the interviewer to follow up trajectories that may emerge spontaneously during the interview (Diefenbach 2009; Mason 1997).

The interview schedule had three parts (see appendix 5). Part one, gathered information related to the participants' professional experience, years of service and levels of their confidence teaching RME. Part two focused on the participants' knowledge of and confident in pedagogical approaches to RME focusing explicit and implicit approaches. The third and final part of the interview schedule focused on participants' level of confidence related to CfE guidance for RME. The interviews were recorded using a digital device (with signed consent) which was password security locked, and transferred onto a private 'icloud' account also password secure (Mason 1997; Menter et al. 2010). However, owing to time constraints only one interview was fully transcribed (see appendix 6) while the other three were partially in the form of notes, in order to gain the information needed to contrast and compare data among all five participants (Birley and Moreland 2013).

Analysis of the data followed a common protocol associated with qualitative research which involved reading and re-reading of the data first to understand it, and then recognising issues that later formed distinct themes (Attride-Stirling 2001). The themes were arranged under three main themes related to teachers' confidence: (a) explicit and implicit pedagogical approaches, (b) subject knowledge and competence and (c) RME within CfE guidelines. The use of data from participants from different schools and in different local authority (i.e. source triangulation) helped to strengthen the dependability of the data that informs this study (Bogdan and Biklen 1997; Mason 1997).

Ethical procedure

Permission to undertake the research was initially approved by the university's ethics committee and was therefore undertaken following the university's strict guidelines on ethical research. Individual participants (i.e. teachers) were approached personally by the researcher to seek their consent (Mason 1997). The researcher shared freely with the headteachers and potential participants the ethics form and consent form. Those who agreed to take part were identified and during the interviews also given a consent form to sign (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). There were no special circumstances that required extra concern in regards to Ethical issues during the research.

Participants of the study

The study is based on data that was collected from interviews with five teachers (n=5) in three rural non-denominational Scottish primary schools. All five participants (from the three different schools in two different local authorities) were interviewed at a time and place that was suitable to them, although in all cases these took place in the participant's classroom. Each interview took not more than 30 minutes.

Table 2. Coding and profiles of study participants

Teacher Code	School Code	Gender of Participant	Years of Service	Primary Stage Teaching	Class Size	Currently Teaching RME
1	A	F	7	P1-7	11	N
2	B	F	34	P5-7	20	Y
3	B	F	8	P1-3	19	Y
4	C	F	8	P1-4	13	Y
5	C	F	1	P5-7	11	Y

The two local authorities involved in the study were identified although the particular schools were not. Instead these schools were given anonymous codes such as 'School A', 'School B' and so on. Equally, in order to protect the identities of the participants, anonymous codes were used such as 'Teacher 1', 'Teacher 5' and so on (see Table 2) (Marshall and Rossman 1995).

Limitations of the study

This was a small study involving only five participants from three rural schools in Scotland and also with only one interview fully transcribed. Thus, while the findings are relevant and point to important lessons in RME within CfE they are limited only to the sites of the study concerned and persons involved, and thus cannot offer conclusive perspectives related to the issues described in this study.

Findings

The study found that the teachers had varying years of teaching service from teaching only one year to 34 years, with 11.6 years as the average number of years the five participants spent teaching RME. Although at the time of the study one participant was not teaching RME, her perspectives were equally valid because previously in her seven year of teaching service she had taught the subject and after all Scottish primary teachers receive full training RME as well during their initial teacher education (Matemba 2014b; Matemba 2014c).

The substantive findings from the study were grouped under three key themes. The first theme examined teachers' confidence in RME related to their knowledge of and competence in two pedagogical approaches, namely, explicit and implicit. The second theme concerned teachers' confidence of the subject knowledge in RME they have in the context of CfE. The third theme describes teachers' confidence related to their professional engagement with the expectations of CfE. These themes emerged after careful analysis of the data and also collaborated by relevant literature.

Teachers' Knowledge of Explicit and Implicit Approaches in RME

Jackson (2004) contends that the effectiveness of Religious Education in the classroom is in direct correlation with the pedagogical approaches teachers use (Jackson 2004). However, despite the gloomy picture exhibited in some of the literature and indeed as reported in other parts of the UK such as England, the findings in this small study revealed a surprisingly positive message. Thus, in addressing the first aim of the study related to "primary teachers' knowledge of and confidence in employing implicit and explicit pedagogical approaches to RME", all the participants (n = 5) self-reported that they felt confident teaching RME using both explicit and implicit approaches.

From our discussions with the teachers, it was evident also that they were clear in their understanding not only regarding what 'explicit' and 'implicit' approaches entails but crucially how the approaches can be used in RME lessons within CfE. For example, one participant in the study reported stated that,

I teach RME using both the implicit and explicit method. I am confident teaching RME using these approaches in my lessons (Teacher 3, School B).

As can be seen from the views of Teacher 3, School B what also came out strongly in the study is the issue of *teacher confidence* in the use of these approaches. Thus, when asked how confident they felt teaching RME using these approaches they were unanimous in their response in the affirmative, for example, statement such as "I am very confident teaching using both methods" (Teacher 2, School B). Teacher 4 and 5 from School C also echoed that they felt confident teaching RME using both implicit and explicit approaches. When asked further on this issue the teachers noted the challenge with the new RME curriculum guidelines (i.e. CfE) is that it does not give the teacher any useful pointers regarding pedagogical approaches such as the use of 'implicit' and 'explicit' approaches and yet expects teachers to know and use these approaches.

Teacher's Subject Knowledge in RME

Scholars such as Conroy et al (2013) and Young and Muller (2010) have highlighted that good content knowledge of a subject is directly related to the overall confidence one has when teaching a subject or lesson (Conroy et al. 2013; Young and Muller 2010). Thus the study sought to find out primary teachers' views on how they self-report their subject knowledge of the new RME curriculum and how this impacted on their overall confidence towards RME.

In their responses to the question "do you feel you have good knowledge of religious subjects and does this impact on your confidence" (see appendix 5) the participants provided somewhat an ambiguous response to the question, with others indicating that they had adequate knowledge (n=2) and others saying that they were not sure (n=3). For example, one participant said:

I am confident that I know enough about the six religions I focus on to satisfy the needs of CfE, and thus [sic] the children in my class

(Teacher 2, School B).

Another teacher although stating that she was confident also indicated the area she was less confident about. One teacher stated:

I am very confident when the lesson is on the topic of a religion I have a good knowledge about, but much less confident when the religion being taught is one whereby gaps exist in my knowledge"

(Teacher 1, School A).

The participants were quick to add that they had knowledge about religions because they spend time a lot of preparation time planning their lessons. For instance, one participant said that "I put in a lot of preparation time prior to teaching a religion" (Teacher 3, School B). In one case, one teacher also acknowledged the support of colleagues towards gaining subject knowledge and confidence in RME, as the excerpt below show:

The support from other teachers has led to the knowledge and confidence I now have in RME. If I hadn't such support, I would be treading in [difficult] water here

(Teacher 3, School B).

While in the cases of the teachers' highlighted above where there is an indication of teachers having good subject knowledge which also made them feel confident as teachers of RME, the study also captured where teachers' experience of RME (i.e. subject knowledge and feeling of confidence) was not so positive. For the teachers who expressed this view one thing they kept repeating was that although they prepared adequately for their lessons (i.e. reading relevant materials) they did not have the confidence that they were teaching the correct things. The teachers indicated that while they had good knowledge of "well-known" religions such as Islam and Christianity they lacked knowledge in many if the World Religions CfE expect them to teach. The excerpt below illustrates the issue:

I do not feel secure with the knowledge I have on religions, and this is why I am not confident in RME

(Teacher 4, School C).

As we can see in the above excerpt, the participant did not feel confident teaching those religions where gaps of knowledge existed.

Teachers' Engagement with RME within Curriculum for Excellence

As scholars have pointed out (Matemba 2014a; Watson 2010; Young and Muller 2010), CfE is an *open* curriculum which does prescribe the content to be taught, with teachers expected to "fill in" their content in what schools should teach in practice. Evidently, it is a curriculum that in theory expects teachers to have a high degree of subject knowledge and pedagogical

competence related to curriculum Expectations (Es) and Outcomes (Os). In this study the interest was to ascertain how teachers' engage with the nature of RME within CfE, in terms of how they meet Es and Os.

In their response to question "does CfE provide adequate guidance in relation to Es and Os in RME?" one teacher in the study said that she was very confident interpreting RME's Es and Os in the planning and teaching of her lessons, stating that "The Es and Os are straightforward, a starting point, to inform you about the experiences children should be getting, I'm very confident working from them". However, other than the response of this one teacher to the question noted above, most teachers in the study were unanimous in expressing the concern that subject's Es and Os are too "broad" and "vague", with the consequence that a teacher is not always sure that what they are teaching is correct or what the curriculum expects. It was thus not too difficult to see that the nature of RME within CfE of being "open" and having "broad" outcomes was a key factor that contributed to their feeling of being less confident with the subject. Even for participants (i.e. Teacher 3, School B) who said that she was "very confident" with her subject knowledge of RME in the previous section, expressed being less confident with CfE in terms of meeting RME's Es and Os. She further noted that,

I feel unsure of the content to teach, how much, how little [because the Es and Os simply say that children] should enjoy or they should experience their learning (Teacher 3, School B).

Comparing to the previous curriculum (i.e. 5-14), Teacher 3 in School B added that in fact she felt more confident teaching RME within the old 5-14 curriculum because that that program of study was detailed in prescribing what teachers were expected to teach (see Grant and Matemba 2013). The participants were insistent in their view that they struggled to plan successful RME lessons owing to the "broadness" and alleged "vagueness" of RME within CfE. As the following excerpts here illustrate:

It just isn't specific enough, which is leading me to be not as confident, as I don't know if I'm teaching the right thing at the right time

(Teacher 1, School A).

... because it's not overly detailed [the Es and Os] and because I don't feel that I have a good knowledge about religion, it does lead to me sometimes think, am I teaching the correct thing here? ... and I think that's really why I'm not that confident

(Teacher 4, School C).

This is really the area that I'm not confident about, because the Es and Os are so broad and I don't have the knowledge

(Teacher 5, School C).

From what most of the teachers said it can be surmised that the alleged "vagueness" and "broadness" of Es and Os within CfE exacerbated by the lack of curriculum guidance and subject knowledge among some of the teachers, was a key contributory factor to their lack of confidence in RME – an issue that also resonates with the findings of recent research (Matemba 2014a; Matemba 2015) .

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate Scottish primary teachers' confidence in RME within the new CfE programme. To that extent it found that overall the majority of the teachers in the study indicated that they were not confident in RME. They cited mainly the

lack of subject knowledge and the “open” nature of RME within CfE as areas that contributed to their diminishing levels of confidence in the subject. In relation to CfE the vagueness of Es and Os in RME were also identified as problematic areas for teachers. A rather surprising finding in the study relates to the self-reported confidence teachers said they had related to their pedagogical knowledge of approaches such as “explicit” and “implicit”. However, given that the views of teachers captured in this study—particularly related to teachers’ confidence in pedagogical approaches—were self-reported by the teachers there is need to collaborate these findings with other evidence such as classroom observations and HMIE reports. So while the findings reported in this study are valid as far as the evidence that was captured from the teachers is concerned, it is possible that collaborative evidence might reveal a slightly different picture, or not, regarding Scottish primary teachers’ confidence in RME within CfE.

The implication of these findings is that the lack of teacher confidence mainly related to subject knowledge and the curriculum (i.e. RME within CfE) can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of RME and the snowballing effect this might have on children about the subject. It is evident that teachers need a more coordinated response by the government through HMIE or Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs) responsible for the subject towards improving teachers’ competence in various areas of RME within CfE. However, given that QIOs are generalists they may themselves lack the subject knowledge to effectively provide professional advice to RME teachers (Matemba 2014a). The study recommends that Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in relevant areas could benefit teachers’ confidence in RME, although a time of government cuts teachers might struggle to get the appropriate level of funding to attend such courses particularly for a less regarded school subject.

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