

Japanese educational system and competitiveness in children (II)

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In this paper, the profiles of Japanese child development, Japanese family education, and preschool education system were discussed. Approximately, 93 percent of the children attend at least 2 years of pre-elementary education (2001). At the foundation of Japanese children's self-discipline there are several practices: (a) Children help shape classroom rules and norms, (b) build their identification with authority, (c) reflect on their behavior, (d) such reflection may build an enduring habit of self-evaluation.

Key words: educational system, preschool, Japan, competitiveness

In the previous article (Yamazaki, 2002), the following topics were discussed; Japanese child development, the formation of Japanese culture, the structure of Japan's child rearing, self-discipline, and an example of science teaching in elementary school. In this article, the foundation of kindergarten education will be discussed.

The Curriculum Standards in Japanese Kindergarten

It is fundamental for kindergarten education to be conducted based on environment. In the course of education in kindergartens, the following three matters are to be emphasized.

- (1) To help children develop through everyday activities in a manner appropriate to their stage of growth.
- (2) To comprehensively attain the aims of education mainly by instruction through play.
- (3) To provide guidance in accordance with the developmental characteristics of each child.

The objectives of kindergarten education are as follows:

- (1) To encourage basic living habits and attitudes for a healthy, safe and happy life, and to nurture the foundations for a healthy mind and body.

- (2) To encourage love and trust for people and to cultivate an attitude of independence, cooperation and morality.
- (3) To encourage interests toward one's surrounding nature and society, and to cultivate sensitivity and a capacity for appreciating one's surroundings.
- (4) To encourage interest toward language in daily life, to develop pleasant attitudes in talking and listening to others and to cultivate language sense.

The Course of Study for Kindergartens further indicates aims, which are the concrete objectives of kindergarten education, and content, concerning which teachers provide guidance to the aspects of child development.

Curriculum is arranged in each kindergarten in accordance with the standards shown in the Course of Study for Kindergartens, taking into consideration the actual situation of the kindergarten and the community.

The minimum number of school weeks for kindergarten education is 39 weeks a year, and the standard number of classroom hours per day is four hours in consideration of the developmental level of

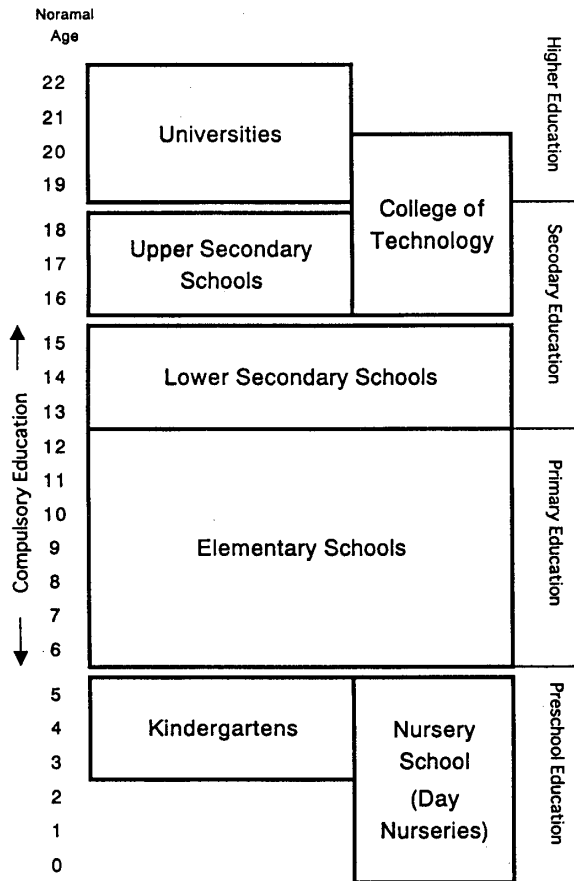


Fig. 1. Education system in Japan

(Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, 2000)

the minds and bodies of the children. Fig. 2 Prescribed content of kindergarten education in Japan (Sciences of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, 2000)



Fig. 2. Prescribed content of kindergarten education

(Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, 2000)

are without any bias or prejudice

- (7) whole-heartedness to challenge things by main strength

Prescribed content of kindergarten education is classified into five areas: health, human relationships, environment, language, and expression (Fig. 2). What is important here is that children themselves experience and learn things through play. Play is the most important factor in kindergarten education.

What is competitiveness? The word "competitiveness" can be replaced by the words spontaneity or a motive to accomplish tasks. Then, what kinds of factors work together to form competitiveness?

- (1) self-confidence
- (2) concentration
- (3) perseverance
- (4) self-educability
- (5) attainable aim (that is, to have appropriate aim or goal)
- (6) open-mindedness to see and feel things as they

Some people say that children or human beings are idle by nature, so they will not do anything spontaneously unless they are compelled or forced to do. But the opinion is not necessarily true. For example, babies are filled with joy and satisfaction when they can stand by themselves for the first time. Once they stand, they begin to walk step by step, experiencing many failures. They try and try again to get to the better level, even if they don't get any praise or reward.

As children begin to walk, their environment widens drastically. They go out of their houses to a park in the neighborhood or visit a friend's house to play with. Also they begin to realize the existence of peers. At first they seem to be satisfied just to be with other peers, but they begin to exchange words and play together. Sometimes they may fight or quarrel, but begin to know the importance of friends

to enrich their everyday life. They also experience various emotions while interacting with other children. They become interested in various objects to which they paid no attention when their environment and social experience were limited.

Originally all children have a motive to improve themselves or a motive to attain better goals. They also have a motive to be recognized by others and a motive to excel other peers. Some motives are based on self-improvement and others are based on human relationships. Then, how can we encourage children to grow spontaneity and a motive to attain goals? We should bear in mind that to encourage children to do and learn things spontaneously is not at all a simple nor easy task. It never works well if you try to make children do better by imposing outside pressure on them. It means that traditional method of giving them candies or rods does not work well. At first there may be times when it work well, but soon its effect dies and in the long run, children will come to rebel against you. Reward and punishment cannot encourage children to have inner drive to do something spontaneously.

Then, when can we see and realize the existence of spontaneity, concentration, perseverance or whole-heartedness in children? The answer is quite clear; when they are at play. Children at play are very lively and active. They seem to make the best use of their knowledge and skills in play. They also use the five senses fully; they watch, touch, feel, smell and hear. Children's play contains a series of behavior, such as exploration, investigation, operation, recognition, and perception. Activity of the kind looks like play to the eye, but this is learning itself to children. Play is the basis of spontaneous learning. This learning activity is not done upon compulsion nor by suggestion by others. Nor children play to seek for reward. This is the spontaneous activity driven by the inner motives in children. Indeed, play is children's lives. Through play, they train their skills, develop imagination and creativity, and learn various social rules and the ways to cooperate with others. An American writer says in his book, "I have learned all the wisdom I need in my life at a kindergarten sandpit." He also says, "I have learned everything at kindergarten that man should know, such as how to live your life, how to behave and

spend your daily life." Indeed, at kindergartens you can see children express their joy using their whole bodies. You can find spontaneity, concentration, creativity, whole-heartedness and zeal among children at play. Competitiveness grows in children's play. Therefore, in order to support children to acquire competitiveness, it is necessary to offer children an environment where they can play to their hearts' content, and in a modern society where the favorable environment is scarce, kindergartens and day nurseries should be responsible for the task.

Some environmental conditions to help children develop play

These four conditions are the minimum essentials.

- (1) Play environment should be free of limitation of time and space.
- (2) Play environment should be flexible, containing uncertainty.
- (3) Play environment should be less-structured or less-organized.
- (4) Play environment should have a permissible and friendly atmosphere.

But often problems occur, many adults misunderstand that favorable play environment means safely-arranged play spots with abundant colorful toys. But please remember it is children who play.

Children are not so much attracted to such play spots, because in such cases, the existence of children itself is often forgotten. Not toys or a playground slide but children should play the leading role there. Therefore, there is good reason why they prefer a place where worn-out articles are piled up to a cozy park.

What we call educational toys have highly organized structures. In fact, these toys are made with clear intention to have children learn words, number or time. Children may play with them for a while, but they soon get tired of them, because these toys lack flexibility. There is no possibility for them to extend to another play. A carton box or pieces of wood will be far better and more attractive tools for children to play with. These materials can be made into anything they want, as they have flexibility and respond to children's interests. Children begin to acquire play competence in favorable play

environment. At the same time, we also must think about the human environment in order for children to acquire competitiveness through play.

Then what attitude should teachers take in order to support children to develop competitiveness? The followings will be the answers.

- (1) Evaluate and accept children as they are.
- (2) Convey your warm interest and trust to each child and make them have confidence in themselves.
- (3) Trust children's capability of dealing with things. Nurture children's self-respect and try to be trusted by them.
- (4) Respect efforts made by children and help them have the attainable goals. Do not forget to praise them when they accomplish goals. At the same time, tell children the importance of efforts they make even when they are not successful.
- (5) Give advice if necessary or if asked by children but let children take the initiative in problem solving. Wait patiently till they get to their own conclusions.
- (6) Help children have reliable peer relationships in groups.
- (7) Let children have a sense of lack and dissatisfaction for their environment. Such feelings make children work on their environment actively and spontaneously, using their imagination and creativity fully in order to make their surroundings more comfortable and attractive to them. As fed-up lions will not chase animals, mental and physical hunger makes children active and spontaneous.
- (8) Do not impose values on children from adult side. Children's play sometimes includes cruelty. They stomp on ants or pull butterflies' wings off. Teachers worry and try to prohibit such behavior but it is important for children to experience both positive and negative sides of play. If teachers set prohibition on children's play, play loses its essential meanings and it dies at this point.
- (9) Help children experience the pleasure to challenge something new.
- (10) Have reliable relationships with parents. Education and discipline at home, as well as at kindergarten, is inevitable to children. Therefore,

it is necessary that teachers and parents should have the same educational policy and respect each other's way of thinking and nursing.

One of the model educational institutes in Japan

Our kindergarten serves as one of the model educational institutes in Japan, and several times a year, we have study meetings inviting educators and teachers from other kindergartens and day nurseries. They observe children's activities and learn the educational goals we are aiming at. They exchange opinions one another and discuss how early childhood education should be. In the meeting we often hear teachers from other institutes say that they are very much surprised and impressed by the lively and active way our children behave.

Of all the kindergartens in Japan, about 60% (Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, 2000) of them are private and they have their own curriculum to appeal their originality to parents. Many of the kindergartens and day nurseries give children mass education. Children are well disciplined and behave as they are told to. Children paint pictures, play musical instruments, dance and sing as a class. On special occasions such as sports day and exhibition, you will be surprised to see children show perfect discipline under the supervision of teachers. Their parents and relatives look really pleased with the beautiful way their sons and daughters behave. As for children themselves, we do not know whether they really enjoy their activities or not. Actually they look very careful about which foot to start or about the next action they are to take.

Some educational institutes teach children number, even arithmetic, English and Chinese characters. Others let children memorize old proverbs and the words by Confucius. We have chances to see those children say the words beautifully on TV but many Japanese kindergarten teachers do not think children understand what those words really mean. Neither do I think that they want to live up to the words by Confucius. But many parents believe that these activities are the ways to cultivate intellectual

talents and skills in children. They look very proud of their youngsters to hear them exchange greetings in English.

Many parents and even some educators tend to think that the earlier children start learning things, the wiser they become compared with other children. But unfortunately this is not true. Unless they are really interested in learning something or willing to use the skills or knowledge continuously or unless they have a motive to apply their acquired skills to something else, this intellectual education in early childhood will be unsuccessful. As soon as graduating from kindergarten, these kinds of knowledge or skills will disappear. On the contrary, there are times when some troubles happen in elementary

school education. Some teachers say that such children have lost the excitement and fresh feelings to learn something new at elementary school, because what they learn as first-graders at elementary school are the things they have already done at kindergartens. Therefore, some children come to find classes dull and uninteresting. In fact, some educators fear that too much early education imposed on children might deprive them of the spontaneity or excitement in finding something new. They tend to lose motives to do and challenge things. As a matter of fact, Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture decided to do a longitudinal survey on the influence of early intellectual education has on children.

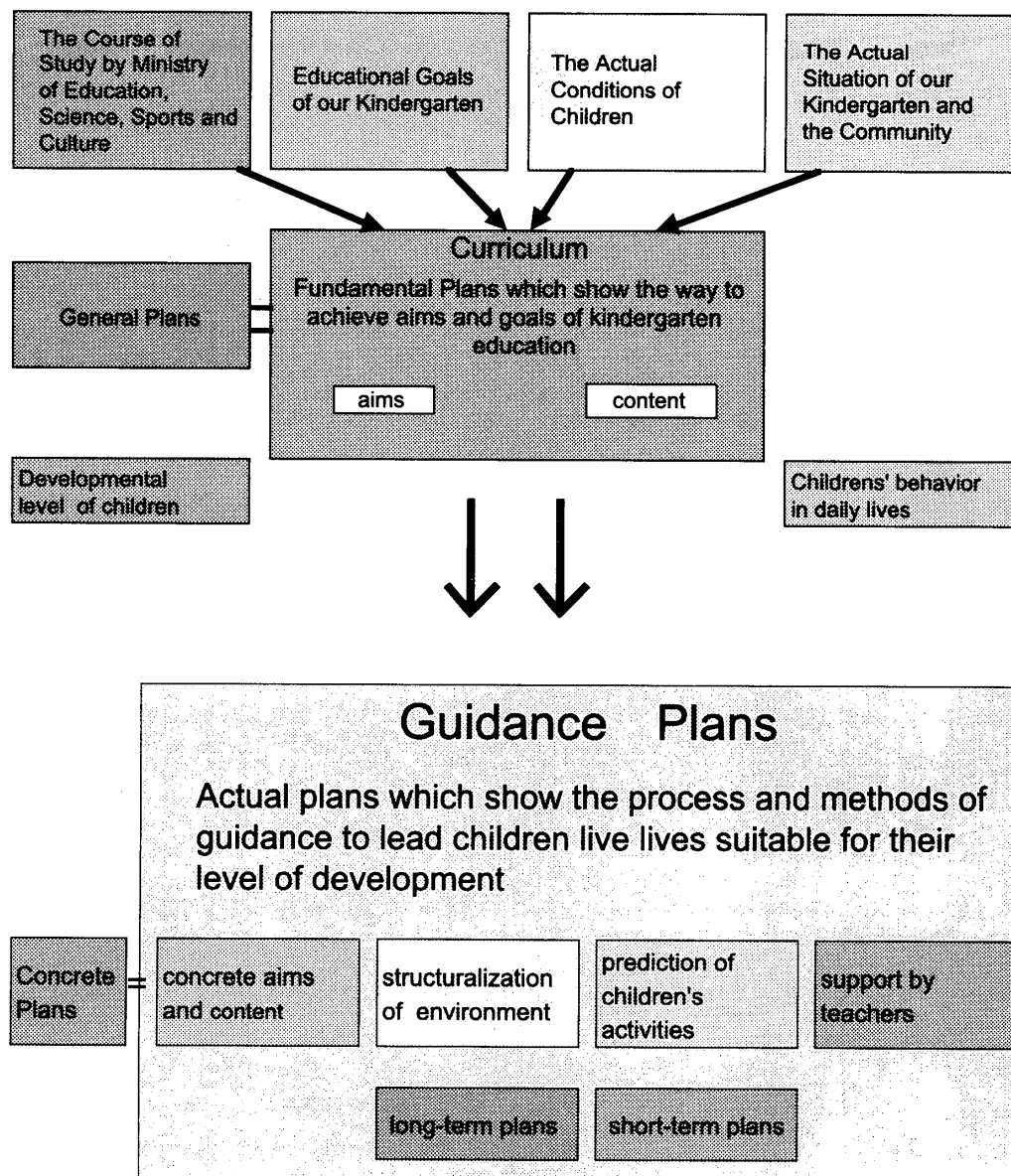


Fig. 3. The actual process of arranging curriculum and guidance plans

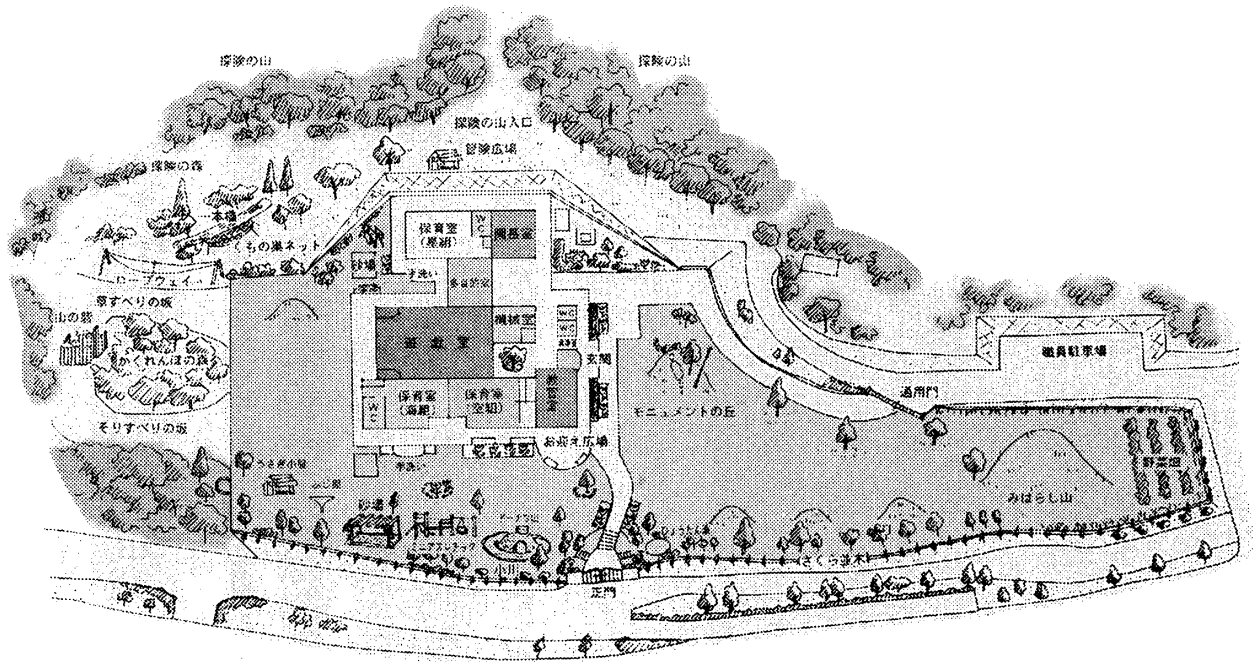


Fig. 4. Perspective of the Hiroshima University Attached Kindergarten

How to motivate the children's behaviors (curriculum and guidance)?

We should not give children education to show off, but give them motives fundamental to their stage of growth. Anyway, the right guidance at the right time is important in education in general. Fig. 3 shows the actual process of arranging curriculum and guidance plans.

For several years, Japan has been nursing children with the following two principles. To develop individuality of each child through free play and daily activities in rich natural environment. To help children attain self-actualization.

Generally, Kindergarten starts at 9:00. Children come accompanied mostly by their mothers. After exchanging greetings with teachers, they put their belongings to an appointed place and choose a sticker to put on their attendance notebooks. Then they start playing with peers or sometimes by themselves. They are allowed to do anything at any place they like. On days without lunch, they go home at 11:30 but twice a week they enjoy having lunch with teachers and friends. On these days kindergarten closes at 1:30 or 2:00pm. Every day before they go home, children gather together in each classroom and talk about what happened during the day. Teachers ask them questions like;

what did you do today? What was the most interesting and exciting thing? Didn't you have any trouble during play? Did you find anything new? What are you going to do tomorrow? Teachers help each child have a chance to talk about themselves. They also give some advice and suggestions to motivate children to develop their play the following day. Children enjoy communication one another, exchanging useful information they got in their play, such as "I found grass hoppers there." or "Making juice with morning glories was very interesting. The color was really beautiful." Often the whole class enjoys games or sings songs together. Sometimes teachers read interesting stories to them. The meeting lasts about 30 minutes.

We think very highly of this assembly because it gives children a sense of self-fulfillment and self-confidence. It also helps children deepen their peer relationships and mutual understanding.

The sketch of Hiroshima University Attached Kindergarten

Adventure Forest

This area is rich in changes of the four seasons. In spring, children pick wild flowers and berries. In summer and autumn they enjoy catching insects. In autumn, they notice that the leaves

change their colors and they are absorbed in collecting acorns.

Adventure Mountain

Adventure Mountain is at the back of our kindergarten and we do mountain climbing during late autumn and winter when poisonous snakes are sleeping. There, we feel the silence in the mountain, the sound of wind blowing through the trees, the smell of fallen leaves and chirping of birds. Children activate all the senses they have. They experience the wonder of great nature directly and at the same time they feel togetherness with nature. Mountain climbing is good for their physical exercise, too. I climbed the mountain with them and got many acorns from them. It was the first experience for the three-year-old children, so at first some of them were scared of the unusual atmosphere around them. But soon they began to enjoy climbing encouraged by teachers and peers. Before we went mountain climbing, I asked four-year-old children to paint pictures of mountains. Then after we came back, I again asked them to paint pictures of mountains. I was much surprised to see the differences of the pictures. The pictures they painted after they came back are very colorful and have a pleasant look. Especially, the things, which attracted them, were painted very big. They expressed their interests in size. I understood the acorns were their favorites. It can be said that their direct contact with nature inspired their imagination and creativity.

Grass-sliding Hill

They enjoy sliding down the hill with a sledge or sometimes with a scooter. They learn how to balance or how to react to the danger while sliding. We often see they themselves take the initiative in smoothing the surface of the slope or removing things, which may hurt them.

Mountain Fort

Mountain Fort serves as the base of children's various activities. They play house and we see them change into witches or monsters there. On fine days, children are seen to have lunch there, saying, "I feel comfortable here", "Look! Autumn wind came to play with us"

Small Stream

Water has a great effect to relax and sooth children's mind. We have small animals in the stream such as carp, and crawfish. Children enjoy floating here, too.

Vegetable Farm

Children sow seeds and plant vegetables in spring. Then, from time to time, they go and see how plants grow. We grow potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes, and soybeans. In autumn, we have a curry-and-rice party to celebrate harvest. Mothers come to help cooking. At the beginning of November, we had a rich harvest of sweet potatoes. We gathered fallen leaves and baked sweet potatoes with them. Our sweet potatoes tasted really good. Children brought some to their home to enjoy potatoes with their family. Potatoes served as a good topic of family conversation.

In order to support children's development through interaction with nature, it is necessary that we educators ourselves enjoy such activities. We should not teach nature to them but open the door to nature for children so that they have interest in nature. It is important that we share the exciting experiences with children. But at the same time we educators must be modest to the wonder of nature. We must be in awe of nature. And also we should respect children's animistic way of experiencing nature.

Another educational goal we are aiming at is to help children attain self-actualization. As you know, Goldstein first used this word. We examined various theories of self-actualization and observed childrens' behavior, then we have come to have the same viewpoint on this concept; that is every child has a desire to attain self-actualization by nature. Self-actualization in early childhood is not at all inferior to that in adolescence. It has its significant meaning. Self-actualization is driven by inner needs to actualize one's inner thoughts and desires. Its process differs from child to child. The process to attain self-actualization can be seen most effectively in play, because play is exactly what clarifies childrens' inner needs. There are two kinds of self-actualization; factual one in which children produce something through play, and the other is fictional one, in

which children operate images freely and play in their inner world.

We should keep in mind about the kindergarten discipline that even the behavior which may be seen as anti-social at first sight is sometimes necessary for them to attain self-actualization. Therefore, we should not deny such behavior flatly but try to understand its background and help them fulfill their needs. Once children's needs are realized, they feel satisfaction and come to have emotional stability, which then leads to the establishment of individuality. Children develop the self-image. With it arises fundamental energy to support 'ego.'

With this viewpoint, we have set concrete educational goals at each grade.

3-year-old children:

Children who are willing to attend kindergarten

4-year-old children:

Children who enjoy their favorite play to their hearts' content

5-year-old children:

Children who have confidence in themselves and work actively as seniors

Last of all, I would like to ask educators and parents not to make haste in nursing children. Do not be impatient. We should have wide-open and gentle eyes to watch children carefully and sensitive ears to listen to them, but a small and generous mouth to give only necessary advice to them. At the same time, we should have inner eyes to reflect on what we are doing as educators of children. Also it is important for us to have modest ears to listen to others' opinions and suggestions.

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